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Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel Box Folder 164 59 919

Three rabbis - Akiba, Meir, Rab, 1954.

THREE RABBIS

Akiba - Meir - Rab

January 24, 1954

My dear friends, in our religion there is an unbroken chain of tradition from Abraham down to the present day. There have always been teachers in Judaism from Abraham down to the year 195h, not all equally great, of course, but all equally devoted and each one serving the needs of his generation. These teachers of Israel, of Judaism, through the ages went by different names - patriarchs, prophets, priests, elders, scribes, sages (Hebrew...). There names different, but they were all dedicated teachers of our faith. What they taught is found in books. Our religion expresses itself in texts, books - books of the Bible, books of the Apocrypha, books of the Talmud, books of the Midrash, the individual writings of great men: great philosophers, poets: Saadi, Maimonides, Halevi, Moses Mendelssohn, right to the present day. These teachers left us their spiritual legacy in books, and there is an unbroken line of that literature - that religious literature - from the days of Abraham and Moses to this day.

In the past few months I have spoken to you of prophets, kings, Moses, Abraham, whose teaching and whose history are found in the books of the Bible. This morning in speaking of rabbis we are speaking of teachers whose instruction is found in the Talmud, principally. The Talmud which is the collection of the instruction of the rabbis covering a period of some 600 years from about the second century before the common era to about the fourth century of the common era. That is the classic age of the great rabbis whose teaching we find in the Talmud and in supplementary Talmudic writings like the , and similar works. Recently the Talmud has been translated into English and into some 3h rather sizable volumes. The Talmud is the product of the deliberation of the rabbis and their schools, their academies in Palestine during these 600 years and also in Babylonia. All through much of that

period of 600 years the Babylonian Jewish community was a very important one and an autonomous one. It established its own schools and its own academies and it produced its own great rabbis. Some of them as great, if not greater, than the greatest of the rabbis produced in Palestine. The Talmud, which is composed of an earlier section—the works of the earlier rabbis, called the mishnah, and the later section—the work of the point of the point

was looked upon as a sort of another holy language by the Jewish people. And by the time of the beginning of the fourth century before the common ea, the Jews of Palestine were speaking Aramaic; that was their vernacular. They were studying Hebrew, of course, in their schools, and their prayers were in Hebrew, but the language of the street and of the home was Aramaic, and the language of the Jews who lived in Babylonia was also a dialect of Aramaic. We have in our prayer books as well as in the Bible itself some reminiscences of this Aramaic speech, which was the language of our people from about the beginning of the third century on. Our Kaddush, for example, the mourners' prayer, was written not in Hebrew, but in Aramaic.

Now the Talmud represents the development of Jewish law subsequent to the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. The Five Books of Moses were pretty well completed, and in their present form, about the fifth or the sixth century before the common era. That represented the law, the divinely revealed Law, which was to cover every situation in life, every conceivable human relationship. But life moves on, new situations arise, calling for new adjustments, for new laws, and their developed subsequent to the Torah, new laws which were looked upon as unwritten laws. The Torah was the written Law, (Hebrew). But these subsequently evolved laws to meet new situations were looked upon as the (Hebrew), the un-written law. It is clear that laws which were enacted in the United States 100 years ago are not adequate to meet life today. The Constitution of the United

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States had to be subjected to a series of amendments and is continually being amended and re-interpreted. And so the Laws of Judaism found in the Torah which were adequate for the day they were enacted had to be supplemented. The difficulty there was that the Torah was a divinely revealed book and in the Torah it is clearly stated that you should not add anything to it nor detract anything from it. And there was a difficult problem. There was a danger of the Torah becoming a dead book, not a living guide to the life of the people, a vestige of the past. And so very early the teachers of Judaism began to interpret the Torah from the days of Ezra in the fifth century before the common era after the return from Babylonian captivity. They began to interpret the Torah and to make it applicable to the needs of the day. Ezra did that and his disciples who were known as the scribes, those who copied the Torah, the written law, and after them the men of the great synagogue, the great assembly as they are called, continued to interpret the law. They were guided by the principle (Hebrew) raise many disciples and build a fence around the law just as you build a mote around a castle when you want to defend the inner citadel - you have to build outworks, bulwarks, fortresses around it so that it, the citadel itself, could not be easily reached build fences around the Torah, develop new laws, new regulations, new ordinances, to protect the inner life of the people from assimilation, disintegration. And after the days of the men of the great assembly, that task was taken over by the Sanhedrin.

