

THE CONTENT OF JUDAISM

LAST NIGHT, WE BEGAN OUR DISCUSSION OF THE CONTENT OF JUDAISM, WHICH MAKES IT POTENTIALLY ACCEPTABLE AS THE UNIVERSAL RELIGION. WE STRESSED THE FACT THAT, UNLIKE FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANITY, AND MANY OF THE FAR-EASTERN RELIGIONS, JUDAISM AFFIRMS THE ABILITY OF MAN TO CARVE A MEANINGFUL LIFE FOR HIMSELF IN THIS WORLD. JUDAISM RECOGNIZES THAT, IN ONE SENSE, MAN IS INSIGNIFICANT IN THE FACE OF GOD'S POWER, BUT, ON THE OTHER HAND, MAN IS THOUGHT TO BE CAST IN THE IMAGE OF GOD HIMSELF, AND MAN IS CONSIDERED "LITTLE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS." THUS, JUDAISM OFFERS THE GREATEST HOPE FOR MAN IN THIS WORLD. IT TEACHES, "RECOGNIZE YOUR SHORT-COMINGS, BUT DON'T MINIMIZE THE POWERS THAT GOD HAS PLACED WITHIN YOU THAT ENABLE YOU TO GROW AND TO CHANGE." OUR PRAYER BOOK READS, "BLESSED ART THOU, O LORD, WHO HAS IMPLANTED WITHIN US, INFINITE LIFE."

LET US BEGIN THIS MORNING WITH A QUICK LESSON FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT. IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES, IT IS TOLD THAT A MAN COMES TO JESUS TO ASK, "MASTER, WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?" JESUS REPLIES, "THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD WITH ALL THY HEART AND WITH ALL THY SOUL, AND WITH ALL THY MIGHT, AND THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF." THIS HAS BEEN HELD BY CHRISTIANS TO BE THE MOST MAGNIFICENT DEFINITION OF RELIGION. WE, AS JEWS, MUST ADMIT THAT THIS IS SO. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO COMPILER A GREATER DEFINITION OF RELIGION THAN THIS. WE OUGHT TO BE PROUD, THEN, OF THE FACT THAT WHEN JESUS GAVE THIS DEFINITION, HE WAS, AS A JEWISH TEACHER, QUOTING FROM THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES. THE FIFTH BOOK OF OUR TORAH, DEUTERONOMY, CONTAINS THE TEACHING OF MOSES, "THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD WITH ALL THY HEART AND WITH ALL THY SOUL AND WITH ALL THY MIGHT." THE THIRD BOOK OF OUR TORAH, THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS, INCLUDES THE TEACHING, "THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF." IT IS A MATTER OF WRITTEN RECORD, THEREFORE, THAT THE HEART OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IS A QUOTATION FROM JEWISH SOURCES, ANTEDATING JESUS BY SOME 700 OR MORE YEARS.

THE UNIQUE THING ABOUT JUDAISM, HOWEVER, IS THAT ITS RELIGIOUS DEFINITIONS ARE NOT THE RESULT OF ABSTRACT PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING. THEY ARE THE RESULT OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF HISTORY AS LIVED BY A PEOPLE STRUGGLING TO MAKE LIFE WORTHWHILE. IT WAS THE HISTORIAN SACHAR WHO WROTE, "OTHER PEOPLES HAVE TRIED TO LIVE THEIR LIVES BASED ON THE BIBLE, BUT THE JEWS WROTE THE BIBLE WITH THEIR LIVES." FOR US, THE BIBLE IS NOT JUST A COLLECTION OF PIOUS SAYINGS; IT IS THE PULSATING HISTORY OF OUR FOREFATHERS; IT IS A DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS LIVED BY A PEOPLE WITH A DEFINITE PERSPECTIVE OF LIFE, THROUGH WHICH THEY INTERPRETED ALL THAT HAPPENED TO THEM.

