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The Tree and the River, 1983.

The Tree and the River
Daniel Jeremy Silver
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I am sure that the churches of America are fairly crowded this morning. It's Easter morning. The great theme is the resurrection of their Christ, their Saviour. I am equally sure that a significant proportion of those who crowd into those churches have grave reservations and many doubts as to whether the son of God actually walked on this earth, whether the tomb was actually empty, and whether faith in a Saviour redeems. I base that judgment on results of a Gallup Poll study which was released this last week. The publishers interviewed a statistically valid group of Christians and found a significant degree of doubt as to the fact that Christianity's basic myth is in fact historically factual.

I'm equally sure that last week when Jews throughout America sat down Seder night to celebrate the deliverance from Egypt a significant number of those who read the Haggadah had doubts about whether or not the slaves in such numbers had been redeemed from Egypt, whether the plagues had actually taken place, and whether a Reed Sea had been crossed dryshod. One of the truths about our contemporary condition is that a goodly number of those who remain loyal to their ancestral religious tradition have serious reservations and doubts about the historicity of the founding myths. I propose to address myself to that problem, our problem, this morning.

How can we continue to have faith in a religious tradition whose founding history may, in fact, be myth? How can we continue to trust a religious tradition whose Scripture may not be revelation, the actual words of God? I propose to approach this discussion by holding up for comparison two of the great thought systems through which we seek to understand ourselves and our times: in the first instance, history; in the second instance, religion.

As an intellectual discipline, history acts as a caustic. I do not mean that the study of history necessarily makes us be cynical or caustic, but, rather, that like many chemicals the study of history dissolves the bonds which seem to hold together disparate assumptions of our thought. Those who study history know

how illusive certainty is in the area of human affairs. Did the Civil War occur because a majority of the nation determined to eradicate slavery or was it the result of the fact that the south was primarily agricultural and the north primarily industrial, and the material interests of those two parts of the nation had irreconcilable economic interests when it came to determining the financial and tariff policies of the nation? Was the conflict a class conflict? Had it to do with the fact that the south had an essentially patrician culture and the north a more egalitarian one, one more suspicious of any elite or of all class privileges? Or was it an electoral conflict? Had it to do with the fact that the great open spaces of the great plains and in the Louisiana Purchase were being closed in and organized as states and the competition of north and south for their votes and the recognition that these would fall to the group around whose economic and class vision the new states were organized?

Or had it to do with the idiosyncracies, the prejudices, the principles, of Douglas or Lincoln or Justice Taney or Jefferson Davis or any of the other major actors in that drama?

The complexity of the question of causation is one of the reasons history is always being revised. Some write political history. Then economists come along and show us how the forces of technology and production and distribution affect history. Then sociologists come and show us how much community and family structure and cultural forces impinge upon history. Then psychologists come along and show us how much individual idiosyncracies and ego needs change the course of history. History must deal with all of the contradictions of human comedy, nature and of all the conflicting pressures in community structure. It's no surprise then that history always escapes certainty. The final and complete record is never published. We can know something about the etiology of an event, the causes of an event, but never be confident that we know everything about them. And so history is always full of surprises.

How many of us would have predicted that it would be a liberal administration in the United States, one committed to social concerns, which would have prosecuted an imperial war in southeast Asia?

And how many of us would have believed that a fiscally conservative administration in Washington would have sent up a budget which requires massive Federal deficits?

History is not only a result of complex causes but it is full of the accidental and the unpredictable. You know the old English doggerel - for want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the rider was lost; for want of a rider the battle was lost. And so those of us who study history know that things are never quite as they seem, and we are necessarily doubting Thomases. Our task is to raise questions to the certainties which it is religion's task to place before us.

For the moment, let's lay history aside and talk about religion. If history is a caustic, religion is a glue. Religions exist in every culture that man has ever created because of the universal need of every community to affirm and confirm a certain set of values, a certain direction for the community, a vision of what life, if it's well led, can truly be like. Religion exists because life is confusing and we cannot live without direction. Without religion we'd all feel like flotsam, bits of wood, tossed about by the restless sea. We'd feel that our lives were out of control - and that's the way of madness. Ultimately, if our values are not confirmed, declared sacred, we become paralyzed, unable to move. We become lethargic because there's no reason to marshal our energies. And so it is that every group of humans has spun forth and shaped a religion. To be sure, many out there never enter a church or a synagogue or a mosque, nevertheless, they are religious. The non-churched accept certain sacred values. In the United States these are generally humanistic and democratic. They deal with the Fourth of July, due process, the American Constitution, the Bill of Rights and individual freedoms. They're implicit in the society at large, and explicit in the cere-

monies, and so sociologists and anthropologists often speak of a civil religion; and they do so because when all is said, these values and this vision cannot be proved scientifically - we accept these democratic humanistic values of faith, and as with all religious values, they are ultimate values, that is, we stake our lives on their appropriateness.

