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The fool hath said in his heart: there is no God, 1945.

650
"THE FOOL HATH SAID IN HIS HEART: THERE IS NO GOD"



By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, January 14, 1945

I am very happy that ^a/Sunday morning has been dedicated to the splendid organization of The Temple Men's Club...I hope that it will continue to prosper, to serve the cause of our beloved institution towards Judaism and Jewry.

I chose as the theme of my sermon this morning, the verse from Psalm 14. The theme of this psalm is "The Fool hath said in his heart; There is no God." Now the word "Fool" in this verse is not used in any contemptuous way. Rather does the term suggest the man who lacks wisdom, an ignorant man, a man who jumps to conclusions, a man who makes hasty generalizations. Why does such a man arrive at the conclusion: "There is no God". The second half of that verse gives the answer: Men act basely, they do abominable things. There is none that does right. The third verse reads: "All have strayed from the path, their souls are all rotted. Not a man does right -- not one! In other words, the evil of the world, the gross injustice everywhere, the abominable things which are committed in society, that impels the spiritually impatient and religiously ignorant man to say: "There is no God." Men become atheists, because they cannot reconcile the existence of Evil with the existence of a just God.

This acute spiritual problem exists, ofcourse, for the good man rather than for the wicked man. The wicked man, as the Psalmists says in an earlier Psalm "in the pride of his countenance does not seek God. All his thought is: "There is no God." He rejects God! He moves forward in his mischief, his deceit and his violence "singing ^{out} the praises of his own desires", and confident that there is no God Who will find him/and punish him. But the good man, grievously troubled, as was Job of old, by the fact that the righteous so often suffer, and the wicked triumph over them. Over and over again in the Psalm we hear such plaintive cry: My tears have been my meat day and night - while they continually say unto me: Where is thy God."

You will recall Job, in the agony of his life, in the midst of his fearful pain, cried out: "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, wax mighty in power? Neither is the rod of God upon them...They spend their days in prosperity. Yet they say: "Who is the Almighty that we should serve Him?"

You may recall also the complaint of the great prophet Jeremiah:

The man who wrote this psalm, like the men who wrote some of the other great psalms in the immortal Book of Psalms -- this poet does not lose faith in God, because the righteous suffer, or the wicked prosper. He does not rush to hasty conclusions! He is aware that his evidence is fragmentary and inconclusive. He, finite, mortal man, is able to see only a fragment of reality, and only an infinitesimal part of the arc of human experience. What perspective can he have on the total life of humanity? How far can his vision extend? How deep can it penetrate? When you come to think of it as the Psalmist does, could society really exist as it has existed for thousands of years if evil always triumphs, or if the measure of evil in the world is always greater than good? Evil is in essence chaos, something undermining, something which makes for anarchy. Mankind has steadily through long centuries emerged from chaos, constructing increasingly better social forms and organizations and ways of cooperative life. There are frequent throw-backs and disastrous lapses. But never fatal enough to stop permanently the advance forward and upward. Humanity has steadily advanced to higher forms of civilization. And the heart of all progress must be the principle of Good. In other words, it is Good therefore which is ultimately triumphant.

Therefore, the Psalmist, his faith unshaken, seeing in the evolution of human society evidence that depravity and corruption do not triumph in the end, is able to reply to the man who is hastily driven to the conclusion -- "There is no God" -- "Verily God is with the righteous generation. -- The Lord is refuge of the meek."

The philosophy of the men who wrote the Bible, the philosophy of men who fashioned our religion, the philosophy of all men of vision is very simple. The Universe is a planned Universe, physically and spiritually. Matter as well as human society have their one common source in God. God is their common architect. He laid down the eternal laws of life and growth and change which control them. The laws operate in such a way as to sustain the Universe -- not to destroy it. God intended the world of men to be inhabited,

and human life to improve and develop. Inherent in the fact of progress and improvement is the fact of evil, inadequacy and want from which human life is to swerve forward. Human suffering, physical and moral, is thus part of the plan determined by all-wise God for the progression of the life of man, without which progress itself would have no meaning. All that has shed luster on human life, and given dignity to human existence, science, art, education, decency and inventiveness have been successive triumphs of man over ignorance, fear, superstition, disease, want and drudgery - evils all of them!

