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The First Commandment: the Changes Reform Judaism Can Not
Make, 1966.

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THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

The Changes Reform Judaism Cannot Make

The Temple
November 20, 1966

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Reform Judaism began as a vote of confidence in the parent faith. The original and motive purpose of Reform was to clear away the rust and the barnacles from the ship of faith after a long difficult voyage through troubled waters, so that the ship could sail on unencumbered. The founding assumption of Reform Judaism was that Judaism was seaworthy - anyone who did not believe so, disembarked and found other means of transportation.

The early Reformers liked to compare Judaism to a tree. Judaism had its roots, its trunk, its boughs and its leaves. At each turn of the cultural season, when the intellectual mood of the world changed, the leaves dropped off; customs, folkways, mystical symbols, Messianic ideas, but the tree remained firm. Within it was the possibility of new foliage, a splendid foliage of meaningful worship, binding song, serious thought and high challenge.

Reform is a movement of rejuvenation. It is designed to renew the ancient and venerable faith. Reform Judaism was never conceived as a denomination - a self-contained and self-sufficient group of Jews who bowed to any other God but the God of Sinai or who accepted any other moral commandment than the Mitzvot of our Bible. I say this because there has grown up in our midst a group who, I am afraid, have turned in on themselves. They emphasize the Reform and not the Jew,

the change and not the changeless. Paradoxically, I find among them our most verbal and aggressive universalists, those who complain that the Jews give too much to United Jewish Appeal and not enough to the United Appeal, too much to their own causes and not enough to all other causes. Strangely, these are the very same Jews who are aloof and distant when it comes to the matter of broad Jewish identification.

Reform is a movement of Jewish renewal. We emphasize Judaism yet to many it is the reform which is enticing. Reform has all the connotations which are exciting to our age - newness, change, contemporaneity, experimentation. Judaism suggests a venerable tradition, a tradition whose wisdom must be searched out and unlocked.

This is the hatchet age. We like to cut away the old, to free ourselves of the binding. We have no patience with research and with search, with finding out, with reformulating the wisdom of the ages. In our arrogance some of us believe that only this age has wisdom. And so there are some schools and there are some pulpits which emphasize the new and not the venerable, which teach their young people that traditional Judaism is an archaism, a relic, medieval and outdated. 'We are the enlightened. They are the benighted.' In doing so, of course, we set up unnecessary barriers within the household of Judaism and cut ourselves off from a useful and necessary historical conservatism, which is the counter-weight and balance to our tendency to be rash and impulsive.

Reform is a vote of confidence in Judaism. But, I am afraid that there are some professional liberals among us who look upon Reform

as a faith of infinite plasticity. I often think they believe Reform Judaism is a spiritual jelly fish, opaque and translucent, able to refract every color and shade of the cultural world, forming and refashioning itself to every shift in the current of the intellectual scene. What is old and embarrassing they want to cut away. What is new, whether it is substantial or simply stylish they bring in and canonize. When anyone says to them; 'this is Judaism,' on this we can not bend, they become put out. After all, we ought to be open and infinitely receptive.

I want to put these remarks into juxtaposition with the First Commandment. The First Commandment names and affirms God: "I am the Lord, thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of bondage." Today there are those who wonder why we must continue to affirm God. They look about, they look at themselves and they realize that for many this is an age of weakening faith. Their children ask them embarrassing questions. 'Explain to me this invisible God you talk about.' Their children ask them even more embarrassing questions. 'How is it that you belong to a God-affirming congregation and prayer and piety play such a marginal role in your lives?' Liberals by profession, if not by politics, they wonder 'why not just put aside all this embarrassment? Let us put God in the deep freeze. Let us put theology in moth balls. ' Why must we speak of God, to search for God, to try to find some principle of harmony in all the cacaphony and confusion of our age?' Let us allow Reform to emerge as a pristine humanistic morality unencumbered by the First Commandment. Such thoughts are tempting. They are tempting to anyone who has had a long involved discussion

with his child, seeking to make clear that which can never be quite clear, seeking to make another aware of the spirit which infuses the human being and the universe, which one can sense but not fully know. It is always tempting to court popularity. But imagine for a moment the Jew who joined those who insist that God is dead. When this Jew went to God's funeral, what would he do there? He would stand beside the coffin and say,

"Exalted and sanctified be God's great name."

