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The Jewish Religion, 1950.

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THE JEWISH RELIGION - ITS ESSENCE

November 19, 1950

In speaking of the Jewish religion, we should bear in mind that we are speaking of a religion that is very, very old - nearly 4,000 years old - a religion which spans perhaps four-fifths of the recorded history of mankind, and it must, therefore, be very clear to us that such a religion so old must have changed and evolved and progressed through its long history or it could not have survived. Static religions, like all static human institutions, perish and pass away. It should also be very clear to us that this religion must be possessed of some permanent, vital and valid and universally applicable truths to have outlasted all the varying forms of social life during this long period of time and all the changes and advancements in human thought in the last 4,000 years.

Both these things are true of Judaism. Judaism has changed through the centuries. In fact, change and progress are characteristic of Judaism. Judaism seems to have been possessed of a rare genius to accept other ideas and re-mold them, to make new adjustment without, at the same time, sacrificing its own intrinsic and distinctive essence. Judaism has changed and has remained in its essential teachings constant, a continuous and identifiable reality, spiritual oneness.

The origins of our religion are quite humble and are lost in the mists of time. All human activities are of humble origin - all science, all art, architecture, music, painting, sculpture - whatever activity one may think of, its beginnings are very, very humble, very crude, very primitive. And our Bible retains quite a number of these low-strata/^{as it were}of beliefs and religious practices which were common to our ancestors in the dim, distant days as they were common to all ancient peoples. Our Bible, we find, frequently admonishes our forefathers to "put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river in Egypt, and serve ye the Lord". Our Bible calls attention not alone to the worship of many other gods among our forefathers, many "Baalim" of the heathen, but also the many superstitious practices in which our forefathers indulged - magic and divination and fertility rights and sacrifices, even

human sacrifices. But the voice of the Bible which admonishes our forefathers against these beliefs and these practices is already the voice of the higher religious consciousness of our people. It is the voice of what we may call the authentic Judaism, the permanent quality of the religion of our people. That Judaism which has evolved early - earlier by far than among any other people - into the kind of a spiritual and prophetic faith which it is today and which has been for a long time.

When we, therefore, speak of the essence of the Jewish religion, we should be thinking of our religion at its highest and perfected expressions, not in terms of its humble origins. We must think of the Judaism of the prophets, that amazing group of spiritual geniuses who lived between the 8th and the 5th centuries before the Common Era, who reached the very peaks of religious idealism and the very depths of spiritual insight.

Now, there have been other peaks reached by our religion since that time of the prophets - high plateaus reached by sages and seers and Rabbis - in the subsequent centuries, but the real heroic creative period of Judaism was the period of the prophets which witnessed the very highest peaks reached and which saw the main contours of our religion, as it were, defined, and the goals set for all time. It is in that Judaism that we find what we may call the essence of our faith. But it should be remembered that the essence of a faith is not its totality. It is not necessarily its full substance, or its historic personality. You may say that the essence of a man is his thinking mind because that does represent man at his highest, but man is much more than a thinking mind.

What then is the prophetic essence of our religion? Here again we should bear in mind that the purpose of religion is not to explain the universe. Insofar as any explanations are at all possible, and it is doubtful whether any real explanations of the basic reality of the cosmos are at all possible - but insofar as any explanations are available, they must be sought in the fields of science and scientific research. Religion does not attempt to explain the universe, but to define our proper

attitude towards it. Religion evaluates. What are we to think of this universe, and of our place in it? Has existence any meaning? Is the world a blind mechanism or is it an ordered, a universe informed by purpose and guided by mind? And what is the destiny of man in this universe? And what contributes to the proper achievement of man's destiny? In other words, what is good for man and what is evil for man? Now, these are the subjects of all classic religions. Judaism is not a philosophy, strictly speaking, although there have been very great Jewish philosophers, but as philosophers who sought to interpret Judaism philosophically. Judaism is not a system of metaphysics, a system of thought about the universe and its phenomena, or speculation about it. It is not concerned with theoretic questions really. Judaism is a set of positive, moral evaluations leading to a set of compelling moral mandates.

The prophets of Israel, for example, were not concerned with proving the existence of a first cause, nor with describing scientifically how God created heaven and earth. Dr. Leo Baech, in his very interesting book on Judaism, makes this very correct observation: "The Israelite genius did not move from nature to man, as later in the case of the Greeks, but it moved from man to nature." The prophets began their declarations, their pronouncements with the words:

"Thus saith the Lord". That was their starting point. It was the axiom. When a prophet like Isaiah declares: "Lift up your eyes on high and see Who created all this," what he was saying was not providing a proof for the existence of God. To him that required no proof any more than his own existence required a proof, but what he was trying to call attention to was to the power and majesty of God, that people may see in the ordered universe, in the majesty and the grandeur of the heavens and the earth, a power so great and so perfect, a power that never wearies nor grows faint, so that men should have confidence in that power, that that God will not forsake them or leave them to destruction.

