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Temple Emanu-El, New York, notes and speech for 125th
anniversary service, 1970.

Notes for first lecture 125th Anniversary series

1. Jews have always had a history, but not always an interest in history. If I were to explain this fact I would derive it from the fact that the poor and huddled masses of the world who endure each day without hope of a better tomorrow who are powerless to effect their fate and their destiny traditionally show little interest in the record of their powerlessness. Time lacks meaning for them. Time is not change. Time is not money. One day, one year, is much like the next.

One can almost date the beginning and the end of the period of Israel's indifference to history. It begins in 70 C. E. with the destruction of the Second Temple. It ends with the French Revolution in 1793 when the Jews re-enter the mainstream of world power. The early Jews, the Biblical Jews, on the other hand, were fascinated by history, by what we now call sacred history. Genesis is a record of the history of the creation of the world and contains the patriarchal sagas. Exodus to Deuteronomy are much more than a law book for they contain the record of the formative events of Jewish history, the exodus, Sinai, 40 years of wilderness wandering and the entrance into the promised land. The first great historical saga is the Deuteronomic saga which fills Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. And there is the second review of this history carried down now into post-exilic times, in the first and second Chronicles Ezra and Nehemiah. This interest in history extends beyond the Biblical age. The Maccabean kings had Chronicles drawn up of their rebellion and of the Hasmonean raid and later there was the historian, Artapanus, in Egypt and, of course, Josephus in Judea and Rome. Then with Josephus who lives through 70 C. E. the interest in history comes to an abrupt halt and for 1500 years Jews are literally anhistoric, indifferent to the history of human beings. Now the question is why. The interest of the Biblical

Jew in time and in history derives from several facts:

a. They were part of the actions and passions of their time. The invasion of Canaan by the Hebrews and the concurrent invasion of Canaan from the sea by the Philistines made a major change in the history of the Middle East and brought an end to a thousand years of Canaanite dominance in that area. The empire of David and Solomon was for a short time a major empire in that part of the world. As late as the first century BCE the Jews represented 20 percent of the population of the eastern Roman Empire. The Hasmoneans established a sizable little kingdom. Jewish mercenaries were involved in the Persian and in the Greek armies. So it was that they were very much a part of the history of their time, but that doesn't explain it all because there are other communities which were effective, the Moabites, the Nebitians and the Edamites and they have left little recorded history. Why were the Jews so interested in writing history and their neighbors not? The answer lies in the religious realm, in the fact that Jews alone in that community went beyond the gods who were the gods of nature, aminism, to the god of history, the god who reveals himself in his providential care of mankind. The Jews were fascinated by history because it was through the historical experience of man that man found evidence of the actions and the covenant faithfulness of God. Talk a bit about covenant, theology and all that means. What happens is God's response to man's faithfulness (hesed), proof of His power, evidence of His existence. God's actions evidence His mercy and His justice. In Greek times this emphasis on sacred history was wedded to a somewhat later development of history among the Greeks,

interest in history is transmuted into the rabbinic interest in midrash which is

a passion and understanding of the motivations of men, Herodotus and Phacidites, and led to an explosion of interest in that part of the world into Artapanus, of Damascus, Josephus etc. The Jews still insisted that God had chosen this people and had a special destiny for this people. And the depth of this thesis is found in every line of the Bible and also found in the necessity of those who broke away, the Christians, to insist that the covenant, the old, had been broken, that God now had a new historic relationship with a different group of believers.

Then what?

Then comes this long period of indifference to history and the question is why. Obviously, it begins with disaster. It begins with a sense that the disaster is not a matter of chance nor simply a political ineptitude or incompetence, but it is deserved "for our sins." It is punishment etc.

