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The Teachings of the Fathers, 1985.

THE TEACHING OF THE FATHERS

Daniel Jeremy Silver

May 5, 1985

A vivid line in the Talmud says that "as much as the calf wants to suckle so much more does the cow want to give suckle." The speaker was reflecting on the profession of teaching. In effect, he was saying: as much as a student wants to learn, so much more does the teacher want to teach. Teaching is a vocation, a compulsion.

As a teacher, I propose to use this moment, even though it partakes to a certain degree of ceremony, as an opportunity to teach. Specifically, I propose not only to deal with content but to do so in a relatively old-fashioned way. My predecessors knew nothing about audio-visual aids or laboratory experiments or overhead projectors or all the other paraphernalia which a modern classroom seems to require. They knew only books. Teaching was an investigation of texts. A student would stumble through a text. The teacher would correct the reading. The student would comment on the reading. The teacher would suggest as many different levels of meaning in that text as he was capable of doing and the student was capable of absorbing. Behind this educational program lay the assumption, an assumption with which we no longer agree, that all knowledge is to be found in the particular literature which our ancestors called Torah. Mastery of Torah, therefore, was the royal road to wisdom.

So much was this a matter of convention that when the art of printing was developed and books available to ordinary people, Jewish printers, almost without thought, began to print the frontispiece of a book in such a way that title, author and general subject matter were framed by a pair of gates. Above these gates they placed the phrase 'Zeh Sha'ar L'Adonai, ha-tzaddikim yavou bo.' "This is the gate of the Lord. The righteous shall enter into it." By entering through these gates, by turning from this title page into the body of the

book, the reader enters into the world of the Lord, a world which is holy, the world of truth and wisdom. The gates symbolized those of the Temple of Jerusalem. If you want to understand why some of us have such difficulty as we watch the end of the age of literacy, it is because we have been conditioned for generations to the importance and the value of what is contained in books.

I thought that today I would teach you some text, more precisely that we would examine briefly the text most often studied by our ancestors. Can you guess what text that would be?

The Bible? The Bible was read ceremonially and regularly translated into vernacular as part of the worship service, but if you look at how our ancestors carried on what we call today 'adult education' you would find that the Bible was not studied by itself but through the prism of later literature; commentaries, the Talmud and the like.

The Talmud? The Talmud certainly provided the framework of discipline and instruction in our communities, but only advanced students studied the Talmud. The Talmud is difficult. It is vast and written in a scholastic shorthand which takes years to master. Only those who would today be called graduate students really dug into the Talmud.

What about the prayer book? Today the prayer book is read by more Jews than any other volume. We handle the prayer book whenever we come to services, but when our ancestors came to the synagogue they were not met by a friendly group of ushers who handed them a prayer book. Our ancestors brought their prayer books with them to the synagogue. That is to say, they knew the service by heart. They had been reciting it since childhood. Until Gutenberg there were only manuscripts and manuscripts were not standardized. It would have made no sense to say: 'we will begin on page 16.'

The text most frequently studied by our ancestors was a short, 'the whole could be written out on both sides of two sheets of foolscap, five-

chapter long anthology of aphorisms which went by the name of Pirke A.ot or just Avot. Pirke Avot is generally translated Chapters of the Fathers. I prefer the translation Sentences of the Founders.

As far back as the fourth century, Pirke Avot was a regular subject of study by Jews. How do we know this? In the great Babylonian colelges there were regular Kallot, what we would call today alumni colleges. Between regular professional sessions the schools held Kallot during which well-known professors met with alumni and others to study a subject of general interest. Frequently, Pirke Avot was the chosen text. Many of those students went back to their communities wondering why this process couldn't be dupliated at the local levels. Pirke Avot is not too recondite a text for average people to manage so the practice began of reading Avot every Sabbath in the synagogue. This proved a bit much and the custom was stabilized, probably by the eighth or ninth century, into the practice of reading successive chapters of Avot on the Sabbaths between Passover and Shavuot. There are six Sabbaths in that period, so a sixth chapter of well-known rabbinic thoughts was added, and that is how the book appears today.

The five chapters of the original text seem to have coalesced into a form much like the one we know by the end of the third or the early fourth century. From some early date it became the custom to include this text as a separate section of the Mishnah even though it is in style and substance quite unlike anything else in that collection. The Mishnah's sixty-four other sections present law. Avot consists of didactic statements about education, virtue and philosophy. The Mishnah rarely cites the authority of a particular sage. Every quotation in The Sayings of the Fathers is ascribed to a particular authority. Yet, Avot cites the same authorities as those responsible for the Mish ah and uses the same Hebrew style.

Let's get to the text. If you open our prayer book to page 16, a teacher always makes sure that text is readily available, you will find a section entitled From Chapters of the Fathers. For reasons which I will try to explain and which I do not necessarily agree, the editors of Gates of Prayer excerpted portions of Avot rather than print the whole text. The older and less capacious Union Prayer Book makes available the entire text. Even a quick glance reveals that Avot consists of a string of aphorisms, each one attributed to a particular scholar. Some knowledge of our history makes clear that in the first two chapters the scholars are listed in chronological order. Most of the various ideas expressed are general and as appropriate to our day as they would have been two thousand years ago.

