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Cornell University, 1958.

WHAT IS JUDAISM

by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

33.3 Long-Play

I am ⁱⁿ pleased to summarize ^{ing} the doctrines of Judaism and ^{ing} to point out its distinctive pattern and its essential message to mankind, I should like to remind you that a religion as old as ours--reaching across many centuries and many lands, embracing many cultures, and reflecting a great variety of experiences--there are bound to be many levels of development, many varied and shifting emphases--highways and byways as it were--of thought.

It should be remembered that Judaism is not a fixed and inveterate set of dogmas, doctrines, and observances which have remained constant and inflexible through the centuries. Judaism is not a formalized creed which consists of so many articles of faith which have received the official stamp of approval of some authorized church council. In fact no attempt was made to formulate a definitive creed of Judaism until the Middle Ages, some 1500 years after the time of the great prophets of Israel. Nor is Judaism based on some unusual or dramatic event in the history of the Jewish people or on some extraordinary personality, although historic events and great personalities ^{did} played a significant role in the development of our faith. Rather is it the evolving faith ^{and} the ethical thinking of a spiritually sensitive people through long centuries of time, and it is only the religious sense or genius, if you will, of this people, which gives organic unity to the faith which we call Judaism.

Just as in the case of all other religions, so also, Judaism; there have been in it from time to time various schools of thought: the traditionalists and the reformers, the ritualists and the pietists, the rationalists and the mystics, the priests and the prophets. At times the views of one or the other predominated, but most often they interpenetrated and modified one another. But it is not difficult at all to discover beneath the surface of these movements and currents the deep, steady, and persistent channels which carried on throughout the ages, the major trends, the key ideas. These have to do with ~~the~~ three central convictions - Unity, Freedom and Compassion - in God and in man.

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A clear knowledge of God, Judaism maintained, is possible to no one, but an acceptable 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 (Ex. 33:18-23). This was then revealed to him in the thirteen moral attributes (Ex. 34:6-7). In Judaism the true worship of God does not culminate in a mystic ecstasy, or an inner "experience" of God, or in the "identification" of the worshiper with God, but in the good life. "And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord" (Dt. 6:18).

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The accent in Judaism is never on abstract speculation but on an ethical message and a program. Many of the basic theologic and philosophic problems which engaged the minds of men through the ages are propounded in Biblical and Rabbinic literature, and receive various degrees of attention, but the strong emphasis is always on moral action. "The beginning of wisdom is reverence for God" (Pr. 1:7). Reverence for God is made manifest through action. "He judged the poor and needy, then it was well. Is not this to know Me? says the Lord" (Jer. 22:16). 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 true worship of God, not a full intellectual fathoming of His nature. "Let him who wishes to glory, glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who practices kindness, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things do I delight, says the Lord" (Jer. 9:23).

No special metaphysics, no unique "knowledge" or secret gnosis which is requisite for salvation, no evangel of a miraculous scheme of redemption are offered by Judaism. It is not a transcendental wisdom so recondite that it can

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be grasped only by the exemplary few, and by them only after a long and intense psychophysical discipline. Judaism does not attempt to answer unanswerable questions, or to give man what man cannot have.

Judaism is Torah - "teaching." The Aramaic Targum correctly translates it Oraita, while the Greek Septuagint ineptly renders it nomos -- law. Torah is a compendium of moral instructions, a rule of life for all men, a pattern of behavior, a "way" revealed in the life of a people through prophets and sages, which, if faithfully followed, leads to the well-being of the individual and of society. "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" (Ex. 18:20). "The 'mizvah' (religious commandment) is a lamp, the Torah is a light and the moral instructions are the way of life" (Pr. 6:23). The term Halachah which the Rabbis employed for laws based on the Torah also means the proper way in which a man should walk.

Judaism's "way" is designed to sustain and advance life, not to escape or transcend it. Its roots are set deep in the practical needs of man and it is fully responsive both to his instincts and his aspirations. Judaism is a devout morality. The source of its authority is God. The motive force is the love of God and man. Its 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. The reward for man and mankind is now and in the future. To propagate this faith -- "to proclaim God's unity in love" -- Israel deemed itself chosen as an instrument of leadership. The technique for this leadership is defined: "To learn and to teach, to observe and to practice."

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The teachers of Judaism constantly stressed the fact that Judaism is a livable faith, not too difficult for man or beyond his reach. It did not demand the impossible of man. The good life, acceptable to God, is within the reach of all. The standard of conduct demanded of man was not inordinately difficult

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of attainment:

For the commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear and do it?" But the word is very near you.

It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it (Dt. 30:11-14).

The task of building the good society is difficult, but no one man is called upon to bear the entire burden alone. Each man is required to do what he can to the best of his abilities. R. Tarfon (c.100) said, "It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

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Judaism had faith in human perfectibility, but it took a reasoned and long-range view of it. Human perfection is a goal, not a present reality. Judaism therefore outlined a considered regimen of moral tasks and duties and a deliberate course of training for the conduct of the good life. "Love your neighbor as yourself," is not the beginning of such a course but its consummation. We do not climb a ladder by starting at the top. A premature demand for maximum moral performance on the part of the individual is as fatal to his development as a similar demand made upon the physical exertions of an athlete. Hence Judaism offered an ordered manual of training -- the educative laws of the Torah.

