

## WHAT LIBERAL JEWS BELIEVE

A HIGH HOLIDAY SERMON, RABBI HERBERT M. BAUMGARD, 5747-1986

When our ancestors gathered together on Yom Kippur Eve, as we are gathered tonight, they were quite clear about what they believed. To be a Jew in medieval Europe, for example, meant to be adrift in a hostile sea of superstition and prejudice, and yet few Jews wavered in their conviction that as a Jew they were serving God's special purpose. We who live in an age that is supposedly rational and scientific have more questions about our Jewish orientation. Indeed, many of us have no clear understanding about our Jewish religious beliefs. Yom Kippur is certainly a time for examining those beliefs.

One way to understand what you believe is to eliminate certain things in which you do not believe. Let us start with the most advertised religious belief in modern times, the Christian Fundamentalism which is thrust at us from every TV station each Sunday morning. Because of President Regan's personal beliefs, the representatives of Christian Fundamentalism have made serious inroads into the White House itself. Pat Robertson, a Fundamentalist Minister running for the Presidency of the United States, has stated publicly that Christians who believe as he does are more patriotic and more devoted to family life than those who do not accept his beliefs. What is it that Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggert would have us believe?

Let us begin with what I call the Fundamentalist formula. The formula states that when Adam and Eve ate the "apple", they committed a sin which condemned not only themselves but all members of the human family forever. This is what is called "Original" sin. According to the Fundamentalist formula, because of Adam and Eve every baby born to a human begin today is born in sin and is condemned to eternal Hell.

So the second part of the Fundamentalist formula is Hell. Hell is a place, they tell us, that God has created to torture all humans at their death because of the original sin in the Garden of Eden. The third part of the Fundamentalist formula is salvation or the way to escape eternal punishment. That way, the TV preachers tell us, is to believe that a savior died for your sin, and to believe that his blood erases the judgement that assigns each of us to the eternal fire.

What do we as Liberal Jews believe? Well, to begin with, we do not accept any part of the Christian Fundamentalist formula. We Liberal Jews do not believe in the existence of Hell at all. We do not believe that a good and forgiving God would wait for us to die and then punish us eternally. We believe that even the worst of humans is not worthy of such unrelenting punishment. Secondly, we Liberal Jews do not believe in "Original Sin." We do not believe that the sin of Adam and Eve is carried in our genes down through the centuries so that every new born child is afflicted with its venom. The Prophets Jeremiah and Exekiel, 2600 years ago, made it clear to Jews that "the children shall not suffer for the sins of the fathers". On the contrary, each individual is responsible for his own sins, they taught us. Since we do not believe in two aspects of the formula, we feel no need for the third part. Since we do not believe in either "Original Sin" or in Hell, we see no need for a doctrine of salvation from Hell. Even if we did, we would not accept the very ancient idea that the sins of people today can be washed away by substitutionary atonement, i.e. by someone else's sacrificial death. What do Liberal Jews believe, well first of all, we do not accept any of Jerry Falwell's formula.

In rejecting this formula, however, we have already stipulated that we believe some other things very positively. We believe that each person is responsible for his own deeds. The corollary to this is the belief that salvation is not escape from eternal fire but an integrated self in an integrated world. That is to say we believe that



the person who is positively oriented towards the moral and caring life and who works towards a peaceful and just society is a saved person. As our prayerbook informs us, God "has placed within us eternal life, natah b'tochaynu Chayah Olam". The roots of salvation are in our minds and hearts, and the problem is somehow to integrate our lust, our personal ambition, and our energy with what is good for the group and society. For us, salvation is a this-worldly concept.

Again, in rejecting the notion of Hell, we are saying that we believe there is a Creative Force in the world which is loving and forgiving. The corollary to that is the grand idea of Moses that we have to fashion ourselves in the image of that force which some of us call God. The Book of Leviticus quotes God as saying: "Ye shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy". Our task is to try to imitate God in His holiness, in His caring nature. Our task is to be God's partner in perfecting an incomplete world.

When I have given this sort of presentation in the past, someone always has asked, but Rabbi, if you do not believe in other worldly salvation, you do not believe in life after death. Some Jews are confused about this issue. The rejection of the Fundamentalist doctrine of salvation is not at all a denial of the possibility of life after death. What we reject as Liberal Jews is only the specific content of the Fundamentalist formula.

To be sure, belief about life after death is not a dogma in Liberal Judaism. Orthodox Jews believe in the resurrection of the body in God's time, and they speak of some modified system of reward and punishment in the hereafter. When the early Christians spoke about the resurrection of their leader, they were trying to speak about the fulfillment of one of Orthodox Judaism's basic beliefs. "See", said these Jews who began their own sect, "our leader has been resurrected, and if you believe in his sacrificial atonement, you too will be resurrected." The Orthodox Jew taught simply that if you follow the laws of the Torah you will be resurrected.

St. Paul, the refugee from Orthodox Judaism who expanded upon the teachings of Jesus, made it clear that you do not have to follow the laws of the Torah, if you believe in Christianity's Savior.

We Liberal Jews find it hard to believe in the resurrection of the body after its certain disintegration in the earth. On the other hand, we can recognize that there is a very obvious kind of physical survival through the reproduction of the species. When a baby is born, it carries with it the cells of its parents and its grandparents. So that even if the parents and grandparents pass away, their cells survive in a new body. This is a very real kind of physical survival, but what happens to that elusive but wondrous thing called the individual personality, that lamp that lights the shade that is our body? What happens at death to that motor-force which enables us to be ethical or loving? Honest answers here can only be expressed in symbolic terms.