The sense of guilt of history as punishment suggests the model of a prisoner sentenced to an indefinite stay in jail, a life sentence, and that is, in fact, the attitude which Jews seem to have adopted towards the long galut. Time lost all sense. The exile would be over when God willed it to be over. Until then it was simply a matter of endurance. And for spiritual sustenance people lived in two moods, not in the present, but in the past and in the future. And the questions they dealt with emotionally were what did it feel before when we were free? They lived in Biblical times. And also what would it feel like after when we are released in messianic times? They lived in their eras of freedom and the present was not free. The present was simply gray, empty, routine. And so the Biblical interest in history is transmuted into the rabbinic interest in midrash which is their atonement by Jews themselves. The question of the nationhood of the Jew becomes an important thing because the basic emancipation spirit was "to the

simply a rehearsal, a revival, of the stories, of the myths, the legends, of the Bible, the sagas, which allowed the Jew to assume that he was among those who were brought out of Egypt, he was among those who thronged to David's court. He read his present through the eyes of a more glorious past and the history that he expected was sacred history in the sense that God would in his time when repentance was complete God would bring messianic times, the glories of the future.

The Jew lives, in a sense, in time but out of time, in history, but out of history. And for the longest period no histories are written save the briefest kind of listing of scholars by their generation and, finally, in the early centuries in the second millenium a series of memorbuch, memorials to the martyrs of the crusade or of this or that expulsion. Here was the theme was to remember the dead, to memorialize the sacred martyrs, and to ask God petitionally to use their blood as atonement for the guilt of the people, to hasten the day of the coming of the messiah. In these martyrologies you begin to move towards history, particularly the later martyrologies of Eban Verga and Samuel Usque, who begin to see the inter-relationship of Israel's fate and the great events of the larger world beyond, in part because they are now children of the Renaissance, the new period in the cultural history of the world. But the rediscovery of the present really does not begin until 1789, the French Revolution, where political events thrust the Jews back into history. There is now the possibility of Jews being citizens of the larger world. And with this possibility comes a new need for self-understanding, for definition. Jews are no longer a nation set apart, seen as punished in the eyes of the non-Jewish world, seen as suffering the guilt of the past until God accepts their atonement by Jews themselves. The question of the nationhood of the Jew becomes an important thing because the basic emancipation spirit was "to the

Jew as Jew nothing, to the Jew as Frenchman anything" so history was reborn in part because the Jew's sentence was over. Jews now belonged or thought they belonged, but two questions need to be answered: What is Judaism, including the basic question are Jews a separate nation and this leads to the whole issue of assimilation, transformation of Judaism from a nation to a people or from a corporate community to a congregation; and secondly, what is Judaism in the sense of what does being Jewish require? Is the medieval rabbinic form and its institutions the only one? Is it ^a whole question of theology of change ~~and~~ ^{or of} reform which means the rediscovery of the variety of modalities of Jewish life in the past. And it's fascinating to recognize that the renewal of history comes at the very beginning of the modern period for very basic reasons and the reasons men have always studied history for, an understanding of themselves. It coincides with the European interest in history, as a statement of human progress rather than a divine history, that the movement is associated with Hegel particularly. It's associated with the need to understand the variety of changes which has taken place in the Jewish past, that the revelation has been constantly reinterpreted and the rabbinic synthesis is not immemorial. The assumption now is that there can be change, change in the varieties of Jewish past can be identified. This is the work of the *vissenschaft* and there is a search for Judaism within the Jewish nation, for the transformation of Jewish history into a history of Jewish ideas, the search for the Jewish soul which one associates particularly with Heinrich Graetz. And finally there is the strand which is unique to the 19th century of dialectic, the assumption of human progress. The renewal of interest of history is different than the Biblical interest of history in that it sometimes assumes sacredness of history, God's control. It also assumes the

rope theory, the rope analogy and Dubnow.

effectiveness of man, the possibility of man being a partner with God in the work of creation, the possibility of progress or the inevitability of progress which means that historians are now not only theologians but professional historians. History is both seen as sacred and as secular. And the history books which are first written tended to answer very specific questions which come up. As an example, look at the career of Leopold Zonz. In his Prussia the government denied the Jews the right to speak, to preach in German. They looked upon this after the Congress of Vienna as a change and all change with anathma and Zonz wrote a book called Gottesdientschlie Vortrage. . . . to offer the proof that Jews had preached in the vernaculars for hundreds of years. Later on the Prussian government denied the Jews the right to take last names, so-called Christian names. It was a way of keeping the medievalism of the Jew and Zonz wrote a book called About Names Among Jews. In the process this academically trained man brought the academic methods to bear on the literature of the Jewish past and they began to open up this past for our understanding.

