

HEBRAISM AND HELLENISM:

THE PLEASURE ORIENTED VS THE PURPOSEFUL LIFE

By Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard, Beth Am
Miami, Florida, 5731 - 1970, Yom Kippur

A great English writer of former days, Mathew Arnold, once wrote an essay entitled, "Hellenism and Hebraism". Mr. Arnold tried to show that the history of the Western World in the last two thousand years was the result of the conflict of two dynamic forces, Hellenism and Hebraism. To Mr. Arnold, Hellenism was the set of ideas and values set in motion by the ancient Greeks. It represented man's questioning spirit, his desire to know things as they are. To Mr. Arnold, Hellenism included man's sense of joy, his drive towards music and the arts. For Hebraism, Mr. Arnold reserved only man's drive towards the moral and the purposeful. If it were not for Hebraism, in this sense, wrote Mr. Arnold, the Western World would long since have become pagan, for man's uncontrolled thrust towards pleasure, ultimately, leads him to degradation. Arnold was able to recognize, however, that when the advocates of Hebraism overload their followers with guilt, they give men a burden they cannot possibly bear. In the end, Mr. Arnold concluded that the world needs a blending of both Hellenism and Hebraism.

While I think Mr. Arnold's understanding of Hebraism was too narrow, he might well have written his essay for today's world. In a real sense, the battle between these two forces still goes on unabated. In the wider group of modern Hellenists, we could include all of those who live without asking the ultimate question, "to what purpose?". At one extreme of this group we would find the shallow pleasure-seekers who say, "Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we shall die". At the other extreme we would find the intellectuals who glorify technological progress, irrespective of the consequences upon society and the individual. The Hebraists of today would include, at one extreme, those sainted souls who say with Maimonides, "Weigh each deed as if your act will turn the balance of the world in favor of peace or justice". The modern Hebraists would also include those pragmatists who fear that anarchy will result if men do not acknowledge, at least, a minimum set of moral rules. Judging by the mad rush away from moral discipline today, we would have to say that, for the present, the pendulum seems to be swinging towards the Hellenists. The Hebraists are currently known as "the squares". They are not where the action is.

Let me give you an interesting case in point. A few years ago, I journeyed to Florida State University to participate in a panel discussion on the theme, "The Playboy Morality". I was surprised to see thousands of college students attending each of the lecture-discussions. They had come, of course, not to hear Rabbi Herbert Baumgard. They came to hear a modern Hellenist, the Rev. Dr. William Hamilton, who had co-authored a national best seller on the theme, "God is Dead". These students came to hear Dr. Hamilton kill God. In the course of his remarks, to which I was to reply briefly, Dr. Hamilton asked the students to dance like Zorba the Greek. "Just dance for the joy of life," he urged them. "The old rules are disappearing", he said matter of factly. He challenged the students to fashion their own set of rules and to live as they alone determined.

In my reply to Dr. Hamilton, I said to the students, "If you really want to know the joy of dancing on a continuing basis, and not just for one fling, go to a dancing teacher'. Study some of the disciplines of the dance, then, you will be able to make-up more steps than Zorba ever dreamed of". "Don't be a fly-by night dancer", I suggested. "First, learn the patterns and the possibilities of the dance; then, you will know the deeper joy of dancing." I also told the students a story from Hasidic sources which popped into my mind. The story takes place during the holiday of Simchat Torah, when, in the Hasidic Synagogues of Eastern Europe, the Rabbi would take the Torah (the scroll containing the Five Books of Moses) and dance with it. On this occasion, the Rabbi danced with the Torah, and, then, he laid it down, only to continue his dance, holding his arms as if he still had the Torah. His disciples were puzzled. "Whatever is the Rabbi doing?", they asked. It was up to the Rabbi's most brilliant pupil to suggest a reason for the Rabbi's actions. "First", said the pupil, "the Rabbi has danced with the Torah, absorbing all that it has to teach him; then, he laid down the Torah and projected what he had learned into a new dance, into a new teaching". From then on the Hasidim taught, "It is every man's mission to become a Torah himself, but, first, he must study and absorb all the Torah has to teach". Although most of the students at Florida State University were not Jewish, they understood clearly that the Torah in the story was a symbol for the accumulated wisdom of mankind.

I was delighted by the warm student response to my remarks. You see, they had come to watch God be killed, but when the killing was through, they weren't very happy about it. All of which may prove that our students are ambivalent about their modern brand of Hellenism. They are not quite ready to turn their back on all of the tradition.

The Hasidic story of the Rabbi dancing with the Torah teaches very clearly that Hebraism is not simply a matter of ethics and purposefulness. Hebraism also encourages us to dance in life, to experience pleasure; but it teaches that the pleasure and the purposefulness should be tied together. We Hebraists do not think the two things are incompatible.