If you were to ask me, "Do you believe in heaven", I would answer, "of course": but I mean something entirely different by that term than the Fundamentalists who have a very literal interpretation for it. In a funeral eulogy, I often speak of the individual person as the river and God as the ocean. I believe that each of us is an outlet of the divine spirit. I believe that God lives through each of us, rejoices with us, achieves with us, and suffers with us. What happens to each of us is of critical importance to the world, because what happens to each of us is also happening to God. The person who lives by this faith will measure his deeds by a more exacting standard, and he will understand that he does not suffer alone. Our prayerbook says, "God is closer than breathing". Can this mean that the Divine and the human are part of the same essence; that "chayah olam, eternal life is indeed within us!?"



Anyone who has watched a large body of water at high tide knows that if the water cannot go this way, it goes that way. Similarly, if one source of life closes down, another opens up. If the divine spirit, the great thrust of life, cannot live in this body, then it bursts forth in a new baby. Which is a way of saying that to the extent that the life force within us is the life force of God, our life force will burst forth in another outlet when our lungs and mind shut down. To the extent that our individual life is the stuff of the universe, we can never die.

But most of us are concerned with a more specific kind of eternity. It is not enough for us to know that our cells survive in our children and grandchildren. It is not enough for us to know that we are part of a life force which never ends. We want to know that that which is distinct about Herbert Baumgard, John Smith, and Mary Goldberg somehow has its personal ongoingness. Here again the Liberal does not want to accept easy and unsupportable answers. He can, however, acknowledge the fact that all kinds of possibilities exist, even if we cannot prove any of them absolutely right now.

Consider for a moment what the human mind really is. The human mind is a computer, no more or less. What we call the mind is made up of a lump sum of our personal experiences perpetually recorded on our brain. The human mind, so to speak, is the computer at the local station. Suppose now that there is a computer of greater power at a central station. Suppose that this computer, this greater mind, absorbs all of the experiences which are recorded on our individual computers and stores these experiences forever. Our personal computer may disintegrate when our body disintegrates but this greater computer, this ever-living mind, may keep our experiences, our personality, alive forever. Improbable you say, but human beings have created just this sort of minor to major computer installations. In fact, we have computers in outer space talking to computers in Houston, Texas, hundreds of thousands of miles away.

Is it not possible, nay probable, that the reality principle we humans have just discovered concerning computers has long been in existence and on a much more profound scale than we can imagine?

In Liberal Judaism, it is possible to entertain varying theories about the unknowables like God and life after death. But if this is so, you might well ask, if it is possible to have different hypotheses, how can we believe anything at all with conviction? To this, there is a simple reply. If one knows all the answers, there is no need of faith. I believe with Einstein that we will always be as infants in comprehending the universe, and ultimately one has to make a leap of faith as to what the probabilities are and as to how one chooses to live one's life.

While only a small God is absolutely knowable, I accept the hypothesis that God is as Moses understood him to be, a God who cares about slaves and about the outcast. I choose then to live my life as this God's partner and imitator, trying with my frail human powers to do Godlike things. Einstein did not know absolutely that if you split the atom you would get energy in the amount of  $mc^2$ ; but Einstein had the faith that "God does not shoot dice", as he put it. Einstein had the faith that God was a master mathematician, that the atom was highly organized and disciplined, that if you split it, a calculable amount of energy would be released. Einstein's hypothesis proved to be inordinately precise and correct. We could say that this wondrous atomic power has come to humankind only because there was a man who had faith in the logic of the universe, who had faith in the mind of God.

Some people can accept only a religion which guarantees them that all the answers are in and known. My feeling is that if God can be defined in a formula, then he is not God at all but an idol. What excites me about Biblical Judaism is that it starts with the assumption that God cannot be completely known. God says to Moses, "I am what I am. I shall be what I shall be". That is to say, I am not a God you can see and define precisely, and I am not a God to be manipulated by magicians and incantations.



What excites me about Liberal Judaism, which is derived from the scripture, is that it calls us to go in search of this God who is ever beyond us, even while He is closer than breathing. Great ideas are sometimes communicated best by stories. Bear with me then while I tell you a story which I have told you before, because it is an essential story for the person of Liberal Jewish faith. The story is that a disciple of the Hasidic Rabbi asked him, "Master, how is it that God sometimes seems to be so far away?" The Rabbi answered, "How is it that a parent attempts to teach a child to walk? If the parent always held on to the child's hand and stayed close, the child would always be dependent and would never learn to walk. So what does the wise parent do, he stands away from the child and beckons to him. And what does the parent do after the child has taken his first steps towards him? Why the parent moves away and beckons again. So it is with God and his children", taught the Hasidic master. "God wants us to grow towards Him. To become like Him. So He stands away from us and beckons to us. And then what does He do after we move forward? Why He recedes and beckons again". The implication in this classic story is that each time we walk towards God, we take some of His qualities into ourselves, we become more God-like. And as we become more God-like, we become capable of conceiving of a more expansive God idea, which is to say, God seems once again to recede. And so the interaction goes on and on and on.

This is why the religious life of the Liberal Jew can be so exciting. It is a journey that never ends. It is a perpetual growing. It is an eternal seeking. As one Jewish sage, Maimonides taught, "It is in exalted seeking that you experience eternity".