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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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That man is not free; that death is better than life, 1952.



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## WHERE JUDAISM DIFFERS

- V. That Man Is Not Free
- VI. That Death Is Better Than Life

March 16, 1952

In the previous addresses, dear friends, in this series I have spoken on the theme, "Where Judaism Differs", on the proposition that man needs to be saved, that man should not enjoy life, that men are not equal, that man should not resist evil. Judaism differed also sharply on other propositions of an ethical nature, namely, on the proposition that man is not free and that death is better than life. Many religions, past and present, held that man is not free, and many scientific theories, as well, held to the same idea. That man is capable of free volition, of making a free choice, of originating unpredictable decisions, and of affecting by his action his own destiny - all this was denied by many great religions of mankind, and science, especially up to quite recently, seemed to corroborate this position.

Life was governed by fate. That was predominantly the conviction of the ancient world. Nature and human life were ruled by an unfathomable and an uncontrollable necessity. Even the Gods were subject to the relentless operation of this necessity. Man cannot affect or alter his fate. At his birth his destiny is unchangeably decreed.

The Greeks called this ineluctable fate, Moira. The Greek poet, Hesiod, represented Moira by three sisters - Clotho, the youngest, who spun the thread of life; Lachesis, the second, who twisted this thread of life; and Atropas, who with a huge pair of shears, cut short the thread of life. It was these three sisters, three fates, who determined a man's life and a man's destiny.

In Norse mythology these fates go by the name of Norns, and the same maidens, under different names, performed the same relentless function of determining the life of the individual. Among the Romans it was the Parcae who performed this task. Nothing that man could do would affect or alter this absolute and, to man, irrational work of fate.



And it was also held that man's fate was somehow written in the stars. The stars and planets were looked upon as heavenly deities, gods, and it is they who determined the course of events and the lot of every human being on earth. Some men were born under a lucky star; others under unfavorable constellations. Astrology which was nigh universal in the ancient world and in the medieval world and has persisted to our own day - astrology is a sort of a pseudo-science, by which one could forecast what would happen to him or to the world by reading the signs of the heavens. And even when there was not the acceptance of a blind, impersonal fate - that is to say, when man reached a point in his religious development where he thought that a personal God would rule the life of men - even then they ascribed to this God absolute determination over the lives of men, which could not be changed either by the actions or prayers of men.

In India all forms of that complex of religion which is called Hinduism, including Buddhism - all these religions accepted as dogma the fact that man's destiny is pre-determined. There was a universal causal law - they called it Karma - which held sway over gods and over men, and there was no escape from it. Salvation, that is, escape, is to be found only in finding a way to break this chain of causation, to escape from this remorselessly revolving wheel of rebirth, this evil cycle of existence - and this can be done, according to these religions, only by disintegrating oneself, one's personality, by nullifying oneself completely, by ceasing to be an inspiring spiritual or intellectual individual; that is, to pass to the stage of what they call An-atta - not self, Not "I", ceasing to be, in other words.

Fatalism, too, is characteristic of the religious and cultural history of China. Confucious was frankly a fatalist, and so is one of the three great religions of China, Taoism. And although Mohammedanism, Islam, is a powerful theistic religion and believes firmly in a personal God who rules the world, nevertheless in Islam, too, the greatest emphasis is placed on Mismet, on fate.



The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

The Will of God, it is inscrutable, it is unalterable, and therefore, both piety and wisdom dictate that the wisest course for a man is complete and unquestioning resignation to His will.

Now, men were led to these beliefs in fatalism by what they saw and experienced. They saw all around them the phenomena of death, inevitable, certain, sure, for all men. And they saw about them evidences of accidents which they could not explain, and the death of the young, and the surface unrelatedness of man's actions and merit to his lot on earth, and the prevalence of evil in the world, and its persistent and indurate character, and they came to the conclusion that somehow this world is run by fate.