Judaism does not attempt to alter human nature or to suppress human instincts. Its aim is to guide them. It is deeply perceptive of man's capacities, but also of his limitations.

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Judaism does not regard extremes in piety with favor. "Be not righteous over-much" (Eccles. 7:16). The man who is excessively pious is characterized as a *hasid shoteh* -- a pious fool. R. Joshua (2 c.) was wont to say: "A pious fool brings destruction upon the world." Judaism was suspicious of all that was florid and baroque, overstrained and exaggerated in the realms

138 of spiritual thought and exercise. It mistrusted mystic inebriation, agitated hysterical religiosity, a debauch of piety. It held its ethical demands in the firm grasp of human competence and experience.

141 It is to Hebrew ethical thought rather than to Greek that one must go for a fruitful concept of the golden mean. Judaism did not recommend as the ethical goal a mathematically calculated counterpoise between undesirable extremes, one of excess and the other of defect, but a driving forward toward holiness and self-perfection along the temperate ways of moral progress. The golden mean is not a measure of computation but a wise technique toward a life of continuous and mounting aspiration.

142 But while Judaism is preeminently a practical and livable religion, a constructive idealism, it is not an "easy" religion. Nor is its code of conduct
142/3 reduced to calculated prudence or a self-complacent morality. It is an ethics
3 of quest and fervor. Its reasonable, practical idealism is of a revolutionary quality, an explosive moral common sense. It is a religious humanism which is actively and passionately intolerant of all moral deception and self-deception and of all forms of injustice and human exploitation. It is especially intolerant of them because its demands and expectations are not excessive. The oppressors of mankind can get along much more easily with mystics and visionaries, with dreamers and perfectionists, than with determined people possessed of an obdurate morality of common sense, who know what they want and who are convinced that it can be had.

For Judaism the moral life involves struggle against forces within and without. It is an earnest and arduous quest. One must "press on to know God" (Hos. 6:3). One must seek Him "with all your heart and with all your soul" (Dt. 4:29). It is not enough to know what justice is; one must seek justice (Is. 1:17). "Justice, justice, you shall pursue!" (Dt. 16:20). One must be "swift to do righteousness" (Is. 16:5) and one must pursue righteousness (Is. 51:1). It is not enough to know truth; one must "seek truth" (Jer. 5:1).

143 One must "seek peace and pursue it" (Ps. 34:15). Judaism is a summons not so much to ethical knowledge as to ethical action and mission.

195 Judaism has no relish for the "scourgings, macerations, mortifyings, fasts, disciplines that clear the spiritual eye and break the soul from earth." It does not regard them as the way to holiness or spiritual freedom. Freedom cannot be acquired through the mortification of the flesh any more than through its indulgence. Only that which is *harut*, engraved on the tablet of the Law (Ex. 32:16), can give man *herut*, true freedom. To become holy and free one need do no more than observe faithfully the clear commandments of the Torah: "That you may remember and do all My commandments and be holy unto your God" (Nu 15:40). Judaism's aim was not to make men morosely penitent but joyfully active in moral enterprise. It did not seek to curb the impulses and desires of the human heart but to direct them toward the "wholeness" and harmony of living.

220 Man should avail himself of every opportunity for enjoyment and happiness. One need not and should not renounce what is lawful. Food and drink are given by God to man to sustain life. "Thou preparest a table before me, Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over" (Ps. 23:5). It was with the gifts of the good earth that Isaac blessed his son Jacob: "May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine" (Gen. 27:28). One should partake of the gifts of God in gladness and bless Him for His bounty. "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, " a man should recite, for bread and wine, for fruit and oil, for spices and fragrant plants, and on seeing a beautiful tree or a rainbow, and for all the goodness and beauty and joy that are in the world. The last of the joyous blessings pronounced at every wedding ceremony rings with exultation: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe Who hast created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, mirth and exultation, pleasure and delight, love, brotherliness, peace and friendliness . . ."

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The commandments were given to man to help him and he is capable of ful-

172 filling them. In his efforts to do so he need have no uneasy conscience about some primordial sin whose taint is forever within him. He need not mourn for some lost paradise or break his heart in reaching for the unattainable. He should not try to get out of his skin. By sincere efforts toward self-improvement, man will be fully justified. "And it will be righteousness for us if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as He commanded us" (Dt. 6:25).

173 A man rises and is brought nearer to God by sincere actions and good works. It is "deeds which make atonement for man." His deeds also, not mere faith, are the final measure of a man's spiritual merit -- deeds which spring from the depths of a willing heart and a full, free inclination. It is not so much what a man's belief is, but how that belief expresses itself in conduct. "Thou dost requite a man according to his works" (Ps. 62:12) is an oft repeated teaching of the Bible. "One cannot obtain rewards except for deeds" Reward is given for setting out to perform the deed as well as for actually accomplishing it. Even the sincere commitment to undertake a good deed is not without its reward. But the accent is always on action. Faith is important -- "Great indeed is faith before Him who spoke and the world came into being" -- but it is not a substitute for action, nor is it in invidious contrast to it.

