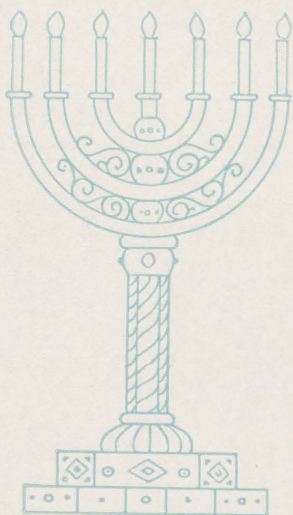


WHAT IS IT TO BE A JEW?



by

Rabbi Herbert Baumgard

WHAT IS IT TO BE A JEW?

by Rabbi Herbert Baumgard

Foreword

What does it mean to be a Jew? This is a most difficult question to answer in practical terms. It occurred to the author of this narration that perhaps one clear way to teach the meaning of Jewish living to young adults was to illustrate the manner in which certain dedicated Jews lived their lives.

This narration was first presented in Temple B'nai Israel, Elmont, L. I., by members of the Confirmation Class in 1955. While it is, perhaps, more effective in the hearing, the narration has value also when it is read. It is presented herewith through the courtesy of the Publication Fund of Temple B'nai Israel, Elmont, N. Y.

Narrator:—Let's be frank and admit that in our day and age, most Jews do not know what it is to be Jewish. They believe themselves to be Jews if they are born of Jewish parents. Or they believe themselves to be Jews if they stand *outside* a Jewish synagogue on Yom Kippur. Can these people be correct in their understanding of Judaism? Let's hear what some of the great Jews of past and present have to say about being Jewish.

AMOS:—I am Amos, a Prophet of ancient Israel. I lived 2700 years ago. In my day most men thought they were being Jewish when they brought their sacrifices to the Temple. In my day men thought they were good Jews when they flocked to Jerusalem, at the feast days and sang hymns to God. How wrong they were! God was only angered by their show of piety and their inner wickedness. He said unto them, "I hate, I despise your feast days. And I take no delight in your solemn services. . . . Take thou away from Me the noise of thy hymns. And let Me not hear the melody of thy psalteries. BUT LET JUSTICE WELL UP AS THE WATERS, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE A MIGHTY STREAM." In my day, 2700 years ago, to be Jewish one had to *seek justice* and labor for righteousness.

Narrator:—In our own day it is difficult to tell a Jew from a member of any other faith. Indeed, it is difficult to tell a Jew from an atheist. If you ask a modern Jew a few questions about Jewish history, he looks at you as if to say, "Who needs to know that stuff? That's for Sunday School kids and old ladies." Today you see Jews, like other people, scrambling to make a great deal of money so that they can buy prettier cars and more lavish furs, but too few Jews busy themselves trying to establish justice in the world. Let's hear what a great, modern Jew has to say about being Jewish.

EINSTEIN:—My name is Albert Einstein. I am a scientist. I am a scientist who sees in the wondrous unity of the world proof of the existence of a great planner whom we call God. I am a Jew. I am a Jew not merely because I was born of Jewish parents, but because I believe in the Jewish approach to life. Jews have always emphasized the importance of study and

the importance of teaching. To be a Jew you must want to learn about the great secrets of the world, and you must want to educate your fellow men concerning those secrets. The great goals are peace and justice, but we can reach those goals only if we have devoted students and teachers of life's great lessons.

Narrator:—The Jews are an ancient people. Our history covers the great expanse from Abraham to Einstein, almost 4,000 years. We have survived many civilizations; we have lived in the four corners of the world; we have known war and persecution, and we have known the glory of escape from slavery.

MOSES:—My name is Moses. I lived about 3200 years ago. I know what it is to be a slave. To be a Jew you must know what it is to be a slave. You must feel the lash of the taskmaster upon your back and you must cry out, "Not for me! The lash is not for me. Nor is it for any man. Freedom is God's eternal gift to man, which none can take away from him." To be a Jew you must feel this in your bones; you must shout it from the rooftops; you must labor for it day in and day out. When the Negro is shunted to the back of the bus, you must rebel. When your neighbor loses his job because he belonged to a liberal organization, you must stand up for him. When a stranger is called a traitor because he criticizes the government, you must insist upon his right to speak his mind. All of these things are part of the never-ending search for Freedom. All of these things are part of being a Jew.

Narrator:—Moses was more than a seeker of freedom, he was also a law-giver. Through him the Ten Commandments came to the world. Are there no other great Jewish law-givers in our day? Are there Jews in our time who say that to be a Jew you must also be one who seeks to humanize the law?