What's the meaning of Jewish history, this rediscovery of the present? In part we have had a movement towards scientific history, the influence of times, cultures, institutions, political realities in the shaping of the Jewish question, the deromanticization, the desacrilization of the Jewish past. Judaism is the result of pressures and opportunities, not of God's purposes. As an example Dubnow.

2. You've had this search for the Jewish soul. What makes Jewish life unique? Some have used the image of the soul, ~~some have~~ there's been the search for the essence of Judaism - Where Judaism Differed (Baeck-Silver) and you've had the on the third level the cultural creativity of the Jewish group - the rope theory, the rope analogy and Dubnow.

And now a paragraph or two about our book which is obviously an attempt to move beyond pure secularism. Jews are simply a response to the actions and passions of their time towards uniqueness, but without any assumption of the dogmas or the ideas which make this unique, rather the assumption that Jews have always read in and read out of the same basic past certain ideas, the basic myth, patriarchs, and the Moses stories and that the revelation at Sinai and that these have been critical.



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WRHS AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES
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Rabbi Perilman and dear friends -

It is a privilege and pleasure for me to be here as part of this 125th anniversary celebration of Temple Emanu-El. I confess, however, that I am not quite certain as to what my role should be. Certainly you did not invite me to rehearse Emanu-El's chronicle of achievement. These are your achievements. You wrote this history. You have for long been the largest congregation in the largest Jewish community in the world. Your buildings have been landmarks in this city. Your leadership and your membership have been active in all that has made for the progress and prosperity of New York.

Perhaps the success of Emanu-El suggests something of what I ought to say. There are always those who feel that simply by affiliating with a premier congregation they are among the faithful and have assured themselves of a first rate faith. Faith cannot be had simply by enrolling oneself in a Temple register. Faith can not be had by delegating the responsibilities and activities of religious life to an institution, however significant that institution may be. Faith must be won, it must be searched for, it must be wrestled with. Faith is an active undertaking.

Before coming, I went back and read a bit of the history of Emanu-El and discovered that some fifty years ago at a celebration much as this one, your then Rabbi Enelow chose to speak these words:

The most serious problem today lies in vicarious Judaism. All too large is the number of those who are content with passive membership in the community and in its organizations. The actual conduct of religious life they leave to others, but no religious life can flourish by delegation. The Jew has never believed in vicariousness in matters of faith.

In his day and in ours there are Jews who practice vicariousness in matters of faith. "I belong. I pay my assessments. My children go to the religious school. My daughter's marriage was solemnized by the rabbi. I attend occasionally on the High Holidays - that's it, isn't it?" Of course, that's precisely not it!

Whatever else our age is or is not, it is a convulsed age - an age of confusing change. Our times force us to ask ourselves again and again; what is demanded of me and by whom? Old assumptions are no longer taken for granted. Is there a new morality? What are the new moralities? What is the way that I should go? What are the standards by which I should abide? How can I achieve significantly? How can I find peace of mind and happiness? Never has an age had so much; so much opportunity, so much freedom, so many nervous breakdowns, so many young people walking around with dead, sullen faces. We are confused, we need desperately the balanced theological understandings of Jewish thought and the high moral reach of Jewish ethic. For many, Judaism and life pass each other by because they have confused the institution with that which takes place within the institution, the envelope with the substance of the letter. He wore an open shirt, he had beads around his neck, he was unshod, he spoke with a smile, and in a deliberately soft voice and he said to me, "You know, I'm not the one who dropped out, but my parents have. ~~They~~ live for things. They live to see and to be seen. They say what everybody else is saying. They read what everybody else is reading. They go to synagogue when everybody else gets dressed up. It is not that they don't know, it is that they no longer care to ask the questions."