What Matthew Arnold, did not know when he wrote his famous essay, is that Judaism has always had an internal conflict between its own brand of Hellenism and its more fundamental moralism. When Arnold wrote his essay, he was identifying Hebraism with Christianity, with its emphasis on man's evil nature, with its dark look at sex, and its Calvinistic emphasis on restraint, even in the joy of family life. Had Mr. Arnold known Judaism better, he would have broadened his definition of Hebraism.

HASIDISM VERSUS TALMUDISM

One of the key words in Judaism is "simcha" or celebration. Ever since King David danced before the Ark, when it was first brought into Jerusalem, we have celebrated religious occasions, whether it was Simchat Torah, or a Bar Mitzvah, or a wedding. For us, it is "a mitzvah", praiseworthy, to participate in a simcha; but, even beyond this, our historical development includes an entire philosophy that we might call our own Zorba-ism. The original name of our Zorbaism is "Hasidism". The basic teaching of Hasidism is that the shortest road to God is the path of joy, the celebration of life. "The greatest sinner", the Hasidim taught, "is the man who is unhappy for small reason." With all that God has given us, they taught, not to rejoice in the little details of life is to reflect a lack of gratitude. To be sad is to impune the hospitality of our Creator.

To be sure, Judaism has its sterner side. We call this intensely ethical orientation of Judaism by the name of Talmudism. Anyone who reads the Talmud cannot help but be impressed by the tremendous scope of wisdom it contains. The Jews who lived their lives according to Talmudic rules had to be ethical in their business; they had to be peace-loving; they had to be concerned for the community; and they had to be law-abiding. Hasidism, which developed in the early 18th century in Eastern Europe, sprang up as a revolt of the impoverished Jewish masses against the intellectualism of the Talmud. The Talmud taught the persecuted Jews to glory in the ancient past and to anticipate a better future. The Hasidim asked, "How about a little happiness now?" The Hasidim taught that God is as much present now as he was in the time of Moses. He is as much with the poor man as with the rich man. They emphasized the unique and precious nature of each individual, irrespective of his academic or economic achievements, before a loving God who appreciated feeling as much as knowledge.

Because they appealed to the less-educated masses, the Hasidic Rabbis taught through stories and parables. One Hasidic Rabbi taught his disciples, "There is a key which unlocks the lock of the Gate of Heaven, but God prefers that you smash the lock with one heartfelt sigh." The key represented Talmudic ethics. If you have that key, you can get into heaven, but God prefers "that you smash the lock with one heartfelt sigh." God prefers the man who does good, not because the book says so, but because inately he wishes to be good, out of love for man, God, and the world.

Much of what our better young people are saying today, the Hasidim said in their time, two and a half centuries ago. Listen to the modern ring of this story. Once a Rabbi was late for the Synagogue service. His friends were very concerned about him. Certainly, the great Rabbi must be ill or worse, if he did not come in time for the service. When the men were almost through with their prayers, the Rabbi came into the Synagogue, all aglow. "What happened, dear Rabbi," they asked? "Are you all right?" The Rabbi first apologized for being late and, then, eagerly told of his experience. "Today, I left my home early to come to the Synagogue," he began, "Since I knew I had much time, I went by the way of the forest. There I saw the huge trees, and I marvelled, 'What a miracle of God that such a tree could grow from a small seed!' Then, I passed the lake, and I was fascinated by the fish in their infinite variety and size, and I marvelled that God in his wisdom could create beings without lungs to live under the water". "So you see, dear friends", concluded the Rabbi, "I was so overwhelmed with the beauty of God's world that I neglected to be on time to worship."

This story was a Hasidic technique to teach that it is possible to pray in other places than in a formal House of Worship. No good Jew should ever forget this. I would be the first to encourage people to pray as they witness the miracles of nature about them; yet, what would happen, if each of us prayed alone all the time? Would we have any community institutions? Would we ever come together to share our hopes and problems? You see, it is not a question of this or that, but a question of this and that. There are times to pray and dance by oneself, and there are times to dance and pray with others. This is what some of the Hellenists of today find so difficult to digest. For them, things are either black or white, pleasurable or purposeful, funful or serious. They are unable to distinguish the shadings in between.

I agree with the teaching of the Hasidic Rabbi (of the village of Mezritch) who declared, "Greater than the first miracle is the last". We need to know that God is as much present today as yesterday. The greater miracles will take place tomorrow, precisely, because the Creation is continuous, and the power of God is dynamic. We cannot be enslaved to the past, but that does not mean that we should totally disregard the past. Only the fool ignores the

learning experiences of those who came before him. You see, it is not a question of the new or the old. Why not, the old and the new, syncretized?

