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One Hundred Years of Religious and Cultural History, 1949.

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ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Sunday, November 13, 1949

With the end of the Ghetto era the Jewish people faced a spiritual and cultural crisis which involved also a crisis of survival. When the Jews lived, prior to that period, in isolated existence, it was spiritually sheltered in its own traditions. It was secure in its own way of life. And whereas there was always the danger, of course, of physical extermination at the hands of enemies, there was no danger whatsoever of internal collapse and disruption. But when the Ghetto walls fell, the Jewish community, no longer segregated and insulated, lay open to the sweep of alien cultures, the allurements of an attractive alien way of life, and it felt the full impact of European enlightenment and rationalism which in so many ways were anti-traditional and anti-dogmatic. In other words, political equality, which the Jews increasingly achieved during the 19th century, the free movement and co-mingling with the non-Jewish world, freer economic and secular educational opportunities - all these meant a lessening of Jewish particularism and a rapid assimilation.

If the Jewish community, therefore - that is, Judaism and the Jewish people - was to survive these forces of disillusion, a new orientation was imperative. Satisfactory adjustments were to be made to the new culture, the new scientific temper of the age, the new political and economic conditions generally. And heroic efforts were made, not all of one kind, not all with the same degree of success, to achieve these imperative adjustments. And this process, in a sense, this process of finding a sound rationale of Jewish existence in a modern world is still going on. In a sense the process began, tentatively, of course, with Moses Mendelssohn at the close of the 18th century, but it gained momentum during the Napoleonic era when the armies of the French Republic, carrying the slogans of the French Revolution of liberty, equality and fraternity swept through many countries of Western and Central Europe, and this process reached high tide during the century which we are considering, the century between 1850 and 1950.

Now, many Jews during this period found their solution to this problem in total assimilation and baptism. They left the Jewish fold, some of them by the front door of baptism, and some of them by the rear door of inter-marriage, and a gradual drifting away from the Jewish community. Some Jews acted out of considerations of quick preferment and advancement for their careers - it was easier to get ahead as non-Jews. Members of the Jewish bourgeoisie, the upper classes especially, those who were avid for social recognition, were the most active in disencumbering themselves of their Jewish affiliations. Wealthy Jews or their children are frequently among the most vulgar of social climbers. Other Jews saw no reason for continuing Judaism and a separate existence of the Jewish people in an age of universalism, of growing brotherhood and internationalism. Why should the Jew maintain his separate identity in a world which was rapidly becoming one world, one religion for all mankind? By surrendering their Judaism, they saw themselves, in a sense, as the forerunners of this new universalism and the enlightened champions of this new emergent and unified humanity, the humanity that would forever be freed from the dark divisions of race and nation and religion.

For ^{very} many people during this 100 years, especially the first half of it - and not only Jews - felt as though they were on the threshold of great new beginnings. There was an apocalyptic and messianic mood abroad in the world at the close of the 19th century.

The great organizer of Reform Judaism in the United States, Isaac M. Wise, in 1875 declared:

Before our very eyes the world moves onward into the golden age of a redeemed humanity and the fraternal union of nations, as our prophets thousands of years ago have predicted. We are fast approaching the universal democratic republic with civil and religious liberty, cemented by the world's advanced intelligence. This century settles old accounts. It is progressive.

And many, many people - Jews and non-Jews - felt the same way about it. And so many Jews, feeling that this new age of universalism was around the corner, rushed headlong into the abandonment of their Jewish loyalties and allegiances. The number

of Jewish baptisms increased rapidly in Western Europe during the closing decades of the 19th century, as did the number of inter-marriages. And of course, an inter-marriage almost inevitably led to the total assimilation of the children of the first generation or the second generation. Between 1880 and 1905 the proportion of mixed marriages in the Scandinavian countries - Denmark, Norway, Sweden - the proportion of mixed marriages to Jewish marriages was about 70%. In Germany in 1931, the year of Hitler's advent into power, there were 2,480 marriages with both parties Jewish, and 6,370 Jewish men and women married non-Jews. The same is true in the large cities of Europe - in Budapest, Paris and elsewhere. Jewish intellectuals, artists, professional men, professors in colleges and universities, big industrialists sought to cover up their Jewish origin. That was in vogue in many circles.