In a way, these beliefs were man's way of adjusting himself to conditions which he could not correct. It was also a way of escape from moral responsibility. There was nothing he could do about it, nothing he could do about the wrong of the world, and the injustice of the world, and the evil of it, since they were destined from the beginning by a power which he could not control.

Now, Judaism challenged all this fatalism and all this determinism; in fact, there isn't even a term in the Hebrew language for the word "fate". is not at all what we understand by the term, fate, which controls Gods and men alike, which is irrational and immoral, unmoral. Judaism refused to accept the doctrine that man is not free. Judaism not only proclaimed a personal God who rules the world with justice and with mercy, but a God who wants man to be free and to be His co-worker in the development of mankind.



Judaism is a prophetic religion, with a powerful social message and challenge to improvement, to advancement, "to improve the world". There is evil in the world, of course, but it can be overcome. There is wrong in the world, but it can be righted, and it is the very purpose and meaning of human life to set it aright and to establish the good society. There is no other meaning to life but to strive after perfection, after improvement, personal and social, and such perfection is possible. And man was given by God all the freedom he needs to accomplish this. Man has adequate instruments under his control by which to change the face of the earth, the structure of society, or his own personal life.

Now, of course, man is not all-powerful; man is not omnipotent; man is not a God; man has not created God; but man - man must work within certain limitations, limitations of environment, limitations of heredity, psychological limitations, geographic limitations. But even these limitations are not iron-bound, absolute, or unchanging. Man is not all-powerful, but neither is he powerless. He is not helpless. He has enough energies in his mind and in his soul to accomplish much, very much in the world - energies which he is not even aware of and were never fully explored. Man can choose and must choose between courses of action. I read you this morning that great chapter from the Book of Deuteronomy: "Behold, I have set before ye this day life and the good, and death and the evil. Choose thou life."

Whenever man has chosen wisely and was prepared to pay the price for his choice in labor and struggle and effort, he has advanced in knowledge, health, in well-being. And whenever a man has not chosen wisely, he was retarded or he retrogressed, or he plunged into misery and chaos and stagnation. Man cannot escape his moral responsibility by blaming everything on God or on fate all the evil in the world or all the evil that he himself commits. Man may not be fully master, absolute master over his own destiny, but he is certainly a co-worker with God in his destiny. Man is not merely a tool, he is an artist, he can wield tools. Man's fate is not



written in the stars. Man writes it himself with the help of God. The great prophet Jeremiah declared: "Hear ye the word which the Lord speaketh unto you, O house of Israel, thus saith the Lord: Learn not the way of the heathen and be not dismayed at the signs of the heavens. Do not be afraid of the signs of the heavens, for these customs of the heathen are vanity." There's nothing to it! The Rabbis declared: "Israel is not subject to the power of constellations or the dictates of heavenly bodies."

Jewish philosophers knew the theologic difficulties which were involved in insisting upon free will for man, and at the same time, maintaining the providence of God and God's fore knowledge. They knew the difficulties. Nevertheless, this paradox, this seemingly inherent contradiction did not faze them at all. They acknowledged it as one of the great mysteries of the religious life, mysteries which are found equally in the physical and in the scientific world of man. They, therefore, said, "Everything is foreseen by God. Nevertheless, free will is given to man." God's fore-knowledge does not contradict human freedom. God is aware of all possibilities, and yet man is free.

Medieval Jewish philosophers - Saadya, and Halevi and Maimonides, Crescas and others - tried hard through philosophic demonstrations to reconcile man's free will with God's omniscience. They argued in so many ways that God's knowledge is not causative, not compelling, not pre-determining. But perhaps Bachya was right when he declared that the problem, this theologic problem, is "too complicated for human solution".

An eminent scientist recently wrote, speaking of science and not of theology, "In the evolution of scientific thought, one fact has become impressively clear; there is no mystery of the physical world which does not point to a mystery beyond itself. All highroads of the intellect, all byways of theory and conjecture lead ultimately to an abyss that human ingenuity can never span." And if science is prepared to make such a confession, certainly religion can. We cannot solve all problems,



all seeming contradictions. We have not the minds of Gods.

