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Thou art the Man - The Ethical Challenge to the Individual, 1949.

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"THOU ART THE MAN" ★

WRHS
The Ethical Challenge to the Individual

AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

Sunday, February 27, 1949

When Nathan, the prophet, pointed his accusing finger at David, the King, who had sinned grievously and perpetrated the crime, and said to him: "Thou art the man", the prophet Nathan had only placed the responsibility where it belonged at the door of the perpetrator of the crime, even though this perpetrator were King, but he also indicated for all time Judaism's position as regards all ethical responsibility. It rests squarely with the individual - "Thou art the man".

The ten commandments are all in the second personal singular. "Thou shalt, thou shalt not; I am the Lord, Thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt; thou shalt; thou shalt not." The individual, man or woman, the individual stands in a direct and immediate moral relationship to his God. Man's relationship to God is direct and personal. And when man sins, he sins not only against himself and against society, but most especially he sins against his God. "Against Thee, Thee alone, have I sinned."

We read out of that beautiful 51st Psalm that man is, of course, a member of society. He lives out his life within a group or a class or a family. He lives out his life within a given environment. There is constant interaction between himself and others. And to that extent there is collective responsibility. We cannot altogether escape the rewards and punishments of the good and the evil and the world about us. Our personal history is part of the encompassing group history. There are individual mitigating circumstances for the conduct of the individual. And our great religion is fully aware of these extenuating circumstances. But when all is said and done, "Thou art the man". The moral imperatives are yours! The challenge is directed to you, and there is no escape. One cannot seek self-exculpation by ~~blaming~~ blaming society or class or family or environment in which he finds himself. One cannot hide morally behind others. When the first man, Adam, sinned, he hid from the Lord, but the voice of the Lord searched him out. "Where art thou?" There is no escape. For there is no ethical life possible

for mankind unless the individual is made to assume the full share of moral responsibility. Our religion exalts the individual in order to make him a free moral agent. The individual is very, very important in the philosophy of Judaism. He is not just a number. He is not just an insignificant ant in a heap. Every single human being is important because every single human being is made in the image of God. He is possessed of his own authentic status and dignity and worth.

The Rabbis say that every human being has the right to declare: "For my sake was the whole world created." This concept was not universally accepted in olden times, and certainly not in modern times. The noted French philosopher, Auguste Courte, declared that humanity alone is real. The individual is only an abstraction. Judaism rejects that point of view. Totalitarianism states things of the individual as an impersonal unit within the state or class. Judaism does not accept that point of view. Judaism maintains that the individual is possessed of rights which are bestowed upon him by God, and therefore, they are irrevocable rights which states and governments have no right to take away from the individual.

According to our religion, every man has a free road to God, and God finds his way to every man however humble. In God's scheme of things no man is dispensable. To quote the words of a great American poet, Walt Whitman: "An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make for a superb nation." One man is equal to a whole society if that man has in him the qualities which make for a great society. And therefore, every man has the right to be judged on his own merits, and therefore, every man is responsible for his own conduct.

Now this profound ethical concept was very slow to develop in ancient Israel. Originally the sense of group or race or national solidarity was so strong among our ancestors that the individual was completely absorbed. The moral re-

sponsibility of the group submerged the moral individual. Society was a monolithic structure. Thus, for example, if a generation sinner and merited God's punishment, it was assumed that this punishment would be visited upon the entire generation, on all men alike, without distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Thus, in the generation of the flood, everyone died, good and evil alike. God blotted out the whole of mankind, including all other living beings on earth. And again, in the generation of the tower, the insolence had become so great that they sought to build a tower to Heaven and God scattered the whole race of man, and confused their speech, and good and bad suffered the consequences of the collective guilt of the generation.

The Rabbis sensed the moral impropriety of such collective punishment and so declared that up to the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, the law of collective responsibility prevailed, but after the giving of the Torah, the individual was judged by his own record. But actually the change in this moral thought of our people did not take place at the time of the giving of the law, but much later - at the time of the break-up and the extinction of the national state and the destruction of the Temple in the 6th century before the common era. Something revolutionary happened then in the spiritual life of the people. The strong bond of community was relinquished. The nation had seriously disintegrated. The individual Jew now felt himself in a free land. The individual Jew would now adhere to his Judaism not as a matter of course, but as a matter of choice. His religious and moral responsibility were now personal and individualized. It was a matter of the individual's own determination whether he would adhere to the faith of Israel, and furthermore, that individual could not survive and did not wish to survive as a member of a Jewish community unless the collective burden of national guilt which brought about the destruction and the exile were first removed from him. There was no sense in going on if the children were to suffer

forever for the sins of their parents. The individual reached out for moral freedom and personal, individual relationship to his God, and personal and individual responsibility.

