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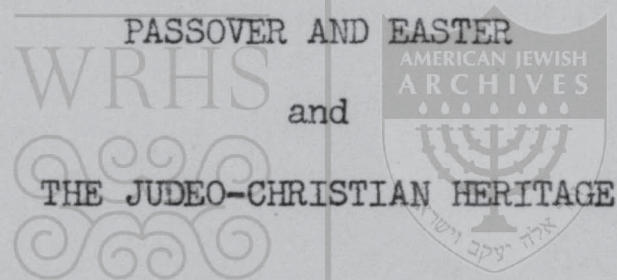
Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Passover and Easter and the Judeo-Christian Heritage, 1949.



Sunday, April 17, 1949

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At the very same time that we of the House of Israel are celebrating our Passover festival the Christian world is celebrating on this day the festival of Easter. These two festivals, Passover and Easter, have much in common. The name, Easter, is an Anglo-Saxon name. It is derived from an Anglo-Saxon deity, Eastre, whose festival, for she was a spring goddess, was celebrated at this season of the year. Passover, too, originally was a spring festival, and it is possible that the name, Passover, refers to the skipping of the new-born lambs in the spring of the year. The name for Easter in French and in Italian, Paques and Pasqua, which are derived from the Greek, Paska, bring clear to one's mind the fact that Easter has its origin in Passover. The two festivals are then both nature festivals celebrating the resurrection of nature in the spring of the year.

In the course of time both holidays came to be associated with great historic events which occurred also at this season of the year. In the case of the Jewish Passover, the deliverance from Egypt; in the case of Easter, the crucifixion and resurrection of the founder, the master of Christianity. These historic events were critical and decisive for the people of Israel and for the Christian community. Originally, the Christians, who were all Jews, celebrated Easter on the Passover; that is to say, on the 14th of Nisan. It was much later that Easter was fixed to be celebrated by the Christian world on the first Sunday following the full moon after the spring equinox. The Last Supper of Jesus, which has come to be the basis for the Eucharist and the Mass, was undoubtedly the Seder, and the bread and wine were undoubtedly the matzoh of the Passover, and the four cups of wine and the hymns of praise were undoubtedly the Psalms which we today recite on Seder evening.

The great and tragic climax in the life of the founder of Christianity took place around the Passover holiday. And therefore, the Easter story is forever associated with the Jewish Passover. So they have this, too, in common - Easter and Passover - but they have much else in common.

The whole saga of Jesus which receives its culmination in the story of Easter, is the story of a Jewish Messianic movement which occurred in Palestine in the first century of the Common Era. All the principal actors in this drama, with the exception of Pontius Pilate, were Jews. Those who accepted and those who rejected Jesus were all Jews. Their training, their upbringing, their way of life, their religious thought and their discipline were all derived from the synagogue and from the Torah. Jesus did not proclaim a new religion, and his early followers did not establish a new church. They constituted themselves into a Jewish Messianic fact. What Jesus taught to his disciples are the ethics of Judaism. He placed different emphases on one or another of these concepts. Jesus was not particularly interested in the legal interpretation of the Torah. Like the Prophets of Israel before him, Jesus was interested almost exclusively in the spiritual content of Judaism. And like some of these Prophets, he believed and he was strongly persuaded that the world was fast approaching its end, that the Kingdom of God or of Heaven was at hand and therefore, the ethical teachings which he propounded took on an apocalyptic urgency. There was an over-emphasis on things which men should do to be saved. And this over-emphasis is rather rare in Jewish religious thought. Jesus' doctrine of pacifism, for example, was not generally accepted by authoritative Judaism. Non-resisters to violence, turning of the other cheek, general negative attitude towards this earthly life, this thought of not taking any thought for tomorrow, this concept of loving one's enemies - those were in a way unique ethical emphases of Jesus which were the result of his conviction that the world was being brought to an end, that God Himself would set all things right and destroy everything that was wrong, and that, therefore, it was the duty and the opportunity of every human being who wished to enter the new order intensively to cleanse himself of all evil so that he will not be among those who are caught in the birth pangs of the Messianic times.

