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Abraham - The friend of God, 1953.

ABRAHAM - THE FRIEND OF GOD

November 8, 1953

These last two weeks, dear friends, we have been discussing, "What is Judaism", its outstanding tenets, principles and practices.

This morning I should like to discuss with you a personality who reflected in his life, in his conduct, some of these great tenets and principles of Judaism. In fact, one who was among those who fashioned these tenets and these principles - the first Jew - Abraham.

In our prayers we speak of the God of Abraham - "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, God of our Fathers, God of Abraham." We don't speak of the God of Moses; we speak of the Torah of Moses, but we speak of the God of Abraham. For our religion traces itself back in its origin to Abraham. It was Abraham who first proclaimed the idea of the "One" spiritual God to mankind. The story of Abraham is found in the First Book of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis, and the very first thing we read in that story is the command of God to Abraham to get out from his home, from his country, and go to another land, and become a pilgrim for the sake of his faith. " ", get thee out of thy land and thy father's house unto the land of Arachobe. Abraham is the first pilgrim of humanity who, for the sake of an ideal, left his home, his possessions, his career, and set out into the unknown in order to live by his faith and practice it fully. We are very proud in this country of the Pilgrim Fathers; there is something magnificent about all pilgrims. Abraham was the first among pilgrims of faith, and he set the example for all subsequent generations of Jews. It is of the very quality and essence of Judaism that they inspired the people to such a degree that of their own free will they become wanderers and exiles and pilgrims of the ages for God's sake and for their faith's sake. The Jewish people were not only the first pilgrims of the ages, historically they were the first martyrs of religion.

In ancient days no people died for their faith. If a country was conquered

and the conqueror wished to impose his faith upon the conquered, the conquered accepted without question the Gods of the conquering people. The only people in antiquity which resisted the faith of conquerors and which preferred death rather than surrender their own faith was the Jewish people. And the first martyrs among our people are found in connection with the great rebellion of the Maccabees against the Syrian-Greeks in the second century before the Common Era. And from that time on till the present the history of the Jewish people has recorded many glorious and tragic cases of martyrdom for faith.

I had occasion not so long ago to address a body of Jewish leaders and I told them that there is something very distinctive, gloriously distinctive, about the history of the Jewish people. From time to time others made grave decisions for the Jewish people; decisions over which they had no control. The Pharaoh of Egypt made such a decision to destroy the Jewish people of Egypt. Haman made such a decision to destroy all the Jews of the Persian empire. Ferdinand and Isabella made a decision for the Jews and drove them out, hundreds of thousands of them, from Spain after they had lived there for a thousand years, drove them out into exile and to death. Hitler made such a decision. Six million Jews perished as a result of decisions made for our people. But what is remarkable about our people's history and what is responsible for our survival, in spite of these superimposed decisions, is the fact that in critical moments of its history the Jews voluntarily made tremendous decisions for themselves - without other compulsion. Abraham made such a decision - he could have stayed in Babylonia where he was born, among his people, his kinsmen, be comfortable there. He voluntarily made a decision to go forth into exile for the sake of his faith.

Centuries later the Jews who fled from Egypt and stood before the Red Sea; the waters of the Red Sea before them, death if they marched into it, the Egyptian armies in back of them. They had to make a decision. They could have decided to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt, they would have been received back

there, as slaves of course, but life would have been a shield unto them. Voluntarily, instinctively, without utter compulsion they made a decision to march into the waters of the Red Sea to death, not to death but to life and to freedom. And I suppose when subsequently they stood at Mt. Sinai they were also free to make a decision, a great choice. They were offered the Ten Commandments, the Torah, the bulletin of the law, a way of life which would make them a distinctive and separate and persecuted people. They were asked whether they wanted to be a kingdom of priests of a holy nation. They could have said "no". Other peoples, according to the rabbinic tradition, said "no", we don't want this discipline of a high ethical law. It's too constructing. The Jews instinctively, without pressure from without, said almost precipitously, " " , we will do as we have heard. They made their decision and in so doing they opened a highway to civilization for the whole human race.

