

TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

A Sermon given by Rabbi Dr. Herbert Baumgard, Temple Beth Am, Miami, Fla.  
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In recent days, there has been much talk about the Jewish vote in the coming presidential election. Jews, we have been told, usually vote overwhelmingly for a certain party because that party has seemed to represent the interests of the poor and has been directed towards liberal change. It is not my intention tonite to talk about the presidential election. The point we want to consider is that if one is born a Jew, he is subtly influenced by forces which help to determine, not only how he will vote in a political election, but, how he will otherwise conduct his life.

Sociological studies show that the fact that one comes from a Jewish background may well determine whether one prefers chess or shot-putting. It may determine whether one becomes a doctor or a farmer, whether one goes to college or begins to work after high-school for the telephone company. Many of our idealistic Jewish collegians, so busy in denying their debt to the Jewish people, do not understand that their very idealism, their very desperate need to change the world and to build new institutions, stems as much from their Jewish experience as from the moral thrust of Judaism. The Jewish reformer, who denies the sources which have made him a reformer, weakens those sources, severs himself from his best allies, and, unknowingly, works to defeat his own cause. If he and his children are not strongly dedicated to maintaining those Jewish sources which nourished him, the sources will disappear, and the reservoir of inspiration will dry up. If the Jew is not true to himself, not only the Jewish community, but the world, will be the loser.

A case in point. The Kol Nidre prayer which is the beautiful and compelling prayer opening our Yom Kippur service was born in the fire of Jewish persecution. It stems, we believe, from the Spanish period, late Fifteenth Century. At that time, many Jews were forcefully converted to Catholicism, and they continued to live secretly as "Marranoes"; as converted Jews still practicing Judaism. Having taken the vows in another faith, the Marranoes sought forgiveness from God for these vows given under duress. Anyone who understands the background of this prayer is sensitized to resist those who force their opinions on others. At the very least, the Kol Nidre is a call to religious liberty, although we have made it over the years into a grand repository for all Jewish experience. Many of us feel both elated and sad when we hear this prayer. We may not know why precisely, because our response is emotional, more than rational. To the extent that we are more informed about the Jewish experience and more sensitive to it, we invest more profound meaning into the Kol Nidre prayer. If you become involved in the prayer as a knowledgeable Jew, it will work to influence your life in numerous ways.

Humanism, A Growth from Judaism

Many Jews, however, are not moved at all by this prayer. They say, "I am a humanist. I believe in the glory of man. I don't believe in God, and I don't need religion." When I hear such a statement, I get two kinds of reaction. First of all, I am delighted to hear that any person feels so strongly about mankind, and I hope that he is really sincere. Secondly, I know such a person is ignorant of Judaism,

otherwise he would acknowledge the immense debt that the humanist philosophy owes to Judaism, which is the humanist religion, par excellence. The closest that the contemporaries of the ancient Hebrews could get to humanism was a statement found in a Babylonian priestly text. It reads, "The King is like the shadow of a god, and man is like the shadow of the King." It remained for the Hebrews to teach that man is created in the "image of God" himself. The rabbis have interpreted this to mean that man has the potential to grow in mind and spirit in the image of infinite love, justice, and mercy. Through all the long centuries when Christian teachers maintained that man was born in original sin and could be saved only "in the shadow" of a certain man - god, throughout all these centuries, Jews taught that man was not born in original sin, that, on the contrary, he had the capacity to make noble choices and to live the moral life. If one is, indeed, a humanist today, let him, at least, acknowledge that his entire movement stands on the foundation built by courageous Jews.

One of the great modern humanists, Erich Fromm, has made this acknowledgment in his book, "Ye Shall Be As Gods." Fromm is an outstanding lay psychoanalyst, author of books like "The Art Of Loving", In his new book, Fromm retells many of the stories he learned in an Orthodox Yeshivah, stories which influenced his choice to enter the field of psychoanalysis. For reasons similar to those motivating Erich Fromm, Jews have been drawn to those professions which seek to help man develop his faculties and to live the more noble life. It is not by accident that so many Jews are doctors, psychiatrists, teachers, researchers, and lawyers. From contact with the Jewish group, and with our own family members, we have somehow learned that it is our duty to help man in his difficult sojourn on earth.

#### Mist We "Kill" God?

There are an increasing number of social commentators who speak of the present age as the Post-Christian age. They mean by this that this is the post-religious age, an age in which man is deified and God is eclipsed. Some of the foremost leaders of the "death of God" movement have been Christian religious figures like Altizer at Emory University, and William Hamilton, formerly of Colgate Divinity School, and now at the New College in Sarasota. Theologians of this type have contended that since Christianity has given to God all the glory and the power while depicting man as sinful, weak, and completely dependent on God, the only way to elevate man is to reverse the equation, if not to eliminate God entirely. When I appeared with the Reverend Hamilton on the same platform at Florida State University, he admitted under close questioning, that he had become merely a humanist, surrendering any real belief in God.

