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Ethics - by God or man?, 1954.

ETHICS - BY GOD OR MAN?

by

*An address delivered at _____, Ann Arbor, Michigan,
Nov 11, 1954*

DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

November 11, 1954

Ann Arbor, Michigan

I was asked to speak on the subject "Ethics - By God or Man?" As a Rabbi in Israel, I shall try to give you the answer of Judaism to this question. I have no other. I am also persuaded that when all is said and done, there is no other answer which any God-centered religion can give.

There arose in Israel in ancient times, in a small country which was the crossroads of great empires and cultures, a group of men who had a unique and challenging message for their people and for mankind. By it the world came to be profoundly agitated and the spirit of man was quickened to new adventures in faith and social aspirations.

These men, the prophets of Israel, were the founders of Judaism. In later times and in other settings, their basic ideas gave impulse and substance to Christianity and Islam. They projected a way of life for men and nations, which like some strong gulf-stream, has flown for centuries steadily and discernibly through the great waters of humanity.

They were not specifically theologians, these men who fashioned Judaism, nor did the faith which they founded ever boast of a systematic theology or an ethical science. There is no work on systematic Jewish theology until the early Middle Ages, a thousand years after the final canonization of the books of the Bible, two thousand years after Moses. There were many theologians and philosophers among the Jewish people, especially in later times, and some of these were not wanting in great speculative power, but Judaism is not based upon their theology or philosophy. These religious philosophers, in successive generations, employed

whatever philosophic thought was current in their day, from Platonism to Existentialism, to defend or to corroborate the basic tenets of their faith, "to prove the ideas of the Torah by correct reasoning."

Judaism welcomed the light of reason to illumine for man the truths which it proclaimed. It never sought refuge in obscurantism. It never justified itself by anti-rationalism. It revered the human intellect as a divine endowment. "It is the Lord Who gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding," and it taught men to pray daily: "O, favor us with knowledge, understanding and intelligence" (in the daily Amidah), but it was not impressed with intellectualism. It knew the limits of discursive reasoning and was not finally impeded by logical contradictions. Jewish philosophers never sought to accommodate Judaism to any system of philosophy but to re-enforce its basic tenets by the best speculative thought available. Their object was to explain and verify, not to equate.

That was wise, for the best philosophy of the day, like the best science of the day, like Aristotelian physics and Ptolemaic astronomy in their day, like Newtonian physics and Euclidian mathematics in our day, proved not to be the last word after all. The spirit of each age was allowed to have its say in Judaism, but never the last say, and nothing was permitted to endanger the quintessence of the faith.

Judaism is not as tidy and precise a system of religious thought as some men enamoured of systems might wish, any more than history is, but just as history, in spite of its troughs and crests and its patent incongruities, manifests a clear upward movement in human development, so does Judaism reveal in its development the progress and perseverance of a group of cardinal spiritual and ethical ideas. Judaism held high a light in the darkness of the world. Not all the darkness is dispelled, but there is enough light there to guide man along his way

and society to a fuller and happier life. A clear knowledge of God is possible to no one, but a true worship of God is possible to everyone. This profound truth was made known to the foremost among the prophets, Moses, who when seeking to discover the nature of God was told that the face of God was forever hidden from mortal man, but that he might learn much about "all the goodness" of God. This was revealed to him in thirteen moral attributes. Judaism taught man a true worship of God through a way of life informed by ethical aspiration. "The beginning of wisdom is reverence for God." Reverence for God is made manifest through human conduct and action. The emphasis is never on abstract speculation or on theology. "He judged the poor and needy, then it was well. Is not this to know Me? says the Lord." It is in this sense that the phrase "to know God," which occurs frequently in the Bible is to be understood. "Da'at Elohim" - the knowledge of God means the worship of God, not any intellectual fathoming of His nature. All speculative ways of knowing God lead from one darkness to another. "A man, when he has made an end (of probing the mysteries of God) has hardly begun, and when he ceases, abides in deep confusion." A modern philosopher, A. N. Whitehead, makes a similar confession for philosophy. "Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains." However profound our insights, we must still resort to human categories to describe God, and we cannot escape the limitations which condition all human knowledge.

Judaism has no special metaphysics, no mythology, no unique "knowledge" or secret gnosis requisite for salvation, no evangel of a miraculous scheme of redemption. Judaism is Torah - a compendium of moral instructions and imperatives, a rule of life, a pattern of behavior, a "way" revealed in the life of a people through prophets and sages, which if faithfully carried out, will build the good society on earth. "You shall teach them the statutes and the decisions and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do."