HOW DID THE HEBREWS UNDERSTAND THE INJUNCTION, "THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF." THE SPECIFIC LAWS OF THE LAND MADE IT MANDATORY FOR THE NEAREST OF KIN TO BUY BACK A MAN WHO HAD SOLD HIMSELF INTO SLAVERY TO A FOREIGNER. THE LAW FORBADE THE ENSLAVING OF ONE ISRAELITE BY ANOTHER; IT ENCOURAGED LOANS, BUT FORBADE INTEREST ON THE LOAN; IT GAVE TO EVERY ISRAELITE A LAND-HOLDING THAT HE MIGHT HAVE EQUAL ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY; FOR THE ANCIENT ISRAELITES, THE WORD "LOVE" MEANT RESPECT; IT IMPLIED JUSTICE, BUT IT WAS MORE THAN JUSTICE; IT MEANT THE WILLING PERFORMANCE OF THAT WHICH WAS JUST; IT MEANT HONORING YOUR NEIGHBOR AS AN EQUAL BECAUSE YOU RESPECTED HIS INTEGRITY AS ONE MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD.



IT WAS LOVE FOR HIS NEIGHBOR, THAT CAUSED THE ISRAELITE TO ENACT LAWS PROTECTING THE WIDOW, THE ORPHAN, THE STRANGER, AND THE DISPOSSESSED. THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS MAKES IT CLEAR, "THAT THOU SHALT LOVE THE STRANGER AS THYSELF." THE HEBRAIC RELIGIOUS MOOD FOUND ITS PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION IN THE SPECIFIC ISRAELITE LAW. THE ISRAELITES WERE NOT TALKING ABOUT SENTIMENTAL LOVE IN THE BYE AND BYE; THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT THE KIND OF LOVE THAT AFFECTS MEN IN THEIR DAY TO DAY RELATIONSHIPS. THE LAW WAS EVEN EXTENDED TO THE CARE OF ANIMALS. IF YOU SAW A DONKEY WHICH HAD COLLAPSED FROM THE WEIGHT OF ITS BURDEN, YOU WERE COMPELLED BY LAW TO REMOVE THE BURDEN FROM THE DONKEY, EVEN IF IT BELONGED TO YOUR ENEMY. IN A HUNDRED DIFFERENT WAYS, THE HEBREW BIBLE SPELLS OUT THE SPECIFIC LAWS ACTUALLY LIVED BY OUR FATHERS IN TRANSLATING THE DICTUM, "THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF." THE SPECIAL VIRTUE OF THE ISRAELITE RELIGION, IS THAT IT WAS TRANSLATED INTO ECONOMIC LAW, WHICH MADE RELIGION AND LIFE ONE INDIVISIBLE UNITY. THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT, WHICH GIVES TO EACH INDIVIDUAL CERTAIN INALIENABLE RIGHTS, HAS CREATED LAWS WHICH STAND ON THE SAME KIND OF STERN ETHICS AS THAT WHICH MOTIVATED ANCIENT ISRAEL. IF ONE WISHES TO UNDERSTAND THE UNCOMPROMISING RESPECT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL WHICH WAS PREVALENT IN EARLY AMERICA, HE HAS FIRST TO STUDY THE HEBREW SOCIETY WHICH INSPIRED SO MANY OF OUR FOUNDING FATHERS.