Now this practice of developing an unwritten law and deriving it from the written law and therefore giving to the unwritten law the same authority as the written law was not accepted by all the Jews. There was great resistance to it. And by the second century before the common era there developed two major parties in Israel, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees maintained that the only law that was given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai was the Five Books of Moses. The laws in those books are binding upon all Jews. All subsequent laws may be accepted, may be rejected with impunity, but have no divine sanction. The Pharisees, on the other hand, said

lopments, which are as vital as the written law, which will save the written law from becoming senescent, obsolete. There was also the question of great doctrines which the Sadducees refused to accept because there is no trace of these doctrines in the Five Books of Moses. For example, the question of resurrection and immortality of the soul on which the Pharisees laid a great deal of stress and which in course of time became an integral part of the creed of the Jewish people but which the Sadducees refused to accept because there was no authority for these ideas in the Five Books of Moses.

Now the rabbis were the champions of the unwritten law and to prove that the unwritten law was obligatory they found sanction for it by a very skillful process of exegesis in the written law itself. They developed a series of laws of interpretation. The great Hillel developed seven such laws; laws like inference from the minor to the major; inferences to be drawn from a similarity of phrases or by new induction. They developed a whole technique of interpretation whereby the laws were grounded and rooted in the old laws and therefore received the same sanction, the same sanctity as the written law of Moses.

Now the Talmud of which we are talking contains these legal extensions of the Torah, as it were. How they were arrived at by the rabbis, of the discussions at the academies about these laws, laws concerning prayer, charty, tides, the proper observance of the Sabbath and the holidays, laws of marriage and divorce, laws of property, civil law, criminal law, courts, evidence, testimony, laws concerning sacrifices, ceremonial laws, laws of clean and unclean, laws concerning idolatryall these subjects which were very vital to the life of the people were discussed at the Sanhedrin or in the academies of the rabbis (named), wherever these great academies were established through these centuries; decisions were reached on the basis of

these discussions usually by a majority vote and they became the binding law of the people. The Talmud contains all this and it contains much more. Besides being legislators, the rabbis were also rabbis, teachers, ethical guides, preachers. It was their duty to teach their people Judaism, to inspire them, to encourage them, to guide them; and so in this Talmud we find many of the ethical doctrines of these rabbis - some of their theologic and philosophic discussions, even fragments of natural sciences, of medicine, the history of the time. An amazing collection of Jewish religious literature of six centuries, and for more than 2,000 years Jews the world over, your ancestors and mine, have lived by the laws of the Talmud. It was the book of instruction in the Jewish school. Next to the Pible - sometimes priority was given to it in instruction over the Bible. And through its discipline and its way of life which it defined for the Jewish people, the Jewish people and Judaism walked reserved through the ages.

I want to speak this morning about three of the rabbis whose teachings are found in the Talmud. Actually, more than 3,000 of such rabbis are mentioned by name in the Talmud. I could have selected others besides the three - Akiba, Meir, and Rab - equally great, perhaps some greater, but of some I have spoken in the past I choose to speak of Akiba this morning because Akiba was one of the greatest of the rabbis of the Talmud. He is a rabbi who is mentioned most in the Mishnah, but he was not only a great religious teacher and an heroic figure, he was a great political leader. Bar Kochba lived at the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 of the the common era and a subsequent, turbulent, rebellious years during which the Jewish people refused to yield to their defeat at the hands of the Romans and awaited an opportunity to revolt a second time, which they did in the years 132 to 135 of the common era under the leadership of that great figure Bar Kochba. Now this Rabbi Akiba was the spiritual guide and mentor of Bar Kochba. He gave the inspiration to the revolt against the Romans, traveled far and wide through the Jewish Diaspora soliciting funds to help in the revolt, to arouse then ational sentiment among the people. He called Par Kochba

the Messiah, and Akiba finally perished when the great cause of Jewish independence went down to defeat at the hands of the Romans.