But not all Jews sought that kind of a solution for the problem - the solution of escape, which was really no escape as later events proved. For anti-Semitism caught up with these people even with their children and their grandchildren. An heroic effort was made both by the Jews in Eastern and in Western Europe to modernize Jewish life and thought so as to make it more attractive to the new generation and to keep them loyally attached to the faith and the life of their people. It was felt that Judaism needed modernization, both in doctrine and in practice, and that Jewish life could well afford to slough off some of the unpleasant accretion of the Dark Ages. So a movement to reform Judaism began in Germany early in the 19th century, and by the beginning of the century which we are considering - 1850 to 1950 - reform had made considerable progress. It was at this time that the great figures of Reform Judaism made their appearance - Geiger, Holdheim, Einhorn, Stein, Adler, Philippson, Hirsch.

It was about this time that three historic conferences were held by the lay and rabbinic leaders of German Jewry to define the new conceptions and to agree, if possible, upon basic revision of Jewish doctrine and ceremonial practice. And at these conferences many matters which are still subjects of discussion and disagreement among

the Jews of the world came up for discussion. They discussed them, not with an eye for weakening Judaism, but an eye for strengthening it. Questions such as the authority of tradition in Jewish life, the value of ceremonies, the use of Hebrew in prayer and instruction, the revision of the Prayer Book, the role of Israel in the world, Jewish nationalism, the restoration of Palestine - all these subjects were most vigorously, and at times, most furiously, discussed at these religious conferences held about the beginning of the century under consideration. And synagogues in many parts of Western Europe began to revise their ritual and their order of service. The vernacular was introduced in the Prayer Book and became the language of the sermon. Parts of the services no longer relevant to life were eliminated from the Prayer Book like the service of the Prayer for the Restoration of the Sacrificial Cult. The organ was introduced in the service; the music was modernized and beautified. The family pew was introduced; the separation of men and women in the synagogue was abandoned. New methods for the instruction of the youth were adopted. The second day holiday was abandoned. The mandatory character of the dietary laws was surrendered. And all this was done not without considerable controversy and sharp division of opinion. Some felt that the reformers went too far, especially in the fields of the abandonment of Hebrew altogether and in the abandonment of prayers for national restoration. For most of the reformers of Western Europe were anti-nationalists; that is, anti-Jewish nationalists. They were not anti-German nationalists - very strong nationalists and patriots, as far as Germany was concerned.

Simultaneously a new orthodoxy developed whose champion was a man of the type of Sampson, Raphael Hirsch - a new orthodoxy which saw no irreconcilability between the strict, traditional Judaism and modern civilization, and which, like neo-Catholicism, insisted on maintaining the whole tradition of Judaism within the framework of modern life and insisted that that was quite possible. And midway Conservative Judaism appeared on the scene which recognized the necessity for some change, but which did not go along with what they regarded as the excessive reforms of the reformers. It was

in the New World rather than in Western Europe that Reform Judaism made its greatest advances. By 1873 the Union of American Congregations was founded, and in 1875 the Hebrew Union College, the training ground for reform rabbis, was established in Cincinnati by its founder, Dr. Isaac M. Wise.

How far these efforts to modernize Judaism in order to solve the basic problem of adjustment succeeded, it is as yet difficult to say. Certainly, it stopped a headlong rush which was developing towards apostasy and escape. There were other factors which assisted in this curb upon the headlong rush away from Judaism - the rapid development of anti-Semitism, the disillusionment with enlightenment, and the Nazi experiences sobered many Jews. The millennium was not around the corner. They realized that in a sense there was no escape open to them, and also, the increasing and ultimately triumphant march towards the establishment of the Jewish State was responsible for replacing self-effacement and depreciation with a great measure of self-pride and dignity in Jewish life.

There is today, at the close of this century, under observation considerable religious indifference among our people, just as there is in the non-Jewish world, but simultaneously there is also a very active congregational life in almost every community in our country, and synagogues and temples are increasing in numbers, and Jewish schools and academies. It is yet too early to strike any balance and to draw any basic conclusions.