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174/5 The prolonged theologic debate -- faith versus works -- which agitated the Christian world for centuries and which has not subsided even in our day finds little room in Jewish thought. In Judaism a man is made upright both by his faith in God and by his good works, the former being demonstrated by the latter. His spiritual life is not consummated by faith in God -- it begins there, and it is ethical conduct which brings him near to God.

Not even a belief in Judaism is a requirement for such "salvation." It is open to all men, even to those who do not accept Judaism. Gentiles who avoid the grave moral offenses of murder, incest, adultery, robbery, the eating of the flesh of living animals, idolatry, and blasphemy -- the so-called seven

175 laws of Noah -- are in the same category as the most pious among the Jews who
176 observe the 613 commandments.

178 In recent decades the doctrine that man is helpless to save himself, as
178/9 reformulated by Existentialism, has won adherents in Christian circles, and
more recently, even among some Jewish theologians. Existentialism is a phil-
osophy grounded in deep pessimism and disillusionment. Its mood is crisis;
its idiom, death. Man cannot escape the predicaments in which his existence
is involved; his mind is snared by irresolvable paradoxes. His efforts at
social and ethical improvement will not bring the Kingdom of God any nearer.
It is even suggested that the very thought of man cooperating in its estab-
lishment is presumptuous and is but another evidence of his besetting sin of
pride.

Such an exaggerated pessimism is diametrically opposed to Judaism's
conception of man's nature, endowments, and achievements. Judaism does not
build God's absoluteness on man's nothingness. Man can, to a large degree,
make his own world; and man has, to a large degree, made it. In spite of frequent
and tragic setbacks, it has been a progressing world.

180 Judaism maintains that man is finite and yet not helpless. Man cannot
think as God but he can think about God. He 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 well intentioned and directed toward
God and the good of his fellow men.

108 The teachers of Judaism almost instinctively rejected a formula of Either/Or
in assaying religious values. They avoided all sharp antinomies, all irreconcilables,
which lead to a spiritual impasse. Thus Judaism never proclaimed that God is
love. It never proclaimed that God is justice. Justice is no antonym for
love; hate is. In the few places in the Bible where the attributes of God are
enumerated, they are fairly well apportioned as between justice and love, with
a marked bias toward the latter. The teachers of Judaism, knowing man's frailty,

108 taught the love and forgiveness of God. Knowing also man's stubbornness and
the frequency of his backsliding, they taught the justice of God and His sure
108/15 and certain retribution. Judaism maintained a reasonable balance between
individual and society. Any monolithic corporate society which demands Gleichschaltung,
Vermassung, totalitarianism, would be viewed by Judaism as disastrous to the
spiritual growth of the individual.

It was never Either/Or in Judaism with reference to faith and knowledge.
Judaism faced the inevitable limitations under which man's faith must function,
but it never permitted these shortcomings to force it away from its balanced
position and to acknowledge defeat in agnosticism or atheism. It did not stand
helpless before the impassable boundaries of reason and speculation, immobile
in the presence of confounding paradoxes. It went beyond doubt with open eyes,
115/16 and chose the way of complete faith in the face of incomplete knowledge.
What is paradoxical to the mind need not prove a block to moral action. A
paradox is not necessarily an immobilizing self-contradiction.

120 Where the range and scope of ideas were concerned, Judaism again rejected
Either/Or. It did not set out to pursue an idea, even a good idea, à outrance,
relentlessly to its logical conclusion; it did not aspire to any ideological
consistency regardless of consequences. This often leads to a reductio ad absurdum.
A spiritual concept or an ethical ideal is desirable only to the extent that
it is serviceable to man and society.

Thus, for example, Judaism held high the ideal of peace. It was the first
religion to think of an international order, to proclaim peace as an ideal for
mankind, and to summon nations to "beat their swords into ploughshares" and "learn
war no more." Yet it never passed over into pacifism. Judaism was convinced
120 & 22x that the theory could not sustain the practice.

122 Similarly, while Judaism made social justice and the economic rights of
men central in its teachings, it never preached communism or the abolition of
private property or the wrong of possessing property -- all leading ideas in
some other religions. None of the Hebrew prophets -- the foremost champions

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of social justice — advocated communism in any form. They did not make social justice synonymous with equalizing the distribution of the goods of a community and the establishment of a communistic society. In Jewish law and in Jewish tradition, the rights of property were safeguarded within the framework of social responsibility and the well-being of the community. Judaism is not committed to any dogmatic economic system. It was concerned with the safeguarding of humane principles which each age must be challenged to translate into such economic arrangements as would best meet its changing needs. There are essential human rights at stake in every economic system, and religion must remain free to defend these rights for which no system provides adequate guarantees.

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It is not argued here that in all matters in which Judaism differed from other systems of religious belief it was superior to them. In many ways, indeed, Judaism was superior, and as pioneer in the field of ethical religion, Israel did merit the Biblical designation of "first-born" (Ex. 4:22). But qualitative differences are not necessarily competitive assessments. All rivers run to the sea, but their courses and channels differ widely. Each system of thought has its own texture and pattern, and each faith its own perspectives. There are radically divergent views, for example, between Judaism and Buddhism — a faith which in all probability was in no way influenced by Judaism — in regard to basic perspectives of life and human destiny; yet both created noble patterns of life for their followers and inspired generations of men. Both Christianity and Islam, which did inherit much from Judaism, but deviated from it in certain essential regards, molded great civilizations and produced men of noblest character and idealism. Differences should not obscure the underlying unity of the human race or the common needs of human life which all institutions and beliefs of mankind aim to serve, or the urgency for their close cooperation to achieve their common purposes.

