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The Law of the Golden Mean, 1949.

THE LAW OF THE GOLDEN MEAN

by

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

Sunday, January 23, 1949

My dear friends, the chief contributions of Judaism to the civilization of the world are two; the Jewish concept of the one spiritual God, and the Jewish code of ethics known by the general term of "Torah". Both of these were evolutions and refinements of beliefs and ways of life which were common to all ancient peoples in pre-Israelitic times. The originality of Judaism consists not in creating something out of nothing, any more than in the originality of a great scientist or philosopher consists in creating something out of nothing. Rather does the genius of Judaism and the originality of its contributions consist in having taken the common clay of the primordial and unreflective folk ways prevalent among all people in ancient times and molding them into something finer and nobler, and thereby enabling mankind to advance to higher terrains of faith and conduct, of freedom and truth.

Judaism was a revolutionary set of moral and spiritual ideas, not a system necessarily, but a complexity of revolutionary ideas which shook the ancient world. Judaism challenged and defied a long-existing and indurate religious granth to which the whole of mankind had been habituated by countless thousands of years. Judaism disputed that religious culture - not alone a religious culture which was common to primitive and backward people, but the religious culture of the great civilization of ancient times which had developed along the Nile, the Tiber, the Euphrates and the isles of the . And for a thousand years a stiff-necked, undaunted, little people inhabited a narrow strip along the Mediterranean and some hillsides overlooking that ancient sea - for a thousand years that little people clung to its own challenging vision of God and human destiny, and it lived there as within some fortress island besieged by a circumambient heathen all around, and it then repulsed all assaults which were made to destroy that vision of God and men. After a thousand years of clinging to its own vision and defying the world, its vision finally triumphed. And by way of Judaism and Christianity and Islam, the essential doctrines of Judaism came to be accepted.

Now, in the next few weeks I shall try to discuss with you some of these revolutionary concepts. This morning I should like to dwell on one very characteristic feature of this ethical complex which we call Judaism which, according to tradition, came to be expressed in some 613 positive and negative commandments corresponding to the number of organs in the human body and the days of the year.

While Jewish ethics is not a philosophic system, it is not difficult to discover in these principles and teachings all grouped under the general term of Judaism certain definite attitudes, certain predelictions, certain perspective, certain definite trends which run through the whole pattern of what we call Judaism. This morning I should like to refer to one of these characteristic features - namely, to the practical soundness, the remarkable sanity, the fine moderation, the utter sobriety of Jewish morals. Judaism is a code of conduct withinthe reach of man. It is intended for man as he is, this mortal, finite, imperfect, groping, aspiring human being. And it is a code of conduct intended for this rough and tumble world of struggle, conflict, and frustration - not for some romantic Arcadia. It is a livable code of ethics.

This fine moderation of Jewish ethics was something more than the Greek idea of the Golden Mean which Aristotle defined so nobly. The Greeks, one of the most marvelous of people in all times - also a small people - were artists by nature, and they favored in all things proportion, order, symmetry, balance. They called it the middle of the road, and on the portals of the were inscribed the two words, "Nothing in excess." Virtuous conduct is balanced conduct. Evil is excess. Evil is deficiency.

Now this concept is not quite adequate as the ethical formula for human conduct. It does not provide for the practices of self-sacrifice, martyrdom, and humility which mankind has so frequently practices. It does not provide for the qualities which occupy such an important place both in Jewish and Christian ethical thinking - humility and resignation and compassion and forgiveness. Judaism taught man to aspire, to strive after perfection - not necessarily to seek a golden mean. "After the Lord Thy God shall ye walk. Sanctify thyself even in matters which are permitted." God is infinite. How can man presume to walk after God? This means trying in your human way to copy the attributes which you ascribe to God. Just as God visits the sick and comforts the mourners, so do you in your life seek to imitate these qualities. Judaism urged that a man should sanctify himself even in matters permitted to him, and above all, Judaism challenged a man to help establish the Kingdom of God upon earth, to fight for justice, to war against wrong. The ideal man was not the imperturbable aristocrat, but the man who stepped into the bloody arena of life. That is why the Greeks produced marvelous philosophers and artists, but no prophets. Judaism produced the prophets of mankind.

And so, Jewish ethics cannot quite accept as the complete and comprehensive ethical formula the Greek idea of the Golden Mean. Judaism demands more of man than to be satisfied with finding a balance between two extremes. On the other hand, Judaism tells man, ""Thine is not the duty to complete the task, neither art thou

from it." The road is long and hard. The goals of mankind are far distant.

