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Some Breakthroughs in Jewish History, 1963.

Some breakthroughs in Jewish history

Sunday morning, February 10, 1963

My dear friends, part of the exciting story of man are the moments of discovery and invention, which suddenly open up new worlds, heretofore closed to him. In the course of the long history of mankind such eruptive and revealing moments have been rare. For long stretches of time the human race carries on from generation to generation in a changeless routine of notions and traditions, and habits, conventions, convinced that that is how things have always been and must always be. And suddenly a breakthrough occurs, a breakthrough of so novel and revolutionary a nature, that it compels a complete reshuffling of all the inherited ideas, judgements. The old, incrustrated mold of thought and evaluation simply falls apart. Ancient dikes, as it were, give way to a flood of new insights and new speculations. Cultural mutations follow. A reconstruction of old values, a surge of new power, and a new day begins for mankind.

The discovery of the New World was such a breakthrough. The revival of learning, that sudden burst of culture in the fifteenth century, was another. The invention of printing, the new astronomy of Copernicus, the coming of the steam engine, the discovery of electricity and its applications, in dynamos, and telegraphy, and lighting and heating, telephone, wireless - these too were breakthroughs. So was the discovery of the velocity of light. So was Kitty Hawk, and heavier than air aviation; nuclear fission was a major breakthrough into vast, undiscovered worlds. So was X-ray, radium, anesthesia, and other discoveries and inventions in the fields of physics, chemistry and medicine. In prehistoric times, invention of fire, the invention of the wheel, the domestication of animals, and the transition from food collecting to food producing were such major breakthroughs.

Now, books have sometimes been responsible for breakthroughs in civilization - books - Plato's "Republic", Aristotle's "Metaphysics", Isaac Newton's "Mathematical principles of natural philosophy", Darwin's "The origin of species" in the field of biology, Freud's "Introduction to psychology" in the field of psycho-

analysis, Karl Marx's "Das kapital" in the field of economics, Einstein's "General theory of relativity" in the field of physics - these were books that were breakthroughs in human thought, that opened doors, for man, to new worlds. Centuries ago the Magna Carta was a breakthrough; so was our Declaration of Independence: documents.

Our political revolutions, like the American Revolution and the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, the Russian Revolution in the twentieth; religious revolutions like the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century - such revolutions often shake the very foundations of long-established societies. A new intellectual climate follows the storm of the revolution. Ideas are forced to re-form, regroup themselves, and thereafter the world is never the same again. A new social order, a new intellectual order, emerges.

Now in the history of the Jewish people, such political breakthroughs occurred from time to time. The first among them and most important, of course, was the exodus from Egypt. That was a breakthrough in Jewish history. It ended four centuries of slavery. It began Israel's career as a nation. And everything in the life of the people of Israel thereafter dates from the Exodus. You may recall a song in the Passover Haggadah, which enumerates the many degrees of benefits, benefices, which God conferred upon the children of Israel. If God hath done this for Israel and had not done this, it would have been enough - dayenu.

If He had divided the Red Sea for us and had not supplied our wants in the wilderness for forty years, it would have been enough. If He had fed us with manna and not given us the sabbath, if He had given us the sabbath and not given us the Torah, if He had given us the Torah and had not led us into the promised land, dayenu - it would have been enough. Each act of God's providence, while regarded as very important in itself, was not considered indispensable. Not so the deliverance from Egypt. Without it, it would not have been enough. That was the sine qua non of our people's history. That was the first major breakthrough, political if you wish, social, in Jewish history.

