

THE MESSAGE OF JUDAISM TO
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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DANAN maintained that before we can act as accurate interpreters of the content of a religion, we must at one time have believed in it. If we do not believe in a religion we cannot rightly understand it.* Commendably,

the committee on program have acted upon this principle; and though I should have much preferred it that they had invited another to speak in my stead, I wish to thank them for having asked a Jew to present the cause of Judaism. First, because it seems as if no years of study can give the non-Jew that ingrained familiarity with Jewish doctrines, institutions, and viewpoints which insensibly comes to those who have been born and bred in the faith; secondly,

*International Journal of Ethics, October, 1902, p. 102.

because with the best of intentions, no Gentile can share to the fullest extent in those sentiments which somehow have power to clarify the intelligence and to promote truer estimates of Jewish belief and conduct than can be achieved by the judgment alone; and, thirdly, because, for some reason or other, the world persists in misunderstanding the Jew, misinterpreting his religion and confusing his hopes. One of the most curious phases of current thought in the religious world is the outlandish conception of Jews and Judaism which still possesses the minds of multitudes of men and women, otherwise intelligent and well informed. Day after day Judaism is described, both in speech and books, in a manner which would lead any one who knew not otherwise to discredit the fact that Jews had been prominently before the world for something like four thousand years. By many they seem to be thought of as though they possessed possibilities which had never been tested, as though they were some pre-historic relic which had been suddenly unearthed and placed on the shelf of a dusty museum to be peered at by curiosity-seekers and to set in action the brains of antiquaries and learned societies bent upon discovering what kind of creatures those might have been which in the dim distant past lived and moved and had their

being somewhere in far-off Asia. Even those who acknowledge that Judaism was once a religion of potency now persistently reiterate that its work is finished and has been finished for nineteen centuries. They picture the Jews as an example of the most unwarrantable stiff-neckedness, in that they will not be effaced; and they bear the religion of the Jews all kinds of grudge, because it stubbornly refuses to be done with. They will not acknowledge, nor will they try to understand, that it is to-day a living, virile force.* And since even such distinguished contemporaries as Delitzsch, Harnack, Bousset, and Houston Chamberlain have shown, in recent writings, that they are unable or unwilling to do justice to Judaism, it certainly seems advisable that one who is himself a Jew should assert what his religion is and is not; what are its eternal and what its temporal elements; what is of greater and what of minor import.

Of course I make the same claim for Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, any and every religious denomination. Devotees, not outsiders, should declare where the doctrinal and ethical emphasis is to be put; and I ask this privilege for Judaism, in particular, because being the growth of thousands of years and countless minds having contributed to its evolution, none

* Cf. Jewish Chronicle, October 30, 1903, p. 23.

ought to be better qualified than the modern Jew himself to establish the *modus vivendi* between this necessarily heterogeneous product and the great intellectual and social movements of the age.

Every attempt to adapt a religion to a new environment of necessity means selection; and, assuredly, the modern Jew, in a modern environment, has the same right to declare that his religion should not be defined in terms of distinctiveness in dress, custom, diet, ceremony, habit, language, abode, that Hillel, who preceded Jesus by some seventy years, had when he replied to the heathen who asked him for a concise summary of his religion, "What is hateful to thee, do to none; this is the law, all else is commentary." We Jews of to-day have the same right and duty to select what are for us the fundamental teachings of our religion that the Talmudic Sage, Ben Azzai, who lived in the beginning of the second century, had when he maintained that "the most fundamental teaching of Judaism is the brotherhood of man"; or that Rabbi Akiba, his contemporary, had, when he declared that "Love thy neighbor as thyself is the very quintessence of Jewish teaching"; or that Rabbi Simlai, of the third century had, who was of the opinion that "The righteous man liveth by his faithfulness," is the "epitome of all the commandments."

The student of Jewish literature and history experiences no difficulty in tracing these processes of elimination and emphasis. Now, the records show that animal sacrifices and various symbols, ceremonies, laws, doctrines, have become obsolete and antiquated; now, it is an old point of view or concept that is being antagonized by a new one; and now, it is a new combination of circumstances and conditions of such imperative importance as to demand either a new emphasis and a new application, or the restatement of an old duty or doctrine.

Also religion must be progressive; and, would it be a vital force in the lives of men, it must change its outward manifestations with the process of the suns; wherefore, Judaism to-day is no more the identical Judaism of the Old Testament than modern Christianity is identical with the Christianity of the New Testament, than the Republic of Roosevelt is identical with the Republic of Washington and Adams.