I become curious when I find a text which has been excerpted or edited. The question is why. Why begin with 1:2 rather than 1:1? Let me quote the missing opening paragraph:

Moses received the Torah on Mt. Sinai. He gave it to Joshua. Joshua gave it to the elders. The elders gave it to the men of the Great Assembly who used to say: be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and build a fence around the Torah.

To appreciate the importance ascribed to Avot by the first generations of those who created the Judaism which is considered orthodox today, we must weigh this particular opening statement. Whenever you find someone insisting on a chain of tradition, you can be sure that someone else has questioned his authority. The Pharisees and Tannaim who shaped rabbinic Judaism insisted that at Mt. Sinai Moses had received not only the Commandments which appear in the written Torah but a set of oral instructions and teachings, and that these teachings have been passed on by an unbroken chain of religious leaders with complete fidelity, Moses to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and so on down to the teachers of their day. It was on this basis of enlarged tradition that the rabbis claimed the authenticity of their definition of

Judaism and Jewish practice. Some called their approach innovation; they called it infidelity.

Rabbinic Judaism is not an extended shadow of Biblical Judaism. Biblical Judaism was centered on a shrine - the Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbinic Judaism was centered on the synagogue. Biblical Judaism empowered a dynastic priesthood. Rabbinic Judaism vested authority with the learned Torah scholar. The Torah was not read during Temple worship. The Torah was enshrined as the central symbol of Judaism by the rabbis and routinely chanted during public worship. Study became a religious virtue for rabbinic Jews. That had not been the case in the Biblical tradition. Rabbinic Judaism elaborated any number of practicing ways that were not universally required by the Biblical tradition. Many of the forms of Biblical Judaism: the Sabbath, the rules of purity, and the ramified dietary regulations were new departures. Those who affirmed these developments claimed that they had not innovated but simply confirmed God's original intention.

Why did the editors of our prayer book eliminate this historically crucial paragraph? I did not sit in on that committee meeting, but I would suggest that the answer relates to Reform's redefinition of tradition. Orthodox Judaism draws about itself the authority of being traditional by insisting on a two-level Sinai revelation; modern non-orthodox Judaism also insists that it is based on the authority of tradition, but, obviously, does not agree with the orthodox on what is tradition. For us Sinai is no longer a particular extended set of instructions unchanged since Sinai. We hold dear a dynamic, evolutionary concept of tradition. Tradition for us lies in the emergence in our past of certain seminal insights which have been elaborated over time but not fundamentally changed. I believe that the editors excluded this text which insists that the oral law as well as the written law had been given on Day One of Judaism because they did not want to reinforce a venerable but discredited

idea; further, that they printed a selection of texts with a deceptively straightforward translation to suggest that these ideas remain of value to us, that the tradition nevertheless has value. This translation turns rabbinic idiom into familiar English terms. Avodah becomes the general concept of worship, not specifically Jewish liturgy. To further suggest their definition of tradition, they took this process one step further by printing alongside their translation the Hebrew original. Even those who cannot read Hebrew associate Hebrew with the Biblical past. Here then is another kind of definition of tradition, one which emphasizes the continuing relevance of certain venerable ideas.

I would have preferred it had they chosen to print the whole text. I respect the dignity of any classic text. It should remain what it was intended to be. Moreover, choice is always arbitrary. To pick and choose is to leave out items of interest and value. Shammai is quoted as saying: "Love work, hate tyranny." Both ideas have merit. Work can be fulfilling. We shadow our lives when we think of work as a necessary evil. Freedom is essential. Without freedom, work is drudgery. But those items are somewhat self-evident. As a matter of fact, Shammai said three things, not two. "Love work, hate tyranny, and do not get too close to those in authority." I can see the editors saying to themselves: 'young Jews ought to be politically active.' Shammai lived under Roman tyranny and espoused political disengagement. We live in quite different times. We want our young to be politically active. We like to define social action as part of the mission of Israel. But then I thought of Bitberg and of the poor man who is President Reagan's advisor on Jewish affairs, and what he has been through these last weeks. I wondered if he would not have been a happier man if he had listened to Shammai and not gotten too close to those in authority. Those who join the White House staff end up trapped in a terrible dilemma. They are close to those in power and presumably can exert some influence, but they do not have the power and ultimately they must "shape up

or get out."