Or when the Psalmist, for example - and the Psalms, dear friends, are prophecies set to music - that's what the Psalms are, the message of the prophets who later on, as it were, restated by these poets and singers, accompanied to the sound of the harp and the psaltery. Lyrically prophecy expresses itself at its best and its highest in the 150 Psalms which go to make up our Book of Psalms.

When the Psalmist said,

"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork," he, too, was not endeavoring to provide some argument for a belief in God, but what he was expressing poetically was the thought that just as the heavens and the earth and everything that one sees is perfect and beautiful and majestic, so is the moral law,

"the law of God". The moral law is perfect and majestic.

Judaism proclaimed on the strength of moral intuition or mystic insight or revelation or the inspired interpretation of human experience - Judaism proclaimed that this universe is not anarchy but order, not chaos but cosmos, that a spirit of boundless power and boundless goodness fashioned it, that this world is not an architectless or mindless mechanism devoid of personality or of purpose, but that it is the creation, the purposeful creation of a master mind and a master architect. And just as this God, boundless in power and boundless in wisdom and goodness, fashioned all things according to his will and assigned to each its place, its function, its attributes, so also did He fashion man and assigned to him his unfolding position in the scheme of things and endowed him with functions and special capacities. God did not create the universe in order to destroy it. "And God saw all that He made, and behold, it was very good. Thus saith God Who created the heavens and the earth."

"God did not create the world for chaos."

"He fashioned it

so that it might be everlastingly inhabited." Nor did God create man in order to defeat him ultimately in helplessness and in ruin. God wishes man to live and grow and progress and prosper, and there is a way by which man can grow, live, progress and prosper. That is the good way, the way acceptable to God and accordant to the highest interest of man, the way of justice and love, the way of brotherhood and charity and peace.

At our last service, you will recall, I spoke of the J. Blyden. He
Essence I said that

The essence of Judaism ~~then, friends~~, may be summed up in two simple phrases,
~~faith in God and faith in man~~, faith in the perfect God and faith in the perfectable
man. ^{Judaism proclaims} Faith in a God, Who is not an impersonal and ^{non-}moral force of nature as were the
gods of ~~the ancient Greeks or Romans~~ all the ancient peoples - but ~~of~~ a God who
controls all the forces of nature; ~~faith in the God who is not nature~~, but ^{its} ~~the~~ cre-
ator ~~of nature and its governor~~, including of course, also, ~~the nature of man~~; a God
who is everywhere but whose completeness is ~~not~~ exhausted ^{no} anywhere.

"The heaven and the heavens of heaven cannot
contain Thee." Nevertheless, "His glory fills the entire uni-
verse." A God who is far and ^{yet} near, beyond and ever-present, exalted and yet

"God is near unto all those who call upon Him." A God who is beyond
all time and ~~a~~ space, and yet, is the dwelling place of all of us.

"Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations." ~~This is~~
~~what the great Isaiah proclaims and the other prophets.~~ "Thus saith the High and
Lofty One, that inhabiteth eternity Whose name is Holy. I dwell in the high and holy
place, but also with him that is of a humble and contrite spirit, to revive the spir-
it of the humble and to revive the spirit of the contrite ones."

^{Judaism proclaims} Faith in a God, ~~a God~~ who is One, the God of all creation, the God of all man-
mind - white and black ~~and~~ rich and poor ~~and~~ saints and sinners; - a God who demands
justice of those who would worship Him, ^{and love and humility} a God whose especial wards are the weak and
the handicapped, the poor, the denied and the dispossessed, ^{of the earth} a God who abhors oppres-
sion and exploitation, who ^{desires} ~~wants~~ men to be free and at peace, to be forgiving and com-
passionate; a God who forgives sin and evil-doing and ^{where} ~~summons~~ the sinner unto the very
day of his death to repent and ~~to~~ return. ^{Judaism proclaims} Faith in a God was the essence of Judaism;

^{is an oft-repeated phrase in our liturgy} ~~faith in a God who is both king, ~~father~~ and father.~~ "Our Father,
our King." "Even as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord hath pity upon us." ~~A~~
God to whom we can call and be answered, a God whom we ^{may} ~~can~~ trust even when we walk in
the valley of the shadow of death. "I shall not be afraid for Thou art with me. Thy

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~~rod and Thy staff, they comfort me."~~ ~~A~~ God who is a refuge from the ~~heat~~ of adversity, ~~from~~ ^{and} defeat, from the terrors of the unknown, from ~~from~~ ^{and} sorrow and bereavement; a God who is the strength of ~~human beings~~ for the struggle of life and for the ~~building~~ ^{the good society} ~~the good fight~~, the shield and ~~the~~ ^{the} buckler, ~~an~~ ever-present help in trouble. ~~"Even when~~
~~my father and my mother forsake me, God will take me up."~~

This ~~then~~ ^{first essential} is the ~~essence~~ of Judaism - faith in a personal, just and loving God who is One and Everlasting - ~~A~~ perfect God.

