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What is man?, 1953.

WHAT IS MAN?

February 1, 1953

My dear friends, to the ancient man the universe was vast, but much smaller than we know it to be. The ancient man had no conception of space in terms of millions of light-years, and of his earth, as existing for millions of centuries, and of the history of man as reaching back into hundreds of thousands of years. And yet, even to him, within the much narrower framework of his time and space concepts, the life of the individual man seemed very, very short indeed, and not very significant.

"Man is but breath and shadow, nothing more," wrote one of the great Greek dramatists, Sophocles. And the chorus in Aristophanes' play, "The Birds", thus sings of the race of man: "Weak mortals, chained to the earth, creatures of clay as frail as the foliage of the woods, you unfortunate race, whose life is but darkness, as unreal as a shadow, the illusion of a dream."

And so small and paltry is man that the Psalmist, looking at the vast expanse of the heavens and considering the moon and the stars, is inclined to turn to God and ask: "What is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou dost care for him?"

And Job, speaking in the midst of his excruciating physical pain and in the bafflement and anguish of his spirit, cries out, "What is man, that Thou dost make so much of him, and that Thou dost set Thy mind upon him. Remember that my life is a breath."

Now, this sense of littleness and of insignificance must be felt even more by modern man - modern man, the boundaries of whose universe and time and space have been stretched beyond his most terrifying imagination. Since has convinced modern man, to quote a modern philosopher, that "his story is a brief and transitory episode in the life of one of the meanest of the planets." And furthermore, the organization of society in the modern world has further tended to reduce the stature of man. With the coming of the industrial age, a process of depersonalization of the individual man has

set in; a process of what the Germans called "Vermassen", treating men in the mass, and with the spread of all forms of bureaucratic control in so many activities of the human being, and with the spread of collectivizations in society and dictatorship of all forms, the individual has become socially reduced in stature, and therefore, even smaller in his own eyes.

So that the modern man has even more reason than the ancient man to cry out in frustration and dole and in despair, "What is Man?"

Now, how does our religion answer this question? What has Judaism to say about this problem, what is man? Does our religion deny that man's life on earth is short and weak and full of trouble? Not at all! How could it? Our religion has always faced life frankly, squarely. Our religion is a guide to life as man actually experiences life. Our religion is not an opiate, a mirage, an illusion of euphoria. And so our religion acknowledges over and over again that verily, man's life is short. "Our years come to an end as a tale that is told." Or as the modern version of the new translation of the Bible has it, "Our years come to an end as a sigh." "The years of our life are three score years and ten, or even by reason of strength, fourscore year; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are gone - soon gone - and we fly away."

"As for man, his days are like the grass," we read in the Bible. "He flourishes like a flower, and then the wind passes over him and he is gone and his place knows him no more." Man's life is short and his powers are limited. At times, man is helpless. Men dwell in houses of clay. Their foundation is in the dust, they are crushed before the moth, between morning and evening they are destroyed. "Is my strength the strength of stones," cries Job, "or is my flesh bronze?"

No, man cannot always match his hour or his challenge, and man does at times frequently succumb to the crushing burdens of his life. Man's life is short, his powers are limited, and he is prone to sin. Man can sink very low indeed. Many are the temptations of his life, and he cannot always resist their impetuous onslaught. There

is much evil and cruelty and selfishness and envy and pride and malice and hate in the human heart. And man's hands are often full of blood.

And yet, our religion, accepting all these facts - nay, calling sharp and frequent attention to these facts - our religion nevertheless answers the question, "What is man?" by declaring that man is a child of God.

"You are children of the Lord, Your God." Not in any physical sense, of course, but in a spiritual sense. Man is fashioned in the image of God. Again, not in any physical sense, but in a spiritual sense. God is not a man.

Man is both a son of the dust, and a son of God. And the distance between the two, between his origin and his destiny - that distance represents the divine assignment of his career. It is the drama of his existence, the very key to the mystery of his life.

God said to Abraham: "Walk thou before Me and become perfect." The Aramaic translation of that verse, the Targum, points up this translation of this interesting command given unto Abraham. "Serve before me and become perfect." And unto every human being our faith proclaimed: "Become thou perfect before the Lord, Thy God." And here again the Targum points up this translation. "Become thy perfect in the service of the Lord Thy God."

Man's kinship with God is reflected in his moral aspirations, in his upreaching, his lifting up of his soul and his mind and his hand, always to that which is better than the momentary best.

