

THE TORAH -- A BOOK OF LIFE

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You all know that the Ark in our new Sanctuary will be in the form of an open Torah Scroll. So far as we know, this will be the first time that the Ark has been designed in this fashion. It will be a dramatic reminder that the Torah is the key symbol in Jewish life. Some Jews are under the impression that just as the cross is the main symbol of Christianity, so the Star of David, The Magen David, is the main symbol of Judaism. The authors of the New Testament, especially Paul, directly state that from their viewpoint, the cross is a replacement for the Torah. In those days, men had not heard of the Star of David which may be of European origin. But the Torah has always been the most significant Jewish symbol. It has been called Torat Hayyim, The Torah of Life, for it contains the secrets of life, and it has been called the Atz Hayyim, The Tree of Life, for it is a living and growing thing. It is characteristic of Judaism that its central symbol should be a book, something to study, something to learn. Mohammad envied the Jews because of this book, and the Rabbis in the Talmud taught, "Turn it and turn it because you will find everything in it."

Let us turn the Torah this evening and see if it has a message applicable to our modern age. It begins with an account of the creation of the world. We have pointed out before that this account does not purport to be a scientific description of the origin of mankind. On the contrary, the creation story is primarily intended to teach the purpose of the creation. God created the world, we are told, as a backdrop for the character of man. God gives the world to man and says, "Here, it is yours. Make of it what you will." Every sub-section of the creation story has a moral. The details of the story are not important. The moral of the story is of tremendous value to modern man. Take now the story of how woman was formed from the rib of man. The text reads, "and the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the place with flesh instead thereof." We might think this to be merely a quaint story, but when we read the moral of the story, we must quickly change our minds. The moral begins when Adam sees the woman and says of her, "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." It is easy to see that the authors of this story were concerned with the sanctity of marriage. The woman is considered to be one flesh and one bone with the man.

The ancient Rabbis correctly interpreted the meaning of this story, for one of them added this commentary. He said originally the first human creature was bi-sexual, and God then divided that creature into the two sexes. Since that time, said the Rabbi, the two aspects of mankind have been eagerly searching to re-unite themselves. The story in our Torah does not end here, however. It goes on to make a second moral. Having stated that the man and woman are one flesh, the Torah goes on to say, "Therefore shall a man leave his Father and his Mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh." The teaching, of course, works both ways. The husband and wife must cling to each other, not to their respective parents. For husband and wife to be capable of real union, they must not stand in the protective shadow of dominating or possessive parents. Yes, the Torah is a Book of Life, and it has much to teach us today, if we want to learn from it.

We say that the Torah is a holy book. It is not holy because it contains magical ritualistic formulae. It is not holy because it contains divine words. It is holy because it contains stories about life, from which we can learn if we are disposed to do so. There are no sinless characters in our Torah. Our fathers understood that the best of men fail on occasion, and the worst of men are capable of change and growth.

Judah was among the brothers of Joseph who sold him into slavery, but when in later years Joseph in Egypt wants to hold his younger brother Benjamin as hostage, Judah offers himself as a hostage in place of his younger brother. It is possible, contends our Torah, for men to change. Moses was fearful of leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, and, indeed, he fled from Egypt to the peaceful oasis of Midian to become a shepherd there. But Moses overcame his timidity, and returned to his suffering people to aid them in every possible way. Even God, in our scripture, does not appear to be devoid of conflicting emotions. How He would like to punish Israel for the worship of other Gods! Yet Hosea pictures God's battle within Himself, "How shall I give thee up, Oh Israel....My heart is turned within me, My compassions are kindled together....I will not execute the fierceness of Mine anger....For I am God and not man....And I will not come in Fury...."

The Torah is a Book of Life. It teaches that anyone who lives--experiences anger and hate, but it is better to let compassion overcome the anger. There are some religions which teach that the person who thinks the thought of anger or the thought of maliciousness has thereby sinned. Judaism does not teach this. The Torah makes it clear to us that everyone, even the greatest hero, has these thoughts. The religious act is to channel the anger and the hatred so that it does not harm others. The religious act is to undue the wrong originally done. The religious act is the deed that brings men together.

Some religions have the tendency to belittle the needs of the body. St. Paul discourages his followers from the sexual act under any circumstances, but states that marriage is better than roasting in Hades. The Torah understands that the ability to participate in the sexual act is one of God's most wonderful gifts to man. The Torah speaks about the abuse of the sexual privilege, but not against the importance of the function. It speaks of the responsible use of this God-given power. In this matter, as in every other matter, the Torah stresses the significance of wise choice. It understands that if man is to be free, he must have the freedom to make the wrong choice also, but man is not to be pinned down by threats of eternal punishment in Hades.