Even when we bury God we can not avoid praising and glorifying Him. The absurdity of this image points up the absurdity of a Godless Judaism. Judaism begins in the affirmation of God's presence in and within the universe. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Judaism grounds morality, ethics, virtue in God's will and in His being. "Holy shalt thou be, for I, the Lord thy God, am Holy." Judaism brightens the tragedy of our being with the hope of God's comfort and presence. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for Thou art with me."

Judaism without God, without the reality of God's being, is a distortion - an historical absurdity. I say this quite deliberately, I know there are those who would like to see Judaism only a teaching goodness and a preaching of political liberalism. I say this in the full knowledge that there is a Rabbi in Detroit who has affirmed that God is not. Some look upon this man as a trail blazer. They believe he is heroic. I look on him, I confess, as a woebegone straggler trying to catch up with the baggage train of the legion of the non-believers. God knows that agnosticism and disbelief have academic credentials in our day. What he is saying has

been said for three hundred years and more. It is not new. He is not a pioneer. And one must fault him for a vulgar form of spiritual hucksterism. Why must he seek to build a congregation which will listen to his theological idiosyncracies by playing on the vestigial ethnic loyalties of Jews? Why not simply go out and build a congregation of non-believers who will seek for the spiritual wherever that search may lead. When Felix Adler set out to found the Ethical Culture Movement he had the good sense to leave Temple Emanuel and to go across Central Park and found a new movement.

It may be that we have reached that enlightenment stage where the God idea has been totally discredited and can no longer be believed. If so, Judaism is no more than a historical curiosity. Let us put it aside. Let us give it a decent burial. Let us at least allow our venerable faith to pass on in decency and in its last moments contort it into a parody and caricature of its self.

Roots hold the tree to the ground. Through its roots a tree draws nourishment. Judaism is rooted in faith in God and if this root is cut away, I am afraid Judaism will die of spiritual malnutrition. Look about you for the children and grandchildren of those who on their own converted Judaism into an ethical culture. Look about you for the children and grandchildren of those to whom Judaism was perhaps a gastronomic delight, and a good joke but otherwise little more than an ethnic liability. Where is their activity among us? Where are they? Judaism does not have the option of turning itself into a non-God-believing faith. Reform Judaism does not have the option of a vote of no confidence in Judaism.

We have only to look about us to see Jews, our neighbors, who have no express faith in God. Sometimes we need look only into the mirror of our souls. In our century faith in God is hard to come by, is it not? Much of what the so-called 'Death of God theologians' write is not a substantive argument as to whether God is or is not, but a psychological description of our times. They are saying simply this: When the modern tries to tune the universe in he hears only static; when he tries to sensitize himself to the spiritual element in life, he finds his receptors numb and scarred over; when he tries to see beyond his own small world he is confronted by a dark, impenetrable cloud of confusion and non-understanding. In this sense the issue is not whether God is dead or alive, but whether the modern can not grope his way to God. Each of us can testify to this difficulty and confusion. Faith is no longer omnipresent in our cultural milieu. Non-faith, disbelief is widespread. It is hard to work out a harmony from all the separate facts which crowd in about us. Faith is hard to come by, but it can be had, there are men of faith.

One of the most prominent among the 'death of God theologians' is a man named Thomas Altizer. He is a professor at one of the Virginia universities. Altizer, I am afraid, is guilty of the same kind of spiritual arrogance for which he faults the ecclesiastics of another age, those church men who said that because we Jews would not affirm Christ we were somehow biologically stunted, or genetically blind in matters of the spirit. Altizer arrogantly assumes that any man who chooses to live in our history can neither know the reality of God's presence nor understand the world as His creation. You and I live in our history. We are not afraid of

the twentieth century. We accept its challenges. We are not afraid of knowledge. We are cultured and educated people and many of us by our learning qualify to that terrible title of intellectual; and yet we can, can we not, see God's hand somehow within the mystery of creation. We do, do we not, affirm the being of God. No, we will not be written out of our century so easily. The believer, to be sure, bears the seed of doubt within him. He is not as confident as a non-believer. Indeed, he is far too ready to humble himself before the man who says confidently: "You don't know enough, little one. You do not know enough not to believe. You are afraid of this century. You are bourgeois. You are a boob. Turn away. If you really looked at this world you would have to doubt."