The great American philosopher, William James, declared in one of his splendid essays, writing on "The Sentiment of Rationality":

Fatalism, whose solving word in all crises of behavior, is "all striving in is vain", will never reign supreme; for the impulse to take life strivingly is indestructible in the race. Moral creeds which speak to that impulse will be widely successful in spite of inconsistency, vagueness and shadowy determination of expectancy. Man needs a rule for his will, and will invent one if one be not given to him.

The important thing is not to accept any religious belief which stultifies human life, which inhibits man's progress, which denies man the opportunity of exploring himself to the fullest, and of exercising all his powers, his insights, all the things he is capable of. To accept such a religious belief is to accept a God who is evil. The God of Judaism is a just and righteous and merciful God. This is the very essence of Judaism. "Will the Judge of all the world not do justice Himself?" God has not doomed man. If man has sinned or erred, he will be punished - that is the law compensation in life. But man may repent, and God will accept his true repentance, and the punishment will be averted. That is repentance. Repentance averts the evil decree. And repentance, which is so dominant in Jewish religious thought is a supreme affirmation of man's moral freedom, of man's control of his own destiny. The greatest holiday which we have in our calendar, the Day of Atonement, is dedicated to the concept of repentance; that is to say, of a man being able to take hold of his own life and refashion it, refashion his own destiny.

Judaism knows of no predestination, such as one finds in the theology of St. Augustine or of Calvinism. Judaism knows of no doctrines of election; that is to say, that before all worlds God chose certain men for ever-lasting life while condemning others to eternal death. Such ideas have their origin in doctrines of salvation by divine grace alone, and not by the moral effort of man, as we have seen in some of the earlier discussions. These ideas are foreign to Judaism. Man is "saved" for the higher life only by his own moral exertions, inspired by faith in an approving and in a cooperating God.



Now, up to quite recently science gave encouragement to the idea of determinism. The universe, they said, was carried on in an ordered sequence of cause and effect, and there was no room in it for the exercise of any volition, of any free-will on the part either of man or of God. Everything was linked up in a causal chain. The order of nature is indifferent to the needs of man or of God. And the 19th century was confident that it could construct a universe as "a perfect mechanical model", a "perfectly working machine". Everything fitted into everything else. There was no need, there was no occasion for any volition, any voluntarism, any free-will. In the 20th century scientists have been abandoning this mechanistic view of the universe. The law of causation has given way to a law of probability.

Writing in his most interesting book, "The Mysterious Universe", Sir James Jeans, the eminent scientist, physicist, declared:

... up to the present at least, the picture of the universe presented by the new physics contains more room than did the old mechanical picture for life and consciousness to exist within the picture itself, together with the attributes which we commonly associate with them, such as free-will and the capacity to make the universe in some small degree different by our presence. For, for aught we know, or for aught that the new science can say to the contrary, the gods which play the part of fate to the atoms of our brains may be our own minds. Through these atoms our minds may perchance affect the motion of our bodies and so the state of the world around us. Today science can no longer shut the door on this possibility; she has no longer any unanswerable arguments to bring against our innate conviction of free-will.

And if physics is no longer pledged to a law of determinism, why should psychology be, or the religious life of man? In fact, the whole new science of psychoanalysis is based on the theory that man can be helped to change his life, his attitudes, his conduct, his destiny, once he is given new insights and a clearer understanding of his own history and of his own capacity.

Here, again, then science is catching up with the great religious insights of Judaism.



And so, on this proposition that man is not free, Judaism registered a strong negation. Judaism maintains that man is free.