~~And the second part of this same essential faith doctrine of Judaism is faith in man, in the perfectability of man. Man is not perfect. Man can never be God. Man is mortal, finite, limited. Man is a creature of God. He is neither all-knowing nor~~ ^{nor even will be.} ~~all-powerful. Frequently, very frequently, the teachers of our religion attempted to remind man of these limitations of his life in order to save him from the sin of pride and arrogance and hard-heartedness. Nevertheless, according to the doctrine of Judaism, man's state is a very exalted one, His is a high status in creation and his is a noble destiny. God created him in His own image. One of the rabbis said, this is the core of the whole Torah; this is the summary, the whole ethical content of life, that man is made in the image of God. God breathed His spirit into him. Even as God is a personality, so is man a personality.~~ ^{man is very important in God's scheme and his destiny a very noble one.}
~~"Be ye holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy."~~ ^{man} God set high goals for man and equipped him with intellectual and ~~with~~ ^{power} spiritual ~~tools~~ to achieve them, ^{Man can have freedom} and God gave man free ~~out of necessity, knowledge out of ignorance and good out of evil.~~ ^{out of necessity, knowledge out of ignorance and good out of evil.} ~~dom of choice and adequate power to move forward. In the concept of Judaism is very important. His life is sacred. The life of every individual is sacred. Every individual has the right to say, "For my own sake was the whole world created." Man is co-creator with God. And in the concept of our religion man can climb upward. Man should believe in himself. Man has power to rise to ever higher levels.~~

To be sure, man will never be perfect. Perfection belongs to God. But man ^{he does not really know} should reach out for what seems to be the unattainable for he ~~will be rewarded by much~~ ^{that is not} ~~that is attainable, and which he thinks is unattainable.~~ And in the very quest of what

seems to be beyond his reach, man will find ^{deaf} ~~supreme~~ satisfaction ^{much enrichment} and ~~ennoblement~~. If ~~he~~ ^{mind and soul} fails, why that is ~~no~~ ^{not a} sin. Let him try again. ^{God forgives sin.} Sin is forgiven by God. The one unpardonable sin is the sin of not trying, ^{of} not aspiring ^{of not reaching out for the better} to ever higher moral levels. ^{and nobler life.} Man is ~~perfectible~~. ^{Man is perfectible. Society is perfectible.}

In the concept of Judaism the world is not running down into defeat, ~~disaster~~ and annihilation. ^{manhood} Quite the contrary. The world that is a world of man is moving forward in spite of temporary checks and set-backs, moving forward to a golden ~~era~~ ^{age} yet to come. ^{to} "the ultimate days" "when the earth ^{shall} ~~will~~ be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea". ^{This is} That's the Messianic hope of ^{Judaism.} ~~our people.~~ Some day, ~~some day~~, all that is wrong and crooked ~~and ugly and mean and cruel~~ ^{of justice} ~~is the~~ world will vanish and pass away, and a ~~beautiful~~ ^{freedom and} time will come ~~of peace and brother-~~ hood and ^{peace} ~~justice~~, "when each man shall dwell under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make him afraid".

And finally, dear friends, the concept of our religion and as a very essential part of our religion, is the doctrine that man realizes himself and fulfills his destiny through the quest of knowledge, through the quest of beauty, and above all, through the quest of the good life, by seeking justice and peace and freedom actively, by being prepared, if necessary, to sacrifice for the attainment of these objectives.

Man fulfills his highest destiny. Essentially Judaism, as far as man is concerned, is grounded in morality. It is possibly through his moral sensitiveness which was greater than other people in antiquity that the Jew came to his conception of the one just and universal God. And when Judaism proclaimed the revolutionary doctrine,

"Love thy neighbor as thyself", he linked it up with his conviction that it is the universal father of all men, the creator of the world, who demanded it of him. "Love thy neighbor as thyself for I am the Lord."

God is worshipped not through ritual particularly, not through sacrifices, not through cult, not through mere observances. "Thou hast been told, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee; only to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with Thy God." That's religion. That's Judaism. That is what all the

great religions of mankind that have survived derived from Judaism. That's the impulse which the genius of the Jew set to work in the world. The objectives of this type of religion have certainly not yet been achieved and are not likely to be achieved tomorrow or the next day. The peaks have not yet been reached but the peaks are there summoning, challenging, ~~everylastin~~ everlasting. Mankind will have to climb along the mounting terraces of experience, climb, however arduous the ascent may be until it reaches those sun-drenched peaks which Judaism set as the moral and spiritual goals and sanctuaries of mankind.

The quest of knowledge - very important - Judaism always fostered learning and all science. Our religion has never been an obscurantist religion, a religion that sought to protect itself by ignorance. The quest ~~ion~~ of knowledge is important for knowledge is also of God. The quest of beauty is important. "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." Above all, priority must be given to the quest of the good life and the light of God. "Thus saith the Lord," declared the great prophet, Jeremiah, "Thus saith the Lord. Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom. Neither let the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glorieth, glory in this, that he understands and knows Me. That I am the Lord who exercises loving kindness, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things do I delight." Amen.