

## "RABBI, WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH?"

Sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, Temple Beth Am, 1960

The most difficult and the most frequent of all questions put to a Rabbi is that dealing with the hereafter. In a sense, Rabbis are constantly required to speak on this subject. Most people do not concern themselves too much with the world to come, but as they get older, or when they are seriously ill, they ask the inevitable question, "Rabbi, what happens after death?". The Orthodox Rabbis in the Europe of several generations past would usually have a ready answer for this question. They would say, "The spirits of the righteous go to the garden, to Paradise. At God's appointed time, these spirits will be reunited with the body, and the righteous shall be resurrected and live in a prosperous and peaceful Israel". So wide-spread was the traditional belief in the survival of the spirit that the kaddish prayer, originally used to mark the end of a period of study in the Yeshivas, was applied to assure the fact that the soul of a departed parent would ascend to heaven. It was held that for almost a year, the soul hung in limbo or suspension while the deeds of the departed were weighed by a heavenly tribunal. If the sons said their kaddish religiously, the soul would be purged of its sins, and, at its appointed time, would enter paradise.

Reform Jews have a much more difficult time answering questions about the hereafter, for we pretend to be rationalists, and we have discarded much of the folklore about heaven and hell and the soul hanging suspended in limbo. For us, the kaddish is a prayer of dedication for the living, an affirmation of the goodness of life; it has no relations to the struggle of a soul to obtain admittance into heaven. For us, there is no resurrection of the body. We like to be scientific, and so, it is not easy for us to answer the question, "What happens after death?".

With the advance of modern science, Orthodoxy, too, has shed some of the beliefs that were part of its teachings in Europe. Discoveries about outer space have made it difficult to teach that there is a heaven above us, for we now know that there is no "above", and no "up", and as the world turns, what is above us at one moment is below us the next. Modern medicine has taught us certain things about the preservation and decay of the body, and it has become more difficult to believe in the resurrection of the body. In spite of the confidence and absolute certainty with which a Catholic Priest may describe what awaits the faithful Catholic in the beyond, a Christian thinker like the Rev. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr had stated, "Every effort to describe the details of fulfillment and to give plans and specifications of the heavenly city leads to absurdity". In other words, this noted Protestant theologian, who believed deeply in the hereafter, nevertheless taught the futility of anyone attempting to describe in detail what happens in the beyond.

Following this reasoning, it would be possible for me to say to you, "I don't know what happens after death, and nobody really knows what happens!" This would be a true statement, yet it would not prevent human beings by the millions from asking, "What happens after death; is there a hereafter!" Moses Mendelssohn, who is considered by many as the founder of Reform Judaism, wrote in the 18th century, in his work, "Phaedon", "Deprived of



the hope for immortality, man..is the most wretched being on earth". This is particularly true when people grow older or when they are seriously ill. Suffering people, those who stare death in the face, are not satisfied with Heinrich Heine's statement, "It must require an inordinate share of vanity and presumption, after enjoying so much that is good and beautiful on earth, to ask the Lord for immortality in addition to it all". The problem, however, is that life is frequently not good and beautiful on earth. Heine's answer may find supporters among those to whom this life has been kind and bountiful. But what kind of answer is it to the six million Jews who were murdered by Hitler? And what kind of answer is it to the teen-ager with cancer? Mankind will forever presumptuously ask the question about the hereafter, for man lives not merely on past memories and present pleasures, he lives in terms of future expectations, and the knowledge of a blank future can undermine his appreciation of the present.

The Union Prayer-Book from which we read tonight recognizes this need of man and expresses its faith in some kind of hereafter by saying, "Our life is more than a watch in the night; more than yesterday when it is past, for Thou dost establish the work of Thy hands". In this context, man is the "work of eternal midnight of the tomb". Yes, Reform Judaism believes in the on-goingness of life, but nowhere does it pretend to interpret what happens after death. It does not speak of "gan eden", a Paradise; it does not conceive of a physical heaven or hell; it does not speak of angels flapping their wings; but it does say, "The spirit born of Thy spirit returns unto Thee".

