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The religion of youth, 1917.

THE RELIGION OF YOUTH
Rabbi A. H. Silver.

Scientifically, ours is an age of unbounded youth. Spiritually, it is one of anchored old age. In man's immemorial struggle with nature, our age is exhibiting a youthful vigor and vision, a vernal freshness and freedom which are inspiring. In a spirit of bold adventure, like the plumed knights of yore, we ride into the Realm of the Unknown in quest of the Holy Grail of Truth. Precedents and traditions, doubts and uncertainties are accounted as naught in our sight. We are supremely affirmative. In an irresistible impulse of abundant youth we have taken hold of physical reality and are molding it "nearer to our hearts' desire."

But in man's eternal pilgrimage to the Dwelling Place of God, our age, in its slow and laborious progress, has evinced a senile languor and dullness which are depressing. We are tired and foot-sore and the pilgrimage has been robbed of its sustaining hope by a rodent scepticism. Believing, we cannot deny. Doubting, we do not affirm. We endeavor to still our great soul-thirst with the waters of fast-failing philosophies and flat moralities and we satisfy our spiritual hunger with the scraps and crumbs of science. Not like gaily bedecked errant-knights of the Spirit do we appear but like lost and wearied wanderers at the lag-end of

a forlorn hope.

Judaism, too, has suffered from an incursion of this senescent spirit of the age. We, too, are sinking deep into the ruts of dotting old age. We are betraying in our slow and unenthusiastic affirmation of the verities and sincerities of our faith, in the substitution of moral formalism and ethical efficiency for religious fervor and spiritual piety, in the morbid practice of adjusting Judaism to the latest fad in philosophic speculation, in all of these and in many others, we are betraying not the outlook of youth nor the insight of manhood, but the dim vision of old age.

The tragedy of the situation becomes even more apparent when we reflect upon the sustained glorification of the Spirit of Youth in Judaism. Dowered from early life with a mission which by its very nature must be perennial, the Jew was aware that the ultimate success of his mission would depend upon the preservation within himself of the eternal spirit of youth. He must never permit himself to grow old for in old age lurked the greatest menace to the success of his God-given task. Whenever he felt the icy fingers of old age stealing over him, his soul would instinctively revolt and his heart would go out in an impassioned prayer-- "Renew our days as of old!" Fill us anew with that divine intoxication which we experienced in the dawn of our life; Restore unto us that all-surmounting, all-conquering spirit

of youth.

To one who is not familiar with the temper of Judaism and is out of sympathy with the impulses which motivate in its life a strange phenomenon, indeed, presents itself in the fact that so many of its prophets and seers were young men. When the vision came to the prophet Jeremiah and the voice of God called unto him saying--"Behold, I have ordained thee a prophet unto the nations"--Jeremiah in fear and trepidation exclaimed, "Ah, Lord God, behold I cannot speak, for I am but a youth." ~~When the prophet Isaiah received that mystic consecration vision amidst the rolling clouds of glory and the celestial harmonies of the seraphim and when the power of the vision prompted him to reply to the query of the Almighty "Whom shall I send?" by "Here am I, send me!" he was but a youth of tender years just placing a hesitant foot upon a threshold of manhood.~~ And Samuel, too, was but a lad when God called unto him through the stillness of the night. Strange, is it not, that young men whose knowledge is circumscribed, whose experience is of necessity limited should see visions and catch glimpses of God, while men of mellow years, of wider experience and riper judgment should go through life untouched by the burning fingers of a vision.

Strange, it is, but true!

The temper of youth is prophetic. The eyes of youth are not veiled by the gauzy fabric of convention.

The mind of youth is not rutted in the deep furrows of custom and tradition. Youth is uncompromising in its devotion, revolutionary in its technique. It sees the broad outlines of things, the wide contours of life. Its soul is not stifled by the jots and tittles of learning. It is sufficiently impractical to be adventurous. It does not weigh each new impulse in the balance of past experience, nor gauge each new ideal by the yard-stick of precedents. And these qualities of soul are the very characteristics of the prophet. Neither Amos nor Isaiah, nor Jeremiah, nor any other of that brood of titanic souls was sophisticated, pedantic, circumspect or conventionally practical. They were extreme, radical visionaries, obdurate and defiant. The prophet challenged the world, and because of that he became the leavening force of society, the formative agency, the power that kept it restive, agitated, moving. He was the tonic, the vigor, the new blood of his people. He was the unconquerable spirit of creative youth asserting itself whenever the pall of old-age began to settle upon men. He was the incarnation of Youth.

It follows, therefore as a matter of course, that a people whose supreme felicity was to function as --"The prophet unto the peoples of the earth," whose fondest wishes was--"Would that all the people of God were prophets," that such a people would keep fresh within its soul the spirit of youth without which prophecy sinks into priestcraft and

priestcraft into dead formalism. And it follows also that Israel can claim this enviable distinction of messenger and mouthpiece of God only as long as he remains youthful in the boldness of its vision, vernal in the freshness of his hope, strong in the affirmation of his faith.

