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“My Religion - God and Man,” 1917 May 20.

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May 20, 1917.

MY RELIGION GOD AND MAN.

*Farewell Address to The Temple Congregation-*

Never in all the long history of man has religion seemed so futile and so perilous--has religion seemed to have failed so completely. The war of the civilized nations has rent the veil. The war of the civilized nations has brought before our eyes the naked revelation of the sliding ~~of the~~ world, of the tempestuous influence of religion upon the lives of individuals and upon the lives of nations. To all sincere and earnest believers in the great historic religions of justice and of love the shock has been beyond measure. I cannot believe the falacious and specious reasoning which would harmonize violence and war, with all their horrors, with the ideals and the teachings of the religions of love and of justice. It is too fearful a price to pay. The death of earth's greatest and best; the death of the valiant hearts and of the heroic spirits of mankind.

I refuse to believe that spiritual rebirth, as some would tell us,--that spiritual rebirth is father of the ways of blood-lust and war, a path to the death of millions, and is nurtured by angry passions and hate--war, with all its violence, war, with all its world-wide horror and devastation and desolation, are to be the con-

eternal teachings of religion,--are to make a destruction of the ideals of all the religions which the world has held most precious. It is true, I think, as has been said many a time of the now already forgotten, that the war has brought to us the collapse of religion--the failure of the parent of all our ideals. It is not the failure alone of religion, it is the failure also of all our philosophies and of all our science and of all our education: for all of them, religion and philosophy, science and education, have failed utterly to prevent the war, and they have been as futile and powerless to stop the war.

Never through all my ministry, with all its varied experience, have I ever been unconscious of the difficulties of those who choose to believe; never have I been unconscious of the difficulties of faith in the presence of the crudeness of superstition, the vagueness of mysticism and the ever present challenge of agnostic doubt and of atheistic denial. It has been a part of my faith and principle that our Judaism, if it shall live, must satisfy the questioning intellect. And, therefore, I have been one of those who have believed, with fullest heart, that our Judaism must adapt and apply and reinterpret and harmonize the ceremonies of the Oriental and the symbols of the Oriental, the laws and the code of the medieval, and

the principles and ideals of the laws of the ancient life, to our modern life. At the same time, I have had but scant patience, I confess, with unreasonable, and I think unreasoning, rationalism with a pretence to intellectuality, here in our country and time.

I say a pretence to intellectuality on the part of those who do not in the least understand the oldest or newest faith--a pretence to intellectuality on the part of those who secretly within themselves are free of the superstitions, ancient and modern--the pretence to intellectuality on the part of those who, even in this 20th Century, are still under the spell of Oriental magic and miracle,--as repugnant to my mind and spirit as our Occidental quackery in religion.

My religion has posited its faith upon the fundamental words of Genesis with which our Bible begins: "In the beginning God", I have believed, with the idea of God, is, after all analysis, study and research, the most reasonable conception of the Universe. I believe in the idea of Unity, as the great poet has expressed it: "One God, one law, one element." "The sublime unity of God." And as also is written in the opening chapters of Genesis, I have believed in that noble and glorious interpretation of human life and history, man fashioned in the image of God. I believe man is born to a ~~xxx~~ nobler life, and I have always felt it to be part of our



Jewish obligation that the Jew shall be the interpreter and ~~example~~ exemplar of this conception of man--men fashioned in the image of God. I know it is difficult to hold this faith. I know it is difficult to believe always that man is fashioned in the image of God. We behold men in the streets of every city, in the great centers of enlightenment and civilization. We see the poor wretches in the streets and in the alleys, and in the gutters as well. We see also the moral lepers who make life on our fashionable boulevards offensive--the moral lepers, educated and cultured, arrayed in their broadcloth and not in rags,--lives misspent and evil and corrupt; glorious powers wasted; endowments and opportunities cast aside. Man is in the mire and mud; man submerged by vice and by crime; man underneath and degradation unspeakable. Then we ask: Are these too human and have these in them the divine element? Are these degraded and depraved and dissipated creatures human and divine and are they human and divine beings? And I answer you that I believe no human beings are all bad, that even in the worst of them there is something of good. And our Judaism has always refused to believe in the doctrine of the fallen human race. We gloriously have affirmed an ever-rising humankind. We have no belief, in the least, in that doctrine familiar to those of other religions, the doctrine of lost

races,--of mankind doomed and damned to eternity, or to earthly  
 torment. It is not a part of my religion! I do not believe it!  
 I believe in the perfectibility of the human race--in the perfect-  
 ibility of all human creatures, even the lowest kind, the most de-  
 praved and degraded of our kind. I believe in the glory of human  
 life, in the innate nobility of human life, in its divine purposes.  
 I believe every human being bears within him the innate God likeness  
 which in life striving shall be developed into Godliness.