Centuries later, the return from the Babylonian exile, and the restoration of Judea, which by the way occurred exactly 2500 years ago this year, that too proved to be a breakthrough. When Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, who had conquered Babylon, where the Jews had been exiled, and became ^{the} ruler of the largest empire the world had yet seen, when Cyrus made the proclamation throughout his empire - "Thus saith Cyrus, King of Persia: all the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord the God of heaven given me, and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah; whosoever there is among you of all His people, the Lord his God be with him, let him go up". Israel was thus given a new lease on life. At the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple, fifty years before this time, the people of Israel felt themselves completely broken, defeated, lost -

- we are completely cut off. The prophet Ezekiel described the feeling of the people of that time as if they found themselves in a valley of dried bones. No hope, no resurrection. This sudden intervention in the history of the people, the conquest of Babylon by Persia, and the generosity of the king of Persia - he was a very tolerant man, religiously - in permitting the Jews in exile in Babylon to return to Judea, and to rebuild their Temple, to rebuild their life, that gave the shattered and broken Judeans a new lease on life; it saved them from extinction. And the prophet of that exile likened the rebirth of the nation which the proclamation of Cyrus made possible, likened it to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

Cyrus was hailed as the messiah, the anointed of the Lord, who ushered in this new day for the people of Israel. This was the second breakthrough in the history of our people.

And when after many centuries, many centuries of pariah existence, of humiliation and persecution in Europe in the middle ages, when after many such centuries of homelessness and wandering and bitter persecution, civil rights were finally granted to the Jews of France by the French Revolution, in September 1791, another historic breakthrough took place. It opened up a new era for the Jews of Western Europe. For the ideas of liberty and equality and fraternity for all men, which

were the ideals of the French Revolution, they carried with them the implication of equal rights also for Jews. And the march of the armies of France into neighboring countries of Western Europe, and the later victories of Napoleon, began a process of steady enfranchisement of all Jews in Western Europe. That was a major breakthrough for our people. It was the end of the dark ages for the Jews of Europe, at least of Western Europe.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, 15 years ago, after nearly two thousand years of national homelessness, marks another decisive breakthrough in Jewish history, the enormous consequences of which only the future, the inscrutable, unpredictable future will fully reveal. But surely a new day has already begun for our people. The galut, the exile, the third of the exiles - Egypt, Babylon, the world exile - the galut has come to an end, and with it much of the spiritual and psychic evils which attended it. An inner revolution is taking place in the hearts and souls of ^{our} people everywhere, a new outlook, new attitudes, a rediscovered dignity, a reborn confidence and pride. These were four of the major breakthroughs in Jewish history.

This morning, I wish not to speak of political, economic or social breakthroughs in Jewish history, but of spiritual, for in them the supreme significance of Jewish history for mankind assuredly lies. Throughout the ages, gifted sons and daughters of Israel achieved distinction in many fields of art and science, and some of them even rare eminence. Witness in our day, the extraordinary large number of Nobel prize winners among our people, far out of proportion to its numerical strength. But you will agree with me that generally, it is generally conceded that in no field did the creative genius of our people express itself so uniquely and so momentously as in the realm of the moral, the spiritual. Here their contributions were novel and revolutionary. By them the world came to be profoundly agitated, and the spirit of man was quickened to new adventures in faith and in social aspiration.

Now, in this spiritual realm, the first breakthrough came with the proclama-

tion of the one, universal God. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one".
 There was no true monotheism in the ancient world before the days of Moses, and^{none} for
 long centuries thereafter. One does not find a single instance of the rejection of
 the mythological concept of deity in the religions of the ancient world. All their
 gods, whether it be of Greece or Rome or Egypt or Assyria or Babylon - all their
 gods of lesser or higher degree, had their genialities, their births, their families,
 their rivalries, their love affairs, and they were all subject to a power beyond
 themselves - necessity, fate - whatever they called it. The God of Israel, the God
 which Israel proclaimed, is alone in being alone, with no power above Him. He was
 not a personification of any force in nature. He was not nature. He was the cre-
 ator of all the forces of nature and all the phenomena in nature. And so all ~~XXX~~
 myths were obliterated in the revolutionary concept of a sole creator, God, whose
 will alone determined everything in nature and in life. And on the score of mono-
 theism, Judaism was uncompromising. Israel defended it fiercely and with tenacity.
 God is one and alone. And what was unique about the God of Judaism, the God which
 Judaism proclaimed was precisely that He was not a national God but the universal
 God, who had chosen the people of Israel to proclaim His unity and His universality.
 This was the great continental divide between Judaism and all other religions. "I
 am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens above, who spread
 out the earth, who was with me, and the day is sure to come when all the children of
 men will acknowledge the truth, when YHWH will be one, and His name will be one".
 Now here was a revolutionary breakthrough in the religious development of man. The
 many gods so dear to the ancient world, the tribal gods, the national gods, must be
 abandoned - they are false, they are nothing; their distinctive representation and
 graven images and idols of silver and gold in human or animal forms, must be des-
 troyed and cast away. And in their place must come^{the} worship of the one spiritual
 God, the father of all men, whose house is a house of prayer for all men, whose
 ways are just, in whom there is no arbitrariness, or capriciousness such as charac-
 terized the conduct of mythological deities of the ancients. There must ~~XX~~ come