THE MOOD WHICH IS GENERATED BY OUR BIBLE, HOWEVER, GOES BEYOND THE FORCE OF LAW ITSELF. THE COVENANT MADE AT THE FOOT OF MT. SINAI WHEN THE LAW WAS PRESENTED TO OUR PEOPLE, RECORDS BUT ONE OF THE MANY GRAND MOMENTS EXPERIENCED BY OUR FATHERS. BY REVIEWING A FEW OTHER EQUALLY GRAND MOMENTS DESCRIBED IN OUR BIBLE, WE CAN COME TO A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISRAELITE RESPECT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL. LET US REVIEW BRIEFLY THIS MORNING, 2 SUCH INCIDENTS. THE FIRST, TEACHES US THAT A FEW RIGHTEOUS MEN, JUST A FEW, CAN TURN THE TIDE OF DISASTER. THE SECOND, TEACHES THAT FORGIVENESS IS GREATER THAN VENGEANCE. TOGETHER, JUST THESE TWO EVENTS, ADD A CONTENT TO THE ISRAELITE RELIGION WHICH QUALIFIES IT FOR THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSAL RELIGION. THE FIRST INCIDENT IS DESCRIBED IN THE FIRST BOOK OF THE BIBLE IN THE TORAH PORTION WE READ TODAY. THE NARRATOR TELLS US THAT GOD HAD WITNESSED THE WICKEDNESS IN THE CITY OF SODOM, AND HE HAD RESOLVED TO DESTROY IT. IN ALL OTHER RELIGIONS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST, THE WILL OF GOD WAS CONSIDERED SUPREME AND NOT TO BE QUESTIONED, BUT ABRAHAM, THE FOUNDER OF OUR FAITH, MAKES BOLD TO CHALLENGE WHAT APPEAR TO BE THE DIVINE DECISION. THE TEXT TELLS US THAT "ABRAHAM DREW NEAR" ... TO GOD ... AND SAID, "WILT THOU INDEED SWEEP AWAY THE RIGHTEOUS WITH THE WICKED ...?" THEN, FOLLOWS THE KIND OF AUDACITY, WITHOUT WHICH THERE CAN BE NO GREAT RELIGIOUS THINKING. THEN, ABRAHAM SAID TO GOD, "IT IS FORBIDDEN TO YOU ... TO SLAY THE RIGHTEOUS WITH THE WICKED ... SHALL NOT THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH DO JUSTLY?" WITHIN THIS STORY, TOLD AND RE-TOLD BY JEWS FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, IS THE LIVING EXPERIENCE OF A PROFOUND RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER, FOR ABRAHAM IS TEACHING ALL JEWS BY HIS COURAGE, THAT GOD CANNOT BE BLIND POWER, NOR CAN HE BE UNDISCRIMINATING JUSTICE! WHEREVER A HUMAN BEING HAS STOOD IN THE FACE OF THE MARCH OF POWER TO HELP A FEW WHO DESERVE TO BE HELPED, HE HAS EXHIBITED THE COURAGE OF ABRAHAM WHO SAID, IN EFFECT, "LIFE CANNOT BE MEANINGFUL UNLESS THE WELL-INTENTIONED ARE SAVED FROM THE UNLEASHING OF BRUTE FORCE." WITH THIS EXPERIENCE, ABRAHAM DEFINES FOR CENTURIES TO COME, THE HEBREW UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF GOD. HE IS A DISCRIMINATING GOD, NOT A GOD OF BRUTE FORCE.



WE ARE TOLD IN THIS STORY, THAT THE HEROIC MAN IS FREQUENTLY IN THE POSITION TO DETERMINE HOW THE FORCE OF GOD IS SPENT. THE RELIGIOUS MAN, OUR STORY TEACHES, IS THE ONE WHO REFUSES TO ACCEPT WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE VERDICT OF FATE, WHEN THAT VERDICT SEEMS TO INDICATE AN UNJUST CATASTROPHE. THE RELIGIOUS MAN IS THE MAN WHO INSISTS THAT GOD WOULD WANT THE REASONABLE SOLUTION, AND THE RELIGIOUS MAN IS THE ONE WHO APPLIES HIS EFFORTS IN THAT DIRECTION.

AS THE INCIDENT UNFOLDS IN THE PAGES OF GENESIS, ABRAHAM APPEARS MORE AND MORE AS THE INTERCESSOR, NOT MERELY FOR THE RIGHTEOUS, BUT FOR THE ENTIRE CITY OF SODOM. THE CONCLUSION OF HIS ARGUMENT WITH GOD, IS THAT IF THERE ARE ONLY 10 RIGHTEOUS MEN IN THE CITY, IT WILL BE SAVED IN ITS ENTIRETY! WHAT A SHARP REVERSAL HAS OCCURRED BECAUSE OF ABRAHAM'S COURAGE! NOT ONLY WON'T THE RIGHTEOUS BE DESTROYED ALONG WITH THE WICKED, BUT ALL THE WICKED WILL BE SAVED FOR THE SAKE OF THE FEW RIGHTEOUS! SURELY, THIS STORY IS NOT PLACED IN OUR BIBLE MERELY TO RECORD AN ANCIENT INCIDENT. IT IS PLACED THERE TO ENCOURAGE ALL MEN IN THE FUTURE TO CONTEND WITH THE FORCES OF DISASTER, BECAUSE OUR GOD IS ONE WHO IS WILLING TO LET MANY GO UNPUNISHED IN ORDER TO SAVE A FEW WHO MAY BE WORTHWHILE. HOW PENETRATED WITH THE CONCEPT OF MERCY IS THIS STORY! HOW PROMINENT A ROLE IT GIVES TO MAN IN WORKING OUT THE FUTURE SALVATION OF OUR WORLD.