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No religious body has warrant for complacency, and none should live abstracted from the realities of the present hour and its unfinished tasks, bemused by thoughts of former triumphs and trophies. The humbling thought for all

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religions is the realization that none has fulfilled its promise and its mission in the world. "We look for justice but there is none; for deliverance but it is far from us" (Is. 59:11).

The one universal God does not require one universal church in which to be worshiped, but one universal devotion. In the realms of ascertainable facts, uniformity can be looked for. In the realms of art and philosophy there can be only sincerity of quest and expression -- only dedication. Religion is the supreme art of humanity.



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In summarizing the doctrines of Judaism and pointing out its distinctive pattern and its essential message to mankind, I should like to remind you that a religion as old as ours -- reaching across many centuries and many lands, embracing many cultures, and reflecting a great variety of experiences -- there are bound to be many levels of development, many varied and shifting emphases -- highways and byways as it were - of thought.

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39 Judaism undoubtedly received affluence from many directions, but it was fed preeminently by its own natural springs. Its founders were keenly aware that what they were bringing to mankind was something radically different and new. They were bringing order, clarity, and coherence to the spiritual life of man by banishing the moral chaos of the mythological complex which held the minds of men enthralled. They were bringing moral freedom to men by repudiating the notions of fate and determinism which obsessed them. They taught mankind a new conception of God, a new social sensitiveness as to what was right and wrong, a new awareness as to man's duties toward his fellow men, a new spiritual refinement and delicacy in the relationship between the sexes. They carried on a consistent, and at times violent, opposition to the preponderance of ritualism and eschatology in religion.

40 There was no true monotheism in the ancient world before the age of Moses and the great Prophets of Israel, and none for long centuries thereafter.

41 One does not find a single instance of the rejection of the mythologic concept of deity in the religions of the ancient world. All the gods of lesser or higher degree have their genealogies, their births, their families, their rivalries, and their love affairs, and they are all subject to a power beyond themselves -- nature, fate, necessity, destiny. There are realities and existences 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.

42 Primitive man looked upon all phenomena of nature as presences possessed of life and power. Nothing was inanimate. It has been correctly noted that early man confronted his world not as "It" but as "Thou." Judaism taught mankind to see the "Thou" only in God.

41 On the score of monotheism, Judaism was stubbornly intolerant and uncompromising --
42 God is One and Alone! It did not fuse with other faiths. It did not incorporate indigenous gods. It refused all forms of coalescence and compounding. It did not finally rest content with henotheism -- "Chemosh your God . . . Yahweh our God! . . ." (Jud. 11:24) or "let all peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of Yahweh our God" (Mic. 4:5). In the end there are no other gods besides

42 Yahweh. 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 -- Who was with me?" (Is. 44:24) And 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" (Zech. 14:9).

Frequently mentioned in connection with the development of monotheism in the ancient world are the religious views of Ikhnaton (14 C.B.C.), who sought to carry out a religious revolution in Egypt by instituting the worship of the visible sun disc, the Aton, and whose ideas appear to be an isolated approximation to monotheism in the ancient world. However, the solar monism of Ikhnaton, which hardly survived him, is not yet Hebraic monotheism, any more than was the solar monism of the cult of Helios which spread in the Roman Empire many centuries later.

43 Nor does one find a clear-cut rejection of polytheism among the Greeks. Greek philosophic thought was, of course, far in advance of the cult concepts of ancient Greece. With the Sophists in the fourth century B.C. there set in a critical examination of the traditional beliefs of the people. By the beginning of the common era a trend toward monotheism is noticeable among limited circles of devout philosophically-minded pagans. Because they were unable to abandon entirely their mythological and cultic heritage, they made an effort to reinterpret the cults and the myths associated with them in such a way as to raise them to higher levels of moral and spiritual meaning. Nevertheless, the old cults survived, and polytheism, sophisticated or otherwise, remained the public and private religion of the people.

The God of Judaism was a Holy God -- "holy" no longer in its primitive cult sense of mere "separateness," removedness, and awesomeness, but in an entirely new sense of moral perfection, in the sense in which Isaiah expressed the thought: "The Holy God shows Himself holy in righteousness" (Is. 5:16). He is the ideal

44 and perfect God. He is the source of all moral law and is Himself obligated by the Law which He decreed -- so that mortal man may appeal to Him on the basis of that Law. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" Abraham remonstrated with God while arguing in behalf of sinful Sodom. "Halilah! -- It can not be!" (Gen. 18:25).

There is no arbitrariness or capriciousness in God, such as characterized the conduct of the mythological deities. He is uniquely and preeminently a God of mishpat -- rectitude and justice (Is. 30:18), even though at times His ways are unfathomable as the great deep (Ps. 36:7). All His ways are mishpat. (Dt. 32:4). He is bound by no external Power but by His own nature which is mishpat, omnipotent but trustworthy. "He judges the world with mishpat and peoples with His faithfulness" (Ps. 96:13). Men are summoned to seek mishpat (Is. 1:17). God's covenant with Israel is a covenant of mishpat (Hosea 1:21). Zion will be redeemed through mishpat (Is. 1:27). And the future of mankind, its peace and security, is bound up with mishpat (Is. 2:4).

