

WHERE JUDAISM DIFFERED

Introduction - Story of Balaam and Balak

The Bible tells us that when Balak, the king of Moab, saw the Hebrews under Moses coming into the land of Canaan, he went to a holy man by the name of Balaam, and asked him to invoke God's curse upon the Hebrews. Strangely enough, however, Balaam blessed the Hebrews instead, but as he looked down upon them from the vantage point of a high hill, he said further, "It is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall be different from the nations." This ancient prophecy about Israel has been borne out by thousands of years of history. The Hebrews have dwelled alone, and they have behaved differently from all the nations.

This morning I should like to discuss three important ways in which the Hebrews have behaved differently from "ha-goyim", the "other nations." The first main difference is that the HEBREWS HAVE EMPHASIZED MORALITY ABOVE CEREMONIAL OBSERVANCE. Those who have studied the religions of the Ancient Near East know that for the contemporary peoples of the Hebrews, righteousness meant no more than ritual piety. Sin meant ritual uncleanness. To the religious leaders of the ancient religions, "truth and righteousness" were nothing more than images (Tzalmani), which were used in magical ceremonies. When a worshipper came to the ancient priest with the proper reward, the priest would hold up an image called "Kittu" or Righteousness and ask the gods to heal his client's illness or to direct his client to victory over his enemies.

The ancient peoples did not believe that the gods rewarded men because they acted justly, but they did believe that the gods could be seduced to favorable action if they were offered honey, sugar cane, or the like. For the ancients, religion was a sort of trading relationship between the gods and men. The American Indian summarized the whole idea when he prayerfully appealed to his god, "You give me rain, I give you blanket."

Hebrews Also Had Much Ceremonial Observance - It would be incorrect to say that the Hebrews of Biblical days did not also share in some of the superstition and magical approach to religion that was so popular in their day. For example, mixed in with the advanced rules for medical treatment, we find that the Hebrews, like the other nations, attempted to heal a leper also by priestly ritual. First, they killed a bird and then released a second bird who symbolized the first bird brought to life again. The Hebrews, like the other nations, attempted to neutralize the guilt for an unsolved murder by killing a young bull and washing their hands in its blood. The Biblical Hebrews, like the other peoples, worshipped their god by the slaughter of animals on the temple altar - but - AND THE "BUT" IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT - the Hebrews knew that religion did not end with the ceremonies. Interspersed with the priestly passages which tell us how the ancient Hebrews followed a few of the primitive ceremonies, there are the loftiest ethical passages, some of which have not been equalled in our day. As we read the Bible, our eye sweeps from the priestly text to the passage which reads, "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil ... a stranger thou shalt not oppress, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt... thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor... justice, justice thou shalt pursue... YES, THE ANCIENT HEBREWS HAD THEIR CEREMONIES SOME OF WHICH WERE SIMILAR TO THOSE OF THE OTHER NATIONS, BUT IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO SEE IN THE BIBLE THAT THE HEBREWS EMPHASIZED MORALITY ABOVE CEREMONIAL OBSERVANCE.

Story of Abraham And Isaac

We read in the Torah this morning the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac. Modern people would wonder why God would command Abraham to sacrifice his son, but when you know that the pagans in ancient times frequently sacrificed their first born sons to God as an act of greatest reverence, then you can understand that this story is placed here in the Torah for the purpose of teaching that God does not want the sacrifice of the only son. The story actually tells us that a lamb is sacrificed in place of Isaac, and this story thus marks the transition in ancient times from the sacrifice of human beings to the worshipful sacrifice of animals. On the other hand, Christianity today is based upon this ancient notion that the sacrifice of the first born son carries with it special religious connotations.

In this connection, we should note that the injunction not to eat pig was made because the pig was the totem image of the pagan god eaten at religious communion. The injunction against eating meat and milk together was made because the pagans worshipped in this fashion. They used the fertility symbol of milk to urge the gods to give them more plentiful flocks. The revolt against ceremonial observance reaches its zenith with the literary prophets like Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah. Hosea verbalized God's command to Israel, saying, "I desire kindness

and not the sacrifice of animals." Jeremiah said in the name of God, "Did I command your fathers in the wilderness to worship me by means of sacrifices." Finally, Amos declared, "I hate, I despise your festival services, and I take no delight in your solemn worship. Yea, though ye bring me your sacrificial offerings, I will not accept them. Take away from Me the noise of your hymns..BUT LET JUSTICE WELL UP AS THE WATERS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE A MIGHTY STREAM."