God is perfect, and man is perfectable! Man will never attain to the perfection of God. But, "Thou hast made him a little lower than God," and that little is very much indeed, but "Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor."

"The most essential feature of man is his improvableness," declared the American philosopher, John Fiske. The most essential feature of man is the fact that he can improve himself. And it is in his "improvableness", in his developing progress along all

lines, in the course of his growth, of his steady ascendancy from the lower to the higher, that man finds his life's prescription, his mandate and his unfailing reward. The Greeks brought their gods down to the level of man. The Jews sought to bring man up to the heights of their God.

Now, the human race, my dear friends, has accepted this mandate.

"Become thou perfect." It has advanced, though it has not been a steady or unbroken advance. It is a long road which stretches between the cave dweller and the jungle man, and the great scientists, explorers and inventors, artists and philosophers and poets and writers and painters of our day. It has not been satisfied with mere biologic survival. It always wanted something more, and it always advanced to something beyond, and it is still advancing to something beyond. Now, this road between yesterday and tomorrow has been heavily strewn with wreckage and battles and tragedy, but the advance has continued, this cumulative progress, this mounting ascendancy of the human race - that has continued, and this forward road towards distant goals, hardly glimpsed by us, will continue for that is the very meaning of human history. What is true of the race collectively and there we have a long history to look back upon, which is a prologue for the future - what is true of the race as a whole is also true of the individual.

Our life is short, to be sure. Therefore, we are admonished by our religion to make the most of every day and of every hour. "Teach us to number our days," is a profound prayer. "Teach us to number our days," to count them and value them as you value each pearl upon a string. We must try to crowd an eternity in every passing moment. Some lives are long but empty. And others are short, but overflowing with goodness and purpose and achievement.

We are weak, but our religion teaches us to reach out for strength, to reach for strength in ourselves, for there may be unknown reservoirs of hidden strength in us. Let us drill deep for that strength, for that moral and intellectual strength that may be within us, unsuspected and untapped. No one knows how strong he is until he puts

himself to the test. Sometimes we are weak because we ignore our own strength. We must reach for strength in ourselves, in those about us, in our family, in our friends, in our community, in our religious institutions, in all these eternal sources from which strength can come.

Our religion teaches us to reach for God's helping hand.

"God is near, very near, to all those who call upon him."

Yes, our life is short and we are weak. We sinned, but there is forgiveness for sin, declares our faith, and always there is another chance. God has equipped us with enough freedom of will and enough resoluteness to overcome our temptations if we are so inclined. We may be and frequently are the heirs of handicaps which we have inherited. We may be and frequently are the victims of environment. In the great accounting, these facts will not be overlooked by Him Who looks deep into the hearts of men and is compassionate. But we must never consciously exploit these handicaps and these deficiencies of environment, as an excuse, as an exemption, as a justification for weakness or refusal to make the effort, to make the struggle, to exert ourselves at times.

Our religion demands much of man because it believes that great are man's powers and high is his estate, in spite of the acknowledged and patent limitations of man.

And great is his reward.

"Great peace have they that love Thy law."

Rewards, not necessarily in terms of material goods, but in terms of the pride of growth and self-development and self-reverence, in terms of dignity and self-respect, in terms of peace of mind and heart, in the joy of helping to build the good society. There is a never-failing radiance, a never-failing feeling of deep satisfaction, a sustaining inner satisfaction in such a life.

What, then, is man? Man is a child of God. Man is an agent of God. Man is an instrument of God. Man is a co-worker of God in creation. Man has a tremendously significant and noble role in the world to play. Man is frequently likened in our

Bible to a tree, and by the way, this week our people celebrate Hamishor Oser B'shevat, the 15th day of Shevat, which is the New Year of trees.

I read out of the first Psalm this morning to you, speaking of the righteous man, "And he shall be like a tree that is planted by pools of water."

"Man is like a tree of the field." And that's a beautiful metaphor. A tree grows. Its destiny is fulfilled in growth, and so does a man grow. A tree must have deep roots, not to be toppled by the first storm; and so must a human being have deep roots, in faith, in tradition, in moral self-discipline. A tree gives shade, shadow and protection; and so much a human being. A tree yields fruit, and so must a human being. A tree holds the soil from being washed away; and so must a human being hold the stability of his society, of his community from being washed away into the sea of disaster.

"For man is likened unto the tree of the field."