Every age has its own problems and perplexities to meet; and, since Israel has always enjoyed intellectual freedom and has never been shackled by a hard and fixed creed, the Jew has been able to meet the new demands of each age and the new spirit of the times, without too much friction with outer authorities or too much opposition from within. Moses, for example, antagonized Semitic heathenism. The

Prophets laid the largest stress on the holiness of God and the implication that He can be most truly and acceptably worshiped by a life of holiness and service. The authors of Ruth and Jonah emphasized the universalistic side of their religion over against the exclusiveness of Ezra and Nehemiah. Deutero-Isaiah pitted his monotheism against Persian dualism, and his conception of the "Servant of God" against the perplexity and despair of the exiles. The Pharisees opposed Sadducean sacerdotalism by making of every house a temple, of every table an altar, of every man a priest, and of every woman a priestess. The Rabbis antagonized other-worldliness with the sanctification of every day and every hour, every thought and every act of this life, imparting a religious dignity even to eating and drinking, to washing and dressing. Maimonides, in the Middle Ages, combatted the heresies of his day with his own construction of his religion, upon an Aristotelian mold. And in the same manner, and with the same justification, the modern Jew selects from the storehouse of his venerable religion what best meets the spiritual needs of his age, best combats the moral evils of his day, best answers his intellectual, social, and moral cravings and requirements.

Israel's message to the twentieth century will then be his emphatic enunciation of

those Jewish doctrines, precepts, and practices which, according to his conception of the cardinal teachings of his religion and ethics, as illustrated and crystallized in Jewish history, literature, and life, are most demanded by the exigencies of the period.

What are these exigencies? It is assuredly not expected that I speak for the whole century. Who dare prophesy to-day what the morrow will bring forth—how much less, what the next decade will yield? What a mighty difference between the beginning and the end of the nineteenth century—and who could have foretold it? I will, therefore, venture to speak only for our day and from my own point of view, having no authority to speak for any one but myself.

Now, what is the most striking spiritual condition that confronts us? Religious chaos—a crumbling of creeds beneath the bombardment of science and criticism, and yet, an irresistible groping after some faith to lean on.

Edward Everett Hale recently wrote that “in less than a generation, the American people have become entirely indifferent to the formal creeds of the churches”; and indeed, it is everywhere apparent that we are facing a host of unchurched, a feebler longing for public worship, more pessimism, more materialism, a wider chasm between religion and life.

And what is Israel's message? The old, old watchword: "The Lord is our God, the Lord is One," the conception of the Divine Unity which distinguished the religion of ancient Israel from that of the surrounding nations, and which has ever been regarded as the one distinctive element of Judaism, the very quintessence of the Jewish creed, the truth for which the Jew feels himself bound to make the supreme sacrifice of life, the truth to which he has borne witness, at the stake and on the rack, and for which he has suffered the protracted torture of degradation, insult, and exile.

The one God—this is his rational gift to the many now floundering around for some faith to rest on. This is his answer to the agnostic: we do know that God is. This is his protest against pessimism: in the divine alchemy also evil is transmuted into good. This is his emphatic protest against materialism: order, law, life, to which the universe so abundantly testifies, are only possible through the operation of mind—of God; while all that we know of the physical universe bears witness that Force is essentially unintelligent, that if the great energies of nature were left to riot unrestrained we should have not order, as now, but confusion, not a cosmos but chaos.

"What," asks John Fiske, "is the lesson—taught alike by the correlation of forces, by spectrum analysis, by the revelations of

chemistry as to the subtle behavior of molecules inaccessible to the eye of sense, by the astronomy that is beginning to sketch the physical history of countless suns in the firmament, by the palæontology which is slowly unraveling the wonders of past life upon the earth through millions of ages—What is the grand lesson that is taught by all this? It is the lesson of the unity of nature.’’* And the Jew adds: if unity is a symbol of the universe, the Power that creates and controls it must needs be One—the first teaching conveyed to the Jewish child at its mother’s knee, the last utterance of the Jew in the solemn hour of life’s cessation.

Now, Judaism not only teaches monotheism, but as you well know, its most characteristic distinction is that its monotheism is ethical; and this implies that, since God is holy, man should be holy; and whatever man is and has is given him by God, not for his selfish use, but in stewardship for his fellow-men; all our talents and gifts impose a responsibility for larger service; possession entails duty; the strong owe the weak protection; charity (*Z’daka*) is that which by right and justice belongs to the less fortunate.