The prophets like Amos left no doubt in the minds of the Hebrews that God desired moral conduct above ceremonial observance. In this matter, the Hebrews were in complete opposition to the "goyim," the other nations, who revelled in ceremonies, but knew little of moral teachings.

II. The Hebrews differed from their contemporaries in another significant respect. They taught NOT MERELY THE WONDER OF GOD, they also taught THE WONDER OF MAN. They spoke not merely of the power and responsibility of God, but also of the power and responsibility of Man.

A. The Goyim - The other peoples taught that everything important in the world was determined by the gods. Man, they said, was at the mercy of the gods. The gods were the actors in the arena of life, and men were the spectators and pawns. The gods could do anything they wished and men responded slave-like to the divine whims.

The uncertainty and fear which dominated the mood of the ancient peoples is revealed to us in a tragic prayer written by a semite about 3500 years ago. The prayer reads, "Oh gods of whom I know, and gods of whom I do not know, forgive me for all the sins which I know I have committed and for all the sins I have committed of which I do not know." This worshipper never knew what the gods wanted from him; he didn't even know which god was afflicting him; he only knew that he, like all men, was powerless before the gods who played with men as if they were insects.

The Pagans did believe that there were a few men whom the gods blessed with favor, but the great mass of men resigned themselves to an uncreative existence. They waited for things to happen to them. They did not act - they were acted upon. Consequently, they were easy prey for the villainous and depraved and the accepted standard was might makes right.

B. The Hebrews - The Hebrews also believed in the great power of God. Anyone who has read the first chapters of Genesis or the Book of Psalms knows with what reverence and awe the Hebrews regarded their God. The Psalmist sang, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. In the eighth Psalm we have this magnificent hymn to God... "When I behold the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast established; what is man that Thou art mindful of him and the son of man that Thou thinkest of him?"

The Hebrews, no less than the pagans, believed in the great power of God, but they differed substantially from their contemporaries in that they taught that God licensed man as His partner in a never-ending creation. Immediately after the Psalmist said, "...what is man that Thou art mindful of him?" The Psalmist answers with the words, "Yet thou hast made man but little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor. Thou hast made him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands - "Let us try to understand the revolutionary notion that is involved in this Psalm. God has given man the power to have dominion over the things that God Himself has created! God has created the laws which hold the world together and cause it to operate. It is man's function to learn these laws and to use them in the service of mankind and a better world. The surgeon who removes a diseased organ and knits together a human body anew has dominion over the work of God's hands in the highest sense of that phrase. This is equally true of the chemist who creates a new healing medicine by means of synthesis, and it is true of the physicist who discovers that the human voice and picture images can be harnessed and transmitted through space.

Reverence for God, yes, said the Hebrews, but reverence for man also. Man is not a mere spectator in the divine drama of life, he is also one of the chief actors and builders. This teaching is forcefully expressed in the incident where Moses turns to God in despair and states that the people are constantly complaining about their hardships in the wilderness. God refuses to pamper the people and to treat them as if they were puppets without responsibility. "Why callest thou unto Me?", God replies to Moses, "Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward!" In fundamentalist Christianity, salvation comes not from the sinner, man, but from the miraculous power of Jesus who alone can save. But Judaism teaches that in many matters God passes the responsibility back and says, "Why callest thou unto Me. Go forward, and you will conquer!"

The holy man, Balaam, said, "The Hebrews are not like unto the nations." They were not like the other nations in that they taught that the purpose of man was to help shape and save the world. When Moses confronted the Hebrews at the foot

of Mt. Sinai and gave them the Torah, he said, in God's name, "See, I have set before thee this day, good and evil, life and death; choose, life that thou mayest live.

The heart of the Hebraic teaching was that the Torah was from God, but the choice of good or evil action lay with man. Consequently, given the rules, which were from God, what happened in life depended upon the choice and the action of men.

Summary - We have said that the Hebrews differed from ha-goyim in that they stressed morality as against magical ceremonies; and in that they stressed the need for action by men as well as acknowledging the power of God. The third major difference between the Hebrews and the other nations was that they were universalistic and not merely particularistic. That is to say, they were intensely patriotic and self-concerned, but they also projected their thinking to include other nations and peoples.