Religions represent the institution by which societies create to provide them with confidence and certainty; and history and religion are, therefore, at odds with one another. Religion seeks to establish certainty; history, insofar as we pursue it, seeks accuracy and, in the process, tends to dissolve all of our certainties. An example; when we apply history to Scripture we can no longer say that our Torah was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. We know that it is a composite book, put together over a long period of time from many strands and traditions which existed in ancient Israel. Christians face the same problem. The gospels were not written by contemporaries of Jesus but years after his death; neither the Tanach nor the New Testament provide a record which can be relied on to confirm the historic claims made in and for these two scriptures.

History dissolves certainty. Religion consecrates certainty. Our problem then is that we can do without history but don't want to. We cannot do without religion but want to feel confidence in its truths. There were long periods when history was a favorite interest. Much of the Bible is history. There were long periods when Jews were not interested in history. During the Middle Ages Jews wrote diaries and a proposed list of martyrs; but were not interested in presenting an historic description of the past. I've come to the conclusion that whenever people have wanted to affirm the necessity of believing, truly believing their ideology or religion they have distanced themselves from history. This was true in the 19th century when forces of conservatism and privilege fought against history. It was a time when the churches of Europe refused to apply the canons of history to New Testament research. Of course, religions have a way of neutralizing history. They set it apart and claim that its analyses do not apply to ques-

tions of religious truth. Revelation is held to be trans-historical.

In the 19th century it was the forces on the right who fought against the consequence of historical research. In our century the shoe has been on the other foot and opposition has come from the forces on the left. During the 1960's some disciples of radical reform mounted a strong challenge to the teaching of history in our universities. They mocked history as a pointless study, the past is dead. They attacked history because, they said, history inhibits the revolution and spirit. History causes you to think prudentially. History suggests that after the revolution another group of bastards will have control of the government, the commissars will want their dachas, and privileges for themselves and their children, and personal ambition which continues to be a primary motivating force. A revolution may change social and political forces, but it can't transform us into angels, and history challenges the confident certainties of those who think otherwise.

Now, how can we handle this challenge of history to faith? The most interesting way of handling this challenge resulted in a new religion - Communism. Communism declared history to be a for sure conclusion. History follows iron laws, the dialectic, and the immutable, inexorable movement of social, political and mostly economic forces which turn class on class until the inevitable ultimate emergence of the working class into uncontested power.

The Marxist historian denies that human individualists specifically affect history. He insists that history will follow a certain course, and the problem that if he faces, if he's honest and willing to face this problem, is that history hasn't worked out the way Marx said it would and those who worship history say that it must. Marx said that the revolution would happen first in the most advanced industrial states where urbanization and the growth and pauperization of the laboring class would lead to their unification, solidarity, protest, and ultimately revolt against their masters.

In point of fact, the Communist revolution took place in Czarist Russia, probably the most primitive industrial state in all of Europe. Marx also insisted that workers would recognize that their ultimate loyalty is to their class rather than to culture, religion or nation, and when their basic interests were at stake they would unite across religious lines. It didn't work out that way. In the first World War, and again in the second World War, workers joined the forces of their nation, the workers of Germany fought against the workers of Russia. Contra Marx, history does not follow a certain and predictable course.

My question is not to Marx but to us. How can we who live in a world which accepts history analysis accept its conclusions and the teachings of our religious tradition? How can we make sense of these two intellectual disciplines whose contradictory approaches we must somehow combine?

When we take the Torah from the Ark we say: "this is the Torah which God commanded us through Moses." When we hold the Torah up, it is a symbol to all of us of continuity - eternal truths; yet, if Moses were to come among us and I were to unroll for him a Sefer Torah he would have no previous knowledge of what I was showing him. He would have to ask me: 'what is it?' Nor could he read the scroll since it is written in a script which was not developed until a half a millenium after his death. In his day there was no Sefer Torah. The Torah was edited and published in the 5th or 4th century B.C.E. - Moses lived in the 13th century B.C.E. - but here I'm talking now as a historian and you can see the problem. As a rabbi I believe in the tradition and its teachings insofar as I can understand them. As an historian I know that much of what our tradition claims to be true is in fact myth, suspect, not quite what it seems to be. How can we marry history and religion into some kind of effective, meaningful and honest relationship?