BRANDEIS:—My name is Louis Brandeis. I was a Supreme Court Justice of the United States of America. I am proud that in my younger days men called me "The People's Attorney." There were many attorneys getting rich serving the larger corporations, but I felt that the average people in our nation were being swallowed up by the huge corporations which hired them, fired them and forgot them. In my day I worked for shorter working hours for women and children. Did you know that children once worked for ten hours a day in these United States? In my day I worked for minimum wages for our workers. Did you know that many men were glad to get a dollar a day, less than some youngsters get today for baby sitting two hours. As a Jew, I remembered the teachings of Isaiah, the Prophet, who opposed those who bought up all the land of the poor people and made share-croppers of them. In my day I tried to

control the large corporations which were milking the people of their energy and their money. I had much to do with anti-trust laws. In my opinion, America has to give up the idea of corporations owned by a few people. America has to come to the co-operative idea, where the workers in an industry own it, plan for it, and benefit from it. Where there is responsibility, there is character development. Where the worker is on the outside looking in, he will become a robot, a mere extension of his machine. We Americans want *thinkers* not robots as men. As a Jew, I worked to bring out the *greatness* in men.

Narrator:—What is it to be a Jew? Amos the Prophet said a Jew had to seek Justice and Righteousness. Albert Einstein said that a Jew had to be a student in search of the secrets of the world and a teacher of these secrets. Moses said that a Jew had to share the afflictions of those who are not fully free and labor for their emancipation. Brandeis said that a Jew must seek to humanize and liberalize the law in the service of the people. But what happens if you live in a society which is totalitarian, which is controlled by conquerors? What happens when you are not able to shape your environment, when all around you despair, and, indeed, death is your lot? What does a Jew do then?

AKIBA:—My name is Rabbi Akiba. I lived about 1900 years ago in Israel. I was burned at the stake. When a Jew is killed for his beliefs and his actions in the service of man, he must shout to the world that righteousness and the Author of Righteousness will triumph in the end. He must shout "Sh'ma Yisroel Ahdono! Elohenu Ahdono! Echod." He must teach others, even with his death, that there is a plan and a meaning for the world; that the unjust shall be overwhelmed. The Romans plagued the Jews all my life. They forbade us to study the Torah and to teach Jewish law. We could not obey them. Even in a lawless world, we taught the necessity of law. In a world which stressed the importance of military might, we taught the importance of the spirit. The Romans burned me, but my civilization has outlasted theirs. They died, and I live in the spirit of my fellow Jews who believe and teach as I did.

Narrator:—Today the Jews are free in Israel and in America. But millions of Jews were the victims of European bigotry. The prophets of old taught that Israel would one day return to its own land. Few modern Jews shared the faith of the Prophets. A few giants of our age did share that faith. One of them was Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, perhaps the greatest Rabbi which Jewry has given to America.

WISE:—My name is Stephen S. Wise. I was pleased to hear the words of Louis Brandeis and Albert

Einstein this evening. These men were my friends. They worked with me to make the world aware of the dangers of Fascism. Brandeis was a Supreme Court Justice, Einstein was a scientist, I was a Rabbi. Each of us was a Jew working in his own way to make the world safe for Jews and for all men. A Jew should have faith in Israel, for it was there that David and Solomon, Abraham and Moses, Amos and Isaiah first spoke. I have been a Jew since Abraham was a Jew. He is in me, and so, I am thousands of years a Jew. How, then, can I forget Jerusalem? I must seek to rebuild Zion, for there I was born, and there my fathers lie buried. But I am an American too. I am an American since Washington was an American. I have been an American for hundreds of years. Washington and Jefferson are in me. How, then, can I forget the glory of the Constitution and the Declaration. I am a Jew and an American. In working for things Jewish, I make America better. In working for American democracy I become a better Jew. To be a good Jew you must be active in shaping your government and the world government.

Narrator:—To be a Jew you must proclaim the goodness of the world like Rabbi Akiba, even when life is at its darkest. Dr. Henry Slonimsky has said, "When you get to heaven, they ask you only one question, 'Did you give up hope while you were on earth?'" "To be a Jew," says this gifted teacher, "you must hope when there is no basis for hope." To be a Jew we must work in our own American society, in Zion, in the world society, to bring peace and justice into the world. Now, let us hear from one more Jew. He is a Jew, as yet unborn, a descendent of King David. Many call him the Messiah, the man who is to save the world.

MESSIAH:—I do not call myself Messiah, the savior. You call me Messiah. You invest in me all of your hopes and prayers. I am not worthy of your hopes. I am not as strong as you think. If the truth be told, I am a prisoner here in heaven. I am chained to my bed. I am not strong enough to break these chains. But, oh my people, you can break these chains. For they are woven with the iron of deceit, with the steel of hate; they are riveted with the heat of injustice. You can free me, my people, by freeing yourselves. I can only come among you when you have caused my chains to melt; when you have found a pattern for living together without torturing each other. I plead with you, break my chains! I need *you* as much as you need me. I can only come among you when you are ready for me, when you have prepared the way. For, if truth be told, my fellow Jews, YOU ARE THE MESSIAH!