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The Mandate of Love and Justice, 1949.

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THE MANDATE OF LOVE AND JUSTICE

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



Sunday, February 6, 1949

You may recall that we began our series of discourses on the Ethics of Judaism with a discussion of the Law of the Golden Mean, and that was followed with a discussion of the Vision of the One World in Judaism. This morning I should like to speak about two of the most precious jewels in the ethical crown of our faith - the concepts of justice and of love. Preeminently in our faith God is thought of as the God of justice. "And the Lord shall be exalted in justice, and the Holy One shall be sanctified in righteousness." The God of justice. In whatever terms or whatever attributes our ancestors conceived of God, they could not disassociate His being from the idea of justice. Job, suffering all the torments of Hell, convulsed in his philosophy of life as a result of the unmerited suffering which came upon him, still proclaims, by way of holding on to something unbreakable, "Can God pervert justice?" That was inconceivable. And the fact that it was inconceivable gave Job the strength to live through the torments of his life.

And similarly, when the father of our race, Abraham, saw a wicked city being destroyed, and feeling that there may be certain righteous among the inhabitants of that city who might suffer undeservedly, turns to God and says: "Can the judge of the whole world not do justice?" To Abraham, too, it was inconceivable that God would be ought else but the God of absolute justice.

And that was the immovable rock upon which our ancestors built their entire ethical system. There is justice in the world, building itself solely into the perfectly just society and the true way to serve God is through acts of justice. The just man will be rewarded even though his reward may not come immediately, and similarly the unjust and the wicked will be punished. And yet, fundamental as is this doctrine of justice, our forefathers understood that there is much else needed to supplement and complement this concept. And so, in their characteristic manner, they said, "When God came to create the world, He first thought of creating the world exclusively on the principle of rigid and absolute justice, and then God realized that the world could not endure if it were built exclusively on justice, and

so, God considered building his world exclusively on the principle of love and mercy, and then God realized it could not endure exclusively on that principle for evil would then go unchecked." It was a case of pouring hot water in a glass which would cause it to crack, or the case of pouring cold water into a glass which would cause it to break, and so they said that God mixed the hot and the cold, merged the principles of justice and love, and through the combination of the two, He builded the world. And so they said, that is the meaning of the phrase in the Bible: "On the day when the Lord God created Heaven and earth." The appellation of God as "Adonai" meant mercy and love; "Elohenu" meant justice. So it was the combination of "Adonai Elohenu" that ultimately became the foundation of the world.

Now it is a favorite polemical pasttime of some Christian apologists to speak of the God of Judaism as the God of relentless justice, the vengeful deity and the God of the new faith as the God of love. It is very simple, through a process of complicated selection, to build up any notion you want to on biblical tests, but the truth never lies in this tendentious partisanship in the selection of biblical texts. It is rather in the comprehensive study of all the Bible that the truth is to be found. And the truth is that in Judaism God is the God of justice and of love, and therefore, human society must be grounded in the dual principal of justice and love.

Now one can argue which should have priority - that the principle of love is the motivating force in society or the principle of justice. Some have maintained that love is all too clannish and partial and unreflective to be an independent basic principle upon which to build society; that justice is a more universal and more reflective, and therefore, more independent principle for social progress and organization. I say that is a subject for interesting speculation. What is not arguable, however, is that as far as Judaism is concerned, the guiding ethical principles are a combination of the two ideals of justice and of love. "The Lord the God, He is a God of mercy." Long-suffering, and full of mercy and of truth. He

kindness unto the thousandth generation. He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. But He will by no means clear the guilty. For the guilty disallows repentance. The probability of turning from the evil way - and God is always there to receive the repentant sinner because God is abundant in forgiveness. But for the obstinate sinner there can be nothing but condemnation and punishment. God does punish but not in order to destroy, but in order to correct.

And so, we have that summary of the Jewish conception of God found in one of the great Psalms. "Judgment and justice are the foundations of Thy Throne. But mercy and compassion go before Thy countenance." The passion for social justice dominates ~~demands~~ all the ethical literature of our people. It is the heart of Jewish prophesy which is the heart of our religion. Justice - and because the prophets of Israel conceived of God as the God of justice - and of love, of course - but justice tempered with love, they had the courage to confront kings and nobility with the challenge in the case of the God of justice to do justice to those over whom they ruled, whose destinies they could affect. A humble prophet like Nathan could confront the great King David, who had sinned, and say unto him: "Thou art the man."

" And a prophet like Elijah, a poor man, defenseless, could confront the King Ahab who had committed murder because of greed, and in the name of the God of justice denounce him. "

You do not find among any of the peoples of ancient days such prophets challenging tyranny. It is in this spirit that the prophet, Jeremiah, stood at the gates of the Temple where everyone was thronging into the Temple - the Temple of the Lord - bringing their sacrifices, assuming that everything was fine because they were bringing their flocks and meal as offerings unto the Lord. It was in the name of the God of justice that Jeremiah could stand at the gates and say to these people: "Will you rob and steal and defy every just principle and then come into this house and say, We are saved?" They denounced all forms of exploitation because of their faith. They denounced all those who dwelt as in Zion, who lay stretched on beds of

ivory and were not for the heart of their people. They crushed the faces of the poor into the dust. That is why I have repeated more than once in our discussions that Judaism was a revolutionary faith. It came to mankind and said: "Religion is not ritual, not sacrifice. Only to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." Justice - justice shalt thou pursue - that was the great cry of the prophets and of Judaism.