Judaism excised the willful, the erratic, and the amoral from the concept of divinity, and based its theology squarely on moral correspondence and proportion.

end44) (See page 149.)

Judaism also banished the sex motif from religious worship.

45 Nowhere but in Judaism, is there a revulsion against the sex motif which is so central in the mythologies of ancient religions, or against the institution of sacred prostitution, which was connected with their worship, or against the unbridled orgiastic rites of their nature festivals. Judaism alone called these practices and their sex symbolism obscene. "There shall be no cult prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog (Sodomite) into the house of the Lord your God . . . for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God".

Laxity in sexual matters which characterized so many of the peoples of antiquity

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and which was sanctioned by the example of their gods was execrated by Judaism in an unparalleled way. Purity of family life, to a degree practically unknown in the ancient world -- even among its most advanced circles -- became the norm for the Jewish way of life, and it has remained a characteristic of Jewish behavior throughout the ages. To perceive the difference one needs but recall the recommendation of Plato in his Republic (Bk. V) and his Laws (Bk. V) on the basis of the ancient saying "Friends have all things in common," that women also should be held in common, and children as well -- a practice which would destroy family life altogether. The utility of the proposal, in Plato's mind, was beyond question; only the possibility of effectuating it remained in doubt. Lycurgus, the reputed founder of the Constitution of Sparta, decreed for his countrymen the honorable practice of giving "the use of their wives to those whom they should think fit, so that they might have children by them" for purposes of breeding strong men and soldiers, or simply as an accommodation, since the matter was not worth fighting over.

That women are by nature common property was a theory widely held in the ancient world, and Plato therefore did not advance any shocking new proposal when he advocated the community of women for his warrior-saints. This view was also subscribed to by many Stoics. Zeno (4-3 C.B.C.), the founder of the Stoic school at Athens, advocated it, as did the Stoic Chrysippus (3C. B.C.). So did Diogenes the Cynic, according to the testimony of Diogenes Laertius. Epictetus, who opposed this view of his fellow Stoics, reports that the idea was very popular among the women of Rome: "At Rome the women have in their hands Plato's 'Republic,' because he insists on community of women."

The writings of Seneca, Juvenal, Martial, Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius all reveal the moral degeneration of Roman society, in which promiscuity, sodomy, and lesbianism were widely practiced. So also do the writings of Paul (Rom. 1:24-27). They help us to realize the violent contrast between the standards of this society and the Jewish standards of sexual decency, the sanctity of marriage and of family life.

Modesty was urged upon men and women by Judaism. The principle laid down was:

46 "Sanctify yourself even in things permitted to you." New concepts were introduced:
47 zni-'ut -- modesty, moral delicacy; boshet -- reticence, sensitiveness to all that is gross. "There is nothing more beloved of God than zni-'ut", and, "He who does not possess the quality of bushah, it is certain that his ancestors were not present at Mount Sinai.¶.

This code of boshet (Ecclus. 41:16) did not result from any prudery on the part of the people of Israel. It was an expression of reverence for life itself and for the dignity of man. It was the esthetics of morality which Judaism introduced to the ancient world, the "beauty of holiness." Three thousand years of Jewish literature are distinguished by a remarkable freedom from vulgarity and lubricity. "It is a man's duty to keep away from unseemliness, from what resembles unseemliness and from the semblance of a semblance."

50 Among the new highways which Judaism built for mankind, its great road toward social justice is of paramount significance in the history of human development. Not only in ethical sweep and outlook, which are normally in advance of law, did Judaism surpass anything which the ancient world attained, but in its legal system as well.

One should be wary of facile and superficial resemblances between Biblical laws and those of other ancient codes. Many parallels and points of contact can easily be drawn between the Covenant Code of Exodus (20:23-23:33 and 34:17-26) and the Code of Hammurabi, for example, which is far more extensive and a thousand years older. The Hebrews upon their entrance into Canaan in the fourteenth century B.C. undoubtedly adopted many of the Hammurabi laws which had long been in operation in one form or another in that part of the world, and which, in turn, were based on still earlier collections of laws. What is significant, however, are not only the laws which the Hebrews did not incorporate into their code, such as the law applicable to a father who devotes his daughter as a sacred prostitute to some god and does not give her a dowry, but the manner in which they revised and recast the laws which they did incorporate and the new laws which they themselves enacted.

51

The Hammurabi Code recognizes two distinct classes of society, besides slaves, and applies separate standards of legal responsibility toward each.

The Hebrew Code, which did not originate or develop among a governing caste, makes no such distinctions. No discrimination is made in Hebrew law between a noble and commoner, and more than between the native born and the stranger (Ex. 12:49 et passim.).

On the treatment of slaves, the Hebrew Code is infinitely more humane. The Covenant Code prescribes punishment for the master who maltreats his slave and causes his death. The slave's death must be avenged as murder (Ex. 21:20*). The Code of Hammurabi is silent on this score. The Covenant Code ordains that when a man smites the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, or strikes out a tooth, he must let the slave go free (Ex. 21:26-27). On this, too, the Hammurabi Code is silent. The latter prescribes death to him who helps a slave to escape, or harbors a runaway slave in his house; while the Hebrew law, in sharp contrast, ordains: "You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you; he shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place which he shall choose within one of your towns, where it pleases him best; you shall not oppress him" (De. 23:16-17).