By way of answer, I'd like you to consider two images, the images which I used in the title of this lecture, a tree and a river. Up till recently, most have thought of religion in terms of a tree. For Jews the tree is the sapling which

God gave Moses at Mt. Sinai, the Torah. Over the centuries the tree has grown, the trunk has thickened and the major branches have thickened. Each spring new buds appear. There has been growth, but the tree which we call Judaism has retained its shape. To be sure, every spring new blossoms appear, the Jewish community customs have developed which flourish for a short period of time, but they wither in the fall and are replaced the next spring by other customs. But the fundamental teachings, the unity of God, the covenant values, and the messianic vision have remained what they have always been, or so this image suggests to us. The tree image is not one I have invented. You can find it in the psalms: "It (the Torah) is a tree of life to them that hold fast to it."

The tree image is fundamental to many religions. Buddha received his enlightenment under a bow tree. Christianity, which is the worship of the death and the resurrection of a Christ, pictures their God hanging on a piece of a tree. It speaks of certainty. It is consistent and reassuring and providing reassurance of what a religion is all about. Our religion affirms the direction we must go and affirm the values we must follow.

Unfortunately, when I look at the tree as an historian I know that the sapling, the concept of the oneness of God, was not planted at Sinai. Monotheism emerged. It did not appear full blown. There is doubt that the Ten Commandments which we say are the symbol of all that Sinai represents was the text of that covenant, but even if it was it says only you shall have no other gods before me. God is the high God, the supreme God, but apparently not the only god. Pure monotheism, the concept of other gods, is not yet encouraged. Judaism is not absolute. The tree is not a sapling given down to Moses at Mt. Sinai, but something more and, therefore,, the image of the river which I'd like to suggest to you.

A river moves across time and space. Consider the Mississippi. The Mississippi

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begins in a spring or a lake in Minnesota. The origins in a rivulet come together to form a larger stream. It's not yet navigable, the water is potable, clean. As the river flows down the continent several thousand miles to the Gulf of Mexico, tributaries add their waters to it, evaporation water from the river, sometimes the river floods over its banks and draws topsoil into the river. Cities and farms draw water for irrigation and drink, and as the river becomes more navigable it becomes less a delight to the eye or to the . It often changes aspect: sometimes it's very broad, sometimes much narrower, sometimes it runs slowly, and sometimes it rushes between narrow cliffs. A river is an entity in constant motion, and there's no way of proving that any molecule of water which comes out of the spring up there in Minnesota reaches the Gulf of Mexico.

What makes the river a single entity? The current, the flow of the water, the movement from past into present.

What is the value of the river? Its value changes with its passage. Its life enhances, but we use it differently. Some swim in it. Others fish in it. Others draw water for the benefit of their community. Others simply rejoice in its beauty.

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Marxism, all the good and not so good religions of mankind are rivers. They flow. They change their aspect. They are different today than they were yesterday and they will be different tomorrow from what they are today. Each river is distinct, the Mississippi is not the Amazon. Each has its own identity, but all share certain characteristics. People use the river for drink, for food, for transport. Each river has somewhat the same purposes, but its own history and place and those whose lives are tied to that river derive some of their distinction from their relationship to it.

Our Judaism is not a new creation unrelated to the religion in Moses' day. Our Judaism is simply that portion of the river which is flowing through our lives.

Much has happened from Moses' day to ours. Jews have lived in various cultures and been affected by various teachings. Different levels of cultures have caused us to reconsider our traditions. New ideas have caused past formulations to be forgotten and new teachings have emerged. In the early days Judaism believed in the physical resurrection of the body. As we became less tied to physical imagery, we began to speak more of the immortality of the soul.

I'm suggesting that the image of the river can help us rethink Judaism in terms appropriate to an age which has been forced to accept Einstein's theory of relativity, thought as a process rather than a conclusion. In our thinking we must deal with change, perspective, with continuity and discontinuity, and learn to derive certainty in a different way. The tree image allowed people to say, my tree is consistent with the archetypical tree, my teachings are the true formulas. Up till recently religion has dealt in the truth. Judaism had the truth and if you didn't have the truth you were in error, in the darkness. The great missionary concerns of Christianity and Islam have been to bring people to the truths to have them eat the fruit of the tree of life. If they shed the darkness which enveloped their sight and accepted the tree, the truth, they would be saved.

This kind of certainty is denied to us in our world of relativity and indeterminacy. We must think in dynamic rather than static terms. Truth flows for us from consequences. By their deed shall ye judge them is our basic standard. Some religions encourage creativity. Others are recidivist. Some religions are healthy-minded. Some are perverse. Some religions are socially functional and some increasingly dysfunctional. It matters a great deal which tradition you'll belong to, but before you join any religious tradition you must feel that that tradition provides you with a certain perspective which is in fact useful, valid, healthy and worthwhile. So the question: where can we find certainty if there is no tree? If the heart of our tradition is not a solid and visible set of standards?