the worship of God who judges the world with righteousness, with Mishpat, and peoples with faithfulness.

It may not be such a revolutionary thought today, nearly three thousand years after it was first pronounced, but it was a shattering revolutionary thought in the ancient world, for it shook the foundations of all the temples of the ancient world. This was the first spiritual breakthrough. A second one was to follow.

All the people of antiquity worshipped their gods by means of ritual, by means of sacrifice. And frequently these rituals were obscene, always amoral. Just observe the taboos and take care of the shrine and its priest, that was enough. Bring offerings to the deity, calves of a year old, thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil, and if need be, your own firstborn; bring them to the deity as a sacrifice, the deity will ^{then} be pleased, and will grant you your heart's desire. That, in a very crude statement was exactly the relationship of the worshipper to his god in the ancient world. Judaism denounced and rejected this concept of worship which was devoid of all ethical commitment, rejected it outright. God, the universal God, the creator of heaven and earth, was not interested in shrines or priests or sacrifices. He was not interested in worshippers who trampled His courts bringing sacrifices and offering prayers to Him while their hands were full of the blood of oppression, evil and wrongdoing. God's sole requirement of man is that he should seek justice, relieve the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow; He does not need temples for His worship - the heavens are His throne and the earth is His footstool - what house can men build for Him? Let men build temples for Him in their souls, in humble hearts, in contrite spirits. And as for sacrifices, he that kills an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrifices a lamb, as if he broke a dog's neck; he that offers a meal offering, as if he offered swine's blood; and he that makes a memorial offering of frankincense, as if he blessed an idol. This is from the 66th chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. Here was another breakthrough, then - a breakthrough for man towards a purer faith and a cleaner mode of worship. And the prophet Micah summarized it all for the men of his generation,

27, 2800 years ago, "thou hath been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee, only to do justice, to love mercy and to walk in integrity -
 to walk in integrity before your God". That was ~~XXX~~^{an} amazing breakthrough in the spiritual life of man. The full import of it - we haven't realized it, really, to this very day.

There was still a third breakthrough for the spiritual life of mankind. It is not enough for man to know God and be righteous - he must also teach other men to know God, and help other men to righteousness. It is not enough for a people to have found the way and the truth, it must also become a light to other nations, and serve God by helping others to find Him. "It is too light a thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the offspring of Israel; I will also give thee for a light of the nations, that my salvation may be to the ends of the earth." The idea of a spiritual mission which is incumbent upon all men and nations, the mission of becoming a servant of God, this too was a breakthrough, for no one had conceived of it before, no one. And man's life upon earth was exalted and ennobled by this strange new summons for man to serve his fellow men, to set the right in the earth, nor did the Romans, nor did any people of antiquity. Israel projected this strange, revolutionary idea that a people must not live for itself alone, for its own aggrandizement, even for its own cultural and spiritual aggrandizement alone, but must assume the burden of service of other peoples, and other nations.