Not so fast. Faith in 1966 has as intellectual credentials and quite as valid as those of non-faith. Agnosticism, atheism, humanism, secularism, are not the only alternatives which are still reasonable. Let me ask this question: Why is it that so many of us have such difficulty affirming God? Your answers would be varied and many. But one answer stands out supremely and it is this: Twentieth Century man is in love with himself! During the last one hundred years we have become aware of our individuality. We no longer feel ourselves tied to the soil or bound by the iron laws of economics. Man has broken the bonds and stands reverent before the skills of hand and mind which have given us knowledge and power. At times we stand in fear and trembling before the vast passions which lurk within us. In fear or in trembling, in reverence of, in awe, we are auto-intoxicated. We live in and for this world, this life, our life only. We lack the ability to see beyond. We look up to the heavens and what do we see? Not the tracery of God's hand but the

vapor trail of a jet these hands have engineered. We look into the mystery of life and what do we see? Not the miracle of creation but minute chemical components and viruses, and precipitates of microbiology. Man is hypnotized by his own being. I re-read recently Sartre's play The Flies. In it the chief protagonist says, "I alone, I am alone, I demanded a sign, I sent messages to heaven. No reply. Heaven ignored my very name. Each minute I wondered what I could be in the eyes of God. Now I know the answer. Nothing. God does not see me, God does not hear me, God does not know me. Do you see this emptiness over our heads? That's God. Do you see this gap in the door? That's God. Do you see that hole in the ground? That is God again. Silence is God. Absence is God. God is the loneliness of man. God is the loneliness of man. There is no one but myself. I alone, I alone decided on evil; I alone invented God. It was I who cheated; it was I who worked miracles; it was I who accused myself today. I alone can absolve myself. I - man - if God exists man is nothing; if man exists God doesn't. I, I, I, I. "We worship the great God, I.

In the worship of the little congregation in Detroit which affirms disbelief, the text of the Mi-chomocho, "Who is Like unto Thee, Oh Lord among the mighty, who is Like unto Thee glorious and holiness?" is now read, "Who is like unto man, glorious and holiness." And this, mind you, in the age of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Napalm and Viet Nam! "Who is like unto man, glorious and holiness?" When you place your hand before your own eye you can not see the glory of the heavens. When you look for your own image in the glass, the glass becomes a mirror. Intoxicated by

himself man can see only himself. Need I remind you that auto-intoxication is a mood, not a philosophy. When some theologians claim that the death of God is a historical fact, I answer them simply, "the death of God is a psychological fact. You have lost the ability to sense God, I still have it."

There are some intellectuals who have become indifferent to the whole religious enterprise, and there are others who are devoted and committed. It is a matter of mood. Some day our inventions will become commonplace. Some day our psyche will cease to hypnotize us. Then men are going to be able to look out and beyond and see something other than themselves. Moods are not facts. The mood of our age is one of weakening belief, and ours is certainly an age in which belief is hard to come by. I submit that the reasons lie not in our science, not in our learning, not in any iron requirement of logic which compells the statement: there can be no God, rather disbelief is simply the temper of the times, the mood of the moment. Moods change. There are cultural cycles. There may yet be a time when the many will turn to Him.