And I suppose when subsequently they found themselves as exiles in Babylonia, after the destruction of the First Temple, they could have remained in Babylonia - history says they were very comfortable there, they were very prosperous, Babylonia was a very rich country. They could have remained there and assimilated - they didn't. Instinctively they made another great decision - their own, " " , if I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning. And they ran to the ravaged and destroyed, little, impoverished Judea and began to rebuild their national life there. And centuries later they had the same choice to make; it was during this very time with the Maccabees, the Jews were called upon to assimilate to the Greeks. The Greeks had a glamorous and beautiful and attractive civilization, high culture, high civilization, but morally corrupt. All the other peoples of the near-east of the ancient world readily accepted the Hellenistic civilization and amalgamated in the great world. The Jews were asked to do the same thing and they said "no."

Mattathias and his sons led a rebellion against these Greeks and restored the integrity, the spiritual integrity, of Jewish life. One of those fateful decisions which determine the course of history. Had the Jews decided then to assimilate there would be no Judaism today, but Christianity in this land. They made a decision. And I suppose after the destruction of the second Temple the Jews then too had a choice - a free-will choice - they didn't have to suffer - they could have accepted the religion of the Greco-Roman world which was a very tolerant religion, and they could have been absorbed among the peoples of the Mediterranean world quite easily. All they had to do was give up their Torah, their Judaism, their own way of life - and they made their decision. After the destruction of the Temple, after the shattering of Jewish national life under Bar Kochba in the second century of the Common Era, in the midst of the terrible Hadriatic persecutions, they made their decision - they said "no", we will persist, out into the exile along the broken highways of suffering and persecution they carried their Torah, their Menorah, their way of life - they made their decision to remain Jews - these pilgrims of the ages.

And all through nineteen hundred years of expulsion, of persecution, of ghettos, of yellow badges, of inquisitions, of pogroms, all through those terrible frightful centuries, they also made their decision, - not to submit, not to give up their religion - to remain Jews. Great decisions - just as the great decision which they made in our own life-time to rebuild the national life in Israel - they didn't have to do it - they willed to do it - thus the Jews of the Jewish people.

Frequently others make decisions for us and they're dreadful decisions but it's decisions that we make for ourselves wherein the key to our survival is to be found.

Abraham was the first one to know how to make great decisions. "

", Abraham is Hebrew, and the Rabbis say Hebrew means "on the other side." He would stand on one side - let the rest of the world stand on the other side, if

need be. And so we have the first quality of Jewish life reflected in this first Jew, in Abraham.

The second one had to do with the universalism of Judaism, of which I spoke in the last two weeks. God said to Abraham, "Get thee out of thy land to the land of Arashabee and I will make of thee a great people." " ", so that all the nations of the world will be blessed for you. There was the idea of mission from the very beginning in Judaism. The idea that this religion was not to be had to one's self as a private monopoly - it's a charge given to the Jewish people to carry it to the world - the Jews are asked to take the torch and become " ", a light unto all the world. There is nothing narrow or nationalistic about Judaism - it's a universal religion - the Jews were called upon to be its special ministers, its special teachers, its consecrated and covenanted champions and defenders. And later they had to fight for this faith, had to fight for justice. The story is told in Genesis of how an alliance of kings attacked the City of Sodom and took captive many of its people and their possession unjustly. Among them was Lot, Abraham's kinsman, and when told this had happened, this great serious act of injustice and cruelty had taken place, whereupon immediately Abraham gathered together his household, all that were with him, his entire clan, and set out in pursuit of these marauders who had taken captives. He overtook them, defeated them. And when he returned with the captives and their possessions to Sodom, the king of Sodom said to him - give me the persons but take the goods for yourself as a reward. The king of Sodom couldn't imagine that anyone would do the right thing for its own faith, and offered him the reward, and Abraham said, "I have sworn to the Lord God most high, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a feastling or anything that is yours to do the right because it is the right." That is the core of Judaism - be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving rewards - be like servants who serve their master without any expectation of reward.

