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The Whys and Wherefores of a Synagogue, 1966.

THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF A SYNAGOGUE

The Temple

Sunday, April 17, 1967

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Jacob's deception of his aging and nearly blind father is one of the classic stories in our Scripture. It was the custom that the eldest son received the birthright. After a death bed blessing, the eldest was entitled to a double portion of the inheritance. Isaac felt death approaching. He summoned Esau, the elder of the twins. Isaac was prepared for the appropriate ritual, but first he had one final favor to ask. He savored a particular delicacy, a stew of venison meat. Esau was a huntsman of note. As a last favor, Isaac asked Esau to arrow for him a deer. Esau, of course, assented. Unbeknownst to father or son, Rebecca had overheard. She preferred the younger twin, Jacob, he who dwelt in the tents, the smooth-skinned lad. She prepared for Jacob armlets and shoulder coverings of animal hides, rough as the skin of Esau was rough, hairy as Esau's skin was hairy. She dressed up and disguised some goat's meat as though it were venison stew. She sent Jacob into the invalid's room to gain by deceit the elder's double portion.

Isaac, even in his age and blindness, had a flickering moment of suspicion: 'the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau'. But the old man could not hold on to his doubts. Within moments, he had given to Jacob the irrevocable blessing and birthright.

In the history of our thought, there are phrases in our Bible which have a life of their own. One of these is Isaac's statement of suspicion, 'the voice is the voice of Jacob but the hand is the hand of Esau'. Jacob, in our literature is not only a specific forefather but a collective symbol of all Israel. It was Jacob who won for all of us the proud title, Israel,

when he wrestled the long night with the angel and could not be thrown or beaten. Jacob is Israel and Esau is Edom - any and all of the powerful nations who, by brute force, imposed their will upon Israel. This phrase was taken to mean that there is a way of life which is the way of sweet reason and of gentle persuasion, symbolized by the voice of Jacob - Israel; and there is a way which is aggressive and physical, and this is the way of Esau - Edom. How so? Was not Esau a cunning man, a dweller in the wilds, and Jacob one who dwelt quietly in the tents?

All this is by way of introduction to a comment which the Rabbis make upon the synagogue. They take this phrase, and weave into it a philosophy of worship. 'As long as Jacob, that is Israel, is in its synagogues, its deeds are not the deeds of Esau.' As long as Israel frequents the synagogue, his life (our life) has the decency and the dignity which is synonymous with our tradition; when Israel (the Jew) forsakes this place, our lives take on the ordinariness, the vulgarity, the coarseness, the overbearing quality which is associated with Esau.

The synagogue is for Israel a civilizing and humanizing institution. Our lives apart from this place are quite ordinary. The market place encourages the guile of the trader. The political arena stimulates the cunning of all who seek power. Life coarsens and brutalizes men. Fortunately we have the synagogue. Here our decency is encouraged and comes alive. Here we respond to the beauty that is Godly. Here Israel's ways are the ways of a noble and high tradition.

What is a synagogue? How did the first synagogue come into being? How does the synagogue go about civilizing and humanizing the Jew? The word synagogue is of Greek derivation. Etymologically, synagogue means a coming together, an assemblage, a congregation of people. The word has informal overtones, and such was its origin. The Temple had an elaborate ritual.

The synagogue's service was simplicity itself. The synagogue responds to the natural human instinct to come together to seek out truths and understanding. Informality and simplicity have always distinguished the synagogues of Israel.

Think for a moment of the shrines that you have visited and the holy places that you have seen. Think of the great sacred compounds of the Mayans and of the Incas of Mexico and Peru. Think of the Temples of Karnack, Thebes and Memphis, of Persepolis and Palmyra. These are elaborate structures in which equally elaborate rituals were carried out. Think of these and you will understand something of the spiritual revolution implicit in the synagogue. Before the synagogue, there was the temple, the Beit La Mikdash. It was a beautiful place. It was a handsome building. Glorious ritual took place there. The people thronged to see the priests in their vestments officiating at the offerings, pouring out libations of wine and water to God, offering up bullock and the holocaust upon the sacred altar. Men were trained from their infancy to tend to the sacrifices and to minister at the shrine. The core of Temple worship was a ceremonial, which was carried out with great pomp and circumstance. Those who thronged to watch the sacrifice felt that they took part in the benefit of the sacrifice. There were nobler shrines than the shrine in Jerusalem and many far less noble. But they all had certain characteristics. They were on a sacred piece of ground. The priests and ministers who officiated were carefully trained for their functions and the central act of worship was a precise rite carried out to please or to placate the God or Gods.

Now consider the synagogue. The Synagogue is a simple room. The synagogue requires neither priest nor Levite. The central function of the synagogue is not an act which seeks to placate God, but an act in which we seek to instruct ourselves, to enlighten ourselves as to the will of God.