He was an amazingly interesting person. At the age of 2h Akiba was an illiterate. He couldn't read the alphabet. He was an Am Haratz, who hated the rabbis. He said if I could get my hands on a haham, on a rabbi, I would tear him like a fish. It was a woman who guided him into new ways of life, Rachel. Rachel was the daughter of a very rich man, and she fell in love with Akiba and she married him, this ignoramus, this illiterate, in whom she saw great promise. And her father disowned her, drove her out of the house. She insisted that Akiba, her husband, leve for some school and begin to study, and at the age of 2h Akiba began to learn the aleph beth.

She worked as a washer woman and Akiba while he studied would every day collect a bundle of faggots and sell it in order to sustain himself. When Akiba was no longer able in a certain period of his studies to pay for his tuition, Rachel cut off her beautiful hair and sold it to enable Akiba to continue to study. When Akiba became the great leader of his people, he bought her a golden tiara as a tribute to this act of hers.

After twelve years of study, Akiba returned to his home town and then he heard in the market place women taunting his wife and saying, "Where is your husband?" And she said, "If it takes another twelve years for my husband to become great in Israel, I wish he would stay away those years and study." When Akiba heard that, he departed without the knowledge of Rachel and spent another twelve years in study. And at 18, in mid-life, Akiba, brilliant, with an amazingly incisive mind, a prodigious memory, became famous throughout the land for his scholarship, for his skill in interpreting the law, and was looked upon as foremost among the leaders among the a cademy of scholars.

Akiba taught, established schools, raised many disciples; among them were some of the greatest teachers of the subsequent generation. Persecutions followed

persecutions after 70, after the destruction of the Temple, in an attempt to stamp out the rebelliousness of the Jewish people. In the year 110 the Jews were prohibited from fixing their own calendar, which in those days was a very important thing because they have no fixed calendar as we have today but the Sanhedrin every month upon the testimony of witnesses who saw the appearance of the new moon would set the date for the new month which helped the Jewish communities then to determine when they should celebrate their holidays. Without the fixing of the calendar every month and without the fixing of the leap year every so often Jewish religious life would have been thrown into a chaos. The government prohibited the Sanhedrin from fixing the calendar, and so the rabbis designated Akiba for a time to leave the country and to go to another country where the power of Rome did not prevail and from there to perform the ceremonies amouncing the new moon and proclaiming the leap year.

When another Roman emperor, Adrian, in 132 of the common era ordered that a heathen temple be built on the site of the old Temple which had been destroyed some 60 years before, that was the spark that set off the new revoltagainst Rome headed by Bar Kochba and inspired by Akiba. Jewish teachers were arrested, the teaching of the Torah was prohibited, Akiba defied the prohibition, continued to teach and to ordain rabbis. He was arrested by the "oman authorities, tried, and sentenced to death, torture, and the records have it that his flesh was torn with iron coals from his body. When he was being tortured he kept reciting the Sh'ma Yisroel, and some of his faithful students watching him said to Akiba, "Akiba, our master, this far you still go? You recite the Sh'ma even when you're being tortured? This is the Torah and this is its reward?" Akiba, the legend says, said, "All my life I didn't understand the meaning of the sentence, And Thou small love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul. Now I know what it means to love God by sacrificing one's life for God, offering one's soul." And he died with the Sh'ma Yisroel on his lips.

Akiba was the greatest of the interpreters, the developers of the midrash, and he was the first architect of the mishnah. Without Akiba there would have been no Talmud. It is difficult here in a short time to discuss some of Akiba's techniques in law-making. It is of interest to call attention to some of his ethical and theologic ideas. Here was a man who loved God to a point of martyrdom, and yet he was not unaware of the great and unsolved paradoxes which religion, faith, presents to the faithful. Here is a problem of how to reconcile God's omniscience, God's allknowledge of everything, of what is to be with man's free will. Is man's conduct determined by God's foreknowledge of that conduct, or is man really free to make the choice, because if man is not really free to determine his own conduct, then he cannot be held morally responsible for his conduct. And here is a paradox. Akiba was asked, and Akiba frankly acknowledged the enigma, resigned himself to a mystery and said, (Hebrew), "Everything is foreseen by God." (Hebrew("Nevertheless, free will is given to man." It is not necessary for a man of deep faith to have the answers to all the problems which perplex the mind of the faithful one. We cannot solve all the problems. The fact that Akiba was unable to solve this problem did not keep him from sacrificing his very life for his faith in God. There was another great rabbi who lived some generations after Akiba, Rabbi Yannai. He was also confronted with one of the great paradoxes of religion:: Why do the righteous suffer? Why do the wicked prosper if there is a just God? That is a problem, you may recall, that agitated the mind of Job, of Jeremiah, of the Psalmist. Rabbi Yannai also resolved himself to an unsolved enigma of faith and said it was not within our power to understand why the righteous suffer sometimes and why the wicked prosper sometimes. Nevertheless, the same Rabbi Yannai built great schools for the teaching of Judaism and raised many disciples.