Now, what is justice? How did they conceive of justice? When they spoke of justice from the Bible or the Talmud, they do not mean legal, formal justice. They meant far more than that. Although they had much to say about these two elementary concepts. A man should not rob his neighbor - not to deceive, not to oppress, Jew or Gentile. "Thou shalt not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren or of the strangers that are in thy land." This concept of the stranger you find among no other people of antiquity.

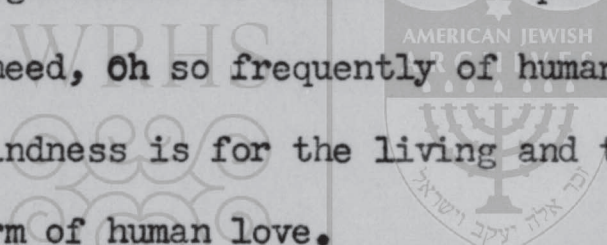
And there is much to say about the judgment in the court where it must be even-handed. "Yet shalt not respect persons in judgment. Yet shall not be afraid of any man, for the judgment is God's. Ye shall not be intimidated by the method to prevent justice. Ye shall not respect the person of the poor nor favor the person of the rich, but in justice shalt thou decree the law." And one law for the home-born and the stranger. When you think of what happened in the last 10 - 15 years, of how great powers arose who proclaimed two laws contradictory and mutually exclusive - one for one's own race and another for peoples of another race, you can realize how farvisioned was this ethical concept of 2800 years ago proclaimed by Judaism. One law for the native born and for the stranger.

But justice meant more than that. To be a just man meant to work for the just society, to work for a condition of life where all handicaps will be removed from all men, where the disappointments of poverty and ignorance will be removed so that all men could equally share in the good on earth for all God's children alike.

Working for the Kingdom of God was a mandate of justice"and that the work of justice shall be peace and the effect of it, quietness and confidence forever", said Isaiah. But while working for this perfect society, while identifying yourself with great social movements, a human being is not absolved of the responsibility of looking after the immediate needs of the man next door to him. Justice demands that you do whatever you are able to do immediately to those near to you, to the members of your own community today. That means doing charity of the highest kind which, among our people, is known as justice. The same term used for justice is used for charity for charity is a derivative of the concept of justice. Among our people in the Bible laws were enacted to provide for the needy. And relief organizations were set up by law by every community before our Community Chests were organized, to see to it that no member of the household shall go hungry and not want, and no people developed the concept of charity to the high degree that Judaism developed it. Charity was a means of helping the less fortunate.

You will recall that famous definition of charity by Maimonides - 8 degrees. And the 7th is the charity which is given where the giver and the recipient are not known. Charity which is given without humiliating the recipient and without taking pride for one's self. And the 8th is the charity where you help a man to help himself. That is the highest degree of Jewish charity derived from this basic concept of justice.

But justice is not love. To justice must be added love. One must be just beyond the requirements of law - beyond the strict social obligations upon men. One must add to his justice the gracious overtone of love. "Love thy neighbor as thyself." We could not live if men were only just to us. It is because some people love us and help us when we do not deserve their love that we are able to live. "Love the stranger as thyself." This, Akiba said, was the highest principle of the

Torah. And this is what God said to Isaiah: "My children, What is it that I am asking of you? Is it not that you love one another and honor one another?" To train ourselves so that we will love and respect one another. Not to hate, not to bear a grudge, not to be too harsh in judgments of our fellowmen. Never judge your neighbor until you have put yourself in his place. Do things for others, for God, not for the sake of receiving a reward, but out of love. Be rather among those who are persecuted than among those who persecute. And even in the matter of charity, there is something greater than charity. Among our people there were two concepts of charity,  , which we translate "lovingkindness". And the rabbis say that lovingkindness is far greater than charity because charity is only with money. Lovingkindness is with personal service with your whole body. Charity is only for the poor. Lovingkindness is both for the poor and the rich because the rich man, too, stood in need, Oh so frequently of human kindness. Charity is only for the living. Lovingkindness is for the living and the dead. To speak kindly of the dead is also a form of human love.

And so we find in our great literature such expressions which startle one when you come upon them at first until you reflect on them. Anyone who denies the principle of lovingkindness in life is as if he denied the existence of God. That is the whole summary of it. If you really believe in a God, then you must believe in compassion and love and sympathy and human understanding, mutual helpfulness. You must not go through life either as an exploiter or as a man rigid - it is not enough. You cannot conceivably live if God were rigid. The principle of lovingkindness - there is one beautiful phrase in the prophet, Hosea, which always runs through my mind whenever I spoke of Judaism. "Life is a covenant of brothers." That is what society is - one family, one God. Another prophet expresses the same idea this way, speaking of God's relationship to his people Israel, he says: "And I will

betroth thee unto me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth thee unto me in faithfulness." God's relationship to his people is one of love as is the exquisite love of youth, one for another. And God will betroth the people unto him in justice and righteousness. Yes, but in lovingkindness and in compassion and in faithfulness, and that is the relationship between man and his fellowmen which alone can make for the perfect society. Justice, righteousness, lovingkindness, compassion, faithfulness. This is the great principle of Jewish ethics. These are the two brilliant jewels in the diadem of Jewish morality.