Judaism has never made the mistake Christianity made in this regard. It never held man in low esteem. On the contrary, Jews have regularly thanked the God who gave them the responsibility for fulfilling extremely difficult moral tasks. This is the whole meaning of the B'RACHAH, or blessing, which goes "ASHER KIDSHANU B'MITZVOTAV". It is an expression of gratitude that God has considered us noble enough

to perform the most exacting duties. Even the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis affirms the view of our fathers that God gave man the world in all of its beauty and charged man "to have dominion" over the earth, to harness it, and to help order it. There has been no comparable "Death of God" movement in Judaism, perhaps, for the simple reason that Jews do not have to kill God to elevate man. We have never taught that man is saved only by the grace of God. We have always taught that God has given man the responsibility of helping to save himself by building the good society on this earth and by fulfilling his God-given potential.

It is precisely here, however, that many so-called "modernists" balk. They ask, "Why do we have to say that God has given us anything?" Well, we don't have to say that. We can say that men have the power to think and the power to talk purely by accident. We can say that the ability to love and the urge to resist evil are purely evolutionary accidents; but there are brilliant scientists who would sharply disagree with us, Einstein among them. Einstein, who believed in God as a Master Planner, once said, "God does not shoot dice." That was his way of saying that such wondrous things as the order of the universe, and such profound things as love and self-sacrifice, are not products of the chance intersection of certain molecules.

#### The Importance of Humility

When the Prophet Micah attacked the religious hypocrites of his day, criticizing the voluminous rituals and the insincere priests, he said to the Jews of his time, "It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee. Only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God". Our great Jewish teachers, mindful of man's weakness and aware of his potential for evil, still believed him to be capable of "doing justly" and "loving mercy". There was still another essential for man, however, according to Micah. He must walk humbly with God, otherwise all of man's planning and labor would be for naught.

If man labors only with the thought of self-fulfillment and personal aggrandizement, if he does not think of purposes beyond his own meaning, and spanning the meaning of his own time, then, what man does crumbles like the Tower of Babel, and men babble in confused speech, unable to communicate with one another.

Now, I don't think that most of those dissatisfied with common expression of religion really want to kill God. I think they want to discard certain childlike God concepts, but they are unaware that one can still believe in God while rejecting these primitive concepts. Let me say clearly, that I am atheistic with respect to the concept of God which teaches that God is punitive, that he weighs in grudging scales our merits and demerits, and gleefully waits to scorch us in hell for our sins. I do not believe in such a God. Nor does Judaism

teach of such a God. Let me say that I do not believe in a God which holds one people to be innately superior to another; nor does Judaism teach about such a God. Judaism does teach, however, that certain peoples can choose a mission of service which can make them different from other peoples. Judaism does teach that man's efforts have a meaning beyond the meaning of his personal life. Judaism does teach that the past is sacred as the seed for the present, and the present is sacred as the ground for the future. It does teach that the ages and the generations are bound together in mutual responsibility. Judaism does speak of duty and loyalty to one's family and to one's group. Judaism teaches that man is his brother's keeper, not merely his own keeper. Judaism teaches that children owe parents respect and care, just as parents owe these things to their children. Judaism does not teach that rituals, in themselves, have a saving grace, but it does teach that rituals can convey emotions that words cannot express, and common rituals can hold a people and the generations together.

#### A Legacy of Idol-Smashing

One of the great legends of Judaism is the story of Abraham and the idols. Abraham was the very model of a young rebel who smashed the idols his father made and sold in his store. "These are not Gods," cried Abraham; "They are capable of nothing." Abraham, the idol-smasher, was not just a destroyer of old ideas and institutions. He had something to substitute in place of the old. He had a new idea of God, an idea of a God rooted in moral law and concerned with the way men treat one another. Abraham also had the idea of a covenanted people, a people dedicated to carrying these ideas to all the world!

Indeed, Jews have been idol smashers down through the ages. Abraham, revolting against the idea of child sacrifice; Moses, revolting against the idea of slavery; Jeremiah, attacking the power-oriented priests in the Temple in Jerusalem; Isaiah, attacking the rich but callous landowners; Nathan, attacking the king who took another man's wife. To be a Jew, is to be part of a revolutionary spirit, but that is not the whole matter. Anyone can be critical. The trick is to be constructive. The trick is to have the better idea. The trick is to make reforms, while harming the least number of people and helping the most. The trick is to be humble in the face of the huge difficulties in ordering human society and in soliciting the best kind of response from mankind.

To the young Jewish rebels of today, we give the advice of Polonius to his son. "To thine ownself be true, thou canst not then be false to any man." Be true to yourself, that is to say, know yourself as a Jew. Know what it is your ancestors really fought for and taught through all the dark ages in order that you might be what your are! To our young people, we have the right to say, "Before you reject Judaism, find out what it is; it might be all the grand things you ever dreamed of". Frankly, this was my personal experience as I worked through my early atheism. After many years of painful searching, I, finally, came to look at things

in this way: As a Jew, I have 4000 years of coordinated group striving to draw upon. Where can I hope to find more wisdom? As a Jew, I have the example of Abraham, and Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Brandeis and Cardoza, Maimonides and Spinoza, Hillman and Dubinsky, and a thousand like them to nourish me. What people can look to their past and find such heroes in such abundant numbers? As a Jew, I believe in the potential in man and in the promise that is God. What philosophy offers more by way of hope or inspiration?

To the young Jews seeking a new and greater truth in every place except within Judaism, we might offer the advice of one prophet who said to similar wanderers in his day, "Come now to the fountain of living waters and drink, for only here, in your own reservoir, will your thirst be truly quenched and only here will your hunger be truly satisfied."