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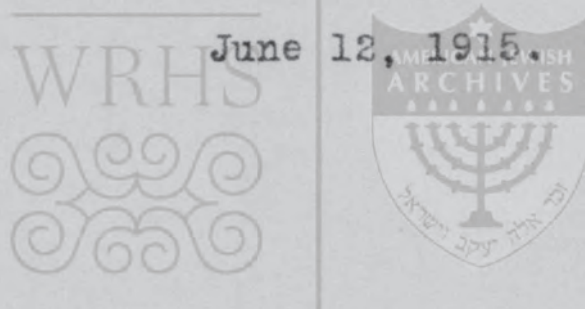
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Dreams and visions, 1915.

DREAMS AND VISIONS

VALEDICTORY DELIVERED IN THE COLLEGE CHAPEL



RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

DREAMS AND VISIONS

VALEDICTORY DELIVERED IN THE COLLEGE CHAPEL, JUNE 12, 1915.

Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver.

Age worships at the shrine of Memory, Youth in the temple of Hope. Age, no longer able to respond to the incessant demands of active life, retreats into the silent corridors of the Past, wandering leisurely through them, reviewing the old familiar things and touching the scented finger-tips of long-departed glories. But full-blooded and high-mettled youth, charged with hope and thrilled with ambition, beats impatiently upon the gates that bar the way to the promises of To-morrow and welcomes the new day with its struggles and its tasks and its wonderful possibilities.

→ "Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" ^(Joel III, 1) Age has dreams----dreams of the days that were. Youth has visions----visions of the days to come.

All great religions begin life with a vision. That, in truth, is their moment of revelation and consecration. Then, indeed, all religions are true; for the holy fervor which is theirs purges them of all that is sordid and false. It is then that Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism or Mohammedanism sweeps through the world propelled by the power of inherent truth. It is then that all religions are creative, apostolic, revolutionary. But time soon dampens the first flush of enthusiasm. Religion settles into well-defined grooves, institutions,

precedents and traditions. The promptings of the innate spirit of man is no longer the sole arbiter of future action. Tradition, the Past, is now the tyrant of the Future. Religious thought is no longer evolving, self-expanding and self-determining. It must now be cast in the narrow molds of dogma; with the result that catholicism gives way to sectarianism, ideals to creeds, religious fervor to stilted piety. Religion which means essentially the enlarging, the deepening and the widening of life becomes untrue to itself in endeavoring to enclose, confine and circumscribe it. The supreme function of religion now becomes the glorification of the past, the worship of history, and the conservation of the things that were.

Judaism, too, has traversed the whole gamut of experience. In the dawn of its national life, it caught a glimpse of a wonderful vision which transfigured its whole being. Then a people of tradesmen and herdsmen became prophets of the living God. Obedient to the beckoning of its vision, Israel discovered new realms for the human spirit, new worlds for the soul's activity. But the aftermath soon came. The reaction set in. Phenomenal activity was followed by spiritual languor and fatigue. Age was claiming its due. Law and not life was apotheosized; the Book and not the spirit which produced it. The vital religious instinct of the people which at all times struggled to express itself in newer and truer forms became straight-laced in the narrow confines of ~~hermeneutic~~ ^{hermeneutic} laws. The Past was encroaching upon the future; the dream was stifling the vision.

But such is the uniqueness and potency of Israel's vision that it is never wholly lost. It is a perpetual light, that flickers in the vast gloom of its life but ever and anon it blazes forth in wondrous brightness, illuminating its world. When Israel is least original, least creative, most accommodative, its innate longing for the wider fields of the spirit, the higher levels and the purer air, asserts itself. Hence, a Platonized Judaism. Hence a Judaism beaten into the framework of Aristotelianism. Hence a Judaism acclimating itself to the many schools of present day realism and idealism. These varied interpretations of Judaism are the manifestations of the one vital impulse of an inspired religion struggling to liberate itself, craving for life, movement, flexibility. Judaism must live and function. It must, therefore, always be fresh, virile, rational, in consonance with the highest truths of the age. Therefore Judaism culls truths from all fields of human experience. But it subjects them all to its own interpretation. It combines with them to the greater glory of all component parts.

It is, indeed, in this work of interpretation that the true originality of Judaism lies. Not so very long ago the preeminence of Israel as a religious ^{genius} ~~leader~~ was called into question. The Bible, it was claimed, was an echo of Babylonia. The Mosaic code was a revised copy of the older Hammurabi code. The religious festivals of Israel were Canaanitish in origin. The Jews were priests but no prophets; enthusiastic disciples but no masters. ^{however,} ~~But~~ A truer survey of primitive religions, soon convinced

men that originality in religious thought lies not in the crude matter of laws or customs or festivals. These are the unconscious creations of all peoples, the spontaneous expressions of social activity. True originality consists in the conscious reinterpretation of habitual practices, in the reevaluation of all social values with an eye to human regeneration. It is to take the mean clay and mold it into a form of worth and beauty: it is to take the expressionless block of marble and chisel it into a statue bodying forth a divine truth, it is to take scattered words and thoughts and weld them into the glory of a lyric, it is to take mute chords and strike them into a heavenly harmony that calls for the originality of the creator, the vision of the poet, the fervor of the inspired one. Judaism found matter and gave it form. It took the superstitions of primitive man and transformed them. It turned the Sabbath of taboo into a holy day commemorating the covenant which exists between God and man. It gave to the nature festivals which it inherited from the agricultural Canaanites greater significance by investing them with an ethical-historical character. It elevated the Festival of Unleavened Bread by making it a Festival of Freedom, and the Feast of Weeks by making it a Festival of Revelation. It took divination and transformed it into prophecy. It seized upon the soul of sacrifice and called it prayer. It raised polytheism to ^henotheism and ^henotheism into monotheism. Herein, then, is the originality of Judaism: in its being an ever-evolving moral form principle, and eternal alchemy by which all the verities and sincerities of life are transformed for the weal of the social

order.