THE NEED FOR A TORAH

How like some of our young people today sounds the Hasidic Rabbi in this next story! A disciple asked his teacher, "Rabbi, how is it that the Bible says Abraham was a great Jew, when he didn't even know of the 613 laws of Moses?" The Rabbi answered, "Abraham knew the law of love, and this law is equal to the 613 commandments". Nothing that our modern prophets teach is more revolutionary than this, yet this heresy was permissible in 18th century Judaism, and it is an essential part of the foundation of Reform Judaism. Even this magnificent teaching has its limitations, however. It assumes that if one is love-giving, he automatically will act nobly and properly towards his fellow man. This is not necessarily true. The love-swing^{ing}/Zorbas have sometimes given us more problems than anyone else. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, in the name of love afflicted the Jews, and many an anti-semite has justified his program in the name of a god of love. Our world needs more than love and good-intentions. We still need the Ten-Commandments and the discipline of the broader spectrum of ethical commands. A certain amount of Talmudism or strict Hebraism is essential to the existence of a stable and democratic society.

In this connection, I think of a young girl at Florida State University who heard me talk about Torah (or a basic code of ethics). She gathered up her courage to come up to me while I was having a cup of coffee in a campus restaurant. In effect, what she said to me was this: "Rabbi, my boy-friend says he loves me, and since I love him, he sees no reason why we shouldn't sleep together. I am encouraged by what you said, Rabbi, to think that I might be right in holding out for marriage". "Tell me, Rabbi", she asked, "is there really a Torah on these things?". We can see from this incident, which is not an isolated problem, that love may "make the world go round", but it doesn't alone hold the world in orbit. Love has to have a base, a home, if it is to be more than pleasure.

"Each person ought to be allowed to do his thing", our modern prophets teach. The Hasidim taught that each human being is unique and each man fulfills a function that another person cannot. No matter what your work is, they said, it is as precious to God as that which anyone else does. In this way, they invested the most menial of tasks with exalted meaning. To the Hasidim, the street cleaner was as important, in his way, as the doctor was in his. The mute person was considered to have a special purpose, even though that purpose might be difficult to discern. The insane person was considered to be especially close to God, precisely because only God could understand him. The Hasidim considered that a man served God to the extent that he followed his individual calling to its deepest extent. "We serve God", they taught, "even when we are unaware of our serving. How much better can we serve when we do our part with

full awareness that we are partners in a mysterious and marvelous universe."

The particular nature of a person's work, and the formal aspect of a person's prayer is not the most important thing to God, the Hasidim taught. God understands and treasures every human effort in its uniqueness. Witness the story of a boy, who was mute, who could not speak. The boy yearned to express his prayers on Yom Kippur as everyone else did, but he could make no sound come from his throat. Finally, in desperation, the child drew out his whistle and blew it as loud as he could. The Rabbi stopped the service in admiration and said, "Let this child's prayer lead all of our prayers to heaven!"

This same spirit is invested in the story of the ignorant shepherd who could not read Hebrew and made his own prayer to God. When one of the educated townspeople heard the shepherd pray, he scolded him for his ignorance. "That's no way to pray", said the educated man. "You must do it in a certain way. You must read from this prayer-book." Whereupon, the shepherd struggled, but in vain, to learn to read. Finally, the shepherd threw the book away and ceased to pray altogether. When the Hasidic Rabbi in the village found out what had happened, he visited the shepherd, pleaded with him to return to his own method of prayer, and assured him that God welcomed his heart-felt prayer. Thereupon, the shepherd got on his knees and uttered this prayer, "Oh Lord, if you owned these sheep, I would tend them for you day and night without fee. For you see, Lord, I love you!" Such was his prayer..., innocent and compelling.

WHERE DOES THE REVOLT END-UP?

Yes, the Hasidic spirit was a fresh breath of wind blowing through an over-talmudized Judaism. How the Judaism of that time needed this return to the primitive, this emphasis on the basic nature of things! But Hasidism then, like the Hellenism of modern times, had its problems. Once the line between the Holy and the profane had been crossed, the Hasidim moved further and further away from the disciplines of Judaism. In time, every village had its own "tzadik", or saint, teaching his own individual brand of Judaism. In time, there was no group loyalty to a central tradition. In time, the emphasis on joy and self-expression uncontrolled, led to anarchy and sexual licentiousness. In time, the Hasdim danced Zorba-like, drunkenly, while the barrels crashed down the hill and destroyed all that Judaism had carefully built for centuries. True, a revolt was needed against Talmudism. The problem with all revolts, however, is how to measure it, how to control it.

I am a Reform Rabbi because I believe that Reform Judaism presents a reasonable balance between Hasidism and Talmudism, between Hellenism and Hebraism, between the need to celebrate life and the need to live purposefully.

From the vantage point of Reform Judaism, it is possible to say, "Yes", to the best aspects of both the Hasidic and Talmudic traditions, to glean from each of them that which is most meaningful in our time.

In Reform Judaism, we are free to create new things, yet we are mindful that we are only creating variations on a theme proven valid by the centuries. We stand on the shoulders of our fathers. Without a knowledge and appreciation of their contributions, we would collapse.

As a Reform Jew, one can have the best of both worlds. Like the Rabbi in the story, we can dance both with the Torah and without it, provided, of course, that we learn to dance, first, with the Torah and provided, secondly, that we understand that we are free to lay down the Torah only when we know enough to be a Torah ourselves! Unfortunately, there are few so well informed and so wise.