But apart from this over-emphasis, the teachings from Jesus derive from the Torah which was his Torah as it is ours. Professor Klausner summarizes his conclusions on the study of Jesus in the following way:

Yet, with Geiger and Graetz, one can aver, without laying ourselves open to the charge of subjectivity and without any desire to argue in defense of Judaism, that throughout the gospels there is not one item of ethical teaching which cannot be paralleled either in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, or in Talmudic and Midrashic literature of the period near the time of Jesus.

The Lord's Prayer, that famous prayer which epitomizes so much of the teachings of Jesus and is so precious to the heart of myriads of human beings - the Lord's Prayer is a condensed form of the Tefilah. It is a short prayer which the Rabbis in the time of Jesus were fond of giving to their disciples. And the disciples of every great teacher would receive his own version of this Tefilah, and so when the disciples of Jesus said to him, "Teach us how to pray," they wanted his version of the Tefilah, and he gave them, "Our Father Who art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name, etc."

Thus, while Jews could not and would not accept the mission of Jesus - and Jews never could get themselves quite ready to accept any Messiah at any time - while they longed for this Messianic time and while the orthodox believed that it would be ushered in by a personal Messiah, they always felt that this task of bringing in this Golden Age was a task for humanity as a whole and not for one man.

And while Jews, therefore, could not accept the Messianic mission of Jesus, and while in later ages a separate church was established, the Christian church, and while the thoughts in later times diverged and while throughout long centuries considerable conflict ensued, nevertheless Christianity and Judaism reflected in these two great holidays, they will forever have in common these basic fundamental ethical and spiritual teachings of Judaism.

And in times of persecution for Christians and for Jews, when Christianity as well as Judaism is threatened, the believer of Judaism and of Christianity come to discover their common tradition and the fundamental ideals which they share. The Nazis, for example, whose defilement we are rapidly forgetting to the hurt of future generations - this attack not merely upon a people but upon a complex of ideals - the Nazis set out not only to destroy the Jewish people but to uproot the spiritual heritage of that people, and hence, to destroy also the spiritual heritage of Christendom, to destroy not only the synagogue but the church as well. It was a nihilist movement aimed at the ethical ideals of Judaism and of Christianity. Hitler clearly averred that it was his intention to tear up Christianity and to annihilate it in Germany, and in the rest of the world. He said that one is either a German or a Christian. One cannot be both. It was Rosenberg who said, "Leave the hair-splitting to others. Whether it's the Old Testament or the New, or simply the sayings of Jesus, it's all the same old swindle. Instead of worshipping the blood of their quondam savior, they should worship the pure blood of the German people." It was the basic philosophy of Naziism.

And the hostility of communist dictatorship towards religion is a hostility directed to both Judaism and Christianity alike, and it is well known that they maintain religion as the opium of the people.

Now, why is it that dictators are so violently opposed to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and why must dictators always be opposed to it? In the first place, this Judeo-Christian tradition is grounded in faith in the individual, in the individual man. The message of his religion is directed to the individual. They see him as a free man whose most significant relationship during his life is not to his state or his class or his group, but to his God. Both the teachings of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount are addressed to individual human beings who have the capacity for growth, repentance, regeneration. Man has status in the Judeo-Christian tradition, dignity, intrinsic worth.

The modern trend, especially in dictatorships, has been in the direction of the monolithic society. The community counts for everything; the individual for nothing. It is the system that is important. It is the party which must receive the undivided loyalty of the individual. Never must the individual pit his own moral judgment against the order of the party or the state. The individual is taught not to want freedom. The Nazi storm troopers had a song: "We spit on freedom." The folk must be free. In our American democracy based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is assumed that no political organization can survive if it is not based on individual liberty. They are primary.

Now it is clear that if the individual is deprived of his freedom, he is also deprived of his responsibility. Children and slaves cannot judge for themselves. And so it is quite understandable when Germans were brought up before the military court for atrocities which they had committed, they could not understand why they were being tried. They had been taught not to interpose their own moral judgment between orders from above and their execution. Judaism and Christianity taught responsibility, primary responsibility towards one's God and conscience - in defiance, when necessary, of the group or the state or the class or the party. Man sometimes must take his position on a moral issue.

