

1969

THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE

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Recently, I made a trip to one of our State Universities to hold a discussion with some of our young people. One young man, at a pause in the discussion, braced himself and proclaimed in a militant manner, "I don't believe in God!" Unfortunately, for this young man, I, as a former atheist, took his declaration all too calmly, and I replied with a simple question, "Which is the God in which you don't believe?" I have learned from my own days of revolt and groping that every mature believer must first be a non-believer. No one can develop a higher concept of God without first discarding his childhood concept of God. Much to the dismay of our young collegiate atheist, I congratulated him on his stage of development and asked him to describe the God he was discarding. When he had defined a most primitive concept of God, I replied, "I, too, am atheistic with respect to that idea of God, but what about Einstein's idea of God who is the master planner of the universe, the author of laws that can be demonstrated mathematically? Do you know enough"; I asked the young man gently, "to say that Einstein is all wrong? And what about Spinoza's idea that God lives through man? What about Dr. Whitehead's idea of the God who is both outside of and dwelling within the world; and what about the Hasidic idea of the divine seed in every man; or what about the idea of the Jewish mystics who taught that God himself is growing and becoming?" Of course, the young man did not know enough about these God-ideas to reject them. His atheism was limited to the rejection of the God of his childhood whom he had outgrown. Most atheists fall in this category. But what about our believers? Are they so brilliant as to have a detailed knowledge which is hidden to others? It seems to me, that any thinking and open minded person must say, "I do not know exactly what God is". If a person says to you that he can define God precisely, then, he is an arrogant man; and if he says, "I know there is not God", then, he is a foolish person. A thinking person who has integrity can only say with the King of Siam in the Rogers and Hammerstein play, "It is a puzzlement". Or he must say with Job, "Thy ways , O, Lord are beyond my understanding".

To believe in God because one knows exactly what God is does not require faith. Faith is believing when all the evidence is not yet known. Even though I am a Rabbi, I would not pretend to tell



you exactly what God is, yet I could say with the poet, "I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something.....whose dwelling is the light of the setting sun, and the round ocean and the living air....and in the mind of man; a motion, and a spirit that impels all thinking things...and rolls through all things...". The opening words of the poet's declaration are the key words: "I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts...". Some of you will immediately see the contradiction in that phrase, "a disturbing presence that gives joy...." To believe in God means that you are constantly disturbed by things as they are in the world, yet, at the same time, you are capable of joy. To believe in God means that you can separate out life's blessings and still be impelled to remove the imperfections of the world. We might say that the believer has a noble restlessness in his contentment. In the religion of the future, meant for educated and rational men in a scientific age, we will not be so arrogant as to define God precisely or to deny him completely. The religionist of tomorrow will be a searcher for the greater truth, and he will understand that in his commitment to the search lies his religiosity.

In seeking to explain why they are not religious some people say, "I simply don't believe in miracles. I don't believe the world was created in six days, nor do I believe that Moses parted the Red Sea with his wand, nor do I believe that Joshua made the sun stand still". To this complaint, I would say, "I don't believe in these so-called miracles either, for this concept of miracle belongs to an earlier age; yet I am a believer in miracles." I do not doubt that the story of Moses and the Red Sea is a mixture of legend and history. As such, the story does not describe a miracle; it only teaches us that ancient man liked to add a little spice to his history; but, on the other hand, a miracle did take place under the leadership of Moses in Ancient Egypt. The miracle was that tens of thousands of Egyptian slaves dared to revolt against their masters and had the faith to cross a desert filled with unknown dangers in search of their freedom. I am not so impressed by Joshua's attempt to maneuver the sun, if, indeed, the text suggests that, but I do think it is a miracle that the sun rises every day without fail. I do think it is a miracle that the earth revolves around the sun, yet is not sucked into it, nor does the earth fly off into space. I think it is a miracle that I can speak and you can hear me. I think it is a miracle that the heart continuously pumps the blood around the body. I think it is



a miracle that the body turns food into energy and growth; it is a miracle that the body has healing powers built into it. Moses may not be a magician, but God certainly is, and not because he breaks into his system of laws to violate them, but because he has created laws which work precisely and continuously. To those who have a primitive concept of religion, a miracle is a change in the natural course of things. To the person who sees the world as a magnificent ordering, as Einstein did and as Moses did, its miraculous nature is reflected in its mathematical precision. God is not less God because he is a super-scientist. Indeed, only a scientist can begin to understand the infinite care and attention paid to the smallest detail of our universe.