Judaism's chief concern is with man's life on earth and with social ideals working themselves out in history. The vision is of a day when "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky."

Judaism's source of authority is God. The motive is the love of God and man. The confidence is derived not alone from revelation, as unaccountably mysterious as the origin of intelligence itself, but also from history and from the empirical experiences of the people of Israel and of humanity. The reward for man and mankind is now and in the future.

Judaism sees in human history and in the history of Israel no mere succession of events but the articulation in time of an imminent divine plan as well as divine judgment and purpose, glimpsed by man in retrospect and then only dimly, but known to God in its completeness, a knowledge which, paradoxically, does not preclude man's moral freedom. Man has been given an assignment in the over-all scheme of things which calls for the inexhaustible inventiveness of his mind and spirit with which he has been endowed by his Creator. The Creator of man is not uninterested in man's assignment.

The Jews were the first to interpret history. There is a pattern in all that transpires and the pattern is a spiritual one. The good will triumph, for God has willed it so, but the triumph may be hastened by humanity's efforts. Climaxing Deutero-Isaiah's superb vision of the New Jerusalem and the Great Restoration, is the verse: "I, the Lord, will hasten it in its time" which contains an apparent contradiction. If God has set a fixed time for the event, what is meant by His hastening it? A Rabbi comments: "If Israel will merit it, God will hasten its coming; if not, it will come to pass in its appointed time." God's ultimate purpose does not dispense with man's participation in it nor absolve him of his duty and mission. This is a basic concept of Judaism. There have been

those who have denied the very possibility of any philosophy of history. There have been others who, like Marx in modern times, built a philosophy of history on economic determinism and on a dialectic of materialism. Proof is as inconclusive for one point of view as for another, and one view is no more "scientific" or plausible than the other. Judaism postulated a Providential version of history based on faith in a God of history "Who rules over all the kingdoms of the nations," Who "makes nations great and He destroys them; He enlarges nations, and leads them away."

I referred at the outset to the prophets of Israel, the founders of Judaism. In Judaism prophecy rose to the highest levels of spiritual revelation and the prophet became a fearless spokesman of God's moral law to men. The passionate ethical earnestness of Judaism is best reflected in the life, labor, struggles, and sufferings of these amazing spiritual pioneers of mankind - "eagles soaring above the tombs" of the ancient faiths, to use a Shelley metaphor, who gave the basic stamp to Judaism for all times. Here, as in so many other cultural experiences of the human race, the peaks thrust up suddenly and sharply, at the very beginning, and were never thereafter surmounted.

The message of these trumpeteers of a new dawn for mankind remained forever the developing theme of Judaism: "Thus says the Lord: 'Stand by the roads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.'" In the concord of their many voices, one strong dominant note is unmistakable - The good way! The good way is not to throng the courts of a Temple and bring a multitude of vain offerings to God. It is not to listen to the voice of priest or prophet as if they were singing a love song with "a beautiful voice, playing well on an instrument," listening to what they say but doing nothing about it. The good way leads directly and humbly to where men penitently and prayerfully wash the blood of sin, cruelty and oppression from off

their hands, search and make themselves inwardly clean, cease to do evil and learn to do good. The good way leads to where men, in struggle and in joy, build the good society through unity, freedom and compassion. The good way is the way of the unwearied moral effort and unremitting action. At the heart of the message of Hebraic prophecy and subsequently of Judaism itself is a summons to men not to rest content with the evils of society or with their own personal shortcomings, but to set to work to correct them.

The prophets were never divorced from the contemporary scene. They were interested primarily in the moral tone of their nation and of society generally, in social righteousness, human brotherhood and peace. They had spiritual kinsmen in the Psalmists, but these men were interested primarily in personal piety and in the individual's quest for the light and nearness of God. They supplemented each other and historic Judaism is a blend of their vision, their passion, their piety and their profundity.

In the eyes of the wisest among the philosophers of Greece, religion was a part of a system of ethics in which there was as little of the social passion of the prophets as there was of the lyric piety of the Psalmist. In the eyes of the teachers of Judaism, religion was the fountain-head of all ethics. Josephus, the cultured Pharisaic historian of the first century, draws attention to this vital distinction. "The reason why the constitution of this legislation was even better directed to the utility of all, than other legislations were, is this, that Moses did not make religion a part of virtue, but he saw and ordained other virtues to be parts of religion; I mean justice and fortitude and temperance (the cardinal virtues) and a universal agreement of the members of the community with one another; for all our actions and studies and all our words have a reference to piety towards God, for he has left none of these in suspense or undetermined.