Never in scripture is it said: 'join a congregation and gain faith.' Again and again it is said Darshu-ni Veyihyu "Seek ye Me, and live." Faith begins in personal search. We are called the children of Israel. Why? Israel is Jacob's second name, the name Jacob earned after he had wrestled the long night with the angel, with his conscience, with the sunshine and the shadows, with his love and his fears, with his hopes and his tribulations, and had not been overcome. Faith is to expose oneself to life, to all the uncertainties, to all the incongruities, to all the confusion, to the maddening throng, to others, and not quail, faith^{is} to dare to live, to be receptive to life. If we are truly sons of Emanu-El, Emanu-El - God is with us, then we have to be willing to let God in, and we will not find God simply by occasionally walking in these doors. We must walk in these doors with a certain receptivity. We must be willing to bare the quick flesh of our souls, to be hurt by life, to care for another human being, to dare for a cause, if need be, to change the pattern of our lives. Only as we touch others can we touch God. Where is God? God, as the Hasid said, is wherever man lets Him in.

So far I have offered an appropriate, typical anniversary sermon; thoughts which ought to be said and are often said on such occasions as this, but I submit that such thoughts are only part of the proper and necessary meaning of this morning.

Another question must be faced. Simply put it is this: What happens when someone walks in these doors and says, 'I am willing, I do care, I want to understand. I need to know. Help me?' How supportive, how enlightening, how responsive, how effective are our religious institutions?

I am afraid that when we look at our institutions, if we use an anniversary to look back and look ahead, we will be forced to admit that much of what we do in this congregation, in any congregation, must be categorized under such titles

as the spinning of wheels or familiar but purely formal routine, what we do simply because it always has been done, words which have been spoken because they were once appropriate, not necessarily because they touch another soul.

When I wondered how I might develop this point for you, I reminded myself that I had in my library a book, a prayerbook, your prayerbook, an Order of Prayer for Divine Service written by and for this congregation by your first rabbi, Leo Merzbacher. I need hardly remind you that Emanu-El came into being out of "Culture Verein," a small group of men who banded together "To create such a service that shall arouse and quicken devotion and thus uplift the heart of God." They wanted a living, vibrant faith. They wanted Judaism to speak to them effectively, in the language of their day. Out of that need came this book of worship. It is a fine, beautiful book. It is good to hold. More than this, it offers what was certainly for its day an effective and harmonious service, and one which was among the significant creations in early reform liturgy.

But what has this book to do with the question of priority and purpose in congregational life? Simply this. Rabbi Merzbacher had the good sense to preface his order, his liturgy with an explanation of the text. Why he had made certain selections. Why certain paragraphs had been excised. Why the prayers were arranged as they were arranged. I often wish our Union Prayerbook contained such an explanation which we might mull over in the quiet of the pre-worship moments. In any case, after addressing a few words to those who would pick up this book when they came to worship, he

addressed a few words to the religious establishment of his day, those whom he felt would pick up this book and be put off and displeased by the changes which he had suggested.

Lay aside this Prayerbook with a smile, if you please, or with scorn, if you choose... be only kind enough to give us some credit for sincerity... Howsoever different, these ideas may be from yours, and our ways from your ways, be reminded of the saying of the sages Kol Mahloket she -hi Leshem Shamayim Sofah lehitkayem. 'Every discord which has a holy purpose tends to the end to a consolation.'

In the event the reforms of his service became familiar. The Jewish community adjusted to liturgical variety and, with acceptance, the religious rebels of yesterday become the religious establishment of our day. I wonder if we accord our critics the same credit for sincerity which Rabbi Merzbacher pleaded for a hundred and more years ago; for there is criticism, all is not right in the household of religion. The votes are being taken, people are voting with their feet and by their votes they are saying; what you do is not so much in error as irrelevant. We do not take exception to your activities but there's no bite in them, they do not touch us, Judaism is bland, it is not alive. The young do not even bother to demonstrate against us. I suspect that what we must do on an anniversary is to ask ourselves again some fundamental questions. Why does a synagogue exist? Why does my congregation exist? And then ask ourselves, "How well do our programs and activities achieve these ends?"