Some people content that they are not religious, because they find it difficult to believe in fate. I don't believe in fate, either. One of the basic themes of our Bible is that there is no blind fate which is superior to the law of God. Only the Greeks gave such honor to fate. For them, even the gods were subject to the whims and fancy of fate. Our Yiddish grandmothers were, in one sense, more Greek than Hebraic, for they spoke frequently of "bescherte, fate". If a baby died, they comforted themselves with the expression, "It was bescherte, fated". If a man acquired tuberculosis or went blind, "It was bescherte, it was slated to be". This is basically an un-Jewish notion, and the concept of bescherte has no place in the religion of the future. In one sense, the world can be compared to a bowling alley. The borders of the alley represent the limitations built into the world by its creator. If we throw the ball too far to one side, the ball will ricochet and go the opposite way, contrary to our direction. In other words, what we are able to do in the world is limited by the world as God has given it to us; but there is a large area where we do control things. The pins represent the problems and obstacles in the world. How many pins we knock down doesn't depend on fate or on the builder of the bowling alley but on our developed skill and determination. God gives us the world with many opportunities and some limitations. How we play the game of life is substantially up to us.

Similarly, where a man drives an auto into a tree, it is not because God willed it, but because the man was negligent, or the car was defective. Nor does God decide in advance which soldier shall get killed and which survive. War is not merely an attack on man,



it is an attack against God, for the very reason that all order and decency are suspended. Where chance and accident reign unchecked, as on the battlefield, God seems to be among the missing. It is no wonder that so many who hear of the horrors of the German concentration camps ask, "Where was God at Auschwitz?" The only answer seems to be, "He was being cremated". Of course, it is disturbing to us to think that God does not control everything. It is frightening to think, even for a second, that God, too, can be victimized, but the alternatives to believing this are even more frightening. One alternative is to believe that God desired the events at Auschwitz for some unknown cosmic purpose. The other alternative is to believe that God was indifferent to what happened there. Neither of these alternatives are compatible with my idea of God.

Some years ago, I knew a Catholic woman who had reached her fortieth year without giving birth to her first child. After visiting all the Catholic shrines in America and Europe, she finally gave birth to a precious boy. This truly unusual young man died at the age of nine of a rare disease. When the priest told the woman that God had taken her son for some unknown heavenly purpose, it was more than she could bear. She left the church and abandoned her belief in God. Someone sent the woman in to see me, and I said to her, "Mary, I am certain that God did all He could do to save your child, and when He failed, His grief was even greater than yours. Know that your tragedy is shared by Him". Somehow, Mary was able to live with this kind of faith and with this kind of God.

God is far greater than any of us can imagine, but he does not control everything. He is creator of galaxies and atoms, inventor of lungs that breathe and minds that think. He is with us in our loving and giving, yes, and He fails with us and shares our tragedies. Otherwise, if God controlled everything, we would be like puppets on a string, and He would be the puppeteer. The greatest gift that God has given us is our freedom, freedom from His complete control, so that we can forge our own character through trial and error, and thus grow in nobility. Because we have this freedom to help or harm ourselves and each other, we have accidents, wars, and concentration camps, but we also have love, accomplishments, and sharing. The world is as it is, with its mixture of good and evil, sadness and joy, because God wants us as a partner and not as a puppet. The religion of tomorrow will teach the partnership of man and God in perfecting our imperfect world.



