

THE MARCH TOWARDS THE UNIVERSAL RELIGION

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Several years ago, on Rosh Hashana, I presented a sermon expressing my concern that so many people were willing to accept the inevitability of atomic war. You may recall that I opposed as negative thinking the drive to build bomb shelters. One of our more thoughtful members sent me a note after that sermon. She wrote, "Rabbi, you're too idealistic and very much impractical." I wrote back, "You may be right in the short run, -- but I have to be right in the long run. In the long run, war must be outlawed." Judaism has always asked its supporters to sacrifice something of the short run for the sake of the long run. The Ten Commandments which were read from the Torah this morning, are not just a practical guide to living. Even in our time, it is somewhat idealistic to say, "Thou Shalt Not Steal", and, "Thou Shalt Not Covet." Nevertheless, the Ten Commandments have served as the basic fabric of modern society. Most of us realize that while they constitute a goal for the future, we must act today as if these goals were immediately attainable. Our fathers realized that you become what you do. The way to realize the world to come is to act today as if it were already here.

Our tradition teaches that the world was created on Rosh Hashana, and in a very real sense, the future world will be re-created today. We can determine today, at least in part, what kind of world we will have tomorrow. Our Hebrew teachers have always projected the world of tomorrow in the most idealistic terms. The goal etched in the stone facade of the United Nations is borrowed from the Prophet Isaiah. It reads, "And men shall beat their swords into plows and their spears into fruit-hooks...Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; Neither shall they learn war anymore." The Hebrews have given the whole world a goal towards which to strive. Idealistic, yes, but our fathers have to be right in the long run. Every nation in the world knows this. The purpose of the United Nations is to create an international atmosphere in which the prophecy of Isaiah will be realized. The universal message of the ancient Hebrews has become a spur to all mankind.

The distinguishing feature of the Hebrew prophets who lived 2700 years ago, is the universality of their message. One prophet said, in the name of God, "My house shall become a house of prayer for all peoples." Another prophet dared to prophecy the time when there would be no need for organized religion because all men would be educated to the point where the knowledge of God and His laws would be in their hearts. Proclaimed Jeremiah, in the name of God, "I will put My law in their inward parts, and in their hearts will I write it: And I will be their God, and they will be My people, and they shall teach no more every day his neighbor, saying, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them." Yes, from the greatest unto the least of them. This view of an ideal future was again expressed by Isaiah who declared, "They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain: For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters covers the sea."

No one can study the prophets without being impressed with their emphasis on a religion for all mankind. It is the prophets who first taught us that the doctrine of the chosen people means merely that the Jews are chosen to set a prime example, and to teach by the excellence of their lives. Indeed, in a day when the Hebrews interpreted the doctrine of chosenness in terms of special reward, the prophet Amos rebuked them and said, "Don't think that you are the only people God brought out of slavery. Just as He brought you from Egypt,

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so He brought the Philistines from slavery in Capthtor and the Aramites from slavery in the land of Kir. Then, lest the Hebrews think that there is any difference between races, Amos proclaims in God's name, "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord."

The significance of the Jew in modern times is as the bearer of the universal message of our prophets. As Isaiah described our mission, "We are asked by God to be an 'Oir L'Goyim', a light unto the nations." In the year just ending, 5723 on the Jewish calendar, there have been some concrete illustrations that the world is moving, slowly, but surely, towards the universalistic goals of the prophets. First, the Soviet Union and the United States have jointly proposed a treaty banning the testing of atomic bombs in the atmosphere. Secondly, the Negro people in the United States have marshalled their forces, and it seems that our nation is moving towards true equality among its citizens. Thirdly, the International Catholic Church, Christendoms oldest and best organized church, has taken major steps towards tearing down its tradition of particularism to make possible inter-faith activity between it and other religious groups. If Rosh Hashana be indeed a time for measuring man's progress from year to year, then the year 5723 has been an exciting and hopeful one indeed. The progress made this past year on these three fronts is not yet cause for a victory celebration, but it is heartening indeed to the advocates of a universalistic faith. They are encouragement to us that in the long run, the religion which all must take up is ours, by whatever name men may choose to call it.