The religious man, therefore bears patiently the afflictions which may be visited upon him because of his Faith in a just and wise God! God's ways may not at all times be comprehensible to him, but he does not in his ignorance or bitterness say: "There is no God". He will regard the evil, crimes, poverty, war not as proof of God's impotence or his non-existence, but as God's challenge to him, as God's summoning to mighty effort to overcome that evil."

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the contrary. It is for God that they cry out! - for His help, His nearness, His comfort, His sheltering arms. They need God! For the greater the strains and the greater the tension, the greater the tribulations of our lives, the more we need our Faith in God.

Faith is not a luxury! It is a desperate need for men involved in great undertakings in mighty enterprizes, in experiences which try their very heart and reins. Faith is all other faiths are energized by this primary faith. Power! There are many forms of faith - the most fundamental - faith in God, but no significant living or undertaking or adventure is possible without Faith.

I recently came across a fine Baccalaureate Sermon preached by Dr. Lowell of Harvard in which he said to these young men going out into the world: "By faith sailed across the unknown waters trusting to find land at the other side. By faith the Pilgrim Fathers migrated to the new world, seeking a home for a free exercise of their religion. By faith the frontiersmen penetrated deeper and deeper into the wilderness until the whole continent was opened to civilization. By faith Washington endured the hardships of Valley Forge that a new and independent nation might survive. By faith the framers of the Constitution devised a form of government that this nation might be united, prosperous, and permanent. By faith Lincoln persevered through the dark days of the Civil War, that the Unity of the nation might be preserved and slavery abolished. By faith Fulton invented the steamboat, and Morse the tel graph. By faith Morton, yearning to reduce human suffering, relieved pain through anaesthesia, and made modern surgery possible. By faith Dr. Carroll offered himself up for exposure, and died, to take away the scourge of Yellow Fever. And what shall we say of others who by faith have planted industries, built railroads, made inventions and discoveries, added to knowledge, healed the sick, purified politics, and improved social relations, of whom often the world was not worthy."

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And the more man responds to the challenge of evil in the world, the more he gives of himself to the struggle, regardless of the sacrifice, the more keenly does he become aware that ~~this~~ there is a God! For he comes to feel that it is God Who has sought him out! It is through the best in us, through our noblest aspirations, that we become conscious of the reality of God.

The most convincing proof of the existence of God for man is the Godliness in man -- the qualities of selfless devotion, love, sacrifice, pity, forgiveness -- the qualities by which men transcend the physical in them and touch divinity.

It was Immanuel Kant who said: "Two things filled him with awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within."

Man has found God in both of these -- in the starry heavens above, and in the moral law within. "The Heavens declared the Glory of God." Many a thoughtful man has become convinced of the existence of God by the majesty, the orderliness, the arrangement and the mystery in nature.

But even more so can men find God, the testimony of His being - in the release of their moral energies, in the doing of things great and good, for the power which they will then experience, and the exaltation and the freedom and the manner in which they will rise above pain, and suffering and frustration and defeat will give them the full answer to those who taunt them saying: "Where is Thy God?"

My dear friends: If the existing wickedness of the world, and the great suffering ~~was~~ were sufficient to make men atheists, then the Jews should be the most atheistically minded people on earth. What people has suffered more than our people? Yet strangely enough, and all through the centuries of persecution our people far from denying God extolled Him and magnified God's name.... Always they said: "We are unworthy. Ours is the sin. Our forefathers needed God. They needed the power of faith to survive because by that faith were we saved. In that same way we need it today. Millions of our people have been slain. Thousands of Jewish communities have been destroyed and the broken highways of the world are filled with our helpless exiles and refugees and the whole Household of Israel seems to have been smitten. In such a time of deep tribulation there is need for reaffirmation, to re-dedicate oneself to God. In all that there is a challenge.... "A Fool hath said in his heart: There is no God." The priestly man, the wise men throughout all the ages said: "The Lord is Blessed."