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Some people contend that they are not religious, because they don't believe in heaven and hell, and because they don't believe in life after death. I don't believe in hell either, except as man experiences it here on earth. On the other hand, if we don't have some understanding of the ongoingness of life, some understanding of the continuity of human effort, then the hell here on earth will become unbearable. The religion of tomorrow can hardly teach of hell in the next world, for how can we reconcile the concept of the goodness of God with the existence of a fiery place where God waits greedily to punish those who have erred. Such a God, in my opinion, would be not God, but devil. Surely, men suffer enough here on earth that they don't need to look forward to further and greater punishment. I am happy to say that Judaism has never made a dogma of the folktales of Gehenna. While the Christian church is founded on the doctrine of punishment for the sinner in the world to come, the idea of hell has always been somewhat outside of the main stream of Judaism. Indeed, our Bible does not even mention hell. I am sure that most of you have heard the story of a group of Jews who came to the gates of heaven only to be told by the caretaker that while they deserved to enter heaven, they would have to wait until new living quarters were built. Where were they to wait? In the domain below - in hades. After they had spent almost a week in hell, so the story goes, the devil desperately called the caretaker in heaven and pleaded with him to take away his Jews. "Why", asked the caretaker, "we agreed that you would keep them temporarily for two weeks". "Well", replied Satan, "I refuse to keep them any longer. They've been here only one week and already they have air-conditioned the place!" I like this little story which does not even have the status of a legend. I like its mood, which teaches that the function of a Jew is to try to relieve man of his suffering, to air-condition a world made too oppressive by poverty and war.

When I have told church groups about the Jewish attitude towards hell, I have often been asked, "If we aren't going to hell when we're bad, then, why be good?" To which I reply, in the spirit of the Book of Job, "For the sake of being good, or to make man's stay on this earth somewhat less burdensome; to bring God's presence more fully into the world".



As for the continuity of human effort and life after death, the religion of tomorrow can scarcely abandon this hope. Of course, I do not believe in a physical heaven. I don't believe there is a way-station in the sky with a blinking neon sign reading "Heaven", nor do I believe in the presence of individual souls with wings flapping around among the stars. As Robert Nathan has said so well in his novel by the same name, "There is another heaven". There is a heaven other than that sanitary place reserved for people of exemplary self-control. There is the heaven of sharing, in which we participate whenever we help someone in need. There is the heaven of loving in which we participate whenever we freely give of ourselves to another. There is the heaven of gratitude, in which we participate whenever we are keenly aware of the many gifts we receive just by being born. There is the heaven of giving birth to children, so that we stand quivering at the side of God, as at the moment when the world was first created. There is the heaven of teaching grand ideas and techniques to those who are young, so that we transmit to future generations the wisdom and accomplishments of the past, and in this handing down, we live forever. We live in idea, in spirit, and in reality. Then, I believe, there is still another kind of heaven, which I call simply, the return. For I believe that each of us is like a river which comes from the ocean of life that we call God; and after our brief flowing in this world, after we die, we return to that ocean. Most assuredly, a return to the ocean is not death for the river, but more like healing for those who have been ill, more like rest is for those who have been weary, more like reinvigoration is for those who come to what seems to be an ending. If our waters are inter-mingled with the m'kor hayyim, the biblical term for the reservoir of life, how can we ever cease to be?

On the holiday of Simchat Torah, which will soon be upon us as the last day of Succot, we do an interesting thing in the synagogue. Instead of reading one lesson from the Torah we read two. We take out two Torahs, one turned to the very end, and one turned to the very beginning. In one breathe, the reader tells the story at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, the story of the death of Moses, and in the same breath our tradition says, the reader must begin the story of Genesis, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth". "Death", says our tradition, "is but a return to the beginning". The religion of tomorrow will need a doctrine of the inter-connectedness of the generations and a concept of spiritual on-goingness.



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Surely, some of you have recognized that in describing the religion of tomorrow, I have simply been talking about Reform Judaism. All of these things, I believe now. All of these things our congregation teaches. We teach the sacredness of the present, the critical nature of the present opportunity which, if not firmly grasped, is forever lost.

We teach that when we act at our best, we participate in the divine nature. We teach that God does not choose to have us stand idly by while He steers the world, nor does He wish us to steer wildly without reference to His course. What He seeks from us is a partnership, so that He can live through us, and we through Him.