There have been writers who since the days of Heinrich Heine and Matthew Arnold have drawn sharp contrasts between Hellenism and Hebraism, the two main influences in Western civilization. They discern a wide chasm between the Greek "Weltanschauung" and the Hebraic "Lebensanschauung." The Greek mind, it is maintained, was engrossed in science, art and philosophy; the Hebraic in religion and morality. Hebrew thought is dynamic, Greek thought is static and harmonious. "Repose, harmony, composure and self-control, they were the Greek way; movement, life, passion and strength mark the Hebrew way." (Add —)

The Greeks went far in religion and ethics, but not far enough, not as far as the deep spiritual insights of the Jews, and the Jews fell far short of the Greeks in those areas where the latter excelled. That is why the peoples of the Western world at the close of the classical age turned for their scientific and artistic needs to Greece, and for their spiritual and ethical needs to Judea.

Plato speculated long about the nature of the Good, and having found a satisfactory definition in terms of the four cardinal virtues whose prototype was a heavenly Form, he did nothing about this Good. It remained an aristocratic intellectual truth. It was not converted into a prophetic compulsion so as to make the good triumph in the world. He did not rush out into the Agora and, lifting his voice like a trumpet, declare unto the Athenians their transgressions and to the House of the Achaeans, their sins, summoning them to repentance and reformation. Nor can one conceive of Plato, or Aristotle, or Epictetus passionately pleading with the Almighty, in the name of Justice to save the wicked city of Sodom, for the sake of the few righteous men in it. Judaism did not speculate much on the nature of the Good, but it told man what is good and what the Lord requires of him "to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God." All who heard Micah knew full well wherein they had individually and collectively failed to measure up to these requirements, and they knew too, that what was

indicated was not a continuous dialogue concerning these ethical concepts, but a beating of the breasts and a thorough-going amendment of their way of life. What was stressed in Judaism and what all God-centered religions must stress was that "the end of the matter, all having been heard: revere God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man." (Koh. 12.13)

Basing his ethical life on God, on the will of God and the service of God, the religious man finds himself confronted with intellectual difficulties and grave paradoxes. Is man free to originate moral decisions and determine by his own action his spiritual destiny? If so, how do you reconcile that with God's foreknowledge and omnipotence. There have been and there are religions which maintain that man is not free, that he is in the grip of a universal causal law, that his status, actions and decisions are fore-ordained and inevitable, that some men are elected and predestined by grace to eternal life and others are not. Man's merit does not exert any influence upon his destiny.

Judaism denied and rejected all these ideas. It gave men the assurance of a God Who desires freedom and Who granted man a capacity for freedom as part of his endowment as a human being made in the image of God.

Judaism proclaimed the liberating doctrine of moral self-determination and therefore also of moral responsibility. "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil...therefore choose life!" God did not fashion man to be a helpless creature of passive receptivity but one capable of selection, decision, and origination. In his spiritual life He has been granted the artist's gift and privilege of dominating the material before him, and the more trained and skilled he becomes, the greater his freedom of execution.

The theologic and philosophic problems involved in human freedom were not unknown to the teachers of Judaism, and they were not unaware of the difficulties in reconciling man's freedom of choice with God's omniscience or man's lot on

earth with his just desserts. But the intellectual difficulties which they encountered in their efforts to solve these problems, a few of the many unsolved problems and contradictions which abound not only in the field of religion but elsewhere as well, did not move them to commit the error of denying free will altogether.

They were faced with a paradox but the paradox did not faze them. They acknowledged it as one of the mysteries of the religious life - not, however, to vindicate God's omnipotence but to safeguard man's moral competency. They resigned themselves to the impossibility of solving what appeared to them in inherent contradiction. The great teacher Akiba declared: "Everything is foreseen yet free will is given to man." God's foreknowledge cannot contradict man's freedom. God is aware of all possibilities, and yet man is free to determine his moral conduct.

God cooperates with man in his moral life, but does not coerce him. God created a moral universe and man's freedom is its hall-mark. As a created being, man is determined; as a creative being he is free. Human action affects history and God intended that it should, as part of a design not grasped by man.

The teachers of Judaism realized that while there are limitations to human freedom, there existed vital areas in which man was free, in which man had a vivid intuition and experience of freedom, and that man could grow into freedom and the proper choice of action through training himself in moral habits, through wider knowledge and maturer judgments.