The Egyptians taught that anyone who was not an Egyptian was to be classed with the base animals. The Greeks taught that anyone who was not a Greek was a barbarian. Both of these great ancient societies were built on a base of slavery. The Hebrews, too, were particularistic. They considered themselves to be God's chosen people, an "am s'gulah." They thought them selves to be in a special relationship to God, yet they were capable of self-criticism, and their moral teachings carried them well past the Egyptian and Greek conception of a master-people. The Hebrews taught that they were chosen to be an "oir l'goyim, a light unto the nations," to project the moral law to the corners of the world.

When the Hebrews showed conceit, the Prophet Amos reprimanded them, saying, in the name of God, "Are ye not as the Ethiopians unto me, oh children of Isreal?" When the Hebrews boasted that God had brought them from the land of Egypt, Amos answered in the name of God, "Didn't I bring the Philistines from the land of Caphtor and the Aramites from the land of Kir?" While fundamentalist Christianity teaches that only those who accept Jesus as their savior will escape hell, traditional Judaism has always taught that the non-Jews shall be worthy of the world to come if they observe but six of the 10 commandments.

The chosenness of which the Hebrews speak is a selection for an especially arduous task, but the God of the Hebrews is the God of all peoples, and the horizons of Judaism have for thousands of years been as wide as the universe. Unfortunately, there have always been Jews who thought that the main distinguishing characteristics between themselves and non-Jews were the ceremonies. Indeed, there have been periods in Jewish history when the great majority of Jews were taught little more than this. For example, the Jews who lived in Europe in the dark ages suffered as the Christians and pagans suffered from a stifling of freedom. In the ghettos, cut off from the world about them, denied the opportunity to share in the shaping of events around them, unable to own land, and unable to participate in the Government, the Jews turned inward upon themselves and lost sight of the fact that the very essence of Judaism is its projection outward.

1. Abused as they were by the non-Jewish population of Europe, the Jews soon lost their drive to shape the world about them according to their high moral standards, and they occupied themselves almost completely with their ceremonies. Ritual was piled upon ritual, and the proper relationship of the ceremony to the moral impetus behind it was lost. Jews began to observe ceremony for its own sake, and thus began to lose this essential distinction between themselves and their neighbors. Outwardly, they seemed to be sharply different from the non-Jews, but in the adoration of ceremony, they were essentially like the non-Jews. The Babylonian Talmud was studied by Jews, not with a view of creating new law for the European situation in which they lived, but for the sake of a non-creative scholarship in minutiae. Many Jews turned to mysticism, called Cabbalah, and they became increasingly involved in the study of hidden meanings and abstract formulae. For centuries it could not be said of European Jewry that it projected its morals more than it cherished its ceremonies.

2. On the other hand, since Jews were not given the slightest hope of shaping the governments or conditions around them, they came to believe in the hopelessness of action by men, and they emphasized more the hope for miracles from God. Jews everywhere longed for the Messiah who would miraculously lead them at God's command to Isreal. When the Zionist movement began, the Rabbis discouraged it as an expression of mistrust in God, for to work for the Jewish homeland was a sign of a lack of faith in God's ability to perform miracles. As a result, Zionists by the tens of hundreds defected from Judaism. When the Rabbis did not urge the people to overcome the severe economic restrictions under which they labored, many Jews became socialists and defected from Judaism. The Judaism of this period emphasized the "faith of waiting" rather than "active faith", and in this sense, it departed from the tradition and became more like the religion of ha-goyim.

3. Bruised and battered as they were by the peoples around them, the Jews of Europe could scarcely have been expected to emphasize the universalistic aspects of their faith. The Russians engaged regularly in the burning of Jewish villages. The Poles kept the Jews the poorest of the poor. In many lands, the Jew as a minority,

was molested and deprived of basic rights. In such a situation, the Jews emphasized the particularistic aspect of their faith. They despaired of the possibility of their tormentors joining with Jews in common cause. The non-Jewish community of the Europe of this period was as coarse and as uneducated as any peoples with whom the Hebrews had ever lived. Consequently, the Rabbis discouraged communication with the other peoples. In the Babylonian Exile, the Jews were among the greatest scholars of the Aramaic language, but in Europe the Rabbis discouraged the learning of languages other than Yiddish and Hebrew. In Alexandria Egypt, 2000 years ago, the Jews were among the greatest scholars in the Greek language and in philosophy, but the European Rabbis discouraged the learning of the developing science of the 18th and 19th centuries. Having turned so completely inward upon itself, the Jewish community was unprepared for the removal of the Ghetto walls when liberation finally came.

