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Rabbinic Judaism, 1946.

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RABBINIC JUDAISM

Second of series of three coordinated lectures on the
subject of "Judaism."

WRHS



By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, March 17, 1946

Last week, dear friends, I addressed myself to the theme of Prophetic Judaism. I endeavored to trace the development of our religion from its earliest beginnings on the high levels of spiritual ethical ideals under that extraordinary group of men of religious genius known to the world as the prophets of Israel. Those prophetic ethical and spiritual ideals touching God and man, and the relation of man to God, the relation of God to fellow man constitutes for all times the essence of Judaism and represents Israel's spiritual legacy to mankind.

But there was more to Judaism than ethics and theology. There was law, ceremonial law, ritual law, religious customs and practices, the observances of the Sabbath and festivals, the way of life which the prophets knew and practised, and for the neglect of which way of life and for the false emphasis placed on one or another of these customs and practises the prophets denounced their people.

There was a Torah among our people. Torah means teaching law. And this Torah contains not only the ten commandments -- the code of holiness, the great moral teaching -- "Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself", or concerning charity, justice. But this same Torah contained many other laws, civil law, public law, laws of property and of damage, laws of domestic relationships, agricultural laws, Temple and priestly laws, dietary laws, ceremonial laws. And all of these laws, moral as well as ritual, has divine authority according to the basic concepts of our people for they were all intended to help the people to walk in the way of God, to suppress their anti-social inclination and to preserve them as a God-serving people in the midst of a heathen and idolatrous world. And there was no concept that was as fundamental as this between one set of laws and the other.

There was no line drawn in Israel in what is come to be known in our day as the sacred and secular. The Torah, specifically the five books of Moses, contained all these laws and came in the course of time to hold a place of supreme authority and reverence in Israel. The Torah was looked upon as divinely inspired. By the time the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile in the middle of the Sixth century

before the Common Era, by the time the great Ezra had rebuilt and reconstructed the religious life of the Jews which needed great rebuilding and reconstruction in the middle of the fifth century before the Common Era, the Torah, the Bible, had become absolutely supreme in Jewish life. It was the Magna Charta of Jewish life, the spiritual and legal constitution for the Jewish people. And that so remains with this emphasis and with numerous modifications to this day.

It was Mohammed who characterized the Jewish people as "The people of the Book." That is what he meant -- a people whose basic constitution was written down in the Book -- the Torah.

After our fore-fathers returned from the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.E. there were no longer prophets among our people. Prophecy had served in Israel. The heights had been reached, and beyond the heights one cannot go. Classic prophecy began to die among our people with the dispersion of our people brought about by the Babylonian exile. The fact of ~~the~~ exile and dispersion now enter into the life and into the race and in a sense quench this great prophetic power.

The new generation, the generation after the Babylonian Empire, faced other problems and required ^a different type of spiritual leader. For the post-exilic generation no longer required prophets, the troubling challenge, and the state of conscience of the prophets. They now required the calm, wise guidance of the teacher, the sage, the scribe, the (chacham).

This guidance was providentially vouchsafed for all the people in the centuries following the Babylonian exile by a group of teachers who went by various titles -- called scribes, the wise men, the elders, later the teachers of the Mishna and still later the teachers of the Gemorrah. Their names changed, but their essential service to the religion of Israel remained the same. They no longer claimed the gifts or the prerogatives of the prophets. None of them. None of them claimed to speak in the name of God, as did the prophets. When Jeremiah and Isaiah appeared before

their people they said: "Thus saith the Lord." That was authority. These post-exilic scribes no longer claimed that authority. They only claimed the right to teach, interpret, to explain God's law, the Torah. And when they found it necessary to amend some of its laws, to revise some of them, to modernize, so to speak, some of these laws, because laws must be adjusted to changing times -- when these teachers in the centuries following the Babylonian exile found it necessary to make any amendments in this basic constitution, in the Torah, they did it not on the strength of a new revelation, but on the strength of a careful interpretation of the text. It was to these teachers, hundreds of them who lived in the years between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D. , a period of over a thousand years, that we owe the development of Judaism in terms of what we call the Oral Law, the Torah being the legal law. It is they who developed the supplementary law of Judaism, the law which extended and adapted the basic laws of the Torah to the changing condition of their time and place.

And by the year 500 of the common era, all these great laws which developed through these teachers came finally to be collected, codified in a great code of legal jurisprudence, as well as religious doctrine which we know as the Talmud, and the Talmud, these oral laws which weren't written down until very much later -- the Talmud, in the course of time, came to hold a position only second in authority to that of the Torah. And our Judaism of today is not only the Judaism of the Torah as it was amended, but also the Judaism of the Talmud as it was amended and adjusted in the course of subsequent centuries.