There is an interesting legend told by the rabbis - that four eminent rabbis entered into the garden, the garden in the Greek sense, where philosophy was taught and Adscussed...Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma and Akiba. And they said Ben Azzai

entered the garden, gazed and died. Ben Zoma entered the garden, gazed, and became demented. Acher entered the garden and trampled down the plants. Only Akiba entered in peace and departed in peace.

Philosophic speculations, doubts, did not upset the spiritual tranquility, the strong faith of this great teacher. At the pace I am going I am afraid we're not going to reach three rabbis: I have difficulty getting through with one. But we can leave one or two of the others for some future time. They have waited a long time for us to discuss them.

I want you to know something more about Akiba; he was a wonderful man. Akiba saw greatness in man. (Hebrew) Man is beloved because he was created in the image of God. And God showed an even greater love for man in making man realize that he was created in the image of God. Because a man is made in the image of God, a man should have the strength to accept the evil of life along with the good. That's strength. And to say at all times (Hebrew), "All that God does is for the good." Man should recite a benediction for misfortune as well as for fortune, because one never knows whether what is momentarily misfortune is really misfortune. There is a legend told about Rabbi Akiba. He came to a town one day, to an inn, and the innkeeper was surly and would not permit him to stay in the inn. So Rabbi Akiba went to the outskirts of town and spent a night there, in a lonely shelter, with his donkey and with a lamp which he had. During the night a lion attacked the donkey and a wind blew up and extinguished the light. And there was Akiba, in great unhappiness and great misfortune. That night, so runs the story, robbers attacked the town, killed everyone in the inn, and had the donkey of Akiba been left alive to bray and to give away his location, or the light, had it remained, kindled through the night, it too would have attracted the attention of these robbers, his life might have been forfeited. This is the theme of The Bridge of San Luis Rey, you may recall. You never know whether the things we ask for is really for our good or the misfortunes which we think ardvisited upon us are really misfortunes.

"Love thy neighbor as thy self," Akiba said. This is the foremost principle in the Torah. He was quoting a great teacher, Hillel. (Hebrew) He loved men. He urged men to be kind, to be charitable one to another. And one day the Roman governor Tineius Rufus said to Akiba, "Why to you talk so much about charity, God ordaining charity upon men. If God loves the poor so much, why doesn't he provide for them?" And Akiba answered, "We are commanded to give charity that we ourselves might be improved by caring for the poor and that we ourselves might be delivered from the hell of selfishness." "On the contrary," said the Roman governor. "This thing of giving charity to those whom God wished to be poor, should make you liable to punishment. If I were angry with a person and sentenced him to prison and ordered that that man should not be fed, no food or water given to him, and someone came in and fed that slave, I would have that man punished." Then Akiba answered, "Suppose that man whom you sentenced were your son, your own child, and someone took pity on him in prison, lying there famished and dying of hunger and thirst and gave him food and water, what would you do? We are all children of God," said Akiba. "Therefore God has commanded us to deal your bread to the hungry and bring the poor that are cast out in thy house."

Well, I'd like to talk to you about Rabbi Meir now, but we haven't the time.

And of Rab. I'll give myself the pleasure of doing that a little later on in the season. In the meantime, it might be very helpful to pick up a Jewish history, or a Jewish encyclopedia, and read up about the great Rabbi Meir, who is also a fascinating character, especially in his contact with this great heretic, this Acher, this "other one," whose name the rabbis even refused to mention, and Rab, who was the foremost rabbi of Babylonia. Read about them. They are great human figures, great personalities, apart from being rabbis. A rabbi can be a great human figure too. Then we will discuss Rabbi Meir and Rab at some future time.

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