Why does a congregation exist? I would suggest that a congregation exists for a single purpose, and that is to encourage the man, the woman, the young person to seek the ultimate religious achievement - Kedusha - holiness, ^{AND} to guide and support him on that way. Holiness is the supreme religious virtue Kedoshim Ti-hyu Ki Kadosh Ani Adonai Elohehem

"Holy thou shalt be for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." And what is holiness? We Jews have always had a particular and special definition of holiness. Holiness is not ritual exuberance. Holiness is not fasting, midnight vigils, endless lacerations, bloody flagellations, exhibitionist piety. Holiness is a particular way of life, moral self-discipline, devotion in act to that wisdom which separates the trivial and the tinsel from the significant, a way of life which is sanctified and concerned, sensitive to human values, in which every human being is sacred.

Throughout the community of Israel these weeks, we are reading from the Book of Leviticus. The Book of Leviticus is essentially one, long definition of Kedusha, holiness. How is one to become holy? By not bearing a grudge, by taking up a stumbling block from before the blind, by dealing openly and honestly with one's neighbor, by honoring one's parent, by fearing God. That is the way of holiness, and that is the way a congregation exists to encourage. Why do we have worship - daily worship, weekly worship? So that we may breathe an hour a day, a few hours a week, the atmosphere of Kedusha, good clean spiritual air, so that we may enter again and again a symbolic environment which will underscore the gap between holiness and the ordinary, the vulgar, and the humdrum. Why do we have learning in a congregation? So that we can take the basic ageless disciplines and relate them effectively to the complex decisions of our lives. And why is there congregation? Because we can not do it alone, because we need help, because we need to meet, to touch, and to learn how to cooperate with each other. That is what a congregation is all about. Are we effectively promoting Kedusha or do we turn off the young and the middle-aged and the older who come searching? Do we present the shadow or the substance, platitudes or the living word,

empty forms or meaningful participant ritual, theoretical talk or the experience of belonging to an historic people?

Reform Judaism, dear friends, came into being in order to make our faith vital, significant. Those who cared nothing about Judaism walked away. Those who cared deeply for Judaism sought to renew it. They took a Judaism that had become lush and ritually overgrown during the enforced parochial experience of the Middle Ages and tried to cut away the underbrush so that one could walk freely about and see clearly the outline of the tall majestic trees - the central affirmations, ~~Our faith~~. Our faith had become community^{ed} bound. We need to learn to live with others. Judaism was tied to premodern aesthetics and attitudes. We needed to draw on new standards of beauty and from the teaching and the wisdom of the new sciences. We sought to create a way of life which would be understandable to the citizen of the 19th century, and since that age was optimistic, confident of man, individualistic, reformist, respectable, our congregations were molded in that image.

I would suggest that we have come to that point in our history where we need a reform of reform, for what we did then is now no longer that vital. That Reform spoke to a particular need which is no longer our need, to a particular Jew who is no longer our congregant. That age was bourgeois - good and solid, full of good and solid middle class virtues. It was respectable and community minded. It knew not Auschwitz, Hiroshima or Watts. We live in darker days, our lives are far more shadowed, our needs are far more urgent. Our world is convulsed. We have lost confidence in progress. Optimism has been drained from us. We wonder whether civilization, man, can survive. People want something more than sweet reasonableness from the pulpit. They want something more than simple dignity from worship. They

need to touch other lives, not to worship next to strangers. They want to feel, they want a living faith, a faith that encourages, engages life, ennobles.