Sermon 650

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What a crowded gallery of moving and unforgettable pictures one finds between the covers of the Bible. In the very first pages one comes upon the first tragic murder in the story of the human race, the first fratricide, the first man whipped by a passion which he could not understand, could not master - Cain slaying his brother, the manipulation of criminal guild in the world, jealousy and bloodshed, the first blind rush to self-exoneration and rscape - "Am I my brother's keeper", the first, the first purging sense of

confession: "Forgive me. My guilt is more than I can bear." How much of human life since that time is telescoped in that brief story of human experience. Every phrase is pregnant with meaning. How many hundreds and thousands of poems since have been written in the language of all people about this very theme, adding nothing new to it. You read along further in the pages of the Book and you come across another picture of an old man who has found a great faith and lived for it. He was a lonely man. He had no child. Finally a child is granted him. He becomes dear to him, dearer than life itself. How he was summoned to sacrifice this child. There is the whole story about an old man who takes a child whom he loves, together with whom he walks to his sacrifice". One wonders what thoughts crossed through the mind of the old man as he walked with his son, about to sacrifice the thing he loved most, his immortality. All the bitterness of sacrifice for an ideal is reflected in that simple picture of them walking together. An unforgettable picture. How often through the centuries the same thing is repeated, great idealists, some who make the supreme sacrifice, tested, proved by sacrifice ~~of~~ are found in the first few verses in a chapter of Genesis. You read the pages further and picture after picture presents itself to you.

Here are two brothers who meet after a separation of many years -

Jacob and Esau, twins who hated and distrusted each other almost from childhood. They were rivals for the birthright. Who shall be masters in the world? Two brothers, two cultures, to civilizations, differing in temperament - the man who lived by the soil, the other^a man of blood, two civilizations doomed to eternal enmity right down through the ages. They meet, fall upon each others' shoulders and they weep. A spurious reconciliation, a reconciliation that can never take place between these two worlds, the whole drama played today on a hundred battlefields. Jacob and Esau met and embraced one another only to be separated again forever after in eternal conflict.

We read on and on the wonder and glory of these pictures, these stories with increasing power.

Here is another picture of the Bible, an old man, Jacob ~~about~~ sees a bloody garment of his son. "Do you recognize it?" he is asked. The old man recognizes it and recognizing it he tears off his own garment and puts on sackcloth. He mourns him for many days. Jacob had loved Joseph deeply. He had given him this coat. He had cared more for him than for his other sons, and had given him this garment of many colors. Joseph was a child of his old age, a child of his Rachel, to sustain him in his old age. Now he was dead.

Another door is opened to the human heart, love which turns into hate. There is a love that destroys. And how many great works of literature were written on this theme since the time of the Bible? Millions of them. And they will continue.

We turn the pages and we come across another story, the saga of Moses on Mt. Nebo, straining his tired eyes to see the land which he will never enter. For forty years he led a rebellious group of wild slaves and the hope that sustained him was the thought that he would see with his own eyes the sacred and beloved soil. That was not given to him. It was told to him that his would be a lonely grave on top of Mt. Nebo, where^{is}

straining his eyes for a last look on the land he will never enter.

And so on and on. There is another story of Samson in Gaza, who was betrayed by the woman he loved, drained of his strength, surrendered to the Philistines, his eyes put out, chained to the millstone in the prison house. Samson was summoned by the Philistines on their festival day to make sport for them. They set him between the pillars. Samson prays: "O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and give me back my strength, only this once, that I may be this once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. His strength is given back to him and he bends under all his might and he brings down the walls of The Temple upon the Philistines and on himself. How much does that picture inspire the unbroken and undefiled spirit of man which rises triumphant from wreck and defeat and makes a final bid of vindication. Here it is all told in the simple story of the Bible.

You read about the patriarchs, judges, about Saul, David, Jonathan, Solomon, hundreds of them.

I close with but one more. There was a famine in the land for three years and David sought the face of the Lord to learn why the famine afflicted the land of Egypt and he was told that it was Saul, King before him who had broken a covenant with the Gibeonites. And David summons the Gibeonites and says: What can we ~~do~~ do to appease the threat of the Lord?" And the Gibeonites said unto him: It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul. The king took the two sons of Rizpah and the fine sons of Michal the daughter of Saul and they were put to death, hanged. The two princes, the sons of Rizpah were put to death and Rizpah, the mother of the princes, says the Bible, took a sack cloth and stood by the dead bodies of her children and she suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night, a mother shielding the bodies of her dead children from the birds and the beasts. One of those unforgettable passages

of the Bible.

Is there any wonder why artists have sought to transcribe on canvas into stone, translate into music this wonder and glory of the Bible? Oh, there is beauty in it and knowledge and something else. Nobility of purpose. For everything that is in the Bible has but one purpose - to help man on the his hard way through life, to make his road easier, to help him face destiny with courage and dignity. Nobility of purpose. Learn how to live a good kindly life. That is th lesson of this immortal book. Whoever has turned to it has found help and guidance and inspiration for his way in the world...