OF COURSE, THE RELIGIOUS PERSON MUST UNDERSTAND THAT, IN THE REAL CONTESTS OF OUR WORLD, THE OPPONENT IS NOT GOD, BUT THOSE WHO SEEK TO ACT AS GOD; THOSE WHO SEEK TO ASSERT THEIR SELFISH WILL AS IF IT WERE GOD'S WILL. IN RESPONSE TO THESE ARROGANT ACTIONS, WE MUST REPLY AS ABRAHAM DID, "HALLILAH L'CHAH - IT IS FORBIDDEN TO YOU ... TO SLAY THE RIGHTEOUS AS WELL AS THE WICKED."

THE JOSEPH STORY, AS RECORDED IN OUR BIBLE, ALSO HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND JUDAISM AS THE RELIGION OF TOMORROW. THE JOSEPH STORY IS ALTOGETHER SO MAGNIFICENT, THAT ONE OF OUR GREAT NOVELISTS OF COMPARATIVELY RECENT TIMES, THOMAS MANN, DEVOTED AN ENTIRE SERIES OF NOVELS TO THIS THEME. YOU RECALL, OF COURSE, THAT JOSEPH WAS ENVIED BY HIS OLDER BROTHERS WHO SOLD HIM INTO SLAVERY TO RID THEMSELVES OF HIM. IN TIME, JOSEPH BECAME SECOND IN COMMAND IN THE GREATEST NATION OF THAT ERA, EGYPT. WHEN FAMINE CAME TO THE NEAR EAST, EVERYONE HAD TO GO TO EGYPT FOR FOOD, FOR JOSEPH ALONE HAD ANTICIPATED THE FAMINE, AND HAD STORED ENOUGH FOOD TO LAST FOR YEARS. WHEN JOSEPH'S BROTHERS ARRIVED IN EGYPT TO PLEAD FOR FOOD, THE BIBLE RECORDS, "AND JOSEPH KNEW HIS BROTHERS, BUT THEY KNEW HIM NOT." FINALLY, JOSEPH COULD CONTAIN HIMSELF NO LONGER, AND HE COMMANDED ALL THE EGYPTIANS TO LEAVE THE AREA. THEN THE TEXT READS, "AND THERE STOOD NO MAN WITH HIM WHILE JOSEPH MADE HIMSELF KNOWN UNTO HIS BRETHREN. AND, HE WEPT ALOUD: AND THE EGYPTIAN HEARD, AND THE HOUSE OF PHAROH HEARD: AND JOSEPH SAID UNTO HIS BRETHREN: "I AM JOSEPH: DO TH MY FATHER YET LIVE?" AND HIS BRETHREN COULD NOT ANSWER HIM: FOR THEY WERE AFFRIGHTED AT HIS PRESENCE. AND JOSEPH SAID UNTO HIS BRETHREN: "COME NEAR TO ME, I PRAY YOU." AND THEY CAME NEAR. AND HE SAID: "I AM JOSEPH YOUR BROTHER! WHOM YE SOLD INTO EGYPT. AND NOW BE NOT GRIEVED, NOR ANGRY WITH YOURSELVES THAT YE SOLD ME HITHER: FOR GOD DID SEND ME BEFORE YOU TO PRESERVE LIFE."