Our concern is with Torah, with learning. In a sense the synagogue is a physical extension of prophetic theology. The prophets believed in the Temple but they raised a skeptical eyebrow at much that went on there. To be sure, the Biblical command had ordered a Shrine. But, the prophets asked, what was the value of this coming together? Who required this of Israel? What was truly required by God? "To wash you, to make you clean, 'put away the evil of your doings before Mine eyes', cease to do evil, learn to do well." What had mechanical ritual to do with righteousness?

The synagogue was a place in which the Jew could learn to do well, learn what was required of him and by whom, hear the command of God read out. When Hebrew ceased to be understood, the word of God was translated and wise men and seers wove its insights into a new understanding and opened up the depth of Scripture for the worshipper's benefit. At first, the reading may have been haphazard. The scribe chose a portion which seemed to fit the mood of the hour. Later precise cycles of Biblical readings were prescribed. But always there was the Torah. It was the instruction. It was the reading. It was the ethic. It was the teaching, teaching not ceremonial. God did not care if a particular form of sacrifice was offered or not. God cared only that Israel had assembled, not where they were assembled.

The informality of the Synagogue left few precise records and makes it difficult for a scholar to describe its early history. Some historians argue that the synagogue began in the seventh and sixth century, BCE., during the Deuteronomic Reformation. The Deuteronomists insisted that the whole cult must be centralized in Jerusalem. Local shrines were pulled down, and the sacrificial worship of God was permitted only in the Temple in Jerusalem. Not everyone could come to the Temple, so each of the communities was assigned a number of days during which their leaders had to attend the

sacrifices and to provide the necessary wine, bullocks, lambs, grain, and heave offering. At the very time that a community's delegation was busy in the Temple, the people back home apparently began to come together and to read those portions of Scripture in which the particular sacrifices being offered at the cult center were commanded. The Torah was read. In this way, all participated in the benefit of the act. Some historians believe that this coming together to read the laws of the sacrifice represents the prototype of the synagogue. Perhaps. If it be so, it would explain why the synagogue still uses the names and the times of the sacrifices as its schedule of daily worship.

A more popular theory has it that the synagogue began not in Israel but in Babylon, and not in the seventh century BCE, but in the sixth or fifth. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the First Temple in the year 586 BCE. Judah was driven into exile. All sacrifice ceased. Judaism would have disappeared had not some new form of religious devotion developed. We are uncertain as to that form, but it is believed that, on the Sabbath or on the Holy Days, prophets drew around themselves disciples and friends, read out to them from the Torah and discussed with them the ideas implicit in Scripture. Many believe that the synagogue developed out of these informal meetings designed to secure the continuity of the faith. Presumably, when the Jews returned to the Holy Land, they brought back with them this form of worship which centered on Torah rather than on sacrifice. Tradition has it that, when the Temple was rebuilt and sacrifices offered again, the Judeans placed a synagogue in the Temple itself and the two forms of worship existed side by side for centuries. The Talmud tells us that, in the year 70 when the Temple was raised by the Romans, there were over 400 synagogues in the city of Jerusalem alone. Whichever explanation you prefer, it is clear that the veneration and study of Torah was the center of the early synagogue.

Had there been no Torah, there would have been no synagogue. It was the possession of the Torah which drew the Jew into the sanctuary and stimulated him to build his synagogue. Study, understanding, exposition of the sacred text were the concerns of the synagogue.

There was Torah in the ancient synagogue and there was Avodah - worship. If we explain the origin of the synagogue as deriving from the local groups who came together to read the sacrificial laws, then it seems clear that from the beginning, not only were the relevant portions of the Scripture read, but the psalms and Biblical portions which accompanied the sacrifice in the Temple. If the synagogue grew in the Exile, then it seems clear that the sages read out to their disciples, not only the Torah, but the prophecies of return and of the renewal of God's steadfast love and that the people sang the great hymns which were familiar from the cult and which now form the Psalms. From the beginning, worship and study are interwoven in the life of the synagogue. So much so that the words 'sanctuary' and 'schoolhouse' are inextricably one - shul. The Synagogue is a spiritual schoolhouse, a place of devotion, and a place of study. Devotion grew in importance after the final destruction of the Temple when the synagogue had to take over the whole burden of public prayer and the entire calendar of the ceremonial of our people. Indeed, the synagogue alone permitted Israel to survive dispersion. A sanctuary, such as the Temple, is fixed to a foundation. It can be razed. The synagogue is not a building, it is people. It is a minyan. It is ten devoted people willing to come together to worship God. It is portable and indestructible.