Judaism thus consecrates man the steward of his life, his talent, his treasure, and makes it his duty to enlarge these gifts,

* Through Nature to God, p. 23.

without being unjust to any one, in order that he may enlarge his service to humanity; wherefore, wealth is not immoral, nor poverty moral, nor other-worldliness especially praiseworthy.

Moreover, Judaism, lifting man to the dignity of God's image, and considering "Son of God" the equal distinction of every child born into the world, looks upon every human being as a person and not a thing, and deems every economic doctrine and practice unethical which ignores or defies this distinction between men and things. Judaism thus teaches distinctively a social ethics.*

And now we are ready to ask, What is the second condition confronting us to-day? Social disorder. Society is trembling at the brink of a volcano.

What is modern society? It has been well answered: "A horde of wolves, each one trying to outstrip the other, and all fighting for the scant booty. If one of the pack can snatch the bone away from his greedy rival, he rejoices in his success, all the more, since it implies that another has failed. And those that have failed, rankled by envy, or feeling that they had no fair chance, are rising and clamoring for their share of the plunder. You are unwilling! We shall show you that a million of fists have more power than a million of gold

* Cf. Jewish Encyclopedia, art. "Ethics," vol. v., p. 258.

dollars!" Is not this the ominous threat? Oh, look about! What mean these labor troubles, these strikes and lockouts? Is hatred silenced? Has the exploitation of man by man disappeared? Do men no longer join house to house and field to field? Does he that plants the vine eat the fruit thereof? Do we never hear of corporate dishonesty, of frenzied finance? Is man his brother's keeper? Is man brother to man? Is the sword sheathed, the lance turned into the pruning-hook?

Indeed, the social question is the question of the day. And what is Israel's message? As I have already intimated: individual and social righteousness. Listen:

"Have we not all one Father, has not one God created us all?"

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

"Holy shall ye be because I, the Lord your God, am holy."

"Walk before Me and be thou perfect."

"He hath told thee, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee; nothing but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God."

"Lord, who shall sojourn in the tabernacle, who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly and worketh righteousness and speaketh the truth in his heart."

"And they shall beat their swords into

plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

"Not by might, nor by strength, but by my spirit, saith the Lord."

"Justice, Justice shalt thou pursue."

"The holy God is sanctified in the eyes of men by the doing of Justice."

"Cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow."

"Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no room."

"Let Justice flow like water, righteousness like a mighty stream."

In other words, Judaism teaches:

If God is one, humanity is one.

If God is holy, man must be holy.

If God is just, man must be just, and work in harmony with the moral power that maketh for righteousness.

If God is love, man must deal with man in love and make of this earth a paradise, a kingdom of God, a fit habitation for man who is the image of God. Men should be brothers, not in name, but in reality. Brother should weave flowers into the life of the brother who is hedged in by thorns. Humanity should be what the stars above are—a family—each one circling in a given orbit with its own eccentricity, and, though each one is for itself, all being for all, to-

gether they form the beauty and create the harmony which excite universal admiration.

Let faith in the one God be the root of life; let service, justice, love, be the fruit. This, I think, is Judaism's message to our century. It also spells the Jew's mission. For, the Jew has been chosen, marvelously preserved and guided, wonderfully disciplined by the law, by ceremony, and by suffering to exemplify this message unto the nations of the world.

This election, therefore, does not imply higher prerogatives; rather heavier burdens, more complete self-renunciation. It means that, whatever the risk, the Jew must prove his life by that what he claims with his lips is possible of realization; that man can be brother to man; that the highest motive of human life can be duty and not gold, not position, not power, not success.

Whatever others may do, whether others are quick or slow to choose the right, Jews must, as the privilege of their birth, exemplify the higher life in their public morality, in their social institutions, in their private careers, in the very secrecy of the closet. Jews must so live that, through them, God's name will be sanctified; and, through their influence, the families of the earth will be blessed. For this, must Israel have the special discipline of ceremonies: to learn self-control. For this, must Israel suffer, be "the Christ of the nations," as

Zangwill expressed it. For this, must Israel persist in living, in very spite of his enemies.

Greece might die, because the Greek marbles still exist to inspire us. But the Jew must live, because "ethics requires organized communal life to prove its contentions." This, by divine Providence, is Israel's special task and mission—not for self, but for mankind; not for the first, but for the twentieth, the thirtieth century—until the time shall come when God's kingdom will be over all the earth and every man will say: Hear, brother, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.