And now I pass on to the final subject upon which Judaism differed, that death is better than life. "To be or not to be" - that has perplexed the mind of man since the beginning of his thinking life, his intellectual awareness. And it has been responsible for much speculation and contemplation. There were great religions which I have indicated more than once which regarded life as inherent to evil, and preferred extinction to survival; preferred death to life. There were other religions which looked upon this world as a veil of tears, a world of irreparable misery, injustice and suffering, and looked forward with all hope centered on the next world, a world beyond the grave. And the quicker one could "shuffle off this mortal coil", the better. The body is looked upon as a sort of a prison-house, a cruel prison-house of the soul of man, which could find its true happiness and its freedom only out of this world, "where there are no heartaches and a thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to". This world was looked upon merely as a sort of a preparation for the next, and the quicker we get through with it, the better.

The sacred books of ancient Egypt were called the Books of the Dead, and they contained magic and ritual and myth which were all concerned with man's life in the nether-world. his life after death, for that was the real life of man. The idea of atonement through death and the resurrection from the dead and the speedy end of this world and escape from this world were central in the belief of early Christianity. "Whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. My Kingdom is not of this world." And all the ascetic movements of which we spoke were based either on a fear of life or a contempt for life, life in this world, and a sharp dualism of body and spirit.

There were religions who were actually enamored with the idea of death, and the whole of their ritual was built around concepts of death and the hereafter.



Now, Judaism differed sharply with these views and with these practices. To Judaism, creation was good. "And the Lord saw that it was good," we read in the first chapters of Genesis. God is the source of life. Life is a gracious gift of God. "Thou hast granted me life and favor". In fact, a long life was looked upon as a reward for ~~virtue~~ virtue. "My son, forget not my teaching; for length of days, and years of life, and peace, will they add to thee." Judaism was enamored of life. It is a privilege "to walk before God in the land of the living". God gave His law to man, not to prepare him for death, but to prepare him for life, to help him in life, to preserve his life, to ennoble his life "which, if a man do, he shall live by them."

The Torah is called "the medicine of life", and in order to preserve life, our sages taught us that a man may disregard all the commandments of the Torah to preserve his life - all, of course, except the basic three - namely, idolatry, murder and incest.

The only fatalist that we know of in the Bible is the disillusioned Koheleth, Ecclesiastes, who alone among the writers of the Bible, prefers death to life and claims that it were better not to have been born. But Koheleth is also a fatalist, but even he is not always consistent, for even he says, "for a living dog is better than a dead lion".

Judaism is not built around death or around resurrection or around ~~immortality~~ immortality. Belief in the latter came late into Jewish thought. There was a wide variety of conflicting ideas about them, and they were never universally accepted by Jews, by faithful Jews. The Rabbis advised men not to speculate too much about them. Belief in some form of a future life was quite generally held among our people, especially in the post-exilic period, but it was never specific and never regarded as a central dogma. Failure to believe in which disqualified a man from being a faithful Jew.



Our religion admonished us to leave all these to a kind providence, beyond our penetration, beyond our ken of knowledge. "The Heavens belong to God; the earth He gave to the children of man." It is not the dead who praise God and not all those "who go down to the nether-world," we read in the Book of Psalms. "The living and the sound of heart shall praise the Lord." We are advised to think of this world, what we should do here, and how to make this world a fit place for the children of God to live in. There is very little that we can do about the hereafter, but there is much that we can do about the here and the now. And we can know the greatest happiness in this world in doing the greatest good. The future life may be a life of the greatest happiness and bliss for man, but said the Rabbis, "Better is one hour in repentance and good deeds in this world, than the whole world to come." This is an amazing statement of the Rabbis, because it is in this world that we can find our union with the spirit of God as much as in any other world. God is near, here, unto all those who call upon Him.

And while "a good life hath but a few days on earth, a good name endureth forever."

Next Sunday morning, dear friends, I shall endeavor to summarize these six lectures which I have given on the theme, "Where Judaism Differs", and I shall speak on the subject, "What Then Is Judaism?", and in a concise form give you the basic ethical and spiritual teachings of our immortal faith.