52

As regards the provisions of the Hebrew Code (Ex. 22:21-27; 23:4-6; Lev. 19:9-10) for the care of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, the mandate to help one's enemy, and the requirement that justice and compassion be shown to the poor -- of these there are no glimmerings in the Hammurabi Code, which ~~these~~ makes no provision whatsoever for the care of the poor. (* * *) Neither Egyptian nor Babylonian law, makes any formal provision for the care of the needy, such as one finds with the Hebrews -- the mandatory sharing in the harvest, the obligatory alms, the tithe (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22), and the prohibition against exacting interest on money lent to the poor. Nor do they record such thoughtful consideration for the ~~of~~ man in distress and such regard for his inviolable human dignity as are contained in the Deuteronomic legislation:

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When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you made the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge; when the sun goes down, you shall restore to him the pledge that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the Lord your God (Dt. 24:10-13).

In no other regard is the contrast so marked, and it is the very key to an understanding of what was new and different in Hebrew law and ethics.

57

Judaism denounced the oppression and exploitation of the poor, as no religion did before or since. It castigated the rich and powerful for "grinding the faces of the poor" (Is. 3:15), "for joining house to house, and adding field to field

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until there is no more room" (Is. 5:8), for "selling the needy for a pair of shoes" and for "trampling the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (Amos 2:6-7). It cried: "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion . . . to those who lie upon beds of ivory . . . who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruins of Joseph" (Amos 6:4-6).

Legislation was enacted in ancient Israel to guard the poor against total and permanent pauperization. No one's land could be sold in perpetuity and forever alienated. At the time of the Jubilee year, each man was to be restored to his property (Lev. 25:25-28). Whether the laws of the Jubilee year were ever applied in practice is a matter of considerable doubt, but the humane motives of this legislation and its lasting influence on Jewish social attitudes cannot be questioned.

The care of the poor in Israel was a religious duty. The Biblical laws which made provision for the poor were greatly elaborated in subsequent times. Charity came to be regarded as the highest of all commandments, as in fact equal to all of them combined. He who did not give charity was likened to one who worshiped idols.

No literature of mankind abounds in such tender solicitude for the poor or

58 in so many provisions for their protection as Biblical and post-Biblical literature.
"Draw out your sould to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul" (Is. 58:10).

59 The basic humanity of Judaism is seen also in its attitude towards labor.
Physical labor was held in disdain in the ancient world. Because of the nigh universal institution of slavery, the labor even of the free citizen suffered the contempt felt for the work of the slave.

Leading Greek philosophers despised labor and looked upon it as degarding. These aristocrats of the mind were also disdainful of the trader and the merchant. Among the intellectual and upper classes of society, almost everywhere in the ancient world, the earning of a livelihood by manual labor was contemned.

60 Aristotle was of the opinion that laborers, artisans, and merchants were unfit for the exercise of virtue and for citizenship. In the eyes of the Romans, too, labor and trade were in disrepute. Unbecoming to a gentleman, according to Cicero, and vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen, who are paid for their manual labor, and all mechanics, and all small tradesmen.

Except for rare periods in the economic history of the world, when, as a result of war or plagues or other disasters, the demand for labor greatly exceeded the supply and forced higher compensations and fairer treatment, this attitude persisted down to the twentieth century, even among some of the most civilized peoples of Europe.

The Bible regards a man fortunate and blessed who is privileged to eat of the fruit of the labor of his own hands. "You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you" (Ps. 128:2). The wisdom literature of Israel is replete with passages extolling labor, industry and the honest craftsman.

The Rabbis also stressed the importance of men working with their own hands. "Blessing does not rest except on a man's handiwork." "A man must work with his two hands before God will bestow blessing upon him." R. Joshua b. Levi (3 C.) said: "When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Adam, 'Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you' (Gen. 3:18), tears flowed from his eyes, and he pleaded before Him, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Shall I and my ass eat out of the same crib!'

60 But as soon as God said to Hum, 'In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread' (Gen. 3:19), his mind was set to rest."

61 The ennobling powers of labor were also stressed by the great Rab. He said to R. Kahana: "Flay a carcass in the street and earn a wage and say not, 'I come from a noble and distinguished family and I cannot stoop to work and degrade myself.' Fool, your Creator, God Himself, performed work before you were born!" Famous Rabbis like Hillel, Akiba, Hanina, Jose b. Halaftha, Joshua, and many others were artisans, cobblers, blacksmiths, tailors, bakers, potters, charcoal burners, and of numerous other occupations.

62 The same reverence for human life is again in evidence in Judaism's opposition to the abandonment of the aged and the exposure of infants, practices which were all too common in the ancient world.

Plato's already noted approval of infanticide was unequivocal: "The offspring of the inferior, or of the better when they chance to be deformed, will be put away in some mysterious, unknown place, as they should be."