And a great searching of heart took place among the people. And for the first time the Temple which was to be the symbol of the survival of the Jewish state, was destroyed. Not only was the people in danger of extinction, but the faith of Israel and a new set of ideas was required to save Judaism. And the great searching of heart took place, and in the fires of that great national tribulation a new ethical thought was proclaimed. And no one defies that new ethical dogma. There is an amazing chapter in the Book of Ezekiel, Chapter 18, which discusses this problem of group versus individual responsibility. And the prophet Ezekiel pronounces the new dogma and the moral freedom of the individual, of "Thou art the man".

And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying: What mean ye, that ye use this proverb in the land of Israel, saying:
The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
And the children's teeth are set on edge?

As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is Mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

The soul that sinneth, it shall die; the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father with him, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son with him; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his way, saith the Lord God.

Squarely now the ethical responsibility was placed where it belonged and only to the extent that it belonged upon the individual. Thus, the individual man emerged disencumbered from the guilt of others, free and autonomous within his own ethical world, but within that independence and freedom, a very responsible moral

agent. That does not mean that even where the individual sins, punishment is inevitable. Not at all. Because even for the individual sinner, God has opened wide the gates of repentance to enable him to free himself from the burden of his own misdeeds. And so, this self-same prophet Ezekiel, in that self-same Chapter announces also the great doctrine of repentance, of a new start which God gives to every man provided that man sincerely seeks a new start in life:

But if the wicked turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all My statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his transgressions that he hath committed shall be remembered against him; for his righteousness that he hath done he shall live. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God; and not rather that he should return from his ways, and live?

My dear friends, the task of building the good society is the direct responsibility of every man and woman regardless of their gifts, or capacities or station in life. "Of everyone God demands according to the capacity of his life." In the great chapter in Deuteronomy we read that the covenant which God made with Israel was made with every individual. Of each the most is expected, according to the measure of his strength and no one but God can evaluate the true worth of a man's contribution to society. The stone which the builders rejected oftentimes becomes the chief corner stone. Who can measure the impact of one single human life? Who can measure the importance of a single human act? Who knows when a pebble is dropped into the water, how far the circles extend? Who but God? According to our sacred literature, it is the humble who inherit the earth.

Moral responsibility, my friends, is direct and immediate - is now. Do not say that some day when I become rich and have a lot of money, I will become a philanthropist. Do it now even if it means sharing a crust of bread. That is more acceptable to God. Do it now! Do it here in your own home, in your own shop, in your own circle

There are those who are very affable men and women away from home - out in society. In the home they manifest those qualities of selfishness and intolerance which would rob them of the acclaim of their fellowmen if they practiced these qualities away from home. Every virtue of considerateness, love, helpfulness, kindness - they begin here - they begin now. And you are the man!

That is the Jewish ethical concept. There are in charitable life those who are very big givers, but who neglect their own kith and kin, who ignore the responsibilities close at home. That is not the morality of Judaism. Here - now - you do it. You do it! And where there are no people around you who are doing it, that is not an excuse for you not to do it. The salvation of mankind rests with the exercise of the moral initiative of individual men and women who come to move masses to emulation. "Thou art the man."

Many of us are prone to accept these doctrines. They are true, but we do not think that they apply to us. They apply to the other fellow. I had occasion the other evening at the Temple Men's Club Brotherhood dinner to tell a story in connection with a remark of one of the other speakers who stated that when prejudice is discussed, it does not mean him, but the other fellow. The story is of an itinerant rabbi who came to a town late at night and tried to find a room, and all he could get was one already occupied by a General, which he gladly accepted. He asked to be called early in the morning to catch a train. It was dark when he was called and by mistake he put on the General's uniform. When he arrived at the station everyone saluted him. When he got on the train, there was a small mirror where he saw himself in the uniform of the General. "My God," the rabbi exclaimed, "they woke the wrong man. And now I am going to miss my train."

It is waking up the right people, that is the message - the ethical challenge of Judaism. And the right man is you, and the right man is I. The ethical challenge to the individual! You can be a builder of the good society regardless of your station, profession - you can be a builder of the good society. And to help build the good society is the one thing that makes life worth-while and significant.



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THE CHALLENGE TO THE INDIVIDUAL

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Sermon, The Temple, February 27,
1949

When Nathan, the prophet, pointed his accusing finger at David and said to him: "Thou art the man", he not only placed the responsibility where it belonged at the door of the perpetrator of the crime, even though ^{this} ~~the~~ perpetrator ^{was the} ~~were~~ king, but he also indicated for all time Judaism's position as regards ethical responsibility. It rests squarely with the individual: "Thou art the man."

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A great searching of heart took place among the people. The Temple, which was the symbol of the survival of the Jewish state, was destroyed. Not only were the people in danger of extinction, but so was the faith of Israel, and a new set of ideas was required to save Judaism. In the fires of that profound national tribulation a new ethical thought was proclaimed — ¹_mman's personal responsibility ¹_m and accepted.

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extract

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Extract
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