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# *Albert Einstein*

## *The "Universal Man" – The Jew*

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Albert Einstein was one of the truly great men of our age. He is famous not merely because he advanced "The Theory of Relativity" and not merely because he is one of the great scientific minds of all history. He is famous, also, because he was one of the great human souls with a high sense of justice, a devotion to humanity, and an active concern for pacifism and world government.

Einstein tried to live the life of the "Universal Man", but he did not fail to recognize his link to the Jewish people. He publicly stated that many of his views about society and mankind were derived from his experience as a Jew, and he did not shirk his responsibilities in time of crisis to his persecuted and misunderstood people.

Einstein, born in 1879, lived at a time when it was a disadvantage to a scholar and a university professor to be a Jew. Many brilliant Jews actually, or ostensibly, accepted Christianity in order to be appointed to posts in desirable universities. Such a Jew was Heinrich Heine, the great German poet, who later regretted his conversion. Although Einstein found it neces-

sary to move from one university to another and from one country to another because of his Jewishness, he refused to convert.

When Hitler came to power and Einstein saw that some Jews were kow-towing to their persecutors, he became as angry as it was possible for him to become. He wrote, "Has a more striking example of collective stupidity than the blindness of the German Jews ever been seen before in history!"<sup>1</sup> Einstein was for standing up to those who persecuted the Jews, and he could not tolerate the thought of compromise. He resigned from the Prussian Academy of Science, thus surrendering his right to hold a high professional position in Germany, and took up common cause with those who were Zionists. Einstein himself did not seek to live in Israel, but he worked actively to help those Jews who wished to go to the Holy Land.

Einstein was aware of the value of his inheritance from the Jewish people. He once said, "The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence — these are the features of Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it."<sup>2</sup>

Einstein was not a ritualistic Jew, nor was he attracted to formalistic worship. He might best be described as a "prophetic Jew", one who believes that Jews have a special responsibility to live out the teachings of the Hebrew prophets. The three main virtues that Einstein saw in the Jewish tradition he projected as the goals of his life; *the pursuit of knowledge* rather than the pursuit of pleasure, *the love of justice* rather than the search for privilege, and the *desire for personal independence* rather than the desire for personal honor. Fame came to Einstein in spite of a genuine need on his part to work in solitude and seclusion.

One biographer has written of the man,<sup>3</sup> "A deep-seated contradiction was to be found in Einstein: his complete detachment from everything concerning everyday humdrum life (on the one hand),<sup>4</sup> and his acute sense of duty toward the human race (on the other hand)."<sup>5</sup> To Einstein, the scientist in his ivory tower was always a ridiculous figure. He once summed up his efforts in this phrase, "Only a life lived for others is worth living."

1. *Albert Einstein, The Man and His Theories*, Hilaire Cuny, Fawcett Publication Inc., N. Y. 1965, p. 92.

2. *The World As I See It*, Einstein, 1934, p. 143.

3. Cuny, p. 87, op. cit.

4. Emphasis, this author's.

5. Emphasis, this author's.

## Success Without Selfishness

The modern youngster who is motivated to make a great deal of money and to be a success in the eyes of others would not find an ally in Einstein. Einstein was interested in only enough money to get by. For comfort, he preferred a pair of baggy, old trousers and a pullover sweater. Himself a mediocre student for many years in all subjects except math, Einstein was opposed to that kind of education which forced students to memorize without reasoning. He said that the purpose of education was to get young people willingly to serve the community. Einstein was so little concerned about himself that, in his later years, he gave no help to biographers who prodded him to remember incidents in his life. Said Einstein, "What does a fish know about the water in which he swims all of his life?"<sup>6</sup> Einstein was not that self-oriented that he could keep a personal diary nor could he imagine that other people would be interested in the private details of his life. Clearly, Einstein was so aware of the vastness of creation that he placed little significance upon individual matters. For this reason, also, he was not a nationalist, and nothing disgusted him more than the petty maneuvering of the nations to gain an advantage over each other. At the cost of being called a radical, Einstein long advocated that only world government and the abolishment of all national armies would save the world from constant war between the nations. Like Isaiah, he called for all nations to lay down their arms and "to learn war no more." In this sense, he was a real disciple of the Hebrew prophets.