Strive to reach them, but do not break your heart. If you have advanced one step in the right direction - if you have helped your community, your family, or one human being to advance one forward step toward the Kingdom of God, be satisfied.

Let me point to a few of these ethical judgments and ordinances which allow this quality of temperateness. Take the question of property. Private property or possession of wealth, subjects which have agitated society since the beginning of time which are today one of the great foci of conflict and international struggle. There have been and are schools of thought which declared that the possession of private property is morally wrong. The possession of wealth is an unmitigated evil. Great religious orders were established in olden days which were founded on the principle of voluntary poverty along with the ideas of chastity and obedience. Poverty is one of the three principles of menastic life. Christian monasticism is founded on the teachings which said, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast and give to the poor. And thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and then come and follow me."

Judaism makes no such demands. Possession of property in Judaism is not looked upon as evil. We are admonished to respect the property of our neighbor just as our own. We are admonished to share what we have and to help the less fortunate. We are not admonished to help others by becoming poor ourselves. We are called upon to try to abolish poverty know by assisting justice in society. The most desirable norm of life is expressed in one of the fine chapters of Proverbs - the prayer of a pious man who turns to God and says: "O God, give me neither poverty nor riches. Give me my daily bread lest I be rich and deny God, or lest I be poor and profane the name of God."

In the New Testament Jesus outraged the ethics of Judaism of his day. He said, "Ye have heard that it hath been said: Thou shalt love they neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies." In the first place, nowhere in the Bible is anyone taught to hate his enemy. On the other hand, do we find "love thine enemy", because it is psychologically impossible in human life. We are admonished in

Leviticus: "Thou shalt not hate thine brother. Thou shalt not take vengeance." We are urged to forgive our enemies, but we are not admonished to love our enemies. We are told to love our neighbors, the stranger. And even in this concept of "love they neighbor as thyself", the rabbis were quick to point out that if improperly interpreted, even that maxim is an impossible one. If properly interpreted, that means that all that one expects his friends to do for him, he should be prepared to do for them. One does not expect his neighbor to sacrifice his life for him. "Love they neighbor as thyself is fittingly interpreted by Hillel to mean, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself only, what am I?"

Life is possible only through cooperation between men, and no more is really necessary to keep this a decent world in which to live. There are times when a man must endanger his life to save his neighbor. If your neighbor is drowning, for example, it is your duty to rush to his rescue even if you endanger your own life in so doing. But at all other times such sacrifices are not demanded of a man.

There is an interesting problem posed by the rabbis. Tow men are lost in the wilderness and in danger of dying from thirst. There is not enough water in the flask for two. If they share, both will die. There is only enough for one to survive. What is proper? One says both should share in order not to see the death of his friend. Akiba pronounced the ethical decree: "The one who seeks the flask shall drink and live." Your life comes before the life of your neighbor. In the fulfillment of all the commandments a man is obligated to fulfill all the commandments, but is not obligated to sacrifice his life for them except concerning three - idolatry, incest, and murder. All other commandments are pushed aside when it is a question of life and death. All the laws of the Sabbath can be abrogated to save a human life. When a man willingly sacrifices his life in the observance of a commandment, he is guilty of destroying a human life.

I should like to point to another instance of the rationality of Jewish ethical ideas. Take the question of divorce. In early Christianity, it was looked upon as immoral and remarriage was adultery. And the orthodox Christianity still hold this view to this day. On themex other hand, in pagan society, especially in the greater Roman world, divorce was an extraordinary frequency so that it became a universal disorder and contributed to the corruption of the Roman Empire. What was the attitude of Judaism towards divorce? Jewish laws do not make divorce difficult. The right to divorce remained legally undisputed. But the ethical sense of the people is not begun to draw safeguards around the wall in order to make the incident of divorce less frequent and the moral sense of the people created a public opinion so powerful as to discourage the practice of divorce which was not prohibited in law. And in the Book of Malachi we have the statement: "And this further ye do: Ye cover the altar of the Lord with tears. With weeping and with sighing. Inasmuch that He regardeth not the offering any more, neither receiveth it with goodwill at your hand. Yet ye say: Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and they wife and , against whom thou hast dealt treacherously though she is thy comthey thy saith the Lord. panion and the wife of they covenant ... For I hate the God of Israel."