It is only those men who have nothing significant to do in the world who begin to worry about the problem of what is man. It is only those who have no social vision, no sense of social responsibility, no enterprise of growth and development to their lives, or intellectual or spiritual or social, who come like Koheleth came at the close of his life,

"Vanity of vanity, all is vanity."

No man who has set as the goal of his life the perfection of self, the training of self, knowing more, understanding more, gaining deeper insights and wider sympathies and lifting himself up more and more with the great movements of life which make for a better society - no man who looks up to the growth, the moral growth of his own family and of his own group and of his own community - no such man will ever stop to inquire in a sense of despondency, "What is Man?" What value is there in life? And what purpose and meaning?

And so, to the question, what is man, our religion answers, "Man should be what God intended him to be - His child, seeking the maximum perfection which is possible for a child of God to be - a little lower than God."

1/ To the ancient the universe was vast but much smaller than we
know it to be.

He had no conception, ~~the~~ space in terms of millions of light-
years - and of his ~~world~~ death as ~~enduring~~ existing ~~for~~ millions
of centuries - and, the history of man as reaching ~~back~~ ^{into} hundreds
of thousands of years.

And get even to him - with in the ^{unlike} ~~massive~~ frame-work of his
time and space concepts - the life [the ^{subject} ~~person~~] seemed very short
and not very significant.

"No air is but breath and shadow, nothing more" declared Shakespeare

The chorus in Aristophanes play "The Birds" - thus sings of
 the race of man: "Weak mortals, chained to the earth, creatures
 of clay as frail as the foliage, the ^{works} ~~works~~, you unfortunate race,
 whose life is but darkness, as unreal as a shadow, the illusion
 of a dream..."

So small and passing is man that looking at the houses, the women & other things
to ask God: "What is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?"

And Job, speaking in ^{his physical pain} the agonies of his soul and bafflement
of his spirit, cries out 'What is man, that thou dost make,
 so much of him, and that thou dost set thy residence upon him. -
 Remember that very life is a breath -'

24. This sense of littleness and insignificance is felt even more
by modern man - ~~where~~ the boundaries, which ^{in times past} ~~used to~~ have
been stretched beyond his most far-flying imagination. Science
has ~~advised~~ ^{convinced} him that "his story is a brief and transitory
episode in the life of one, the universe, the planets" - (G. J. Baber).

The org of society today has further tended to reduce the status of man. A process of depersonalization, of "dehumanization" has set in with our industrial age - and with the spread of bureaucratic controls over so many activities man and collectivization and dehumanization - the indiv. has become ^{socially insignificant} even smaller in his own eyes.

The modern man has ever more reason to cry out in frustration and doubt and despair: What is Man?"

3). What has our religion to say about this? How does it answer the question: "What is Man"? 2

Does it deny that ^{not at all!} man's life on earth is short, ~~fast~~^{weak}, and full of trouble? How could it? Judaism loses validity & grandeur! It is a guide to life as man actually experiences it. -

It is not an opiate - a mirage - an illusion & euphoria.

Very
 Man's life is short - "Our years come to an end as a tale that
 is told. The year, and life are three new year and ten - as even by
 reason, strength - four new years - yet their span is but test and
 trouble - they are some new - and one fly away" ^{that's for man, his days are}
 His powers are limited - at times he is helpless. ^{like grass, he flourishes but is turning to dust. He will pass}
^{over it. He is not a god}
^{his life is short}
^{no more.}

Major ~~disaster~~ ^{no more} in houses, day - Their foundation is on the dust, they are crushed before the wrath, between morning and evening they are destroyed.
"Is any strength the strength of stones as is Job or is any flesh bronze?"

— Man cannot always match his challenges and his love and
does at times succumb to the crushing burdens of life

He is prone to sin & He can sink very low —
Many are the temptations, his ~~heart~~ ^{heart} and he cannot always
resist ~~these~~ ^{these impulses}. There is much evil, and cruelty, and
sophistry, ^{and very} and pride, and ~~envy~~ ^{malice}, and hate in ^{the} human
heart ~~it~~ — ~~these~~ ^{these} hands are often full of blood. :-

- 4/ And yet - accepting all these facts, - nay, calling hand
and frequent attention to them, our Rabbis, nevertheless -
answers the question "What is Man" - by declaring that
Man is a child, God! :-
- Not in a physical ^{sense} but in a spiritual sense -
 - Man ~~is~~ ^{is} foreknown ^{in the Torah} in the Torah, 2nd -
 - Again, not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual ^{sense} ^{for} he is foreknown
 - Man is both ^{in the Torah} - a son / descendant - and ^{in the Torah}
a son, God - and the distances bet. the two - but
his origin and his destiny - is the divine
Assignment of his career. It is the drama
of his existence - the very key to the mystery of his
life.