What should be the faith of the 20th Century man and woman?  
 What should be the faith of the modern intelligent Jew,--the modern  
 intelligent Jew and 20th Century man and woman, free as men never  
 have been free in all the history of the race? Free from every  
 physical yoke, free intellectually from every shackle of fear and  
 superstition, free from all blinding law and authority, and spirit-  
 ually free to aspire to such ideas and glory as the soul may have  
 power to aspire to? The men and women of this 20th Century are  
 engrossed by their ~~spk~~ materialism--are submerged by their sensa-  
 tionalism. There is enough materialism with sensationalism--too  
 idealism  
 much altogether. But is there no ~~idealism~~ in the world, no idealism in  
 America? Is there no idealism among Jews? I believe the fundamen-  
 tals--the springs of conduct--are neither material nor sensational

even though we are given to the following of pleasure. The springs of conduct are not material self-interest. The springs of conduct are not self-interest in spite of all our calculating selfishness.

I believe that life is under the appointment of God. I believe that life cannot be interpreted, as some would interpret it, as a battle and fight and race; a battle in which the fight is to the strong; a race in which success and triumph are to the swift. I do not believe that man is a fighting animal and nothing more. I do not believe that the strong will triumph and the fittest physically will survive. I am not of those who believe that the human wrecks, the derelicts on the human sea of life, will endanger the progress of the race, and therefore cannot hurry to the conclusion: let the sick perish and be destroyed; let the weak be put out of existence; let us crush the poor, the feeble and the oppressed. Even those who say they believe that life is to the strong and victory to the swift, and that all is only a battle and fight, are unwilling to live out their own cruel, brutal and pitiful philosophy.

Who are they that are willing to say "let them strive"? Who are they who are willing to say "let them perish"? That refuse to say it, even the enemy? The enemy, who fill our hearts with anxious fear, they are human as we are human.



I declare my attitude toward life,--my attitude toward life springing from this whole conception of God, aye, and of man; that we of the 20th Century and we Jews of free America ask for ourselves a faith for manhood that will give us confidence to struggle on in the fight of the world; for manhood that will give them faith and power to endure and sacrifice in the face of life's adversities, and for youth and vigor that will sustain them in the whole earth. I believe in the deep sense of brotherhood; that it is not a mere charity; that it is not the mere temporary feeling of mercy within us; that says "open thy hand" to thy brother and to the needy in the land. I believe in the need of justice to recreate the maladroitness of our human society; that teaches us mercy to all who are stricken; that gives tenderness and pity to all who are suffering, and commands every human being to right the wrongs that still exist after these thousands of years of civilization. Is man only a fighting beast? Is that what we would believe? You have a magnificent illustration of it before your very eyes in the world menace of fighting and of slaughter; of man as a fighting beast, fighting scientifically, with cool precision, with the newest discoveries at his command, and also with philosophical justification, and I regret to add, new inspiration and consecration of religion. Is man only



a sensuous animal? Is that all there is in life?--To feed in the best pastures, to drink the purest running waters, to bask and to play in the brilliant and beautiful sunshine? Is man only a creature of impulses and desires with the lusts of the brute? It is a very low interpretation of human life that you must be only classed with the animal--that the king of creation, the highest of the animal kingdom, the most powerful and skillful and wisest, must be classed with the beasts of the field and the forest. Or is man only a wonderful and marvelous machine, a wonderful material mechanism, with qualities only that make him a polished automaton in this 20th Century? No! I believe none of these. I believe man is a being with will. I believe that man is a being with free will, whose body and whose mind are but the tools and instruments for his labors in the world. I believe you and I are living personalities, and with a soul within us, whatever it be, and that you and I are masters of the mind and of the body in which we dwell. I believe we are beings, not creatures of whimsical chance or human fate, but that we are free-will beings, morally responsible beings to the great divine Father of all. My religion roots itself in faith in God, in the interpretation of life with and under God. And through all these years I have not preached to you justice and love and

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Brotherhood as mere words and phrases. I believe in justice. I believe in justice as the very fundamental rock upon which all civilization must build--justice in all the relations of life--justice of man to man--justice of nation to nation,--fulfilling the old thought: "Let justice roll down the waters and justice like a mighty stream." In the spirit of our Jewish teachers I believe in righteousness,--righteousness as the way for individual ~~xxx~~ salvation--righteousness exalting the nations. I believe with our teachers that righteousness is a sanction of the kingdoms of the world to come. And I reject absolutely the doctrine of the exclusive salvation either for Jew or Christian or any man, whatever be his faith.