The answer, I think, is that not all rivers bring happiness and prosperity to the economy, to the cultures or its banks. The Nile created civilization. Amazon societies remained primitive. When we look back over the long history of Judaism, our river of faith, we discover that during most of its course Judaism has been able to stimulate creative and healthy ideas, ideas which supported a healthy society, ideas which others borrowed and claimed as their own.

Our part of the river has a far different look than Moses' or Hillel's. What allows us to claim that despite all of the change that has taken place there is only one river? How can I, as a rabbi, who is also an historian, stand before you and say, "this is the Torah which God gave us through Moses," and not feel a hypocrite? A river flows in one direction. From Sinai the current of our river has flowed in a single direction. The Mississippi is drawn on by the fall of the earth and by the movements of the earth. Judaism's current, its informing spirit, is the sense that behind all the apparent diversity of life there's a unity; behind all the confusion of philosophy and value there is something of ultimate value. Before our river appeared on earth there was only animism, the sense that the separate forces of nature each had an in-dwelling God within them. Judaism saw not in-dwelling gods but nature itself, and the one God, Creator of all. Nature became the world we live in rather than the abode of God's whom men understandably feared. Before Judaism came into being people believed that there were many gods, each representing a different force or a different attribute. Each group had a purpose, virtue of the attributes of its god. Life lacked balance. Judaism drew all of those forces together and called and denied that any one virtue was supreme God. And at a time when the peoples of the world believed that each race had been separately created and that their group descended of the gods and was different and superior to all others, Judaism came to the vision of humanity; "have we not all one Father, has not one God created us all?" At a

time when other religions declared shrine ceremony was ultimately significant, Judaism insisted what we did in the shrine and what we did in the in the workaday world were of equal concern to God. "Who has asked you of thy hands to trample my courts/bring no more vain oblations/the sacrifice of abomination unto Me/cease to do evil, learn to do well/relieve the oppressed". Our river binds the ethical and the spiritual, the religious and the moral.

Judaism, far more than any other religious culture I know, has reached out to try and understand that which is valid and good and useful in surrounding culture and add to its truths. During the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages we reached out both to the Islamic world and to the Christian world and transferred between these worlds the culture of the ancient world, ideas which helped both of the traditions to flourish.

Still today, we continue to speak of the oneness of mankind and the importance of faith in the one God which transcends, or should transcend, all other less universal loyalties. Still today, we understand that God demands of us goodness, care of family ties, involvement in community, the refinement of learning, and a steady concern with moral duty. We use different symbols today than our ancestors did. We wear different costumes; we don't feel as bound to traditions which are venerable; but the current flows on and so we struggle to adopt these attitudes in a time characterized by the breakdown of community, by confusion of values, by uncertainty of purpose, and by ideological fanaticism. In such an age our river works to remain open, to hold fast to the unifying principles of dignity, compassion, family, love, and moral concern. The river looks different, but the current flows on.

Psychologists describe for us the two distinct sides of the brain and their separate functions. One side of the brain, supposedly linear, fact-oriented, realistic, history-minded; the other side more artistic, and imaginative. The brain ties imagination and reason, and so if we apply ourselves it can tie history and religion. What is needed is an image which will allow us to think constructively

on how this binding can be effectually carried out.

Judaism has never been afraid of history. The Bible is in many ways a history book. Facts must be accepted for what they are, but at the same time, we need that sense of confirming authority. We can't do without it. How do we blend the glue and the caustic? By looking for the purpose behind history and by recognizing the dynamic in religion. We need to think of Judaism, Torah, as an emerging tradition, not an eternal tradition.

It's not an easy marriage to make, but there are really only two alternatives. One is to deny history. Many are doing so. They turn their backs on the contradictions which are inevitable in life and deny the facts as they come to life. They simply close their mind to certain realities and because they are doing so they tend to become rigid and fearful of mediocrity in most aspects of their lives. The other possibility is to accept our world's intellectual confusion that the old certainties have been shattered and to recognize that we cannot live paralyzed by doubt and, therefore, must accept the challenge of creating a new synthesis of faith and history, of doing the hard thinking which alone will make this possible. Let's work out the implications of a dynamic religious tradition and second the idea that Judaism's value to us lies not in some set of immutable truths which have existed unchanged since Sinai, but in Judaism's long record of being an ennobling, valuable, functional and healthy-minded source of inspiration. Judaism has over and over proved its virtue and it will continue to do so if we live with it as a dynamic, creative source of inspiration rather than a static truth.