What does faith require in 1966? Torah, learning, search, wisdom. If there is any damning criticism which must be made of religion in our age, it is that it is an leisure time activity for idle minds. You put your mind aside when you come to Temple. Your mind is for your business. Your mind is for your profession. The idle mind, the rusty mind, the sleepy mind, the lazy mind, which has only the shop-worn platitudes of another century to work with, cannot confront the real problems of our day, or face the challenges of our knowledge

and policy. Hammerskjold said once: "How many have been driven to the outer darkness by too easy talk of faith." Why do our children often turn against their birth faith - because we give them inadequate answers to questions of God and belief? Because the answers are insufficient; 'because they are childish answers;' because religion is not one of those areas in which we are willing to think. If we are willing to think, we will find that instead of being a conservative element religion is radical; instead of being the benighted, we are the enlightened. The arguments of disbelief are cluttered with common-sense truisms which lack any basis in fact and which no longer are even good common sense.

The Cosmonauts looked out into the heavens from their port hole and could not see God. Mr. Kruschev laughed long and loud. "You see, God isn't there." What's behind all this but a vague, medieval plety, a superstition that God is upon a throne in heaven? Will you find such a notion in Judaism? The whole world, our Bible says, is grounded in His being. Where do you find in our Bible that God is up there, or out there? "Thou can'st not see My face, yet I will make all My glory pass before thee." God is of nature but he is not natural. He infuses nature but he can not be seen in nature. This much we all see. But why is it that so many of us pale before the naivete' that because God can not be found by some intricate research instrument, there is no God? That because God can not be shown by radar or sonar there is no God. Why? Because we have not examined the nature of truth. There are many kinds of truth and many legitimate logics. Empirical reason and scientific investigation represent only one of these legitimate forms

of logic. There is a logic of poetry, there is a logic of feeling, there is a logic of love, there is a logic of art, there is a logic of myth-making, there is a logic of religion, and each of these ways by which the mind becomes aware of the real world has brought us a great deal of wisdom and understanding. How much poorer our world would have been without them.

Science can answer questions only in a surprisingly narrow range. Science can describe and devise new controls over natural forces. Science can not give us values. Science can not suggest to us the essential purpose of life. Science can not guide us into our individual dignity. Science can not teach us, 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not;' the morality, the values, the ethic which we all require. We have to turn to other areas of the mind and other responses of our being, and among these, and central to these, of course, is the response of faith.

Most of us are lazy in matters religious. We thought about Judaism till we were what, thirteen, and hardly since. Believing that religion is an idle occupation for a sunny Sunday morning, most of us, I am afraid, have surrendered the intellectual field to the non-believers. We have even convinced ourselves that we are the non-thinkers. and that they are the intellectuals, that they have the arguments and all we have is habit and stubbornness. What a travesty our ancient faith! This Judaism of ours never, never, glorified ignorance. This Judaism of ours never accepted the paradoxical nature of truth. Torah orah, the rabbis said, Torah orah, Life is learning. Life is truth. Truth is light. By truth shalt thou live. We never turned away from the world. We were never afraid of learning. But learning must be mastered. Learning must be

digested. You must understand it for it to have meaning. Our philosophers, our Hillels, our Philo's, our Halevis, our Maimonides tried to confront the world and to understand what is true and has deep meaning, not what is merely vogueish, a fad. We have nothing to fear in learning, except our unwillingness to learn, and it is of that unwillingness that religion today stands convicted.

We have allowed non-religious men to build straw men and again and again to knock them down, because we have not even realized that they were building straw men. Ever and again, one who has been analyzed says to me, "I now realize I was sick. When I was sick I projected upon the universe my anxieties, my neuroses, my needs for dependency. Now I am stronger and I realize that I projected my needs upon the world. Therefore, there is no God!" The argument that God is a figment of our imaginations - a straw man can be refuted. We project feelings on every friend and on every member of our family, but it does not prove that they are not real. a Three thousand years ago the prophet Jeremiah thundered against the Judeans of his day, who projected their needs for a protector upon God. They assumed that God would guarantee the borders of Israel and safeguard The Temple. To these Jeremiah said, "Thy God is no God!" Yet Jeremiah affirmed God.