There's another noble quality of Judaism reflected in the life of Abraham. I wish people would know more about Abraham, the first Jew. Abraham is a great peace-maker, a lover of peace. The Jewish people was the first people to preach peace to mankind. Peace in ancient days was looked upon as very legitimate, as it is in many parts of the world to this day. There was a quarrel between the shepherds of Lot and the shepherds of Abraham and they came to blows; they thought there wasn't enough grazing ground for their sheep and so they began to fight. Abraham called Lot to him and said, "

" , let there be no quarrel between you and me and then may I between my shepherds and you between your shepherds " ,
we are brothers after all, we are human beings, let's not fight, behold, the whole country is before you, " , if you want to
go left then I will go right; " , if you want to
go right " , I will go left. The world is large

enough. And when they realize it, they choose to fight for what is before them.

In the spirit of Abraham, Judaism throughout its history preached the ideal of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation or learn more anymore. And the first Jew was the first man to preach this ideal of peace in the name of the God who is also H'Sholom, the maker of peace.

There's another beautiful quality which is at the very heart of Judaism which is exemplified in Abraham. People sometimes wonder why Jews are so charitable. The incident of charity among our people far exceeds that of any other people in this country or throughout the world. Jews are far more generous, not merely to their own kind, but to others, to strangers, to foreigners, those not of their faith. This isn't a matter of accident, this is a matter of history. This has been ingrained in the quality of the people for hundreds of thousands of years. Abraham was sitting in front of his tent, says the story, " ,
in the heat of the day, " , near the desert, where the heat is

frightful during the day, and he lifted up his eyes and he saw three men, three strangers, he didn't know them, he didn't know what brings them there, didn't know who they were, didn't know whether they came for peace ~~or~~ for war, for that matter, friends or enemies. Yet he arose, " " , he arose to meet them, says the text. And he said to them, if I have found favor in your eyes please do not pass my tent - come in - rest here - refresh yourself. He begged them to come in and enjoy the hospitality of his home. And the Bible says, and Abraham hastened and then to Sarah, his wife and said, prepare a meal for these strangers. Take thee the finest of the flour and the youngest of the flock and prepare a meal for these strangers. And when the meal was prepared Abraham stood by these strangers and served them. Kindness to stranger, " " , was one of the great Mitzvahs, one of the great men's sterling deeds among our people. To welcome the stranger, to care for him, not to ask questions - who are you - what race - what people - what religion, a human being in need of help. And so we have in our legislation in the Bible the first great love of mankind for the protection of strangers - every people took care of its own, more or less, there's no particular virtue involved, but a stranger was looked upon as a barbarian, as a dangerous enemy, as a potential foe. In our Bible the law is repeated four or five times, " " , rest the stranger. Love him as yourself; you were strangers once in the land of Egypt. Thou shalt not oppress the stranger, he shall be as one among you.

And then I read you another quality of Judaism, another great principle. Perhaps the most important principle of Judaism reflected in the life of Abraham was the question of justice. Justice. The world was destroyed because of lack of justice. When the great prophet Michael was asked to define religion and what God wants of a man, he said, God wants " " , to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God. Justice, justice, shall thou pursue. Well, Abraham heard that the wicked city of Sodom and the wicked city of

Gemara, whose inhabitants were vile in their wickedness, the most contemptibly cruel people in the ancient world, cities of Sodom and Gemara. God had determined to destroy them, to wipe them off the face of the earth, so wicked were they. Abraham, who didn't belong to Sodom or Gemara, they were not of his people, not of his race, not of his religion, but they were human beings and he heard that they were to be destroyed, and he stood up before the Lord and said, "Will the God of all the world - will the God of Justice, himself, not do justice?" In the name of justice Abraham dared to challenge God. How come you destroy the city - perhaps there are fifty righteous men in it? Why should the righteous men be destroyed because of the wicked? I read you that great chapter this morning from the Book of Genesis. And God said, no, I will not destroy the city if I find fifty righteous men in it and then Abraham, with his great compassion for human beings, said perhaps forty-five, perhaps forty, perhaps thirty, perhaps twenty, perhaps ten. There weren't even ten righteous in that city. This passion for justice has been a treasure ideal of our people all through the ages. A sensitiveness to the rights of human beings; something very exquisite in Judaism. And Abraham, the first Jew, illustrates it in a most superb way - for Abraham does not challenge a prince or a king or another man - God he called to justice.