During this period of a thousand years -- I am speaking about the post-exilic times in Palestine through the fifth or sixth century of the Common Era, many great and significant things happened in Jewish life. Jewish spiritual powers did not wane or disappear, but developed direction. It was during this period, and earlier to this period that one of the greatest institutions of Jewish life was created -- the synagogue and the Jewish school. Before the Babylonian exile, there

was no temple or synagogue. The only temple was a national shrine at Jerusalem and worship consisted almost exclusively of sacrifice, and the ceremonials connected with this sacrifice. When the temple was destroyed in 586, the Jews were exiled to Babylonia. They no longer had a place of worship, where they could bring sacrifices. It was in Babylonia that the Jews met, whenever they found themselves in that great dispersion, and organized improvised places of worship. And in those improvised places of worship, the service consisted not in bringing sacrifices, but in prayer and in the study of law. Those improvised places of worship created by the Jewish laymen in the Babylonian exile were the original synagogues of Israel. And when the Jews returned from Babylonia to Jerusalem and rebuilt their national shrine in Jerusalem, where they continued to bring sacrifices, they also brought back with them that institution of prayer. They teamed together. And before very long, in every hamlet and town in Palestine there was erected a place of worship where the Jews gathered on week days, on Festivals, on the Sabbath, where the Jews gathered to worship and pray, where leaders interpreted the Torah of God.

When in 70 A.D., the ^{second} Temple was destroyed, never again to be rebuilt, then the whole institution of sacrifice disappeared and there remained in Jewish life as the sole instrument of public worship, the synagogue, which has continued to this day. So one of the great achievements of Jewish spiritual life in post-exilic times was the synagogue. And with it went the first creation of a form of service entirely of prayer which was unknown ^{the} in ancient world. Just as ^{Jews were} the first to create prayer worship in mankind, so they were also the first people to evolve a prayer-book because all the other people carried on their worship in the form of sacrifice of animals in their sacred shrines.

The second great achievement of the people of Israel in this period was the Jewish School. Children, rich and poor alike, -- every child was expected to go to a school where religion was taught, where the ethics of Judaism were inculcated, where

where young men were prepared alike. And the Jewish people were the first people in the world to create a public school of education centuries before the Common Era. And when you realize that the public school system of education in the Western World is only a matter of a hundred years, you can imagine importance of such a contribution. "AND thou shalt teach them diligently unto your people." It was an early mandate in the religion of Israel. The Jewish people wanted everyone to feel himself as if he were a priest and a prophet. Moses said this: that all the people of God were prophets." And at Mt. Sinai, when our forefathers received the ten commandments, they were told that it was their destiny to become " a whole kingdom of priests and a holy people."

And it was also during this period, in the early centuries before the Common Era, that the intellectual life of our people, the spiritual life of our people enjoyed periods of great creativity. During these times, most of the Psalms were written, the greatest religious legacy of all times. During this period the Proverbs were written, the Book of Job and the Apocrypha.

Now, too, on the other hand, and this brings me to the central thought for discussion -- To understand the labors of these post-exilic teachers, rabbis, we must understand the problems they faced. In their days the people of Israel was no longer free. Except for a brief period of political independence, at the time of the Maccabees, the Jews of Palestine were a subject people and Palestine. They belonged to an empire -- at first the Persian, the Greek, the Roman Empire. The Jews did not possess political independence in this brief time. There was already beginning to exist a great Jewish diaspora. By that I mean that even after many returned from Babylonia, many did not return to Palestine and Jews were found dwelling in all parts of the Middle East and later on all along the shores of the Mediterranean. A great Jewish dispersion came into existence. And the problem which the religious leaders faced at that time were (1) how to preserve this people physically. Today we celebrate Purim. Purim is an illustration of what I have in mind. It happened

under the Persian Empire in the fifth century B.C.E. and the Jews, according to our Megillah were scattered in 127 far flung provinces and one man, because of his hatred of the Jewish people wanted to destroy our Jews, and almost succeeded in doing it. The fate of the people no longer depended on themselves. They were now in Palestine, and in Palestine they were no longer politically sovereign and independent. And so the teachers of our religion who believed in the survival of Israel and its destiny wishes to establish some great discipline which would preserve the people in spite of the dangers which threatened them on all sides. The first problem was the national problem.

The second problem was a religious problem. Israel represented a sort of small island of spiritual monotheism in a vast pagan world. This paganism was abhorrent to the Jews because it represented a way of life that was cruel, evil, a way of life that crushed down upon the poor, which maintained slavery, which idolized war, which threw human beings into arenas which held human life cheap. It was a way of life of great immorality, of sexual looseness and corruption. And Judaism was the one dyke, as it were, against these deadly waves of bestiality and animalism. And the religion of the Jews of those days, which was a minority, was being constantly threatened. And the problem was how to preserve the religion of the Jewish people in the middle of the pagan world.