Justin Martyr (2c.) denounced this shameful practice, wide-spread in the Greco-Roman world of his day. The exposed infants, if they did not perish, were picked up and brought up for prostitution and sodomy. Centuries later Mohammed had to forbid the practice of infant exposure to his followers.

To leave the aged to die of hunger and to expose them to wild beasts was also far from rare among the Hindus, Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

Jewish law forbade the murder or the exposure of infants. It was practically unknown in Israel. "It is a crime among them to kill any newly born infant," writes Tacitus, who is not otherwise distinguished for his admiration of the Jewish people.

Old age was revered in Israel. "You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of an old man," we read in the Holiness Code (Lev. 19:32).

63 Thus, in a world of cruelty and inhumanity, where life was cheap, Judaism taught men to open the wells of pity in the human heart. It condemned all callousness. It taught men to rise to higher levels of sensibility and sympathy, and to move away from the old savageries and primitive animality. Mercy and compassion were

63 forever to be the distinguishing marks of a true Israelite. "Whoever is merciful to his fellow-men is certainly of the children of our father Abraham, and whosoever is not merciful to his fellow-men is certainly not of the children of our father Abraham."

More than social justice, more than personal rectitude were taught by Judaism. It called for a quality of humaneness, tenderness, and magnanimity, a sensitiveness to the hurt, physical or mental, of one's fellow men. It extolled the "understanding heart" that "knows the heart of the stranger". (Ex. 23:9)

Judaism's universal rule of kindness extended also to animals. "Until the nineteenth century, cruelty to animals was nowhere illegal, except in Jewish law."

64 Animals, too, must rest on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10). "The duty of relieving the suffering of beasts is a Biblical law." "A righteous man has regard for the soul of his beast" (Pr. 12:10). The Deuteronomic law ordains: "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads the grain" (Dt. 25:4). "You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together" (Dt. 22:10), for the strength of the ass is less than that of the ox and he would be overtaxed if forced to keep up with the ox. A man is forbidden to eat before he gives food to his beast, declared R. Judah in the name of Rab. It is strictly forbidden to cut off a limb while the animal is still alive (Dt. 12:23). The young of an animal must not be taken from its mother for the first seven days after birth, even for a sacrifice. The mother and her young must not be killed on the same day (Lev. 22:27-28).

The story told in the Talmud of the Patriarch Rabbi Judah I (2c.) dramatizes this attitude of kindness toward animals. A calf was being taken to slaughter when it broke away, hid its head under the Rabbi's cloak, and lowed in terror. "Go," said he, "for this wast thou created." Thereupon, they said (in Heaven), "Since he has no pity, let us bring suffering upon him," and Rabbi suffered for thirteen years. Then, one day Rabbi's maid-servant was sweeping the house and, seeing some newborn kittens lying there, she made to sweep them away. "Let them be," he said, "It is written 'and His tender mercies are over all His works'" (Ps. 145:9) Whereupon they (in Heaven) said: "Since he is compassionate, let us be compassionate towards him."

64 The humanity of Jewish law is most clearly revealed in its attitude toward capital punishment. While accepting it in principle as prescribed in the Mosaic law, the Rabbis nevertheless hedged it about with so many strict laws of evidence as to make its application well nigh impossible. A Sanhedrin which imposed capital punishment once in seven years was considered tyrannical. Eleazar b. Azariah (2c.) added, "even once in seventy years." R. Tarfon and R. Akiba declared, "If we had been members of the Sanhedrin, no man would ever have been put to death." The strong tendency of Pharisaic legislation was to do away with capital punishment altogether, and there was a marked trend to mitigate all forms of judicial punishment. 65 The moderation of the Pharisees in these matters was noted by Josephus. It was one of the issues which brought them into conflict with the Sadducees, who were rigorous in the application of the Biblical penal code.

No circumstantial evidence was admissible in capital cases. The evidence of at least two reputable eyewitnesses was required. No man could incriminate himself -- a principle not found in Roman law. Thus torture was ruled out.

66 No kinsmen, paternal or maternal relatives, or relatives by marriage were eligible to act as witnesses. If the accused had not been first warned by the witnesses of the consequence of his contemplated crime, he could not be found guilty.

67 If the accused was finally found guilty and sentence was pronounced, every precaution was taken to the very last moment of the actual execution, to reconsider the verdict in case any new evidence were forthcoming. The court appeared to be hoping against hope to the very end that some new evidence would turn up to clear the man, or that some technicality would be pointed out to force an acquittal. As the condemned man was being led away to the place of execution, a man stood at the door of the court with a flag in his hand, and another, mounted on a horse, at a distance. If in the court someone said, "I have something new to argue in favor of acquittal," then the man waved the flag and the horseman hastened and stopped the condemned who was being led to execution. Even if the doomed man himself said, "I have something new to argue in favor of my acquittal," they must bring him back, be it four or five times, provided that there is anything of substance

07 in his words . . . A herald went before him calling out: "If any man knows anything in favor of his acquittal, let him come and plead it."

When everything failed, the condemned man was urged to make confession, "for everyone that makes confession has a share in the world to come." He was given a strong drugged wine to drink to benumb his senses. If his punishment was hanging, his body was let down immediately after the hanging, and was never allowed to remain on the scaffold overnight (Dt. 21:23). That would have been a needless indignity inflicted on a human being.