And finally there's another quality of Judaism which is superbly illustrated in the life of Abraham - that's the quality of self-sacrifice. No people has sacrificed as much for its convictions as has the Jewish people, I indicated at the very outset this morning. No people brought as many sacrifices upon the altar of faith. But if Abraham were to become the first Jew, the answers to all his people, he in his own life had to give evidence of his readiness for supreme sacrifice. The " ", God tested Abraham to find out his make-up, his spiritual make-up. People have misunderstood the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. It appears to them as being a cruel story; how can a father take his child and sacrifice it. Of course, this isn't the point of the story

at all. The point of the story is given the key to the story in the first sentence

" " , God kissed Abraham, and he submitted him to the most harrowing and searching test of all, "

take thy son, thine only son, him whom thou lovest, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice. Would Abraham be prepared to do it? Well, the text doesn't even give the suggestion of a moment's hesitation. Abraham arose early in the morning and took his son Isaac and began the fateful journey to Mt. Moriah where the sacrifice was to be made. He bound his son and placed him upon the sacrificial altar and he took out the knife to slay his son. And then the voice from heaven came,

" , do not lift up thy hand against this lad,

" , now I know that thou art a true God-revering man, seeing that thou wast ready to sacrifice the dearest thing in life for the sake of your God. Of course, Isaac wasn't sacrificed; he wasn't even told that he should be sacrificed; it was the test that was the important thing. And the meaning of that test for future ages - unless most people are prepared to sacrifice maximumly for their convictions, their convictions have no meaning. They mean nothing to themselves or to society. And only those who are ready to underwrite their convictions with their life-blood and with their dearest possessions, that become the pathfinders and the pioneers of the good society for mankind.

And so this is Abraham, our ancestor, the first Jew, and the radiance of his life has continued to this day. He himself, the Bible says, Abraham died in a good old age, old and full of years and was gathered to his people, but he has remained with his people to this day. And every time you say, Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham - it's this Abraham who speaks to us. Who throughout the centuries, speaks to our hearts and to our minds - this is faith - this is how to live - in love, in hospitality, in kindness, in peace, in justice, in strong unquestioning faith - this is how to live. And as long as you descendants of Abraham will live by this decision, so long will you remain immortal, amen.

1. Pilgrim - First Jew - First pilgrim - for an ideal - Pilgrimage (1)

Father - something magnificent -
It is of the quality of God - that it could inspire men -
their own free will - First Pilgrimage First Martyr
No more fateful decisions -
not long ago - Decisions - Other people made - for us!

Abraham - made such a fateful decision - to leave Pilgrimage
- unknown & unfriendly world נִדְחֵי עוֹלָם
- paved way for a new vision for mankind

2. Universalism - Mission
Not narrow - naturalistic - עולמי
Not narrow - naturalistic - עולמי

(a) To serve & fight in defense of others: King of Sodom
and his King was lot - taken captives - robbed
- pursued -
"I am one of the persons - but take the parts for myself"

"I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, making heaven and earth,
that I would not take a thread, or a shoe-string or anything
that is mine; but for say, 'I have made Abraham rich'"

(b) To do the right because it is the right:

(c) עוֹלָם לְדוֹר וָדוֹר - an essential trust

3. Peace-Maker - First people to preach Univ. peace.

Invited by Shepherd, Abraham & Lot - slaves -

לֹא הָיוּ אֵלֶיךָ עֲבָדִים - לֹא הָיוּ אֵלֶיךָ עֲבָדִים - לֹא הָיוּ אֵלֶיךָ עֲבָדִים

12 - וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל - וְיִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל -
 The world is by sword - but men must fight as it!
 "Beat swords into plowshares" = פְּלִיטָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל =

4/ Hospitable man - וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל - 3 men
 עֲלֵי יָדַי וְעַל יָדֶיךָ - "If I have found favor - please do not
 turn by my tent - but here - refresh yourselves - Hortus!
Sarah - best place - best place - prepared - to himself
 stood by them to see that all was done -

① Kindness to strangers - וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל - Lois
 2 fellow men -

5/ Just man - Justice - Justice -
Challenge for to do justice -
Sodom - וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל

50 - 45 - 40 - 30 - 20 - 10 -

Abraham was not interested in Jewish city - heathen -
world city -

Jonah - Nineveh - Vile numbers - refuge!

6/ Samuel & Isaac - וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל - A test!
No further - answer - וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל -

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