ANYONE WOULD UNDERSTAND IF JOSEPH WOULD HAVE REPAID HIS BROTHERS IN KIND. SINCE THEY HAD LEFT HIM IN A PIT TO DIE, HE WOULD HAVE BEEN JUSTIFIED IN KILLING THEM, OR IN THROWING THEM INTO PRISON, BUT, NO, HE WAS ANXIOUS TO ALLAY THEIR FEARS AND THEIR GUILT. HE WISHED ONLY THAT THEY LOVE HIM AS HE LOVED THEM.



THE TEXT CONTINUES, " ... AND HE FELL UPON HIS BROTHER BENJAMIN'S NECK AND WEPT; AND BENJAMIN WEPT UPON HIS NECK. AND HE KISSED ALL HIS BRETHREN, AND WEPT UPON THEM; AND, AFTER THAT, HIS BRETHREN TALKED WITH HIM ... "

LIKE ALL THE STORIES IN OUR BIBLE, THIS ONE IS PLACED IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS TO DO MORE THAN RECORD AN HISTORICAL EVENT. IT IS DESIGNED TO SERVE AS A PATTERN TO BE IMITATED BY JEWS IN THE FUTURE. IT TEACHES, "DO NOT TAKE VENGEANCE, EVEN THOUGH YOU ARE IN A POSITION TO DO SO. FORGIVE THOSE WHO HAVE WRONGED YOU. LOVE THEM, AND YOU WILL RECEIVE THEIR LOVE." THE STORY TEACHES THAT HUMANITY, THE SIMPLE LOVE OF A MAN FOR HIS BROTHERS, IS MORE SWEEPING AND MOVING THAN THE ARBITRARY USE OF POWER. EACH OF US, FROM TIME TO TIME, IS IN A POSITION WHERE WE HAVE THE CHOICE OF ADMINISTERING A DESERVED BLOW, OR TAKING OUR BROTHERS TO OUR HEARTS! THE JOSEPH STORY IS PART OF THE LIVING FABRIC OF OUR RELIGION. READ IN FULL CONTEXT, IT IS MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE THAN ANY PIOUS UTTERANCE ABOUT FORGIVENESS AND LOVE.

IN MODERN TIMES, WHEN IT SEEMS THAT THE POLITICAL LEADERS OF THE WORLD ARE CONSIDERING WHICH CITIES TO DESTROY BECAUSE OF THE WICKED PEOPLE THAT DWELL THEREIN, WE MIGHT WELL BORROW SOME OF THE COURAGE OF ABRAHAM, TO SAY TO THE POWERS THAT BE, "HALLILAH L' CHAH, IT IS FORBIDDEN TO YOU." WE CANNOT IMAGINE THAT THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH ENDORSES THE BLIND MARCH OF POWER TO WHICH THE LARGER NATIONS OF THE WORLD HAVE COMMITTED THEMSELVES. THE FATE OF THE CITIES OF THE WORLD SEEMS TO BE MARKED OUT, BUT THE JEW AND THE DEEPLY RELIGIOUS WILL SAY, "IT CAN NOT BE!" IF THERE ARE ONLY 10 RIGHTEOUS MEN, THE CITY IS WORTH SAVING. WHEN THE CITIZENS OF THE WORLD HAVE ACCEPTED THE FACT THAT THEY CANNOT POSSIBLY AVERT A HYDROGEN-BOMB WAR, THEN WE WILL KNOW THAT RELIGIOSITY HAS VANISHED FROM THE EARTH. AND, IN THIS TIME, WHEN SO MANY OF US STORE UP OUR GRUDGES WAITING FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS OUR ANGER AND HATE BY ADMINISTERING PUNISHMENT IN RETALIATION, WE MIGHT, INSTEAD, FOLLOW THE PATTERN OF JOSEPH, AND EXPRESS THE DEEP-SEATED LOVE THAT WE ALSO FEEL FOR THOSE WHO HAVE WRONGED US. WE MIGHT DISCOVER THAT LOVE IS A GREATER WEAPON FOR WINNING OUR BROTHERS THAN THE USE OF ARBITRARY FORCE.

SO, WE TURN THE PAGE IN STUDYING THE TREASURES OF OUR RELIGION. MAY I ASSURE YOU, THE TREASURE IS ENDLESS, AND THE SECOND PAGE IS MORE FASCINATING THAN THE FIRST.