## Einstein, The Believer

It has been said by some that Albert Einstein was an atheist, and some younger rationalists have cited him as their support in behalf of the belief in "no God". Actually, Einstein was a deeply religious person as only a highly intelligent and learned person can be. He was an atheist with respect to the popular concept of a god who is like a glorified Santa Claus, but he was almost mystical in his belief in a master mathematician and planner of the universe.

He once wrote, "The essence of the Jewish concept of life seems to me to be the affirmation of life for all creatures. Life is holy, i.e., it is the highest worth on which all other values depend. There remains, however, something more in the Jewish tradition so gloriously revealed in certain of the Psalms, mainly a kind of drunken joy and surprise at the beauty and incomprehensible sublimity of the world, of which man can obtain but a faint intimation. This seems to me to be the loftiest content of the God idea."\*

6. Cuny, p. 9. How similar is this symbolism to the well known Talmudic story about the Jew, the fish, and the fox.

\* "What I Believe." Forum Magazine, Oct. 1930

While Einstein did not believe that God determined the success or failure of men in their petty endeavors, he once stated, "I believe in the God of Spinoza who reveals himself in a harmony of all creatures . . ." <sup>7</sup> Spinoza, as you know, was a Jewish philosopher, who in the 17th century, attacked fundamentalist religions, and spoke of a god of reason who filled the universe with his being. How like Einstein sounds Spinoza's teaching, "Men who are governed by reason . . . desire for themselves nothing which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind" <sup>8</sup> Again, Einstein had said, "This firm belief, a belief bound up with deep feeling, in a superior mind that reveals itself in the world of experience, represents my conception of God." <sup>9</sup>

In his infatuation with the rational basis of the universe, Spinoza, like Einstein, was opposed to arrogant, chauvinistic pietism, but Spinoza also said, "With the Jews . . . piety meant justice; impiety meant injustice and crime." <sup>10</sup> We can see from the writings of great Jews like Spinoza and Einstein, that *their rationalist orientation and their universalism did not prevent them from learning from their Jewish tradition*. It is not surprising, then, that Einstein should write in the days of Adolph Hitler, "Those who rage today against the ideals of *reason* and of *individual freedom* and seek to impose an insensate state of slavery by means of brutal force, rightly see in the *Jews* irreconcilable opponents". <sup>11</sup>

So many of our lesser scientists today wish to divorce science and religion completely. Not so, with Einstein. He said, "The cosmic religious experience is the strongest and noblest driving force behind scientific research." <sup>12</sup> Repeatedly, Einstein taught that there were limits to human knowledge and that, at some point, a leap of faith, a conviction not based on reason alone, was necessary to lead one to basic conclusions. It was, thus, a passion towards the unity of the universe which led Einstein to work so vigorously on the theories that proved ultimately that so different appearing things as matter and energy were really the same thing in different concentrations and arrangements. This passion to demonstrate the unity behind the manifold, the one behind the many, seems, especially, to be part of the ingrained psyche of the Jew. It motivated Moses to declare that there are not many divine beings, but one. It motivated Spinoza to try to demonstrate that all the diverse forms of reality are but an expression of God Himself, a part of His very being. It motivated the Hasidic Teacher, Rabbi Israel to suggest

7. Cuny, p. 147.

8. *Ethics*, 1677, iv, PR 18, Note.

9. Einstein, *Essays in Science*, Philosophical Library, N.Y., 1934, p. 11.

10. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 1670, Preface.