5/ God said to Abraham: - וְאַתָּה אֵלֶיךָ אֵל (Terfom)
וְאַתָּה אֵלֶיךָ אֵל - sees before me and
become perfect.
And unto ~~the~~ every member of the faith it was proclaimed:
וְאַתָּה אֵלֶיךָ אֵל - וְאַתָּה אֵלֶיךָ אֵל

— Man's kinship with God is reflected in his moral aspirations - his upreaching - his lifting up of soul and mind and hand always to that which is better than the ^{motivation} best -.

God is perfect - Man is perfectible! - Man will never
attain to the perfection of God. - "Thou hast made him a little
lower than God" - and that little is very much indeed!
Never the less - "Thou hast crowned him with glory and
honor!" -

- "It is in his
the most essential feature, man is his improvidence"
 - declared the American philosopher John Fiske
 And it is in his 'improvidence' - that man finds his duty
and honor - and his ^{life's} prescription, his mandate, his
unfailing ^{reward} ~~reward~~ to the level of man. The Hebrew

unfailing reward
The Greeks, but their sons against the level of man. The Hebrews
sought to raise man to the level of God.
6/ The human race has accepted this mandate. (It has advanced.)
— the other not been a steady and unbroken advance. —

— It is a lovely road that stretches bet. the ^{Carved} jungle ~~where~~ ^{where} the great scientists, inventors, artists and writers, painters, sculptors, philosophers and poets of an

- It has not been saturated with more biological material. I always
~~and the report will be~~ wanted something more! - and Presely

~~And the road is still there and~~ ~~waiting~~
- This road is ^{broken} strewn with wreckage - and battle - and tragedy -
- but the advance continued nevertheless - Progress

And this road forward - towards distant goals hardly
glimped will continue - for that is the very meaning
of human history -

7/ And so it is with individual men & women.

(a) ~~Our~~ ^{life} life is short ~~to~~ ^{we} must make the most of every day then.

"Teach us to number our days". We must crowd
experiences into ~~each passing moment~~ ^{each passing day}. ~~The~~ ^{Some} ~~are~~ ^{have}
~~which~~ are long but empty. Other ~~have~~ ^{are} short
but overflowing with goodness and purpose and achievement.

(b) We are weak - let us reach for strength - in ourselves -
- for there may be unknown reserves of hidden strength
in us - let's drill deep for strength. ^{we are not - just} ^{unbeknownst}
- in those about us - family, friends, in our
community - in our religious ~~institutions~~ -
- let's reach for ~~our~~ ^{our} ~~strength~~ ^{helping hand} - - 5/1/37
x 1/12 5/1/37 5/1/37

(c) We have sinned - There is forgiveness for this -
and always there is another chance -
- for we are equipped with enough freedom, will and
enough resolution to overcome our temptations -
if ~~so~~ ^{we} of us are so inclined. -

(d) We ~~are~~ ^{may be} the heirs / handicapped - and the victims ^{environment} ~~of our~~ ^{of our}
for the great accounting - these facts will not be ~~are~~ ^{are}
looked ~~by~~ ^{by} ~~them~~ ^{who} ~~look~~ ^{look} ~~deep~~ ^{deep} ~~into~~ ^{into} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~heart~~ ^{heart} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~us~~ ^{us} - and
But we must ~~use~~ ^{use} ~~them~~ ^{them} ~~whether~~ ^{whether} ~~for~~ ^{for}
- excuse, exemption or justification.

(e) Much is demanded of man - we. Great are his
powers - and high is his estate - in spite of his
potential limitations -

8/ And fruit is his reward - וְהַפְּרִי הָיָה לְרֵעֵהוּ - but to
recess. in material parts - but in pride of growth and self
development - in dignity and self-respect - in peace, mind and
heart - in the joy of helping to build the good society.
There is a ^{never-fading} renewance to such a life.

9/ Arlo Day - אֶרְלוֹ הַיּוֹם is
What is Man? - a goodly tree - אֵיל חַיִּים - a source - מְקוֹר חַיִּים - good
fruit - and shade and shelter - and holds the
earth around it - from being washed away -