And they solved the problem in exactly the same way as any people does that feels itself threatened. It built up an army. It converted the whole people of Israel in to an army of the Lord. You know that the soldier in any army is subjected to disciplines which are not binding upon civilians but which are very binding or necessary for the military. These Rabbis built up a religious discipline of law, dress one kind of law affecting food, conduct, /etc. which kept the people less menaced, strong and capable of survival.

Now some people think that because of the numerous laws which they developed they were narrow legalists, formalists. That isn't so at all, for at the same time

they were imposing rigorous disciplines on their own people, they were sending out missionaries through the world to convert the world to spiritual monotheism, to preach the word of God. And they did not expect the heathens to accept that rigid discipline. The people was a vanguard of the Lord. It was enough for them to try to get the heathens to accept the seven laws of the Gentiles who will inherit the world, to get the heathen to give up idolatry, robbery, to keep them from eating the flesh of animals and the flesh of human beings. It was for their own salvation. They had to submit themselves to a complete regimen to conquer, for the Jews were constantly being threatened and their religion endangered. You can establish that merely by the fact that Ezra, in the fifth century, when he came to Judea, found his own religion practically disintegrating. Ezra came to be known as the Second Moses. In the second Century, the Jews in Palestine were faced not only with physical extinction, but with the death of their faith. Hellenism on the surface was attractive, brilliant and many Jews in Palestine were fascinated by Hellenism and began to assimilate, especially the aristocrats. Only those heroic followers Mattathias and the Maccabees were able to overcome Hellenism, only by their efforts were the Jews enabled to survive.

After the first century, Judaism faced the competition of a new religion called Christianity. Later on, Judaism faced the competition of still another religion, Mohammendanism, another offspring of Judaism.

And those who believed in the perpetuation of Judaism, as it were, and its purity, had to fight for its life. These were the two problems faced by them right through all the centuries. This is how they met their problems.

By achieving unity of the people in belief and observance, a characteristic and distinctive way of life in Palestine and in the diaspora, Israel was saved. This is what kept alive the Jews and Judaism not only in Palestine but in the diaspora. In time the discipline became somewhat irksome. Some of the laws became burdensome. And there was rebellion against this excess of discipline .

In the eighth century there was a tremendous rebellion. There were the Kaarites who denied the authority of Judaism... 19th century Reform Judaism... But who ever imagines that Prophetic Judaism could have survived without Rabbinic Judaism doesn't know Jewish history. And whoever thinks that Reform Judaism could have survived without some physical discipline, without pedagogy and inspiration in the home and the school, whoever imagines that can be done today is simply deluding himself. Those who give up these external symbols such as prayer, the synagogue, begin to drift away from Jewish life. They become unhappy about their Jewishness. They begin to seek a way out and they become embittered, frustrated, resentful, very very unhappy.

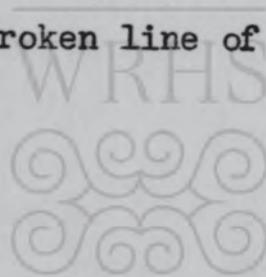
This too should be said about Rabbinic Judaism, and with that I close. The Rabbis, like the prophets, were great Jewish patriots. They loved their people. They believed in their people. One of them was asked: "Torah or Israel -- which comes first?" Through the mouth of Elijah, the answer is given: "Israel comes first." But Israel created the Torah. Out of its religious genius, prophecies, Israel was destined to bring light unto the world. They believed that the Torah was entrusted to Israel because Israel was the strongest and toughest among the nations of the world. These prophets were, if you will permit me to use the modern world, Zionists. Some people believe that Rabbi Silver was the first Zionist in American Israel. Just as the Prophets prayed for restoration after first exile - By the River of Babylon - "If I forget thee, O Zion, may my right hand forget her cunning," - so the Rabbis prayed for and worked for the restoration of Israel in Palestine. It was they who put into our prayerbooks one on restoration of our people. It was they who developed and kept alive the Rabbinic faith of our people which was bound up with Palestine. And to them, like the prophets, there was no conflict between nationalism and universalism, ~~in the~~ and the meet for creating a national center for our people in Palestine. This conflict, this artificial conflict exists only in the minds of certain modern Jews.

Professor George Foot Moore, who wrote "Judaism in the first centuries of

the Christian Era", a book which I recommend for your study, in introducing this period, says: "The Jews in their wide dispersion look forward to the day when they should be gathered again to their own land as the prophets had foretold, and an era of peace and prosperity should follow."