In the end, the Reform view of the hereafter, is rooted in a belief in an Eternal Being in whom we all have our source and to whom we return. Some non-Jews, not all, speak of the resurrection in a most specific way. They teach that we shall be revived in our self-same bodies, with our self-same personalities, with our same tongues, and ears, and they teach that we shall embrace our loved ones who shall be re-created in their sameness. In other words, for them, the hereafter is an eternal existence without cares and the chores of this world; a continuing life without suffering and struggle. Ah, how idealized and how perfect is this dream! The Koran, the Mohammedan sacred book, speaks of heaven in a masculine way. It is a place, where, among other things, the male can have his pick of luscious females. And the Buddhist thinks of the hereafter in terms of the release from suffering and sin, the release of pure spirit from a sad and sinful body. Alas, we Reform Jews are not privileged to have so much certainty in our thoughts of the hereafter, for we feel guilty when we describe heaven in terms of our childhood desires, and we feel the need to project ideas that are consistent with the scientific teaching.

The sub-question remains, is it possible to be scientific in one's approach and still believe in the hereafter? Most scientists answer, "no", but there are many notable exceptions. One of them, the late Arthur Compton, insisted that since immortality is a non-physical question, science can neither prove nor disprove this possibility. Compton makes the point that there is real immortality in the biological sense. For example, he contends that, "The biological center of life is the germ cell, and this, with divisions and subdivisions, grows and lives forever. What the fruit of the apple is to the seed, the body of man is to his germ cell. The apple may decay, but the seed grows into a new tree, which flowers and begets new seeds. The fruit of the tree



will die, but there is eternal continuity of life in the cells which develop from seed to tree to flower to seed, over and over again. IS IT BECAUSE WE CONCENTRATE OUR ATTENTION UPON THE TREE OR THE FRUIT THAT WE SAY THE END OF LIFE IS DEATH? These are merely the outer wrappings, the hull which surrounds the living germ. "Biologically speaking," he concludes, "life, whether it be of an apple seed or of the germ cells of man, is essentially continuous and eternal".

But this eternity of beginnings did not satisfy a religionist like Bishop McConnell who has argued, "If men are the fairest fruit earth can produce, we can hardly think..(of God)..as allowing that fruit to fall to the ground and rot". This is the theme of our prayer-book when it says to God, "Thou does establish the work of thy hands". To religionists, it would be odd of God to build up a complex mechanism such as man and then let it waste away to utter nothingness. The scientist, Compton came to a similar conclusion. He contends that the whole evolutionary process seems to be working towards the making of persons with free intelligence capable of glimpsing God's purpose in nature and of sharing that purpose. Further, he says, it takes a whole lifetime to build the character of a noble man. The exercise and discipline of youth, the struggles and failures and successes, the pains and pleasures of maturity, the loneliness and tranquility of age--these make up the fire through which man must pass to bring out the pure gold of his soul.

Compton asks, "Having been thus perfected what shall nature do with man? Annihilate him? What infinite waste!" Compton, of course, discourages a belief in the resurrection of the body, but he argues that it could be possible for consciousness to survive. He would say that each of us is fed by and each of us feeds the Great Mind, and that the bond between our consciousness and that of God is not severed by the death of the body. Apparently, he means what the Prayer Book means when it says, "The spirit, born of They spirit, returns to Thee".

It is difficult for us to describe specifically what this phrase means. Perhaps an incident which occurred to me will give us a symbolic understanding of its implications. When I was in the army in World War 11, I hitch-hiked a ride from Camp Shalby, Mississippi, to a near-by-town. When I got into the car which stopped for me, I was delighted to hear



some excellent symphonic music which was emanating from the car radio. It has been long months since I had enjoyed the pleasure of a symphonic program, so I listened in rapt attention for sometime. Suddenly, I became aware of the fact that the car was travelling at a very high speed and the driver was somewhat reckless. I was forced to anticipate the possibility that we would have an accident. Oddly enough, I did not think of any injury that might happen to myself. I thought, instead, of the great tragedy that would happen if the brilliant concert were suddenly ended. I thought how unjust it would be for this car radio to be smashed and this ethereal music to be stifled. But then, I was comforted by the perception that even though this radio were destroyed, the music would continue to play. Other radio sets would still serve as receivers and so long as there was a central radio station which played on, there would be no such thing as death for the music. If we take the central radio station as our symbol for God, and the music as the symbol for our Spirit or Soul, then we have in this illustration an insight into what immortality might be. Of course, a human being is not just a receiving set. He also sends out music of his own, and he refines and selects the music that he receives. On the other hand, we do not suggest that God is just a sending station which is not sensitive to the reactions of the receivers and users of the Spirit. Every symbol has its limitations, but imperfect as it may be, this comparison does teach that there is the strong possibility of a man-God relationship of which immortality is a part.