Let us consider for a moment, the new policy of the Catholic Church, which many believe to be a revolutionary change within that church. It has been part of Catholic doctrine for well over a thousand years that no man could come to God save through the Catholic Church. Accordingly, the Protestant religions have been regarded as renegade and false faiths. Until very recently, Catholics have taught that if a man knows of the Catholic faith and chooses not to join the Church, he will spend his afterlife in a place famous for its warm climate. It would be fair to say that the Catholics have presented religion in a highly particularistic fashion. The prophet Amos, 900 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, taught that you did not have to be a Jew to be beloved of God, but Catholics taught later that you had to belong to the Catholic Church to be in the circle of the beloved. Although the Catholic bible includes our bible under the title, The Old Testament, the message of the prophets was overlooked. Indeed, in Europe in the Middle Ages, the teachers of Judaism seemed also to forget the universalism of the prophets. If Reform Judaism has made no other contribution to the Jewish people, it should always be remembered for bringing to light once again the prophetic content of Judaism. Here in America, more and more Jews have turned to Reform Judaism because they instinctively know that its universalistic message is an expression of higher Judaism.

Last June, I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah as a Rabbi. During the 13 years of my involvement in inter-faith affairs, it had never been my privilege to meet with a Catholic Priest to discuss community affairs as representatives of our respective faiths. In April of last year, I was invited as the representative of the Miami Jewish community to meet with Bishop Carroll of the local Catholic Diocese, Bishop Duncan of the Episcopal Diocese, and Luther Pierce, the Executive Director of the Protestant Council of Churches. This meeting was arranged by the American Jewish Committee which has long worked in the area of inter-faith

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and inter-racial understanding. The meeting was a land-mark in the history of Miami. It was the first time that Catholic religious representatives had sat down with Protestant representatives to discuss community problems. Our main concern, was the mounting racial tension. We took steps which led to the establishment of a community relations board by Metro, the first such board with teeth in the history of our community. Miami has not had the tragic sequence of events such as Birmingham has experienced because of the foresight of some of our leaders. Much credit goes to Mayor High, to Sidney Aronowitz, to City Manager McNayr, and to other political figures as well. We speak now, however, of the willingness of the Catholic Church to meet with the representatives of other churches and synagogues as relative equals. This is a revolutionary move towards a universalistic religious climate. We are a long, long way from that idealistic goal, but we have made an important stride forward during the last year.

What happened in Miami last Spring, is being repeated in major cities around the country. There is a definite Catholic movement to work together with other religious groups. The energizing force for this liberalizing of the church came from the late deceased Pope John, and the policy he instituted continues today with his successor. The Catholic Church has determined to shed its medieval policy of exclusive particularism. Please do not think that I am being unduly harsh towards the Catholics today. We, as Reform Jews did not hesitate to criticize our own Jews when they tried to make of Christians second class citizens, and we do not hesitate to criticize Reform Jews who tend to be snobbish towards Traditional Jews. The fact remains that all religious groups have had to come to terms with the growing universalistic spirit in the world, and the Catholic Church represents a last major outpost for the old view which is beginning to yield to the spirit of the age. If the prophets were alive today, they could see that their idealistic prophecies of 2700 years ago are held in honor by most learned people today. Their teachings may have been a bit premature, but they had to be right in the long run!