It is an unfortunate fact of history that when emancipation came to the Europe of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the Jewish religious community was not ready for it. In the wake of the French revolution, Napoleon invited the Jews to share in the extension of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." These were ideals close to the heart of Jews, but the Rabbis were suspicious even of Jewish ideals when spoken from the lips of those who had for so long tyrannized and oppressed. The Rabbis thought to themselves, "the voice is the gentle voice of Jacob, but the hands are the rough hands of Esau."

Summary - Consequently, we may conclude that because of severe persecution and virtual imprisonment, the Judaism of Europe for several centuries was substantially untrue to those three things which made Judaism different from the nations of old. First of all, Judaism in Europe stressed meticulous observance of ceremonies, rather than the projection of morality outward; secondly, Judaism in Europe stressed the wonder of God but neglected the wonder that was man. It said, "Leave everything to God," and finally, Judaism in Europe was highly particularistic and suspicious of universalistic slogans even when the ghetto walls were finally broken down.

With the coming of this new European period known as the Emancipation, many Jews fled the Jewish religious community. Some became Zionists and Socialists. Some became enlightened scientists and philosophers. Some became agnostics. The power of the religious leaders over the community progressively decreased in the face of the new liberty. The drive was away from religion and towards worldliness. There were a group of Jews, however, who wished to emphasize once again those attributes of Judaism which would make it compatible with the new rationalistic mood that was seizing the world. These Jews went beyond European Judaism to the Biblical tradition and they taught, 1) that Judaism emphasized morality above ceremonies; 2) that Judaism stressed the need for man to help God shape history; 3) that justice and peace for all men had always been the supreme goal of Judaism. These Jews called themselves Reform Jews, and we are their direct spiritual descendants. Looked at in this light, we can understand that Reform Judaism is not really reform at all. It actually affirms what has always been the heart of Judaism. It emphasizes those things which for thousands of years, have made Judaism different from the teachings of other peoples. In this sense, Reform Judaism has performed an important task for all modern Jews - it has kept alive this most significant part of our great tradition. Had Reform Judaism not developed, Jews would not have been able to participate in the development of American democracy.

The Modern Situation

What Reform Judaism has done for Jews in America, Israeli Jews have yet to discover for themselves. Those who visit Israel today are astonished to learn that the vast majority of Israelis are not religious. They are not the slightest bit interested in Judaism as a formal religion. This is due to the historic process that we have described. The early Zionists were disappointed in the antagonism of the European Rabbis, and they despaired of Judaism because its chief advocates presented it as a passive faith. The Israelis are activists to the nth degree. They require a religion which will encourage their desire to remould their environment. The Israelis are not religious in the formal sense, but they are intense students of the Bible and ardent admirers of the Biblical Hebrews. The reason is simple. The Biblical Hebrews were active moulders of their environment. In time, no doubt, the non-religious Israelis will discover as the founders of Reform Judaism discovered, that it is possible to blend together the basic teachings of Judaism with activism; indeed, basic Judaism demands that we assist in shaping events around us. Within the next generation we will witness this new expression of Judaism in Israel. It matters not whether it is called Reform Judaism or not, but the historical fact will be that both America and Israel, the two great Jewish centers of the world, will have returned to the basic, activist orientation of Judaism.

But, Rabbi, you may well say, doesn't Judaism need some ceremony and some self-concern. Of course, the people which wishes to survive must have some means of

holding itself together on an emotional basis, as well as on an intellectual basis, and the people which is not concerned for its own survival as well as for the protection of universal ideals will be swallowed up. The problem, of course, is a matter of emphasis, a question of degree. The problem is where to begin and where to break off. Perhaps the best illustration of the need to project beyond particularism and ceremony is found in a story told about the Baal Shem Tov, the ancient hasidic master. It was Simchas Torah and the residents of the village were gathered in the synagogue to witness the gay festivities revolving around the Torah. As was customary on this occasion, The Baal Shem Tov performed a free form dance holding the Torah. After a few minutes, however, the saintly Rabbi placed the Torah down, and holding his arms as if he were still carrying the Torah, he continued to dance but with even greater freedom and expression. All eyes were upon him and all mouths buzzed with the question - Whatever is the Rabbi trying to do? One of his wise disciples supplied the answer to the riddle. "It is simple," he said, "first our master danced with the Torah. Now he is projecting its teachings into all the world." This is basic Judaism. You cannot dance unless first you dance with the Torah, unless first you study it and learn how to tap the divine sources. But then you have the responsibility to project those teachings into all the world!