While Reform Judaism arose in Western Europe, similar, though in many ways dissimilar, movement at modernization called the Haskala movement developed among the Jews of Eastern Europe. There the Jews lived in very compact masses. Jewish life was far more intensive and concentrated than in Western Europe; in fact, in Eastern Europe the Jews constituted a distinctive nationality group among the many nationality groups in that part of the world, and they were so treated, and they were so recognized in the peace treaties following the First World War. The Jews of Eastern Europe

never regarded themselves and were never regarded by their neighbors as merely members of a religious community. They were definitely a nationality community. And when modernism began to ferment among them, it took on a somewhat different complexion than it did among the Jews of Western Europe. It was not principally theologically motivated. Haskala was not a movement to reform Judaism or Jewish worship or the Jewish prayer book. It was a humanistic movement, a movement to make the Jew more modern in culture, in dress, in his outlook, and to end medievalism in Jewish life among them. It was a movement for a modern system of Jewish education to make the Jew, as one of the poets of that era said, "man outside his home while a Jew inside his home". And this movement was intensely Hebraic in character, unlike the movement in Western Europe, and intensely nationalistic. And it was responsible for a new revival, for a new flowering of Hebrew literature, and later on, of Yiddish literature, and it produced a notable galaxy of writers, of poets, dramatists, journalists, and it led directly to the remarkable renaissance of Hebrew culture which now is receiving its high expression in the State of Israel.

Now, both in Eastern and in Western Europe our century saw also an effort to present Judaism, its history, its life, its literature, through scientific investigation and in a scholarly manner. A new science of Judaism developed in order that Jews and non-Jews may understand more accurately and more sympathetically the true character of Judaism, its existence, its contribution, its achievements. Great scholars like Graetz and Zunz and Jost and Krochmal - hundreds of others, organized, systematized and clarified an accumulated Jewish knowledge of the centuries in a remarkable way.

So much for the specific problems which the Jews as Jews had to face during this century. But in common with non-Jews, Judaism had to face also the onslaught of the rationalism and the scientific materialism of the last century. This last century was the Age of Reason, the age of science "par excellence", and it seemed to spell the doom of all religion; Especially was the advent of Darwinism in the early part

of our century - the Origin of Species appeared in 1859 - especially was the advent of the theory of evolution a shock to orthodox theology because the theory of the evolution of species challenged the accepted religious doctrine of the special creation of man, which was based on Scriptures. According to the Biblical account, man was a special creation of God, and differed from the very beginning from all other species. But Darwin maintained and proved that all organic forms of life, was a result of a long series of development under the influence of environment, and that man himself is descendant or ascendant from earlier and lowlier forms of life - descendant from a favored variety of the ape. Darwin maintained that the operative factor of evolution was and is natural selection of variation which aid the species in the struggle for survival, but according to religion, the operative cause in all life is the will of God.

And so, all the great dogmas of religion, the dogma of design, of revelation, of free will, of the divine nature of man, of the literal inspiration of Scriptures - all of these dogmas of religion seemed to collapse under the assault of this new revolutionary biologic theory which affected also political and sociological theories and philosophic thought of the day. It all seemed to collapse. Men jumped to the conclusion that God is dead and religion was only organized as superstition. There is no mind in the universe, no purpose, no world. Many drew a very pessimistic conclusion. There was a wave of suicide that swept over Europe following the promulgation, propagation of this new doctrine of evolution. And others felt that now that God is dead, man is God - man descendant from a favorite species of apes, and that science would soon give man all power over nature and reveal to him all the mysteries of the universe and make him happy and contented.

Later on in our century the science of psychoanalysis seemed to reinforce the science of biology in scientific materialism and in leveling the battlements of religion. The avowed aim of psychoanalysis was to relieve neurotic patients by bringing

to consciousness their unconscious motivation. Its aim was to help men to self-understanding and emotional maturity. It was a new technique of psycho-therapy, but like some other new sciences and new approaches to old problems, it soon developed a metaphysics of its own which had really nothing to do with it, no more than historic materialism had anything to do with Communism. Many religious sects and theologies preached, and their followers practiced a Communism far more fundamental and rigid than the Communism of the Soviet Union today, but they derived their inspiration not from historic materialism, but rather, from spiritual idealism. It happens very often in the development of human ideas that certain specific truths come to be presented with the authority of a new metaphysics which is not at all essentially related to that specific truth, just as historic materialism is in no way related to basic Communism, and Atheism is in no way related to psychoanalysis. But Freud maintained that religious faith is an illusion and religion is only a manifestation of a neurosis.

And so Judaism, in common with all other religions, felt itself on the defensive for a considerable portion of this century under review.

But the close of our century sees scientific materialism pretty well discredited. Science has learned much since the days of Darwin and much about its own limitations. A scientist has recently expressed it as follows: "There is no mystery of the physical world which does not point to a mystery beyond itself. All highroads of the intellect, all by-ways of theory and conjecture lead ultimately to an abyss that human ingenuity can never span. For man is involved in everything which he tries to understand, and man is his own greatest mystery."