Unfortunately, we have to admit that religious groups have not been in the forefront of the drive towards civil rights in our country. The Southern Protestant churches have reacted to the Negro demand for freedom with their own brand of exclusive salvation. God loves only the white man, they have answered, and He loves only the white man who follows one special kind of Christianity. It is a sad commentary on the contribution of the Southern clergymen that when we here in Miami had to nominate one Protestant clergyman for the Inter-Racial Board, the committee could find not one single minister who had been outspoken for the cause of racial justice, other than the Episcopalian Bishops. In all fairness, I can say to you that many rabbis qualified for the single appointment which finally was made. Until recent months, the only clear position in the racial issue had been declared by the rabbis. This past Tuesday, the front page of the Miami Herald carried a photograph of a Negro church window in Birmingham. The window included the figure of Jesus dressed as a shepherd. A bomb had rent that church, killing 4 innocent children attending religious school, and injuring dozens. The photograph showed that the bomb had torn off the head of the figure in the church window. The severed pictorial image was an apt one. The Christian Protestant Church in the South has been without a head, without leadership, in the present racial crisis. Indeed, it has spoken for prejudice and segregation. The Catholic Church has been more liberal on this issue in the South, but its religious leaders have, until recently, refused to meet with white Protestants. This kind of division, this absence of concern for all men, irrespective of their faith and race, has made for tragedy in our Southland.

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But the picture, my friends, is not all bad. The battle has been joined, and the battle will be won. "It is too soon", say the whites. "It is too idealistic!" To which the Negro leaders respond, "We may be wrong for the short run, but we have to be right in the long run." The way to realize the future of equality, the Negro leaders know, is to demand that the future come into being now.

Victor Hugo once said, "There is nothing so irresistible as an idea the time for which has come." We live in a world which is steadily shrinking in size. We are learning that the more men are different from each other, the more they are alike. A religion which teaches the supremacy of white men over black, or the supremacy of Catholics or Protestants or Jews over others, cannot command the respect of the educated people of the world. The only religion which can survive in this scientifically oriented world, is a universalistic religion, the kind which the Hebrew prophets first enunciated 2700 years ago. We Jews ought to be grateful to the founders of Reform Judaism, who, in the 18th Century, dared, once again, to hold high the teachings of our prophets. It is this tradition that Beth Am asks you to project by example and teaching.

There is much strife in the world today, but it is the strife that comes from a battle joined. The battle is one of particularism versus universalism. Shall the United States or the Soviet Union be supreme, or shall all nations live together in cooperation and peace? Shall the white man, yellow man, or the black man be supreme, or shall all men work together to lift mankind? Shall the Catholics or the Protestants or the Jews be supreme, or shall we all realize finally, that God is really one, that He is concerned with all equally, and that religion has no purpose except insofar as it helps all men to reach towards a common destiny.

One question remains to be answered this morning. If our main task as Jews is to teach the universalistic message of the prophets, why do we have to remain Jews to do this? The answer, my friends, is that until the day when the overwhelming majority of people accept this prophetic concept, we must keep our strength marshalled. If we leave the fold to lead the life of the so-called emancipated intellectual, we can easily be diverted from our historic task. To be a Jew, taught Amos, means to share the intimacy of those most directly charged with the realization of a united world. The passage which we read from the Torah this morning reads, "The Lord made not this agreement with our fathers only, but with us all, even us, who are here alive today." It is part of our tradition that all Jews, even those yet to be born, stood at Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and to receive the charge to teach a dynamic new message to the world. The text reads, "The Lord spoke with you - Face to Face - in the mount out of the midst of the fire."

For thousands of years, Jews have tried to keep alive the vision of a day of international peace when men would beat their swords into constructive instruments and when all men would have the law of God in their hearts. Shall we abandon that task as a group in the very age when there is hope for the substantial realization of our dream? I think not. Never have Jews had a greater opportunity to teach their message than today, and never has our voice been so respected. We Jews have lost many battles down through the dark centuries, -- shall we fail to throw our experienced legions into the current great battle for the minds of men? I think not.

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When the peoples all kneel down together, we shall be there. When the swords and guns are melted down, we shall be there. When the names of Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah are honored in the future victory, we, their descendents by blood, and I trust by spirit, we who stood at Sinai, shall be there as witnesses of a faith that has survived all the innumerable minor defeats, to attain to the final victory.