11. Einstein, *As I See It*, 1934, p. 143.

12. Einstein, *Cosmic Religion*, p. 52, 1931.

that God was not only outside of the universe, but also part and parcel of the universe.\* It motivated Einstein to demonstrate mathematically that matter and energy, matter and spirit, were really indivisible. How interesting it is that each of these great Jews was interested also in human brotherhood, peace, and justice! The search for the rational laws which bind together the physical universe is one and the same for great Jews as the search for God and the right way to live. Isn't this what the authors of Genesis were trying to say?

### *His Pacifism*

Einstein did not pretend that his pacifism was a rational conclusion. He wrote, "My pacifism is an instinctive feeling, a feeling that possesses me: the thought of murdering another human being is abhorrent to me. My attitude is not the result of an intellectual theory, but is caused by a deep antipathy to every kind of cruelty and hatred . . ." <sup>13</sup> Einstein did not pretend to understand all the facets of his experience that moved him to be a pacifist, but he might well have heard more than once the discussion in the Talmud <sup>14</sup> which teaches, "He who kills *one man* is as if he had destroyed the *world*." The Jews who did not resist their Nazi murderers can only be understood in the light of that same inner feeling that prompted Einstein to say, ". . . I would rather be hacked in pieces than take part in such an abominable business . . ." <sup>15</sup>

Einstein did not think that religion and science were opposed to each other. On the contrary, he taught that the two were partners in trying to improve the world. What science could accomplish by way of reason had to be added to what religion could accomplish by way of appeal to the emotions. Specifically, he taught that religion gave man his ultimate goals in life and insights into reality which science could not achieve; but Einstein also understood that when religion was presented with a narrow view, it became man's enemy instead of his friend. He hoped that the moral teachings of religions could be applied rationally to the goals of the individual and to society. Social problems, he taught, should be looked upon as so many opportunities for joyous service towards a better life.

Said Einstein, "Every individual should have the opportunity to develop the gifts which may be latent in him . . . and alone in that way can the

community achieve its richest flowering. For everything that is really great and inspiring is created by the individual who can labor in freedom . . ." <sup>16</sup> Einstein may speak as one of the outstanding voices of the 20th century, but his is also the voice of the Hebrew prophets of 2700 years ago. The message is the same: the free individual who is mature enough to recognize his duty to society, the society that does not distinguish between any of its member in terms of their value and freedom. We must conclude that Einstein was not just a scientist. He was a scientist preoccupied with thoughts about morality and brotherhood. He was a rationalist who understood that men act in terms of deeply engrained emotions and instincts. He believed in the importance of gaining knowledge by trial and experience, but he believed that the greatest truths might often be projected by leaps of faith in which reason and emotion were joined as allies. He was the "Universal Man" who was proud of his Jewishness and not beyond becoming a militant Zionist.

The same Einstein who believed in the sanctity of the individual also believed that the goal of the informed individual was to free himself of personal ambition and to become one with the central purpose in life which, to Einstein, all existence seemed to breathe. Whenever we think of Einstein, let us remember that he said these words, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and to stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his mind and eyes are closed. To know that which is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms, this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiosity. In this sense, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men." <sup>17</sup>

This great man, mental giant of our age, felt like an infant in trying to comprehend the reality of life about him. This humility is the essence of the religious spirit. As the Psalmist wrote, "The beginning of wisdom is reverence for the Creator." <sup>18</sup>

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16. Hasidism, the immensely popular Jewish movement of the late 18th and 19th centuries, taught that each person has a latent potential that must be "redeemed" or developed. Martin Buber, the foremost exponent of Hasidism in modern times, was also a pacifist and internationalist. He lived in Israel during his later years.

17. "What I Believe," Forum Magazine, Oct. 1930.

18. Ps. 11:10, Prov. 1:7. The Hebrew word "Yirah" is sometimes translated "fear". It may mean "awe" or "reverence", and is frequently synonymous with "ahavah, love".

13. Einstein On Peace, p. 98.

14. The collection of Jewish teachings studied most often by European Jews.

15. *The World As I See It*, Covici-Friede, N.Y., 1934, p. 241.

\*Whitehead says this in more philosophical language.