68 "And God Himself is sore troubled at the blood even of the ungodly when it is shed."

At every stage of the trial, sentence, and execution, one is made aware of the scrupulous care which Jewish law took to protect the accused -- a care scarcely paralleled anywhere in the ancient world, and not everywhere in the modern world. Judaism's deep regard for the sanctity of human life, its vast compassion for the erring and the sinner, its profound humanity and its instinctive abhorrence of the shedding of blood -- even the blood of the guilty -- are everywhere in evidence.

69 The deep religious earnestness of Judaism is best reflected in the life, labor, struggles, and sufferings of the prophets, those amazing spiritual pioneers of mankind -- "eagles soaring above the tombs" of the ancient faiths -- who gave the basic stamp to Judaism for all times.

69/70 The message of these trumpeters of a new dawn for mankind remained forever the constantly 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 soul' " (Jer. 6:16). In the concord of their many voices one strong dominant note is unmistakable -- The good way! And the good way is not to throng the courts of a Temple and bring vain offerings to God. It leads directly and humbly to where men penitently and prayerfully wash the blood of sin, cruelty, and oppression from their hands, search their hearts and make themselves inwardly clean, cease to do evil and learn to do good (Is. 1:12f.).

70 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 correct them. There was great and urgent work to be done in the world — "for violence and destruction are heard within" (Jer. 6:7), for "justice is turned back . . . truth is lacking" (Is. 59:14-15). To accomplish this work the prophet set out to alert and mobilize his people. The prophet's insistence on action, his driving compulsion to translate rapidly the ideal into the real, has remained the dynamic, always glorious, often imperilling, heritage of the people throughout their long history.

72 The prophets of Israel were interested primarily in the moral tone of their nation and of society generally, in social righteousness, human brotherhood, and peace. Their spiritual kinsmen, the Psalmists, were interested primarily in personal piety and in the individual's quest for the light and nearness of God. They supplemented one another. In neither respect did the ancient world approximate their vision, their passion, or their piety.

Few indeed in the ancient texts and vague are the traces of a personal religion of spiritual quest and inwardness wherein the human soul "thirsts for God, for the living God" (Ps. 42:4), and finds supreme joy in communion with Him. To know that there is a God and that righteousness is the proper way of life acceptable to Him is one thing, and a great thing. To hunger and thirst for God — "O God, Thou art my God, I seek Thee, my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh faints for Thee, as in a dry and weary land, where no water is" (Ps. 63:1) — that summit of spiritual pathos and quest was not scaled in the ancient world by any but the devout seers of Israel.

72/3 The ancients revered their gods, feared them, and worshiped them. They did not love them. One misses in ancient and classical literature any outpouring of love, any deep-stirring affection for any of their gods — even though their pantheons enshrined many gods and goddesses of Love. To love God with all one's heart, with all one's soul, and with all one's might (Dt. 6:5) must have been a

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strange sentiment to the peoples of antiquity. It appears to be uniquely Jewish. There must be a personal God as the object of one's love, one sole God to whom the worshiper can completely surrender himself. Only a monotheistic faith can give rise to such a disposition of devoted love. All polytheistic nature-religions were devoid of it, and so were all pantheistic faiths.

Abraham, the founder of the faith, is called the Lover of God (Is. 41:8; II Ch. 20:7). All the truly righteous are called lovers of God (Ps. 5:12; 31:23). The people of Israel knew that their God in His anger could be stern and smite with fury the wicked and the faithless, but they were nevertheless drawn to Him with bands of love. "I love the Lord," sings the Psalmist (Ps. 116:1); "I love Thee, O Lord, my strength" (Ps. 18:1). They were confident also that God loved them with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3), even when He chastised them.

73/4

Israel had entered a covenant of love with God: "I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in compassion" (Hos. 2:21). The feeling that the covenant was one of love (Dt. 7:12) was not limited to prophet, Psalmist, or mystic. In later ages even the "legalistic" Rabbis found the most perfect expression of the intense reciprocal love which they felt to exist between God and Israel in the passionate rhapsody of the Song of Songs!

Nowhere in the ancient world was there the glimmer of a concept that a whole people might wish to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" and dedicate itself to the establishment on earth of a universal brotherhood under God, even at the price of martyrdom. No people in antiquity longed to become a servant of mankind. They all aspired to be its master.

Nowhere is there a vision of a world welded in a universal brotherhood of men and nations, reconciled in the love of the one God, beating their swords into ploughshares and learning war no more (Is. 2:4); and of a social order when men would sit "each under his vine and fig-tree with none to make them afraid" (Mic. 4:3-4). Judaism gave mankind the concept of Humanity, and the vision of Universal Peace.

74 All these ideas, from monotheism to human brotherhood and peace, all the flowering concepts of unity, freedom, and compassion were fundamentally alien to the ancient world. They were new insights of Judaism, new levels of awareness, and they cannot be explained by reference to any antecedents.

Moreover, they were new not only in the days of Amos and Isaiah, but remained strange and unaccepted throughout the succeeding millennia. They were novel and distinctive not only against the background of the primitive ideas of the heathen and of the more refined conceptions of the Greco-Roman world -- they remain distinctive against some of the prevalent religious ideas of the present day.



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Judaism also banished the sex motif from religious worship.

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