This submergence of the individual is brutalizing the human race. The Jewish tradition maintained that man was master of his destiny within the framework of freedom. And the Christian tradition was that he who is free in God, even though he be a servant, is free indeed, that man must seek freedom even when his environment enshackles him in the spiritual sovereignty of his own soul. The modern world is rejecting this Judeo-Christian tradition. And this Judeo-Christian tradition was created in faith in the equality of all men. Master and servant are equal in the sight of God. Every man is of divine lineage. These religions proclaimed universal equality of all souls. There was no special race or privilege, only responsibility. Judaism and Christianity throughout their centuries of propaganda aim to make human beings

not race conscious but God conscious. There is no race literature in Judaism. There are no Nuremburg laws in Judaism. There were no academies established in Israel to prove the racial superiority of the Jewish people over others. And Christianity preached the brotherhood of man. "The God that made the world and all nations thereon, He being Lord of heaven and earth, hath made of our blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth." All mankind is of one blood.

Now from time to time blood cults arise not only in Nazi Germany - here in the United States, too. For generations we were afflicted with a race myth, and it has not entirely disappeared from the thoughts and from the religion of millions of our citizens. All such doctrines serve as an excuse for segregation, exploitations, legal disabilities, for downright persecution of human beings and are in violent defiance of the tradition of Moses and Jesus - the Judeo-Christian tradition. Those who are fighting the civil rights bill in the Congress of the United States are enemies of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Tomorrow they may be reciting in their churches the chapters of the Old and of the New Testament. This tradition, too, is grounded, therefore, in the ideal of peace. It was universal peace preached by Isaiah and by Micah, and pacifism by Jesus.

In 1936 the official organ of the German ministry of war published the following proclamation which was a synthesis of all their thinking: "War is the culmination of human pursuits. War is the natural and closing phase of an evolution in the history of mankind. War is the father of all things." Peace was only a tactical necessity, an interlude between wars. War is the destiny of mankind. The Judeo-Christian tradition denounces this heresy.

But in its denunciation of war it has been less successful, for even in our own day we have reconciled ourselves to war as almost inevitable. We prepare for war, our entire foreign policy is guided by the ultimate of war.

These are the basic things which Judaism and Christianity have in common: resentment of oppression and tyranny; mandates of forgiveness, pity, compassion, and

love; the ideal of sharing; purity in family life, the sanctity of the home, the clean heart, the clean mind, the clean hand. All of these ideals came from Sinai. They also came from Golgotha.

My good friends, a great tradition is expressed not always in terms of its ideals but in terms of the persons who are the foremost spokesmen of these traditions. The Christian tradition is symbolized in the personality of Jesus. The Jewish tradition, the Passover tradition, is symbolized in the personality of Moses. These are the two titanic figures whose shadows fall against these great holidays of Easter and Passover. Moses, the liberator; Moses, the first great of history whose consuming passion was to knock off the shackles of servitude. Freedom, that is the passion of Moses - freedom and law, freedom within law. So Moses is the law-giver, too. He made them free and exalted them in the freedom of the law. Moses, this man of superb spiritual courage who not only dared to face Pharoah, but who had the courage to face his own people when they rebelled against God. He had the courage to denounce them. But even as he had the courage to challenge and to denounce them, he had the great compassion to love them and when God had resolved to destroy that people, he pleaded with God: "They have sinned, but do not erase them from Thy book; rather, erase me from Thy book." Courage to offer his own life for his people, for his ideal. That is the superb figure which towers above the festival of Passover.

And in Jesus this superb figure which towers over the festival of Easter - another Jew - who has inspired generations of men throughout the world, a man who also wished to free human beings from sin and guilt, and led them to goodness and peace; a man who had the courage to challenge the powerful wrong-doers of his day, to drive the money changers out of the Temple, to face opposition at the behest of his dream and vision, the man who was prepared to die for his vision, but on the cross pleaded for the forgiveness of those who brought death upon him: "Forgive them for they know not what they do."

These two men represent the Judeo-Christian tradition in the world. They can be the inspiration of a forward-marching mankind, a mankind moving forward to beckoning horizons of brotherhood and peace and justice in the world. And is it not high ^{their} them that these two great religions should unite ~~and~~ ~~force~~ ~~their~~ and cooperate in this world which is challenging them both. Is it not time that being thus endangered together, together discover their common heritage upon earth, should forget rivalry, bigotry, and unite in the service of God and in the service of man.