What do you require for a synagogue? A room. This magnificent room? An attic. What do you require for a synagogue? Ten devoted men and a book of the law. That is all. No ritual objects, no special architecture, simply the willingness of people to come together to be instructed and to worship God. No army can prevent devoted people from coming together to worship. And so it was that, when worship was proscribed in the Temple, it continued in the synagogue, as it has continued despite many prohibitions until this very day.

Study and worship, worship and study, these are the twin purposes of the synagogue. The synagogue has gone about its work in a remarkably informal and simple fashion. There are no rules and regulations telling us what kind of room we must build, what kind of ritual objects must be in the sanctuary, what kind of pews or benches or music must accompany our worship. These are questions of custom. It is we who must find the words of instruction, the words of worship to fit into our needs. The synagogue was informal in conception and always flexible in structure.

Over the years, the synagogue has taken on other functions, apart from those of worship and study. In early times, the synagogue was also a hostel where itinerant merchants could come and find safety and the opportunity to worship and to mix with their own. In Medieval times, the synagogue was the town meeting hall. Here the affairs of the community were discussed. Here monies were raised for welfare needs and for the protection of the community. Here, anyone who felt himself aggrieved could come before the altar and stop the service until a public judgment had been made in his cause. Over the long history of our people, the synagogue has served any number of needs besides those of worship and of study, but these are central.

If the flexibility of the synagogue has made for its constant youthfulness and vigor, it has also made for its frailty. As a human institution,

the synagogue is prone to all the vagaries of the flesh. We Jews, like all other people, are vain people. If all a synagogue requires are ten men, often when there are twenty, there are two synagogues.

You all know that story of the shipwrecked Jew on the desert island, who built three huts. When a ship came to pick him up, the captain, who rowed ashore, asked this Jewish Robinson Crusoe, " 'What is this hut for?' He said, 'that is my home' - 'And what is this hut for?' 'That is the synagogue where I worship my God.' 'And what is this hut for?' 'That is the synagogue I don't go to.' " Nor is this uniquely a modern-day problem. The Medieval community of Seville, a community of proud Spanish Jews, numbered less than 400 families and supported at least 32 synagogues. 'Vanity, thy name isn't woman.' The flexibility of the synagogue has been to its disadvantage, not only in terms of the pretensions and the vanities of men, but also in terms of the program of the synagogue itself. There are always those who want instant religion, who want nothing of discipline, little of the spiritual heights, little of the demanding exercise, only the hemish, the familiar, the colorful, an opportunity to be amused or titillated. Already in the Talmud you find the Rabbis excoriating those who intend to make the synagogue into what they call a bet am - a community center, a meeting hall, a gathering place, a place to while away the hours, a place for activity by Jews which is not essentially Jewish. Irrelevance is not a new problem. A synagogue is people, and there are only so many saints, so many sages, and so many wise men in any age; and there are always synagogues which seek to appeal to the mass, to become all things to all men and who in the process forget to teach the word of God and to offer a sensitive opportunity for the worship of God.

Now the twentieth century has seen Jews build the most magnificent synagogues our people has ever built. Wander across the faces of the globe,

and you visit magnificent cathedrals, mosques, and shrines; but you find few ancient synagogues of size. Our people worshipped in little places, but they were filled with tradition and love and devotion, loyalty and faith. We thank God that we have been privileged in an abundant age and in a free time to raise these magnificent walls high, but the purpose of our fine synagogues must remain the purpose of all synagogues. The heart of this place is Torah and Avodah -- study and worship.

For our fathers, the translation of policy into program was fairly easy. The ancients had an easy formula. Torah meant the Bible, the Talmud, Midrash. Avodah meant siddur and mahzor. You knew the curriculum; you knew what was demanded of you and you simply had to develop the popular willingness to come and to be taught, to come and to participate in the worship. We must not only offer Torah and worship, but we must find new terms, a new vocabulary with which to describe our knowledge and our feelings, our search for truth, our understanding of the tradition, our love of God and our desire to worship Him. Today we have a two-fold function, to study and to worship and to cut through and find new ways to study and worship.

We have been blessed at The Temple with a vision which has been constant, our guides have seen to it that there is dignity to our worship and significance, that there is depth in our study and relevance. Their achievement is our burden. It will be the burden of our children and of our children's children. For, as long as Israel raises its synagogues in honor of God, it raises them to understand His will, and to offer up our worship to Him with our lives.

If you are worried about rising rates of delinquency, if you are worried about rising rates of social disorganization, if you are worried about the materialism of our society, if you are worried about the friction

which exists within homes; try a good dose of synagogue therapy. Learn to live here in your spiritual world, to draw strength and understanding from it. As long as the voice of Jacob is heard in this sanctuary, our deeds will not be the deeds of Esau.



Jacob's deception of his aging father is one of the best known stories in the Bible.
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 and now his intention shall be about a story for his father's enjoyment. Esau despised
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 as the hairy & bearded Esau - She asked Jacob often to wear her dress &
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