This was a breakthrough, and with this vision of mission came the final breakthrough, the ultimate vision, the confident messianic vision of the end of days, the vision of remote horizons, when men will beat their swords into plowshares, when wars will cease, and poverty will be abolished and men will dwell secure as brothers, each under his own vine and under his fig tree, with none to make them afraid. This messianic dream, which Israel gave to mankind, was not the dream of some lost paradise, some golden age in the long ago, which in the course of the long centuries had become debased, and deteriorated, into courser and cruder

ages, a sort of tragic devolution in man's career on earth, which is by the way, held by most of the ancients, a devolution, a debasement from what was once the golden age, the beautiful age, down through the courser ages, bronze and iron, to this age. Israel's messianic dream was not of an idyllic world from which man on account of his sins had been banished. The messianic hope of Israel was of a glorious kingdom to come, which all men would build by their own devoted labors and sacrifices. Israel's messianic hope was that of an ascendant evolution, into a golden age, into a kingdom of justice and brotherhood and peace on earth, which would be ushered in not by a man-messiah, not by a miracle-working human being, but by mankind itself, acting as its own messiah, as its own deliverer, through its own efforts, working for the establishment of the good society, of the

, the kingdom of God on earth.

All these were spiritual breakthroughs, of vast importance, breakthroughs for the ongoing life of man. I might refer to it as the four m's - monotheism, the moral worship of God, the mission of man on earth, the messianic kingdom which man is destined to build. These great visions which are still unfolding in the world, and are continuing to be potent and operative in society, are characteristically, uniquely, Israel's imperishable gifts to mankind. And they have become the spiritual blueprints of all men. Amen.

THERE AS NO TRUE MONOTHEISM IN THE ANCIENT WORLD BEFORE THE DAYS OF MOSES AND NONE FOR LONG CENTURIES THEREAFTER.

ONE DOES NOT FIND A SINGLE INSTANCE OF THE REJECTION OF THE MYTHOLOGIC CONCEPT OF DEITY IN THE RELIGIONS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD. ALL THEIR GODS OF LESSER OR HIGHER DEGREE HAD THEIR GENEALOGIES, THEIR BIRTHS, THEIR FAMILIES, THEIR RIVALRIES, AND THEIR LOVE AFFAIRS, AND THEY WERE ALL SUBJECT TO A POWER BEYOND THEMSELVES ~~ABOVE AND BEYOND THEM~~. THE GOD OF ISRAEL IS ALONE IN BEING ALONE, WITH NO POWER ABOVE HIM. HE IS NOT A PERSONIFICATION OF ANY FORCE IN NATURE. HE IS THE ^{creator} ~~CENTER~~ OF ALL THE FORCES AND PHENOMENA IN NATURE.

ALL MYTHS ~~AND MYTHICAL COSMOGONIES~~ WERE OBLITERATED IN THE REVOLUTIONARY CONCEPT OF A SOLE CREATOR GOD, WHOSE WILL ALONE DETERMINED EVERYTHING IN NATURE AND IN LIFE.

ON THE SCORE OF MONOTHEISM, JUDAISM WAS UNCOMPROMISING. ISRAEL DEFENDED IT FIERCELY AND WITH TENACITY. GOD IS ONE AND ALONE! WHAT WAS UNIQUE ABOUT THE GOD OF JUDAISM WAS PRECISELY THAT HE WAS NOT A NATIONAL GOD, BUT THE UNIVERSAL GOD, WHO HAD CHOSEN THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL TO PROCLAIM HIS UNITY AND UNIVERSALITY. THIS WAS THE GREAT CONTINENTAL DIVIDE BETWEEN JUDAISM AND ALL OTHER RELIGIONS. "I AM THE LORD, WHO MADE ALL THINGS, WHO STRETCHED OUT THE HEAVENS ABOVE. WHO SPREAD OUT THE EARTH -- ^{And} WHO WAS WITH ME?" THE DAY WAS SURE TO COME WHEN ALL THE CHILDREN OF MAN WILL ACKNOWLEDGE THIS TRUTH -- WHEN "YAHWEH WILL BE ONE AND HIS NAME WILL BE ONE."