And so, my friends, Rabbinic Judaism continues in the tradition of Prophetic Judaism. We apply the message of the prophets to every-day life. They built ramparts of defense around it. They organized their people through strong religious discipline of conduct to live by that religion and for that religion and in so doing, the Rabbis insured the survival not only of the faith of the prophet, but of the people of the prophets scattered and menaced throughout the world.

Next Sunday morning to follow up this discourse I will speak on Reform Judaism, its basic principles -- unbroken line of historic continuity from ancient to modern times.



1) Last week: Prophetic Jvd: From primitive beliefs evolved!

highest - essence of Jvd - legacy to mankind.
But there was ~~also~~ more to Jvd. > Ethics + Theology.

There was ^{Law -} ceremonial and ritual law. - the observance

[Sabbath + Festivals - A prescribed way of life -
Prophets knew it - Proclaim it - ^{Law 19} repeated
The ~~10~~ 10 - contains not only 10 Com. - Holiness Code - ^{personal domain}

many laws, Civil law, Public law, laws of property,
Agricultural laws, Temple + Priestly laws, Dietary

laws and ceremonial laws.

all of them ^(- moral as well as ritual) had divine authority - like ethical doctrine -

for they were all intended to help the people to
walk in the way of God, to suppress their anti-social
inclinations and to ^{preserve} keep themselves as a God-
serving people in the midst of a heathen and an
immoral world. No conflict - ^(Soul body)

There was no line drawn between the sacred and
the secular. - (Judaic Mon p. 18)

The ~~10~~ 10 - the 5 Books, Moses - which contained
these laws - was to ^{hold the place} ~~be the~~ ^{the} ~~source~~ ^{of} ~~reference~~ ^{reference} authority + reverence in Judaism.

It ^{has} had divine inspiration. By the time ~~of~~
the Jews returned from Babel + Egypt in 5C.
rebuild + reconstituted their rel. life - the ~~10~~ 10
had become Supreme in J. life - The Basic legal
+ sp. contribution Israel. To this day! - It's

Magnum Charta

2/ After Returns - no more prophets - Pro. ceased. (2)

The Heights had been reached - ~~again~~ - Classical people
began to die out with the dispersion, the people.

The part of exile entered into the life, the race, and

the soul, did ~~was~~ grievous to creature joys.

The new generations - faced other problems - required a
diff. type of sp. leadership. - that, the long & public

a broken people, struggling with the hard tasks, survival
required the calm, practical guidance, the con-
stant & the troubling challenge, & the state of conscience, that?

#1 This guidance was providentially overshadowed & by
our people in the centuries which followed by
a group of teachers - who went by various
titles - Teachers - Sages - Rabbis ← מורים / רבנים

- These no longer claimed the gift of proph. a hal.

- They no longer → דין / דיין

- But they ^{taught the} interpreted ^{the} to the people. → דין / דיין

- Its Expositors; they and when they found it
necessary, to amend, revise, modernize - did

so through an elaborate technique of interpretation
whereby they upheld the spirit of not the letter, the
→ דין.

3/ It is to these teachers - whose number runs with the centuries
500 BCE. - 500 AD. - we owe Oral Law -

supplementing ^{expanding} the written ^{applying} Code & Schispenon of the Jud.

When we speak Jud. - we not only the past - exile development -
but also the present in actuality.

- Gaius ^{with those reports and} when Chr. became a state Rl. Islands 7 dangers
fighting for its life -

7) The Rabbis, by achieving unity & help and obscure - a change & destined way of life -
saved Israel. - & left alive Jews & Judaism at
only in Pal. but in far-flung diaspora -

8) In the course, time - expressions & many details
hardness - Reforms - simply -
But whoever imagines that proph. J. could have
survived without debate did not know

J. history.
And whoever imagines that Jud. today can
merely without simply phys. form & Disc.
without Syn. of J. School - without observation
without their pedagogy and inspiration - Home & School
deludes himself -

Those who pick them up - drift away - because
unhappily and then J. - way out! closed!
enlightened & asertful - a frustrated people

9) Rabbis, like Prophets, great patriots - "Zionists"
Just like Isaac & Ter. & Exalted prayed for the restored
So the Rabbis - after 70 A.D. - No conflict but
Ati ba - prayer Unives. & National
Messianic - God abides
Not Center

"The Jews in their wide dispersion look forward to the day when they should be gathered again to their own land as the prophets had foretold, and an era of peace and prosperity should follow." — Rev. Foster Moore

"Judaea in the First Centuries, the Chr. Era."

- 10) Rabbi Jud. continued the trad. of Prep. Jud.
Applied ~~developed~~ it to every day life
Build ramparts; defenses around it.
Organized the people thru a strong discipline. to
live by it. — 480
~~Discussed~~ the survival not only of the faith,
the prophet but of the people, the prophets
realties & menaced threat the world

