

Sermon One- Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov
the son of

IN Israel ben Eliezer, known to the world as the BA'AL SHEM TOV, "The Master of the Good Name", or the BESHT, a name formed from the Hebrew initial of the phrase Baal Shem Tov, was apparently born in Poland near Wallachia around 1700. The condition of the Jewish community in eastern Europe had long been miserable. Two conditions dominated the mood of Jews and Judaism in this period. First of all, the Jews were not permitted to shape their environment. They could not hold positions in the government, or, naturally in the church, and they were unable to hold land. Consequently, the Jewish community was acted upon, it did not act upon its environment. Jews had to wait for whatsoever weather the political and economic barons sought to inflict upon them. As with respect to weather, the Jews could talk about the church and the nobles, but they could do nothing about them.

The second fact which dominated the Jewish community was its poverty. For the mass of Jews, the next meal was a gift of God, a miracle in itself. Add to poverty and to political uncertainty, the sword of the occasional pogrom, and one begins to understand why it was difficult for the Jew of this period to maintain an optimistic attitude toward life.

No wonder then that many Jews sought solutions to their problems outside the realm of normative Judaism. From about 1660 to 1700, Europe was gripped by a Messianic movement which promised sudden and miraculous salvation to the Jew. Many sober-minded and learned Rabbis supported the messianic claims of Sabbatai Zvi. Jews were ready to lean upon anything that promised a change for the better. Unfortunately Sabbatai Zvi was an imposter. To save his life, he converted to Islam, throwing his followers and the entire European Jewish community into a state of confusion.

During the lifetime of the Baal Shem Tov, from 1700-1760, there were four sects, at least, within Judaism, each promising salvation to the Jew. 1) The Talmudists, of course, claimed to speak in the name of traditional or normative Judaism. Unfortunately, however, unlike the authors of the Talmud, they did not create new law in order to meet the changed needs of their surroundings. Since, there was so little the Jew could do to change or improve his position in Eastern Europe, the talmudists turned to the study of the law, lishah, for its own sake. To be a good Jew, they said, and to merit the world to come, you must be an intense student of the Talmud. But not many of the Jews could afford to be students. Even young children had to work to help put a slice of bread on the table. Consequently, Talmudic learning became more concentrated in the hands of the relatively well to do, but it offered no answers to the real problems of the masses.

Two of the other sects of which we shall speak were definitely anti-talmudist. 2) The Caballists of the school of Luria held that ~~this~~ the Talmud was not the authoritative source of for the Jewish community. That source, they held, was the Zohar, and in particular the Zohar as interpreted by Luria, their teacher. Although Isaac ben Solomon Ashenazi Luria (Ari) had died in 1572, he still had many followers in the 18th century who emphasized not this world but the world to come, and not the fulfillment of bodily needs, but the denial of those needs in order that man's higher spirit might emerge. In brief, the Caballists were ascetics who believed that they served God by fasting and weeping as they prayed. To the Caballist this world was a gloomy place from which the soul must free itself.

A second anti-talmudic sect ~~was~~ in the 18th century was the Frankists. The Frankists were followers of a Jew named Joseph Frank who rejected the Talmud as the authoritative source for the Jewish community and again emphasized the importance of the Zohar. Frank, like Paul before him, claimed that all of the laws of Judaism were suspended. Frank ~~at first taught that~~ ~~his personal authority~~ came to teach that he received direct revelations from Heavens, and when prodded by the Talmudists, he led his followers into conversion to Christianity, claiming that this was a necessary transition to the ultimate "Messianic Religion". In the city of Lemberg alone in 1759, over 500 followers of Frank were baptized.

~~The fourth sect~~ The Baal Shem Tov, of whom we want to speak tonight was the leader of a fourth sect which came to be called the Hasidim. The Besht was not an anti-talmudist. He did not call for the abrogation of the authority of the Talmud, but he did teach that the talmudists were not attempting to meet the needs of the masses, and consequently he sought religious virtues along other than Talmudic paths. While the Besht made a radical departure from Talmudic teaching, he nonetheless was a vigorous opponent of the Luria Cabalists and the Frankists. In a few moments we shall see that in many ways the Baal Shem Tov, perhaps alone in his time, emphasized the ^{basic} essential perspective of Judaism, while the other sects, including the Talmudist, denied them.

The prime purpose of religious, taught the Besht, was to bring man to God, but in doing this, he said, man's needs as a human being must be answered. The religion which was beyond the reach of the average man, he thought, was no religion at all. Often he criticized those who admonished the peasants because they were presumably sinners. Once the Besht said to an admonishing preacher, "you have had nothing to do with the people around you, how should you know what sinning is!" The Besht felt that the Talmudists had failed the people by insisting that salvation could be achieved only through talmudic learning. Also, he felt that the Talmudists had become pessimists by postponing human happiness to the world to come. To surrender this world, he felt, was not only unfair to the people, but untrue to Judaism. The Luria Cabalists seemed to think the answer to the unpleasantness of the world was to renounce this world and bodily desires. The Frankists thought they would hasten the coming of the miraculous Messiah by becoming Christians. The Talmudists found escape in preoccupation with learning completely unrelated to the real problems of life. The Baal Shem Tov was a creature of his age in many ways, he too reflected the understanding on the part of the Jews that they could not shape their governmental environment, but almost alone of all the great teachers, he refused to surrender to despair. The Jewish view, he knew, had to be life affirming; it had to be this worldly; it had to promise hope, ~~even when no hope for the present.~~