And in the Talmud we find such dicta as this: "Whoever divorces his wife, the altar shed tears on his account." Now Judaism did not set up any inflexible laws prohibiting divorce. It did not force people who could not live together, whose living together did not make for a holy family life, to continue in their unwilling marital bonds. On the other hand, it gave no encouragement to the practice of chap and easy divorce. On the whole subject of sex Jewish ethics was so sound and sane. In ancient times and to this day religious sanction is given to celibacy especially among priests and holy men. Celibacy was based on a dualist celibacy, that the world consists of matter and spirit. Matter is the source of evail and that therefore sex impulses are hostile to man's development so that in Bhuddaism and Christianity the

idea is developed that the perfect spiritual life is one of celibacy. There is no monkery in Judaism. It never accepted the philosophy that matter is evil. "The spirit is thine and so is the body." "Marriage is holy and numerous offspring are a blessing from God." "By ye fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth." Paul granted the necessity of marriage only as a preventative of immorality, but the unmarried state was preferable. "He who has no wife remains without joy, without blessing, without a helper. He is not a whole and completed man." It is over-indulgence - it is lust and not love which is deprecated by Judaism. And similarly of all the enjoyments of life, Judaism never accepted ascetism as a way of life. Judaism wanted men and women to enjoy all that was put on earth for the enjoyment of man.

Take the matter of war and peace. Some religions preach pacifism as an ethical ideal. And, of course, there is the teaching of the founder of Christianity. "Turn the other cheek." Now Judaism was the first great religion to teach peace. "Beat they swords into ploughshares......" On the other hand Judaism never taught that men should resist evil and that wars are always wrong.

The most peace-loving man of the Bible is Abraham. When his herdsmen and those of his cousin, Lot, began to quarrel among themselves because the cattle of each had multiplied to the extent where the land could not feed them all, Abraham went to his cousin, Lot, and said, "Why then should we fight one another. The earth lies open before us. Choose what you want. If you wish to go with your herds to the North, I will go to the South; if you go to the East, I will go to the West. Let us not fight one another." But this same Abraham, when Lot was attacked, marshalled his entire household and pursued the rebels through the night and slew them and recovered Lot's possessions. Wrong must frequently be resisted but the goal of life is the peaceful adjustment of differences and disputes among men and nations.

And in the same vein Judaism cautioned against extremes in many other things.

"Seek to know God but remember: the secret things belong to God. The revealed things belong to man." The same thing with the hereafter. Judaism had vision and concepts of life after death. Nevertheless it cautioned its followers not to become too obsessed with considerations of the hereafter. "Better is one day doing good upon this earth than all eternity in the hereafter."

Balance - that is one of the amazing characteristics of Jewish morality. A man should do that which he owes to himself, to society, to God. Not sacrifice one for the other. And within this system Judaism taught man that he can live a happy, wholesome and harmonious life.

During the next few weeks I shall go further into a discussion of Jewish ethics. Next Sunday I shall speak on the "Vision of the One World." The following Sunday I shall speak on "The Mandates of Justice and Love in Judaism," and then on "The Challenge to the Individual to Build the Kingdom". And we shall try by analysis to understand the core of this great regigious code of moral ideas which our people gave to us and through us, to mankind.

## THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OUR FAITH

A series of sermons discussing the main principles and implications for life of Jewish ethics. Delivered in January and February of 1949. at the Lemple



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The Temple, January 23, 1949

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Judaism does not begin by burdening man with a load of an original sin, for example, brought about according to legend or belief by the disobedience of the first man. Judaism does not discourage man by proposing to him unattainable objectives — those which he cannot reach. I read you this morning the 30th Chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, "This commandment which I command thee this day......" That is the figure of this way of life, this code of ethics, which we call Judaism.

Nor does Judaism assert that man, by his own good works, can never obtain salvation, that it is only God's grace that can redeem a man. Again, I refer you to this great that the figure your life of good death and look. Choose than the command desting of the command of the compassionate. God will help man.

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I should like to point to Another instance of the rationality of Jewish ethical ideas. Take the question of divorce. In early Christianity, it was looked upon as immoral and remarriage was adultery. And the Orthodox Christianity still holds this view to this day. On theme other hand, in pagan society, especially in the greater Roman world, divorce was an extraordinary frequency of that it became a universal disorder and contributed to the corruption of the Roman Empire. What was the attitude of Judaism towards divorce? Jewish laws do not make divorce difficult. The right to divorce remained legally undisputed. But the ethical sense of the people is not begun to draw safeguards around the wall in order to make the incident of divorce less frequent and the moral sense of the people created a public opinion so powerful as to discourage the practice of divorce which was not prohibited in law. And in the Book of Malachi, we have the statement: "And this further ye do: Ye cover the altar of the Lord with tears. With weeping and with sighing. Inasmuch that He regardeth not the offering any more, neither receiveth it with goodwill at your hand. Yet ye say: Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and they wife and they thy your, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously though she is thy companion and the wife of they covenant ... For I hate futting away saith the Lord, the God of Israel."

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