Sir James Jeans, the famous physicist and astronomer, wrote a few years ago:

Today there is a wide measure of agreement which on the physical side of science approaches almost to unanimity, that the stream of knowledge is heading towards a non-mechanical reality; the universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine. Mind no longer appears as an accidental intruder into the realm of matter; we are beginning to suspect that we ought rather to hail it (that is, mind) as the creator and governor of the realm of matter - not of course, our individual minds, but the mind in which the atoms out of which our individual minds have grown, exist as thoughts.

And science, too, has not brought to man that peace and happiness which it seemed to promise so lavishly a generation or so ago. It has brought phenomenal discoveries and inventions to mankind, but no peace, no happiness, no justice, no brotherhood, no one world. For when all is said and done, it is not concerned with these problems at all. The attainment of these objectives lies not in any laboratory; they lie in the heart of man. And today there is no triumphant optimism in the world in spite of the phenomenal achievements of science - rather cynicism and despair, and the victories of science seem somehow to be barren, and mankind is coming to understand today what religionists of the true spirit have always maintained - there is no conflict between religion and science. They are not two separate and irreconcilable interests of man. Evolution is no enemy of religion. The Bible itself which, after all, is not scientifically the text book of Judaism - it is morally and spiritually the text book of Judaism; the Bible itself speaks of man created out of lowly dust. The theory of evolution, if properly understood, is a source of great moral idealism, that man can rise from the ape and in the course of successive struggles and aspirations to reach higher levels, become a Sophocles and a Dante and a Shakespeare and an Einstein and a Beethoven, is a tremendous source of hope to mankind! It points the way to still further, unlimited advances of which man may be capable.

Psychoanalysis is no enemy of religion. It is one of the ways of healing sick souls of men. It does not and cannot impinge upon the domain of religion. Religion is based on the belief that all life and all purpose derive from one creative mind, the mind of God, and that man is of God and in His image, and that man's way to meaningful existence and contentment is the way which leads to God through justice, kindness, truth, brotherhood, peace. And no science has and no science can contradict these basic postulates in the spiritual life of man - religion.

And so, at the close of our century, 100 years of religious development, I think religion generally feels more confident, less on the defensive. It is confident that

it will survive, and Judaism, too, is confident that it will survive. Certainly, the basic truths, the fundamental ethical and moral ideals of Judaism are eternal. Whether Judaism will survive as a dynamic force in the lives of Jews - that depends upon the Jews themselves. Nobody's underwritten that. There is no automatic survival of a system or thought if there are no disciples willing to live by that system and to practice it.

You may ask me, will democracy survive? Well, the principles of democracy, the basic ideals are eternal - the freedom of man, the equality of man, the inalienable rights of man - these are eternal ideals. Whether democracy will survive in our every-day world among ourselves, in the various nations which constitute mankind today, nobody knows. Democracy has been defeated time and again in the last 20, 30 years in many parts of the world. You cannot answer the question, will democracy survive. All that we can say is, we believe in democracy as a way of life. It is precious to us. We want to conserve it for ourselves, for our children. We will do our utmost to conserve it in society. And by that very resolution and by that very practice of democracy, we help to perpetuate it in the world as a system of life.

And the same thing with Judaism. No one can say whether Judaism will survive among Jews in the world. All that we can say if we believe it is that Judaism is dear and precious to us; it is the kind of faith and the kind of a way of life that we want and because we want it and we believe in it, we will do our utmost to strengthen it, to nurture it, to teach it, to exemplify it in the world. And by that very act of so doing and so believing, we contribute to the perpetuation of Judaism.

And I think that we are entering the new century, Jews of the world, those who have come through the winnowing forces of the last generation which destroyed a third of our people, and the Jews of Israel - I think we are entering the new century with a greater confidence in our faith, in ourselves with a determination to make this marvelous, glorious faith, which has come through nearly 4,000 years of all the vicissitudes of fortune, to make that faith pregnant, beautiful, meaningful in our lives, in the lives of our children and in the societies in which we live. If that is our

resolve, as I believe it is the resolve of many faithful ones, then the future of Judaism is very bright and very attractive.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Sermon, The Temple

November 13, 1949



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Sunday, November 13, 1919

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