HERE WAS A REVOLUTIONARY BREAK-THROUGH IN THE RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF MAN. THE MANY GODS, SO DEAR TO THE ANCIENT WORLD, THE TRIBAL GODS, THE NATIONAL GODS, MUST BE ABANDONED. THEY ARE FALSE, THEY ARE NOTHING, THEIR DISTINCTIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN GRAVEN IMAGES AND IDOLS OF SILVER AND GOLD, IN HUMAN OR ANIMAL FORMS, MUST BE ~~SCRAPED~~, DESTROYED AND CAST AWAY. IN THEIR PLACE MUST COME THE WORSHIP OF THE ONE SPIRITUAL GOD, THE FATHER OF ALL MEN, WHOSE HOUSE IS A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES, WHOSE WAYS ARE JUST, IN WHOM THERE IS NO ARBITRARINESS OR CAPRICIOUSNESS, SUCH AS CHARACTERIZED THE CONDUCT OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL DEITIES OF THE ANCIENTS. ^{There must come} THE WORSHIP OF A GOD WHO JUDGES THE WORLD WITH ^{gh} RITEOUSNESS AND PEOPLES WITH FAITHFULNESS.

THIS WAS THE FIRST SPIRITUAL BREAK-THROUGH. A SECOND ONE WAS TO FOLLOW. ALL THE PEOPLES OF ANTIQUITY WORSHIPPED THEIR GODS BY MEANS OF RITUAL AND SACRIFICE. FREQUENTLY, THE RITUALS WERE OBSCENE, ALWAYS AMORAL. OBSERVE THE TABOOS AND TAKE CARE OF THE SHRINE AND ITS PRIESTS! THAT WAS ENOUGH. BRING OFFERINGS TO THE DEITY, CALVES OF A YEAR OLD, THOUSANDS OF RAMS, TEN THOUSANDS OF RIVERS OF OIL -- AND, IF NEED BE, YOUR OWN FIRST-BORN -- AND THE DEITY WILL BE PLEASED AND WILL GRANT YOU YOUR HEART'S DESIRE.

JUDAISM DENOUNCED AND REJECTED THIS CONCEPT OF WORSHIP, ^{which} ~~was~~ ^{all} DEVOID OF ETHICAL COMMITMENT, OUTRIGHT! GOD -- THE UNIVERSAL GOD, THE CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, WAS NOT INTERESTED IN

SHRINES OR PRIESTS OR SACRIFICES, IN WORSHIPPERS WHO TRAMPLE HIS COURTS, BRINGING SACRIFICES AND OFFERING PRAYERS TO HIM WHILE THEIR HANDS ARE FULL OF THE BLOOD OF OPPRESSION AND EVIL AND WICKEDNESS. GOD'S SOLE REQUIREMENT OF MAN IS THAT HE SHOULD SEEK JUSTICE, RELIEVE THE OPPRESSED, DEFEND THE ORPHAN, PLEAD FOR THE WIDOW. HE DOES NOT NEED TEMPLES FOR HIS WORSHIP. THE HEAVENS ARE HIS THRONE, AND THE EARTH HIS FOOTSTOOL. WHAT HOUSE CAN MEN BUILD FOR HIM? LET MEN BUILD TEMPLES ^{for Him} IN THEIR SOULS, IN HUMBLE HEARTS, IN CONTRITE SPIRITS.

AS FOR SACRIFICES: "HE THAT KILLS AN OX IS AS IF HE SLEW A MAN; HE THAT SACRIFICES A LAMB, AS IF HE BROKE A DOG'S NECK; HE THAT OFFERS A MEAL OFFERING, AS IF HE OFFERED SWINE'S BLOOD; HE THAT MAKES A MEMORIAL OFFERING OF FRANKINCENSE, AS IF HE BLESSED AN IDOL."

HERE WAS ANOTHER BREAK-THROUGH FOR MAN TOWARDS A PURER FAITH AND A CLEANER MODE OF WORSHIP. "THOU HAST BEEN TOLD, O, MAN, WHAT IS GOOD, AND WHAT THE LORD DOTH REQUIRE OF THE^e~~m~~, ONLY TO DO JUSTICE, TO LOVE MERCY AND TO WALK IN INTEGRITY BEFORE YOUR GOD."