What we must be willing to do is to go beyond the commonplace - beyond the truisms which clutter up our thought and confront this universe of ours in all of its diversity, in all of its magnificence and all of its wisdom. The man of faith has little to fear in learning except his own unwillingness - to absorb it, to digest, to make it his own. This is

the challenge which confronts the Reform Jew today. If Reform is a vote of confidence in Judaism as it is; if Reform is the program for the renewal of Judaism, as it was conceived to be and as it must be, and if we desire to be among the forerunners, the saviors, then it is we who must confront this wonderful confusing, amazing world of ours, and find within it the presence of God. There is no more to change. There is no more to break down. There is no more to cut away. That part of our job has been done. Our task is to give depth and build intellectual foundations. This can not be done by a rabbi alone, it must be done in every home, by every Jew. Finding his own spiritual footing, transmitting that to his children, giving him a sense of the meaningfulness of belief, of the meaningfulness of God.

Let me end with this thought. Why should we bother with this search? Why do we need to try to assimilate the philosophies and information of our day into a unity, into one whole? Many say religion is only a matter of peace of mind. A carefully built up annuity would accomplish this end more quickly and more surely than faith. What is faith? Faith is search. Faith is a search for the ultimate values against which we can judge all of our daily responsibilities. The paradigm of the Jew is Abraham, Abraham who was commanded by God, get thee out of thy home - out of thy city, out of the world which is familiar to you. Break away from the prejudices of the people around you. Break out into your century. Come into your own. Where will you go? There is no specific direction. Break out and you will find yourself. In finding yourself you will find God and having found God, what have you found? You have found the ugliness of your own idols, the ugliness of race, the ugliness of

chauvanism, the ugliness of class, the ugliness of ambition, the ugliness of status-seeking, the ugliness of power, all the vain idols which we are prone, each of us, to worship.

Why must we find God? Because God is the unity of the universe. The unity which gives direction, wholeness and wholesomeness to our lives. Can we find God? We can - we must!



Kaddish

Friday Nov 18 1966
Sunday Nov 20 1966

Those who passed away this week

Jahrzeits

DAVID WIESENBERGER
ISAAC NEWMAN
BEATRICE FUHRER GOODMAN
NICHOLAS CHAIKIN
EDNA GOLDSMITH
DR. LOUIS H. BACHRACH
IDA ROSENWASSER
DAVID L. LAZERICK
MAURICE MASCHKE
ROLINDA HAYS JOSEPH
BIRDIE STONE LEVISON
HELEN LEVINE
IRWIN H. KRAMER
MARK L. SAMPLINER

WRHS



THE DEVIL AND THE GOOD LORD

GOETZ: I alone. I supplicated, I demanded a sign, I sent messages to Heaven, no reply. Heaven ignored my very name. Each minute I wondered what I could BE in the eyes of God. Now I know the answer: nothing. God does not see me, God does not hear me, God does not know me. You see this emptiness over our heads? That is God. You see this gap in the door? It is God. You see that hole in the ground? That is God again. Silence is God. Absence is God. God is the loneliness of man. There was God. Absence is God. God is the loneliness of man. There was no one but myself; I alone decided on Evil; and I alone invented Good. It was I who cheated, I who worked miracles, I who accused myself today, I alone who can absolve myself; I, man. If God exists, man is nothing; if man exists.... ~~Heinrich~~, I am going to tell you a colossal joke: God doesn't exist.

THE MAN WHO CHOOSES TO LIVE IN OUR
HISTORY CAN KNOW NEITHER THE REALITY
OF GOD'S PRESENCE NOR UNDERSTAND THE
WORLD AS HIS CREATION

From the desk of—

RABBI DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

Rabbi Forman:

Read Psalm 111

Sing hymn 66

Use Service III

Make announcements of the Temple Men's Club affair
Joint Thanksgiving Service, Abba Hillel Memorial
Service with Rabbi Feldman preaching and your
Temple Young Adults meeting.

Bulletin and Kadish list are in a folder on my
desk marked THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

If you do not feel well call Bernie Martin. He
will be out Saturday night but you can reach him on
Sunday morning - He plans to be at Temple. -----
I plan to be here hopefully.