Because the boundaries between what is free and what is determined are not clearly defined, Judaism urged man to act as if these boundaries did not exist at all as far as his moral initiative was concerned, "to cleave to the sunnier side of doubt," and not to proceed on the assumption that his actions are foreknown and his future foredoomed. It is man's duty to develop his freedom just as it is his duty to develop his mind and reason, although they too have their limitations.

In non-theologic terms modern man finds this issue restated for him, as one between cultural determinism and free will. How can man exercise any choice or moral initiative whatsoever, seeing that his conduct and way of life are coercively conditioned by the society in which he is born and reared and by its economic, political, social and legal requirements and mores. Within such a straight-jacket of social repressions and traditions, how can the individual be sufficiently autonomous to master his own moral career and to be accountable for it?

The best thought of our day has veered away from the doctrine of cultural-social determinism towards a more dynamic conception. Man is able to fashion his own private world within the larger social framework which in itself is not static but subject to change and redirection by man himself.

Judaism rejects an exaggerated pessimism with regard to man's nature and man's endowments. Man can, to a large degree, make his own world; and man has, to a large degree, made his own world. And by and large, in spite of setbacks and throwbacks, it has been a progressive world. Man has moved forward to more knowledge, to higher standards of living, to greater justice, to better health conditions, to greater and more energetic efforts in the eradication of poverty. Judaism takes a wide perspective on human history and sees definite progress, and though the pace is frequently slow and occasionally reversed, it sees man rising from lower to higher levels, from the jungles of barbarism, slavery, poverty and disease, to higher levels of enlightenment, of mastery over his environment, of health, justice and freedom. There is an ascending curve in the evolution of mankind.

Judaism maintains that man is finite and yet not helpless. Man is conditioned, yet he is free to a significant degree. Man cannot think as God but man can think about God. Man does not know the ultimate answers, but in faith he can work with relative truth and find satisfaction and happiness in his work, provided it is

sincere work and well intentioned and directed towards God and towards man.

Man cannot wait and should not wait to do the things which need to be done until he sees the road clearly ahead. Sometimes he must act on faith, even when he does not know what lies ahead. Sometimes he must move forward through mist and fog. He must do what has to be done with the material and opportunities which are at hand, trusting that what he is sincerely striving to do will prove to be within the pattern of the abiding design of human progress and God's purpose.

"Yours is not the duty to complete the task, neither are you free to desist from it." "Share your burden with God and He will sustain you. He will never suffer the righteous to be moved."

Pessimism is a form of atheism, for it omits God from man's calculations, and ignores the spirit of God that is in man. Man should continue to strive and aspire and build again and yet again upon the ruins of his many broken hopes and dreams.

Men cannot see beyond the horizon of their own times. What lies ahead, no one knows. But Judaism constantly reminded man that beyond all horizons there is God.

The stars and planets were there and all the moving constellations before man ever recognized them. In the dark imprisoned mind of the cave dweller in the dawn of time, there already lay impounded all the marvelous achievements of man that were to come, all that he could not see, nor grasp, nor understand - all that he would have refused to believe - the inventions and discoveries, the power and the mastery, the worlds of music, song and poetry, philosophy and science. In the mind of the primitive cave dweller there was already contained, as in a seed, all the blossoming and flowering civilizations that were to come, but he could not see the shape of things to come. He could not penetrate the curtains which enshrouded his visible and empirical world. He would have been justified in

a total pessimism about the future of mankind far more than men of later generations. For these already had a long recorded past to contemplate, a past which, in spite of all its turns and windings, did lead mankind forward to amazing progress and brighter prospects.

Judaism admonished men not to despair of the future, nor of their own strength, nor of mankind's inexhaustible spiritual resources, nor of God's cooperation. Long and hard is the way, but there is a way, and there is a goal, and the faithful children of light will follow it and will not grow weary.



ETHICS—

by God or Man . . .

What is the basis for ethics



Are ethics absolute or relative



Why should I be ethical





ETHICS - BY GOD OR MAN



**FATHER
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Editor of "Theological Studies"
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NOVEMBER 3



DEAN LISTON POPE

Dean of Yale Divinity School
Author of *MILLHANDS AND PREACHERS*
Editor of "Social Action"
Editor of "Labor's Relation to Church
and Community"

NOVEMBER 8



RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

Rabbi of The Temple in Cleveland
Active in many social movements
Chairman of American Section of the
Jewish Agency for Palestine
President of Zionist Organization of America
Past President of Central Conference of
American Rabbis

NOVEMBER 11

AUDITORIUM A — ANGELL HALL — 8:30 P.M.

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