We shall not solve the question of the hereafter this evening; and we need not take ourselves especially to task for failing to do so, for this is a question which has taxed the best minds for ages. We might conclude on the basis of reasonable evidence by many reasonable men that scientifically, it is impossible to believe in the resurrection of the body, but it is not impossible to believe in some kind of on-going-ness of consciousness in which we have a share even if our mind does not survive as an independent unit with an appropriate name and tag. We might further say that we can accept the notion of the eternity of life as evidenced in the germ cell and the seed, so that physically a part of us, the core of us the parent and child of us, never dies.



Now let us consider for a brief moment, the nature of the world to come, if it be there for us. Is it indeed a paradise where people sit around smoking-without fear of lung cancer, wiling away the millions of years without coercion of labor? If there were a world behind, to be meaningful it would have to be an existence in which we were active, in which we did not suffer the worst of all tragedies, eternal boredom. There would have to be things to do there, and I rather think that if we were expected to do things, it would be in terms of our noblest character. In short, we would have to be just and charitable and patient and understanding. I would then conclude that to prepare best for this world to come, we had better rehearse our noble character here in this world. We had better become expert at the kind of activity which surely will be expected of us in that higher and nobler realm.

If we act nobly on earth, we will, at the very least, achieve a second kind of eternity beyond the eternity of our germ cells. Our prayer-book says, "Our love ones continue also in the rememberance of those to whom they were precious. Their deeds of lovingkindness are treasured up as incentives to conduct by which the living honor the dead". In harnessing our longing for an ongoing life might we not make it the longings of George Elliot who wrote:

"O, may I join the choir invisible  
of those immortal dead who live again  
In mindsmade better by the presence; live  
In pulses stirred to generosity  
In deeds of daring rectitude, (live) in scorn  
For miserable aims that end with self;  
(Live) In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,  
And with their mild persistance urge man's search  
To vaster issues".

Our deeds, not merely our seeds, can build eternity for us. This is what the Talmud means when it says, "May the memory of the righteous be for a "Baracha". (for a blessing to the living)".

Finally, let me say one more thing which must be said. We make a great mistake by interpreting life merely in terms of time. A fly lives a few weeks; a horse lives less than a decade. By these measurements in time, man lives an eternity if he fulfills 60 or 70 years. The



significant thing, however, is not the time element but the quality of the life that is lived. We might call this the 4th dimension, the dimension that gives meaning to existence, that raises it out of the realm of the physical and enables a human being to reach into the spiritual and the eternal, even while he inhabits his living body. Some people live to be 100 years of age, but they live in ignorance and fear; afraid to live lest they die; afraid to risk climbing unless they fall. Perhaps this kind of person desires eternity too, but what kind of eternity? An eternity measured in terms of fancy motor cars and mah jong games; an eternity of selfishness and self-gratification? How can we pretend to talk about eternity when we don't even know how to measure the value of the years that we have? If the years beyond are to be meaningful to us, we must be able to use them wisely; but how many of us are wisely using the years of this world? We must first learn how to use the hours at our command before we can dream sensibly of the generations of eternity. One thing we may know, the future is not to be described or inherited by infants who are looking for bigger and better lolly-pops; the search for the future lies with those who understand and use the present best. The future lies with those who build best in the present. We who create with God today have the best chance of understanding and participating in the creation of tomorrow; Those who are spectators and saboteurs of what is good and decent will forever remain spectators and outsiders. The Bible wisely teaches that we earn our own future. We must build for ourselves a character that is worthy of exercise in whatever lies ahead. If we are to stretch out what seems to be the present limits of the evolutionary process, we must reach out beyond our present accomplishments; we must stand on our tip-toes until spiritually, we "touch heaven". As the hasidim well understood, the "roots of heaven" are not in heaven. They are immersed in the earth. And he who would arrive in heaven must first master the secrets of life on earth. Who knows but that the key to the enigma of the hereafter is to be found in the inner heart and the inner mind of man as he seeks his better self? The prayer-book reflects this mood when it proclaims, "Bo-ruch Ah-tah Adonai No-tay-Ah B'so-chay-nu Ha-yay Olom: Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Who hast planted within us eternal life".