Alone of the teachers of his time, the Besht taught that change can come to the world, that change can come to the Jew. If we cannot shape the world outside of us, he thought, we can at least change the vast universe within us. Man can change inwardly, he taught. True fulfillment, he said, comes ~~not~~ by the realization of the divine which is in each human being irrespective of his learning or birth. Hasidism was the optimistic movement of its time. It taught that the world could be a beautiful place in which to live because God was in all things, therefore all things, even the lowest of things is capable of change and growth. The only problem, said he, is that people refuse to recognize the possibility for change. Thus the world becomes dark and gloomy. The Besht presented this idea through this parable. "Once a fiddler played so sweetly that all who heard him began to dance. Then a deaf man who could not hear the music came

3/ along. The deaf man saw the dancers lurching excitedly about. He concluded that all of the dancers were madmen. ". This, said the Besht, is our problem. Too many of us cannot hear the music, the divine music that plays forever in all things.

The Luria Caballists and the Frankists taught that God acted in the world by means of sudden miracles. Not so the Besht. Once when a scoffer came to the Besht he said, "My scientific calculations show that God did not divide the Red Sea for Moses. Because of certain conditions in the sea, it had to divide at that very moment. " The Baal Shem answered, "Don't you know that God created nature?...That is the great miracle". To the Master of the Good Name, the consistent miracles of nature were the greatest proof of God's goodness.

The Caballists were weighted down with the consciousness of man's sin. That is why the world is so evil, they taught, and that is why we must surrender this world. The Talmudists on the other hand taught a stern ~~unrelenting~~ justice as defined in narrow categories. The Baal Shem taught, "no man can be so low that he can not reach upward to God" Since God is in all things, said the Besht, every man is always capable of change and redemption.

While the Talmudists offered no remedy to the evils of the present world, the Besht taught the relative insignificance of the world to come. Once he used the miraculous powers he was thought to have in order to aid a childless couple. According to the legend, the Besht pronounced the divine name which was secretly known to him. The couple was thereby assured of their child, but immediately a voice called from heaven and cried, "For this you shall lose your place in the world to come". Instead of sorrowing, the Besht joyfully proclaimed, " Blessed Be Thou, O Lord, for Thy mercy! Now, indeed, can I serve thee out of pure love, since I may not expect reward in the future world; ". Obviously, the parable is intended to show the Besht's disapproval of the emphasis on the world to come, and the concomitant neglect of this world.

While the Talmudists taught that one could approach God only by studying the laws of the Talmud, the Besht taught that each man had to come to God by his unique personal experience. He once said, " We do not pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac , and Jacob. We pray to the God of Abrahah, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. , for Isaac and Jacob did not base their work on the searching and service of Abraham; they themselves searched for the unity of the Maker and his service. " Consequently, the Besht taught that the Talmudic study is not the best approach to God, for the student must perforce follow the precise path which others have set for him. He once said, "God does not want us to use the key to the door of Heaven. He wants us to use an axe to knock the door down ourselves. " In other words, the Besht felt that a formula can always be memorized , but a deeply felt yearning is far more preferable to the mastering of many formulae.

Similarly, the Baal Shem Tov felt that the intricate studies of the Talmudists kept them from the true service of the people. Once a man was lauding a great scholar, " I envy him his scholarship, " Said the Baal Shem, " But what am I to do? I have no time to study because I have to serve my Maker".

The Talmudists gloried in the wisdom of the past; the Caballists spoke of the glories of the future; the Besht alone spoke of the glories of the present. That is why he spoke of the importance of the lowly, the importance of justice tempered by mercy; and the importance of joy. Religion not through fear, he said, but religion through ^{love} joy. The way to become joyous, he taught, is ~~to~~ through prayer. For through prayer we reach out beyond our-selves, beyond the gloom of the present, to that which is purest joy, the fulfillment of the divine which is in each of us. We begin, said the Besht, with D'vay-kut, clinging to god, we end with het-la-havut, enflamed enthusaism for all that lives. The religious man, said the Besht, grows with each prayerful encounter with the divine. The divine within him evolves as he relates to the divine outside of him. Said the Master, "The ideal of man is to be a revelation himself, clearly to recognize ~~in~~ himself as a manifestation of God". How democratic this doctrine is in the 18th century when ~~all~~ of ~~the~~ the Eastern Europe Christianity and much of Judaism spoke of the sinfulness and impossibility of man.

True enough our Bible tells us that man is made in the image of God, but the world, including the Jewish world had long forgotten this. It was men like the Baal shem Tov who resurrected this concept. The movement he founded swept all of Eastern Europe, and the vigor of his doctrines, soon penetrated even the thinking of the talmudists. The Optimism of the authors of Genesis and the Prophets was restored to Judaism by those who taught in the spirit of the Ball Shem. He would be worth remembering, if he had done nothing more than remind us that this world was created in such a way that it was intended to be for us and not against us.

^{But} The Baal Shem shall be ^{also} remembered as one of the foremost advocates of a joyful Judaism, ~~in which~~ through which the basic needs of man for food and bodily love are not degraded but raised to the ^{status} stature of things potentially divine. Let each man now look at his neighbor and think ~~in his~~ as the Besht taught, "~~for a part of God is~~"

a part of God is in each of us. As we help each other with love and joy, God will be revealed in us".

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