In one of the sequel books to the Torah, King David is pictured as a man who was trapped by his lust. His acquisition of Bathsheba as his wife, after she was married to another, shocked the entire nation of Israel. In any other semitic kingdom, this procedure would have been considered quite within the realm of kingly powers, for who in Aram or Elam or Egypt would question the right of the King to have such women as he wished. In ancient Israel, however, this was considered an abuse of the sexual privilege, an act of irresponsibility even for a King. In one of the memorable confrontations of history, the Prophet Nathan asked for an audience with the King and presented David with this parable, "There were two men in one city: The one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little lamb, which he had reared:

And it grew up together with him, and with his children." Then Nathan went on to say that the rich man, not content with what he had, took the lamb of the poor man. The text says, "And David's anger was greatly kindled against the rich man, and he said to Nathan, 'As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this, deserveth to die', and Nathan said to David, 'Thou are the man.'"

We see here in this story that the ancient Hebrews had a healthy disrespect for kingly power, and a strong regard for the responsible use of the powers God has given us. The tragedy in the case of the single lamb of the poor man, Bathsheba, is magnified, because as Nathan said, the poor man had reared this lamb. He had given it of his love and effort and sacrifice, "and it grew up together with him and with his children." Surely this fact of joint effort wasted is as crucial as the taking of the lamb. Those of us in modern times who have been attracted to the cult of free sexual expression, might bear this point strongly in mind, "Those who have worked together and sacrificed together and reared children together, owe each other every possible effort to work out the future together." Judaism is not opposed to divorce when it is absolutely essential, when, indeed, it is the responsible choice, but it is clear in our age of wholesale divorces that many of our couples are acting on the basis of whim and irresponsibility. No person is all good or all bad, teaches our Torah, even Moses, even David! With most human beings there is a strong chance that matters can be worked through with patience, forgiveness, and sometimes with professional help.

Our bible is a living book, a book of life. The self-same David who forgot that he was a Hebrew King, and not just another oriental monarch, sought forgiveness from God, and went on to become one of the most beloved kings in Jewish history. His virtue was not that he was always good, but that he was capable of admitting his errors and starting again. One can understand how a man who had been a peasant, should become drunk with power when he suddenly became a King. The test of David's character came when he was confronted with the enormity of his deed. Would he insist upon his royal privileges in the future, or would he acknowledge that there was a law superior to his own? The greatness of David was that he accepted the authority of a superior law. He proved that he was capable of change and growth.

How different a man we see in the David who is the Father of the brilliant and handsome Absalom. On several occasions, Absalom, who is not the first born, attempts to seize the throne of his Father. On each occasion, David pleads with his generals to save the young man's life. When, finally, Absalom's attempt to kill his Father fails for the third time, David breaks down at the news of his son's death and calls, "Oh, Absalom, my son; My son Absalom, would I had died for thee, Oh Absalom, my son, my son."

If you have ever examined a Torah, you know that it is made of parchment, which, in turn, is the hide of some animal, usually a goat. It is, in this sense, made from life. The Torah is also written entirely by hand, painstakingly, by special scribes who are expert in this procedure. A good Torah is a work of art, and costs a great deal of money. It has been suggested by some that if the Torah could be printed, its cost would be greatly reduced. So it would, but we have thus far resisted this attempt to make of the Torah just another book that is the product of a mechanized press. The Torah is the living heritage of a people 4,000 years old. It was written by our people with their lives. It comes down to us from one

human hand to another, and because it is not a product of mechanization, it seems to have a special kind of aura.

Religious truths cannot be fully learned by rote; they are learned best by example. The child who experiences love and forgiveness from his parents learns that these spiritual qualities are realities. It is a simple thing for the child then to deduce that human beings are themselves fed by eternal fountains of love and forgiveness. Similarly, Judaism has never sought to be a religion of catechism. We teach that the ultimate test of religiosity is human conduct. The Torah, as the history of our people, is a collection of human experiences. It is the continuing story of how one people tried to make life meaningful. The Torah is not all exaltation, but then nothing in real life is all exaltation. The Torah is an account of successes in the midst of failure; of courage in the midst of cowardice; of hope in the midst of despair. It is yours, dear friends, and mine. It is our story, if we understand it as our story.

Take it with you into your homes, for it is in your home that you face the greatest test of your religiosity. The most difficult thing we have to do is to deal justly and kindly with those who are nearest to us, because we are so emotionally involved with them. Yet, we can not avoid this responsibility, for just as our children are bone of our bone, so our mate is flesh of our flesh.

The Yom Kippur religious service is based upon two assumptions. The first is that the forgiveness of God is readily available to those who wish sincerely to change. The second assumption is that there must be a thoughtful commitment on our part to seek out new ways of living. Judaism assumes that each of us has this potential, and it asks each of you to believe in yourself to that end. As we seek God's acceptance, let us determine also to accept ourselves, and let us not hold at arms-length those within our families whose faults are so intimately known to us. Let us embrace them, with their imperfections and their inconsistencies, for they, too, are capable of growth and change, and if they are worthy of God's forgiveness, can they not be worthy of yours?