All over our country there are tens of hundreds of young Jews who are taking courses in oriental mysticism. Why? Because familiar worship patterns, our worship, does not satisfy their spiritual needs. They want something more intense, something in which they can be more involved, in which there is more movement, more highlight, more depth. All around our country there are hundreds of young and middle-aged Jews who suffer for every injustice save those done to their people; why? Because Judaism has been to them a matter of words on a Saturday morning not a life style nor a mission. All around our country there are many among the middle-aged and elderly who rarely walk into the synagogue because they find that it no longer is^{as} meaningful as it once was. Words are spoken, familiar words. Rites are celebrated, familiar rites, but they have changed and somehow the synagogue has not changed with them. We speak in terms and in forms beloved and familiar a generation ago, but we do not speak with the idiom of the contemporary nor with the forms of today.

Dear Friends, the Union Prayerbook was not given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, There is no rule that worship must be carried out ever and always with a grand cathedral organ and a robed choir in the way in which it was orchestrated these past decades. Aaron did not submit to the tribes of Israel a religious school curriculum which had to be held fast to from then and forever. Miriam was never President of a sisterhood. What we did was good and valid a generation ago. I am suggesting that now we must do other things in other ways; find more effective ways to transmit the ancient insights, the teaching and the

understanding. These insights have not been outmoded. Never have they been more needed. It is simply that we are different. We speak a different language, we dance to different tunes, we sing different melodies. Can we truly say that our synagogues sing our melodies, speak our language, dance to our tune, answer our questions, sometimes? always?

All over our land one thing is clear. There is a desperate search. We are part of it. We are frustrated, bitter. We are confused. What must I do? How shall I live? What are the proper and functional standards of family life? What represents truth? How do I go about effecting social change? How do I go about changing myself? How do I learn to live with other human beings, to touch them, not simply use them; to be part of a community, not partner to a society which manipulates and abuses people?

The synagogue, this synagogue, has much to teach and has men who can teach. What is needed is a willingness to break out of the old modes, break the kelipah, the hardened shell, go about our business untrammelled by the conventions of the past so that the voice of the past can again be heard.

What I am saying to you is not simply another pop culture plea to be "with it." Let me quote to you from one of your own rabbis, Samuel Goldenson, from a speech he made thirty-five years ago.

Our energies, therefore, should be engaged in strengthening and reinforcing every wall and every pillar of our religious structure... We must bring the sustaining and life-giving nourishment to them directly, with such zeal and enthusiasm, with such force and consecration that they will be drawn to us.

In a word the problem is for us to re-assert and re-affirm spiritual content not by word of mouth merely, but by example, an example that shall emanate from genuine feeling and a heartfelt appreciation of their pertinence and sublimity.

As there are some who are leaving the synagogue because we failed to stress the personal and the mystic sides of our faith, so there are others who have become indifferent to the religion of their fathers because their grievances and resentments against a world in which brute inequality and selfish materialism reign are not sufficiently voiced. We can draw them back only by assuming once more the role of the prophets in Israel and preach the simply and unmistakable yet elemental doctrine "Not by might nor by power does man prevail but by the spirit of God." Our message, therefore, should be social and communal, as well as personal and mystic to the end that "righteousness shall flow as water and justice is a mighty stream."

I have suggested ^{that} over the years that our congregations ^{have} become one dimensional. We have spoken with mild tones to the middle-aged about middle class values. We must become multi-dimensional; speak to the street urchin, to the rebellious youngster, to the confused young person, to those beginning a family, worrying through the problems of love, to the middle-aged and the aging, each in his own language, each in terms appropriate to their needs and to their understanding. We have the teaching, we have the wisdom, we have the resource. What we lack are appropriate forms and idioms and we suffer from being hidebound. You have to help us in finding the ways. You have to encourage us to break out of the familiar routines into new avenues of religious undertaking. You have to encourage us by coming, by searching, by seeking, because no institution can remake your faith and give you new strength unless you are willing to come, to be part of its life, of its worship, of its liturgy, of its learning. You have a proud and noble record, a history second to none. You understand the imperatives of learning and of love of God, of Israel, and of mankind. You have the resources of person and profession. You stand on the threshold of a potently great era of service. Walk into it with fresh eyes, clear minds,

burdened by concern but not by the past.

May the Lord establish the work of your hands, yea the work of your hands may He establish it.

AMEN

