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Reel
176

Box
64

Folder
341

The essentials of Judaism, 1934.

THE ESSENTIALS OF JUDAISM

Dr. A. H. Silver
Assembly, October 3, 1934

It is a difficult task to compress into a very limited period a discussion of a theme as broad as that of Judaism. The task recalls a challenge made of a German Rabbi, when a proselyte came to him seeking to be taught the whole of the law while he stood on his feet. The Rabbi evaded a quandary by saying that the whole of the law consists in the following commandments: first, "Love thy neighbor as thyself", and second, "Go out and study".

I shall try to indicate for you this morning the four major tendencies in Judaism, the four strands composite of Judaism, the four streams pouring into the main channel of Jewish thinking. At times one or another of these themes is dominant; none at any time are missing from the complex current that is Judaism.

The first of these major themes is PROPHECY. Prophecy is the most significant and the most dominant feature of Judaism and is Israel's most significant contribution to mankind. For prophecy or propheticism realizes also the essential optimism of the race, the belief in progress, the deep rooted belief that man can raise himself to higher levels of thought and action.

The prophets felt the hand of God, and while the message of the prophets is one, the styles vary, being functions of the personalities which expressed them.

What, then, is the message of Jewish prophecy? In the first place, it has to do with the fundamental unity of the universe, of mankind, and of God. Prophecy organizes the world and the universe into one essential unity. It detests polytheism and idolatry, and

seeks to realize the ultimate unification of mankind, and to relate religion to morality.

That religion had anything to do with the personal moral conduct of individuals did not enter the minds of ancient men. Thus it was that the prophets announced what at that time was emphatically an entirely new concept of religion---that religion did involve the personal moral conduct of individuals. As a result of this the Hebrew prophets were in a position to evolve the highest moral code of mankind, and to make its influence widely felt.

Among the outstanding principles of this moral code is the principle of social justice. There must be no oppression and no exploitation. The prophets speak for justice and they speak for love. "Love thy neighbor as thyself" represents in a compressed form the entire teachings of the Jewish prophets. Then there is the principle of brotherhood, and thirdly (I can do little more than point them out here) the prophets were the first to announce the ideas and ideals of peace. No nation should lift a sword towards any other nation.

Propheticism, then, is the first major tendency of Judaistic thought, and it has remained the dominant motive down to the present day.

The second great major theme of Judaism is LEGALISM. The law is conceived as a method of enforcing the ideals of the race. The law was to be the method of training pedagogy(?); it was to be the method of holding the group intact. It was to be the method by which the people hoped to make the world a better place for the entire human race. You will not understand the legal aspect of Judaism, my friends, unless you regard the law as a covenant. Frequently one hears some man say that the legalistic aspects of

Judaism are opposed to spirituality. But the law was never a burden upon those who respected the law, for they came early to see it as a disciplinary measure to enable the work of the world to be carried out more effectively, and to them it became, therefore, a privilege. Later it became possible to teach man how to fulfill the law through spiritual intent, following the teachings of Jesus. The moral law then became sufficient to ennoble man. The great and vast code of minutia came later, the legalistic hairsplitting that has so obscured the principles upon which the laws were founded. Only later did the people feel the need for fences, but this itself was the outcome of many centuries of persecution and danger.

The law, then, is a major tendency in Jewish life. Even among reformed Jews there is a minimum code to which they adhere.

The third major tendency is **MYSTICISM**, occasioned by the vast number of profound mystics in the deep recesses of Jewish thought. I am referring not to theosophic Mysticism. I am referring to the profound piety, to the profound romanticism of religion which we call Mysticism, referring, for instance, to the marvelous psalms by the forgotten writers of the Middle ages. There is every bit as much piety, mysticism, and truth (?) in Judaism as in Christianity.

The fourth and last major tendency I shall call **NATIONALISM**, which I shall designate as the will to live. It is a view strongly held by the Jewish race. Of course in the last analysis it depends upon one's personal point of view, but the Jews have ever been willing to adopt a rational, normal viewpoint. Nationalism does not exclude internationalism, or further additional ideas of group harmony. The furtherment of this ideal in Israel meant national restoration and unity against common foes. It was not a compelled, an arrogant nationalism, it was in no way connected with exploitation,

and it was not an end in itself. The will to live among the Judaists was so strong that in time there evolved a nation of servants of God, true followers of the Messiah. The underlying idea of the Jewish nationalistic conception is that the nation does not exist for itself, but that the individual is of even higher importance. The nation, then, achieves its greatness not by exploiting the world for its own aggrandizement, but in achieving the supreme good of all. The national ideal becomes the service ideal and this is the Judaistic conception.

These, my friends, are the four major tendencies in Judaism. At times, as I have said earlier, one, two or three of these four predominate. Not one of them is ever entirely missing. These are the four strands which time has woven into the complex pattern which we know today as Judaism.