To print this text without its historic frame and to translate it in a way which removes the Jewish specificity of many of its terms is to fudge the book's original intent and to lead to some fundamental misunderstanding of its purpose. Take the first of the statements which our prayer book includes. "Simon the Just used to say: the world is sustained by three things, by Torah, by worship and by loving deeds." Simon was a priest-scholar who lived in the early part of the second century B.C.E. To read his comment, naked of content or specificity, is to see a pious statement which says something about the importance of Torah, public worship and good deeds. The Hebrew original, however, points to other levels of meaning. Its specific language insists that the cosmos, the world, is sustained by three specific Jewish activities: Torah, the specific instructions to Israel at Sinai; Avodah, the specific forms of Jewish religious life; and gemilut hasidim, acts which meet and fulfill the moral requirements of the Covenant. Hesed is the virtue which describes covenant loyalty. Each of these terms has not only some universal implications which leap to mind to those who knew only the translation and a more fundamentally specific content which focuses directly on the value and purpose of the Jewish tradition. Simon the Just lived at a time when Jews were active as a missionary community. "Out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Jews were eager that the world understand, appreciate and accept the value and the obligations of their teaching, Torah, which they believed to be superior to all others and which they felt would ultimately become humanity's inheritance.

One of the strikingly paradoxical features of our time and place is that at no time in the last 1800 years have more people converted to Judaism and joined the Jewish community, and yet, there is no sense within our community of

covenant loyalty. Each of these terms has not only some of the universal implication which leaps to mind to those who knew only the translation and a more fundamental specific context which focuses directly on the value and purpose of the Jewish tradition. Simon the Just lived at a time when Jews were active as a missionary community. "Out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Jews were eager that the world understand, appreciate and accept the value and the obligations of their teaching, Torah, which they believed to be superior to all others and which they felt would ultimately become humanity's inheritance.

One of the strikingly paradoxical features of our time and place is that at no time in the last 1800 years have more people converted to Judaism and joined the Jewish community; and yet, there is no sense within our community of reaching out and encouraging others to take up our ideas about God, family, human relationships, righteousness and the balance of religious life. Jews view the present conversion and intermarriage activities as the result of the openness of the American society rather than as the result of spiritual search or any missionary activity on our part. Yet, classic Judaism teaches a virtue and philosophy of value and insists that we ought to share Torah with the world. This was Simon the Just's view. The world will fall apart unless Torah, the Judaic outlook, becomes the dominant outlook and practice of the world at large. Now we can accept that theme or reject it, but when we study a text like this let us understand what is being said and what is being said is much more than a nice warm, simple statement about the value of religion, prayer and good deeds.

There are two texts in this collection which are worth reviewing as we close the school year and this year's cycle of lecture services. The first is "Do not separate yourself from the community." In our day of rampant individualism, as our youth go out into the world to find their way, the temptation is to believe that the "I" is all important while the "we" is always negotiable. Many leave without any thought of return. Many focus on a future which presumedly

will satisfy them and do not include in their plans concern for the well-being of others as well. Some think only in terms of career and do not bind into their career planning thoughts of family, civic responsibility and spiritual, emotional and esthetic satisfaction. Everything is focused on success, on promotion, opportunity in the narrowest sense of the world. Such living easily becomes one-dimensional. We cannot survive apart from society and society will not survive unless we concern ourselves with its problems and needs.

The second text reads: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." "In a place where people are not acting as human beings, be human." In a world where technology and mass living are increasingly depersonalizing life, this emphasis on being human is a critical one. Then, too, there are times when it is important to stand up against the conventional wisdom and enthusiasms. Conventional wisdom is of limited value, if not downright wrong. Mass enthusiasms are often mass delusions.

I have thought about this a great deal these last few weeks as we have gone through the heartache of watching the President prepare for his trip to Germany. Many Germans again speak and act as if there were only a handful of Nazis. Why did the Nazis succeed? Because the majority of Germans allowed them to succeed. If they were ideologically organized, they did nothing about their concerns. Fe stood up and said no. Too many professors did not oppose the decision to force faculty Jews to resign. Too few industrialists said, "I won't use slave labor. That isn't the way civilized communities operate." Too few ministers said, 'We worship God as the father of all. There are no inferior races.'

Whenever I am at a service and I want to concentrate my thoughts on some subject of value, I turn to sentences of the founders. It is in the prayer book. No rabbi will object if you do a little of this kind of browsing during

the worship service. As I do, I begin to think of tradition and how we now define this term. The past speaks to us and through us but does not control us. Our teacher still teach, but students can and do sometimes disagree. I think a good bit about tradition and I want this past to speak to me directly. I don't want others reshaping it in their own image.



From the desk of—

RABBI DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

אני מודיע לך כי

התפילה נערכה

ביום זה

בשם ה' אלהינו



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to attend.

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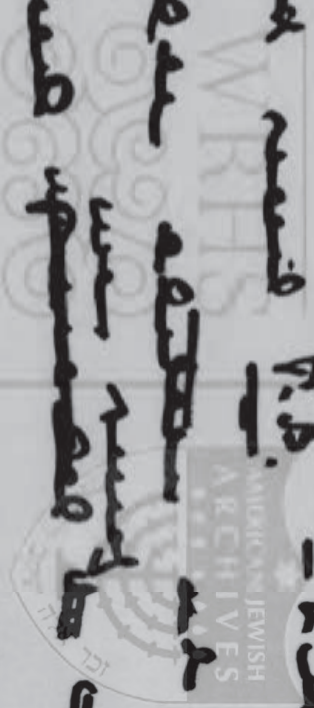
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