Lincoln, the great President, unbeliever, agnostic, whatever he may have been, once declared he was willing to join that church, and only that church, over whose portals would be written "Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man." And here I take my stand. I believe in the doctrine of human brotherhood--not as a lip service, not a phrase to sound beautiful through the world--but I believe in human brotherhood ~~unx~~ uniting men with men and nations with nations around the whole globe. And if there be one thing magnificent and outstanding in our own human life, it is that our America has stood as the teacher x x x that nations might live side by side

peacefully with one another.

Here, from the day this Temple was dedicated, I have preached the spirit of fellowship between Jew and Christian, between believer and unbeliever, because I have had faith in human brotherhood. I take it, that fundamental to all this thought, and allied with it inevitably, is the doctrine of human freedom, in which I sincerely believe. Freedom as the most precious possession of the race. Freedom not for you and for me, but freedom for all of humankind. Physical freedom that banishes forever the degradation of the slave and serf and subject under the task-master. Intellectual freedom that gives to you and every other man freedom to think, and that breaks the chains and fetters of ignorance and superstition--a spiritual freedom that recognizes you and other human beings as modern, free-willing spirits who have passed off forever the yoke of licentiousness. For I think that a life of passion and lust and low ideals results in man's enslavement. Nations must be free.--Not for strife or mastery; not for war and subjugation; but nations and peoples must be free to utilize the blessings and resources of the earth upon which we live, and to develop the nobler gifts and higher purposes of our human life. There can be no true freedom until all nations are free. There can be no true freedom until



within all nations all men are free. Was it said with truth that our America lay here in this western ocean an undiscovered continent providentially preserved to our human life? Perchance it was our America was providentially preserved free from all the entanglements of the ancient world,--providentially preserved for human liberty-- in these last days of earth to proclaim liberty to the world and all the inhabitants thereof.

My religion is that religion that believes that God is and that within human lives lives the divine; that life is under the appointment of God; that life is exalted by some divine purpose, and that every man is the servant of God; and that every man and every woman is under the divine appointment to strive to do God's work in this world. You may not believe it, but I believe, that if men were sincere God-believers; that if men and women and nations would put their religion which they profess into actual practice, that we would transform the world in which we live within one single generation; that we would readjust and reorganize our human society; that still, after the passing thousands of years bears with it the inheritance of evils and abuses that have come down through the ages,-- if men were sincere God-believers and if we in reality would put into actuality the religion we say we believe, we would in one gen-

eration destroy the intense evils which we have accepted and tolerated and approved, and sometimes approved and justified, these many generations. If men and women were sincere God-believers; if the nations of the world truly believed in Christianity or in ~~Mahomedanism~~ ~~Mahomedanism~~ Mahomedanism or in Judaism or in Buddhism, or in any kind of faith, we would not today, in the 20th Century, be mobilizing the wealth and wisdom, the energy and the genius of the whole civilized world for human warfare. We would be mobilizing the wealth and wisdom, the energy and the genius of humankind for human welfare.

It is a privilege to live in the 20th Century. It is a privilege to be a part of the 20th Century race of human beings, with all our magnificent endowments, with all our glorious opportunities. I charge you, men and women of the 20th Century, to live true to your power and to your opportunity. I charge you, men and women of this 20th Century, that we be not of those who are devils of destruction, but rather, let us endeavor and strive to be God's children in the world. I am ashamed to believe that human want and human wretchedness are in fact a part of our human history. I am ashamed to believe that evils are inevitable and unconquerable. I am ashamed to believe it is impossible to make you feel and believe that truth should forever be on the scaffold and wrong forever on

the throne. No! I have abiding faith, ~~xx~~ however dark the world may ~~be~~ seem, however overwhelming the evidence and the testimony to the contrary,--I have abiding faith in the cumulative human power of the conscience of the whole people--in the cumulative human power and in the cumulative conscience of mankind; that if we individuals and the nations of the world will be loyal to the higher life and to true standards of success--loyal to the life of freedom and loyal to justice--loyal to truth, in actual truth to God and our interpretation of man,--that within the time of our own life experience we may revolutionize the world and solve the problems which have perplexed mankind through the ages; that in your time and mine, with the World so minded and so spiritualized and moved, we might fulfill the messianic dreams of Israel and the ancients.

And so, may I ring out to you as fundamental as to our faith, that opening word of Genesis: "In the beginning God", and as associated therewith, that glorious interpretation: "In the image of God made he him." And so, may I close this last sermon to you with those wonderful words of faith with which we conclude our Yom Kippur service, ringing out to the ages again the old historic message: Adonai hu Alohim , The Eternal who is God.

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