

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Sermon given at First Methodist Church, S. Miami
by Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard

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On behalf of the congregation of Temple Beth Am, I should like to congratulate the First Methodist Church for this beautiful and reverent building. It is impressive evidence of your good taste and your dedication to religion. Members of this Church know that it has been my privilege to speak on several occasions in their original chapel. Our children, too, have benefited from your hospitality, for in the days when Beth Am was young and struggling, (we are old and struggling now), we used the facilities of this Church for our Hebrew School. Indeed, our people have been so often within the walls of this church that there might be some confusion at Beth Am as to whether we are raising good Jews or good Methodists.

I think we all have to recognize that the easy and warm friendship between these two congregations is not typical of Church-Synagogue relationships. We have here a precious and unusual evidence of the true spirit of religion. I do not think that the intensity of this relationship would be possible were it not for the genuine love which emanates from your Pastor, Ralph Huston, towards all men. They say that a man teaches best by what he himself is. In Judaism, we would call the Reverend Huston, a Tzadik, that rare individual who demonstrates through his personal being, something of the divine attributes, and through him we are drawn closer to God. I trust that the members of this church do not take him for granted.

I wish to speak tonight about the subject of divine attributes or qualities: We are accustomed to hear the statement that the world owes a debt to ancient Israel for leading us to the belief in one God. I submit to you this evening the thought that Israel could have led the world into great difficulty by stressing the concept of one God. The ancient pagans taught not merely that there were many Gods, they taught that the Gods ruled by whim and caprice. One of their legends teaches that the great flood came because the Gods got drunk and decided to kill off mankind for the sport of it. To the Pagans, the Gods were like men, only more so. They were said to be selfish, lustful, and warlike. Suppose now that ancient Israel had said that there is only one God, but He is selfish, lustful, and warlike. Men would have been compelled to live their lives, under this belief, in constant fear and uncertainty. Suppose that we had been asked, as an expression of our religious faith, to imitate this angry God in His attributes or qualities. The narrowing down of the Gods to one would have had no positive effect on the lives of men, if Israel had not also taught that the character of God was to be thought of in terms of holiness. The Hebrew word for holiness is Kadosh; it means "that which is different", set aside, and thus consecrated. The God of Israel was not only one, He was different from the other Gods. He was a God of another kind! He was thought of in terms of justice and mercy. The main contribution of ancient Israel to us is not that it was the first to speak of the unity of God. What is more important is what they had to teach us about the character of God.

It is in this context that we turn to our scriptural reading for the day, "Fear not", spoke God through His Prophet Isaiah, "For thy maker is thy husband". Just these few words tell us of a revolution in the understanding of the nature of God. The Pagans taught that God was a ba-al, a proprietor.

He owned all the land, and he owned the human beings who worked the land. His human stewards on earth, were thus empowered to be slave-owners, supposedly carrying out the will of God. It was the Prophet Hosea who taught the people of Israel, "Your God does not wish to be called Ba-al or proprietor, He wants to be called Ish, or husband". Hosea taught mankind that man and God are not master and servant, in the worst sense of that relationship, but partners in a continuing creation.

"Fear not", said God, through His Prophet speaking to the Hebrews in the Babylonian Exile, "Fear not, for Thy Maker is thy husband...In a little wrath, I hid My face from thee for a moment...But with everlasting kindness will I have compassion on thee..." The Pagans had taught that God was punishing and angry. Slowly, the Hebrew teachers led their people away from this concept of God. Moses said that God punished the Fourth generation of those who sinned, but he added, "God forgives the 1,000 generation of those who do righteously." Moses put the bias in God's personality on the side of mercy. Jeremiah later taught that God did not punish the children of those who sinned. Each person, he said, is responsible only for his own sins. Hosea went a step further and taught that God eagerly sought out the sinner to forgive him for his past errors, and Isaiah took up the theme, "Fear not...with everlasting kindness will I have compassion on thee..."

A second important lesson which both Jew and Christian have learned from the ancient Hebrews is contained in the 19th Chapter of the Book of Leviticus. There Moses quotes God as saying, "Ye shall be holy because I the Lord thy God am holy". Having learned that the true character of God is to be understood in terms of justice and love, righteousness and mercy, the Hebrews then defined their own religion as the imitation of God with respect to these characteristics. Lest men not understand what this statement meant, the Bible then lists specifically the kind of action God solicits from men. The 19th Chapter of Leviticus tells us that the Hebrews are to leave the corners of their fields so that the poor might harvest them. Fallen fruit is to be left on the ground for those who are hungry. Vengeance is not to be taken against an enemy, but, on the other hand, one may not stand idly by when a neighbor is being wronged. The text goes on to point out in detail that special care must be taken not to cheat the blind or to abuse the weak. One modern writer has interpreted this last teaching by saying, "The worst evil is 'To Kill a Mockingbird', to harm something that is powerless before your strength and which is dependent upon your understanding and concern. It is from this chapter in Leviticus that we are told, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", and later in this same chapter comes the higher teaching, "Thou shalt love the stranger as thyself". Jesus was very fond of this section of Leviticus, and he quotes it at length. Jew and Christian are tied together by this chapter which bids us to imitate God in His holiness. We are asked to do the impossible; we are asked to be like God. Manifestly we cannot completely succeed in this task, but this is the role of the religious person. A thousand years after the compiling of the Book of Leviticus, a wise Rabbi taught, "You are not required to complete the task, but neither are you free to refrain from undertaking it." In each deed of our lives we are asked to use the Divine measurement of justice and love.

The First Book of Genesis tells us that in creating the world, God said, "Let us create man in our image." The Rabbis in studying this verse asked, "To whom was God speaking when He said, "Let us make man in our image?" They answered that He was speaking to Adam himself. God said to Adam, "I have created you in the physical sense, but now, you must help to create yourself in

the spiritual sense. "Let you and I", God said to the man, "now create the spiritual man."

As God spoke to Adam, so He speaks to you and to me. He says, let us make man in the Divine image. When man is born, he is not already in the Divine image. He is born with the potential of being Divine-like. He is created with the potential of bringing into himself the qualities of love and justice, of understanding and forgiveness. Over the process of his life, says Judaism, a man has to work to grow into the Divine image.

We have here a sublime definition of the religious life. We pray to God, the infinite source of love and justice that we might be able to take more of His qualities into ourselves. We study and prepare to act out these qualities, and ultimately we perform the deeds and acts of love which are the evidence of our religious being. With each such deed, we build the muscle and the fiber of our spiritual selves in the image of the one God who is a different kind of God, an Ale Kadosh, a Holy God.