I hold that in religious life today we are fast losing the position of prophets and leaders because we are permitting ourselves to grow old. The first sign of oncoming senility may be discerned in our pseudo-intellectualism, in our feverish attempts to cloak our faith in the tattered garments of an antiquated rationalism. To appear other than coldly rationalistic and smartly logical in an age of steel and concrete is, of course, to confess that we are too anaemic to endure the sober facts of reality. So that we have deliberately set about to tear down every pillar of mystic grandeur and sacred emotionalism in the Temple of our faith leaving the edifice to rest upon the unstable pillars of "pure reason" and unalloyed intellectualism. We have robbed our faith of its glow, of its fervor, of its ecstasy. We have somehow forgotten, or perhaps we have not yet become aware of it, that life moves not to the rythm of logical syllogisms, but to the mighty cadences of emotions. We are stirred to deeds of grandeur or infamy not so much by the force of an idea as by the irresistible surge and onslaught of plangent passions. Our course in life is de-

terminated less by the unsteady hand of the Pilot Reason than by the giant urge and the thrust of the waves of sentiment. We have lost sight of the supreme function of religion which is to reach the volitional springs of human nature, the springs of passions and emotions, to purify them and to direct the course of their outrushing streams. We have not realized that the regeneration of society will be effected not by an increase of knowledge, but by a purging of passions, a crystallization of sentiments, a directing of human impulses heavenward.

This fatuous intellectualism of modern Judaism may be attributed in part to the circumstances which attended the birth of Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism, be it remembered, started as a movement not of spiritual revivalism but of intellectual criticism. It was protestant not evangelistic. Its overt aim was to adjust Jewish life and thought to their new social, political and intellectual environments. Its dominant purpose was not to intensify devotion or to fan the flames of religious enthusiasm. So that the first expression of early Reform Judaism was a shrivelled, shrunken Mosaic Judaism which proved to be a tragically incompetent prosaic Judaism. The later leaders of the Reform Movement endeavored to correct this abuse and to check the process of spiritual deletion--and with some success. But we are still laboring under the rationalistic incantation of the Eighteenth Century. We are still painfully insisting that

Judaism is an absolutely sane, sober, moderate and plausible religion forgetting all the while that in religion, "plausibility," in the painted words of Dr. Schechter, "is more often a sign of mediocrity than a test of truth; that soberness is good, but that inspiration and enthusiasm are better."

As slaves of changing philosophic judgments, we have lost the freeman's courage of affirmation. Our Credo-- "The Lord, He is God," lacks the ring of strong conviction. To a world hungry for a living God, thirsting for the waters of spiritual salvation, to an age tortured with doubts and perplexities, asking in despair for the meaning of it all, seeking amidst the bewildering confusion of life the unity of some steadfast purpose, we can offer nothing but moral proprieties, ethical formalism, pale platitudes. We are starving our religion to the bone of an exalted philanthropy, a glorified system of almsgiving. For a religion rich in colorful emotion, *God's love* ~~thrilled~~ by the touch of divine intimacy, holding the promise of wonderful revelations to those who seek communion with the Infinite, we are substituting a system of sociology. We are stressing moral conduct which is, after all, only a spoke radiating from the hub of ~~the~~ religion, *unfulfilled* only a visible flame springing from the hidden fires of spiritual fervor.

We have accepted, and justly so, Micah's definition of religion: "To do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with

thy God," but we have emphasized "the doing justly and loving mercy" which are the ethical elements of the definition and we have overlooked the "walking humbly with God"-- which is its religious element. Moral efficiency is not yet religion. Ethical conduct is not yet faith. Religion is a "Walking with God," an ecstatic longing for a closer communion, a greater contact, a nearer kinship with the Infinite. It is the "Hithdabkuth" of the mystic, "the clinging to God." Religion is the eternal quest of the soul for self-realization and self-perfection in God. "Walk in my presence and become perfect."--that is the challenge to the religious man.

Only a religion that experiences the rapture of divine afflatus, that is permeated with the consciousness of the presence in its midst of a living God, that dares to affirm in a world teeming with negations-- "I know that my Redeemer liveth"-- can function beneficently in human life. And only a Judaism that is true to its ancient conviction that it is "The Servant of God," that can exclaim triumphantly with its saints and seers and mystics of all time, "I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine"-- can hope to remain eternally young and fulfill its task in the world.

The Rabbis commenting on the fact-- or on what to them seemed a fact-- that King Solomon wrote the Songs of Songs, the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the first a love rhapsody, the second a digest of practical morality and

folk wisdom and the third an amazing soliloquy on the vanity of life -- say that King Solomon wrote the Song of Songs first-- in his youth, and as he grew older he wrote the Book of Proverbs and in his old age he composed Ecclesiastes, for, they say, "when a man is young he sings in the unbounded joy of youth. As he advances in years his ringing song softens into the even accents of mature counsel and admonition. And in the twilight hours of life his voice sinks into pathetic muttering on life's vanity and emptiness." When a man is young he sings! When Israel felt the hot blood of youth coursing through his veins, when the dew of morning was on his lips and the call of God sounded wonderfully sweet in his ears--he sang-- "God is my strength and my song," "Sing unto the Lord a new song"-- "I will sing unto the Lord for he hath dealt bountifully with me." In the hours of darkest night, racked on the cross of universal hate the Jew poured out his soul in triumphant hymns and amidst sorrow and suffering he sang "How blessed are we." How goodly is our portion, how sweet our lot, how beautiful our heritage." But we are drifting into the mood of Ecclesiastes. We have forgotten how to sing. We write treatises and pamphlets and scholarly dissertations but how few are the hymns we write! Living in the sunshine of God's favor, we have lost the spirit of song!

Let us restore to Judaism its lyric expression. Let us bring back the song to the lips of our people. Many

of our people are this day seeking in strange cults and foreign folds the waters of salvation. Their lips are parched and their souls are athirst. They are lost in the grey sadness of life. They cry for that supreme beatitude of soul -contentment which will make their hearts sing for joy. Let us reveal to them the fountains of living water which are within our own faith. For hath it not been said--"For with Thee-- the God Israel-- is the **Fountain of Life.**" Let our prayer be today as it was in days gone by-- "Turn us Thou, O Lord, unto Thee, and we shall be turned; Renew our days as of old."



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