The reform movement of the last century, in its radical reinterpretation of the past, in its reevaluation of all traditional values, and in its adaptation to the demands of a new life, gave another inspiring proof of the originality and the creative genius of Israel. It proved, moreover, that the dream had not yet crushed the vision of the people, that the ~~the~~ perpetual light, could shine forth again in splendor and brilliancy if the breath of new ideas but strike it. The principle of reform is the sine qua non of Judaism's life and progress and he who denies it is ignorant of the true essence of his faith. Nay more; he who in an age such as ours, an age of "inspiration and impulses", of intense intellectual activity, of critical research and unparalleled individualism, would incarcerate the spirit of Judaism in the four walls of traditionalism is an unconscious enemy of his faith and of humanity.

Unfortunate, indeed, would be the lot of us who have been granted the sacred privilege of being Rabbis in Israel, were our future task but the preservation of the past, the guardianship of the Law; were we to be mere channels through which the traditions of the past should flow. Such a task belongs to old men who have dreams and not to young men who see visions. But ours is the blessed lot and rare opportunity of functioning as active agents in a creative Judaism, of reforming, developing and enriching our heritage of the past. We enter our new lives inspired by that same vision which led our forefathers out of the mists of history, through the wide

stretches of spiritual experience ^Ynto the very mountain-heights of moral achievements. We wish to be true to this vision of our ~~in~~ fathers by dedicating ourselves to a Judaism which shall ever echo the highest ideals of the human soul, the loftiest truths of the human mind; a Judaism which shall be the implacable foe of all reaction, the friend of all progress.

And on this day of imperishable memories, when our hearts are filled with the holiest sentiments, when the call of our life-work sounds wonderfully sweet to our ears, we pray that He who was with our fathers in the past may be with us now and in the days to come, that the vision which ~~guided~~ our fathers through trials and tribulations in foreign lands and ~~on distant~~ shores may guide us, too, on our life's journey. We pray that that same vision which animated him who was the founder of this institution, whose face we never beheld but whose memory, living in these halls, was a ^{potent} force for honesty and sincerity, devotion and loyalty in our lives, that that same vision which age has not dimmed in the soul of that champion of true progressive Judaism---the President of this institution, our master and teacher, that that same vision which has sustained and inspired the labors of ^{those} the men who have, through many years of loving service, given us not merely ^{of} their wisdom and experience but, that which is infinitely more precious, of themselves, we pray, Almighty God, for ~~this~~ same vision to guide us, like that pillar of fire which guided our fathers, on to the Promised Land of service and usefulness.

AMEN.

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DREAMS AND VISIONS

Valedictory address, Hebrew
Union College, June 12, 1915

Age worships at the shrine of Memory, Youth in the temple of Hope. Age, no longer able to respond to the incessant demands of active life, retreats into the silent corridors of the past, wandering leisurely through them, reviewing the old familiar things and touching the scented fingertips of long-departed glories. But full-blooded and high-mettled youth, charged with ~~AMBIKION~~ hope and thrilled with ambition, beats impatiently upon the gates that bar the way to the promises of to-morrow and welcomes the new day with its struggles and its tasks and its wonderful possibilities. "Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions". Age has dreams - dreams of the days that were. Youth has visions - visions of the days to come.

All great religions begin with a vision. That, in truth, is their moment of revelation and consecration. Then, indeed, all religions are true; for the holy fervor which is theirs purges them of all that is sordid and false. It is then that Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism or Islam sweep through the world propelled by the power of inherent truth. It is then that all religions are creative, apostolic and revolutionary. But time soon dampens the first flush of enthusiasm. Religion settles into well-defined grooves; institutional precedents and traditions. And promptings of the innate spirit of man are no longer the sole arbiter of future action. Tradition, the past, is now the tyrant of the future. Religious thought is no longer evolving, self-expanding and self-determining. It must now be cast in the narrow molds of dogma; with the result that catholicism gives way to sectarianism, ideals to creeds, religious fervor to stilted piety. Religion, which means essentially the enlarging, the deepening and the widening of life, becomes untrue to itself in endeavoring to enclose, confine and circumscribe life. The supreme function of settled religion becomes the glorification of the past, the worship of history, and the conservation of the things that were.

In the dawn of its national life, Judaism caught a glimpse of a wonderful vision which transfigures its whole being. A people of tradesmen and herdsmen became prophets of the living God. Obedient to the beckoning of its vision, Israel discovered new realms for the human spirit, new worlds for the soul's activity. But the aftermath soon came. The reaction set in. Phenomenal activity was followed by spiritual languor and fatigue. Age was claiming its due. Law and life was apotheosized; the ^Book and not the spirit which produced it. The vital religious instinct of the people, which at all times struggled to express itself in newer and truer forms, became straight-laced in the narrow confines of hermeneutic laws. The past was encroaching upon the future; the dream was stifling the vision.

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WRHS

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