THERE WAS STILL A THIRD BREAK-THROUGH FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF MAN. IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR A MAN TO KNOW GOD AND BE RIGHTEOUS. HE MUST ALSO TEACH OTHER MEN TO KNOW GOD AND HELP OTHER MEN TO RIGHTEOUSNESS. IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR A PEOPLE TO HAVE FOUND THE WAY AND THE TRUTH --IT MUST ALSO BECOME A LIGHT TO OTHER NATIONS

AND SERVE GOD BY HELPING OTHERS TO FIND HIM. "IT IS TOO LIGHT A THING THAT THOU SHOULDST BE MY SERVANT TO RAISE UP THE TRIBES OF JACOB, AND TO RESTORE THE OFFSPRING OF ISRAEL. I WILL ALSO GIVE THEE FOR A LIGHT OF THE NATIONS, THAT MY SALVATION MAY BE TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH. "

THE IDEA OF A SPIRITUAL MISSION WHICH IS INCUMBENT UPON ALL MEN AND NATIONS, THE MISSION OF A SERVANT OF GOD -- THIS, TOO, WAS A BREAK-THROUGH. FOR NO ONE HAD CONCEIVED OF IT BEFORE. MAN'S LIFE UPON EARTH WAS EXALTED AND ENNOBLED BY THIS STRANGE, NEW SUMMONS TO SERVE HIS FELLOW-MEN, TO SET THE RIGHT IN THE EARTH, TO BRING THE PRISONERS OUT OF THE DUNGEONS AND THEM THAT DWELL IN DARKNESS OUT INTO THE LIGHT.

WITH THIS VISION OF MISSION CAME THE FINAL BREAK-THROUGH -- THE ULTIMATE VISION -- THE CONFIDENT MESSIANIC VISION OF THE END OF DAYS, OF THE REMOTE HORIZONS, ~~WHEN GOD WILL BE ONE AND HIS NAME WILL BE ONE~~ WHEN MEN WILL BEAT THEIR SWORDS INTO PLOUGH-SHARES, WHEN WARS WILL CEASE AND POVERTY WILL BE ABOLISHED, AND MEN WILL DWELL SECURE AS BROTHERS, EACH UNDER HIS VINE AND UNDER HIS FIG TREE WITH NONE TO MAKE HIM AFRAID.

^{is} THE MESSIANIC DREAM WHICH ISRAEL GAVE TO MANKIND WAS NOT A DREAM OF ^{some} LOST PARADISE, OF A GOLDEN AGE IN THE LONG AGO, WHICH ^{in time} BECAME DEBASED, AND DETERIORATED INTO COARSER AND CRUELER ^{ages -} ~~TIMES~~ -- A TRAGIC DEVOLUTION IN MAN'S CAREER ON EARTH, OR OF AN

IDYLIC WORLD FROM WHICH MAN, ON ACCOUNT OF HIS SINS, WAS BANISHED.
THE MESSIANIC HOPE OF ISRAEL WAS OF A GLORIOUS KINGDOM TO COME,
WHICH ALL MEN WOULD BUILD BY THEIR DEVOTED LABORS AND SACRI-
FICES, AN ASCENDANT EVOLUTION, ^{into a golden age} A KINGDOM OF JUSTICE, ~~AND~~ BROTHER-
HOOD AND PEACE ON EARTH WHICH WOULD BE USHERED IN NOT BY A
MAN-MESSIAH, BUT BY MANKIND ACTING AS ITS OWN MESSIAH.

ALL THESE WERE SPIRITUAL BREAK-THROUGHS FOR THE ONGOING
LIFE OF MAN. ^{- FOURTHS -} MONOTHEISM, THE MORAL WORSHIP OF GOD, THE MISSION
OF MAN ON EARTH -- THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM WHICH MAN IS DESTINED
TO BUILD. THESE GREAT VISIONS WHICH ARE STILL UNFOLDING AND ARE ^{continuing} ~~STILL~~ ^{to be} POTENT AND OPERATIVE IN SOCIETY ARE ISRAEL'S IMPERISHABLE
GIFTS TO MANKIND. THEY HAVE BECOME THE SPIRITUAL BLUE-PRINTS
OF ALL MEN.