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"QUESTIONS OF HONESTY"

a sermon preached by

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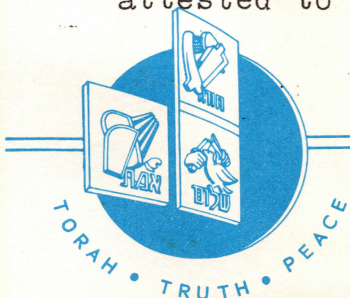
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All of us like to be certain. Certainty is associated with security while doubt usually corrodes self-assurance. In most matters today we demand the illusion of certainty even when there is plenty of room for doubt. We delude ourselves into thinking that those who handle the critical aspects of our lives are much more certain than they really are. While trust is a good thing, honest doubt is sometimes even better. For out of the honest doubts of those who question come not only some answers but, what is even more valuable, better questions.

An infantile view of religion, in my judgment, is that which represents religion or faith to be absolutely certain, with all the answers to the great problems and mysteries of life. Personally, I am much more disturbed by those who give the impression that they have all the answers than I am by those who have honest doubts. In reality this is the continuing mood of authentic Judaism. The quest for certainty was the goal of many of the medieval philosophers but not the regular practice or teaching of the rabbis. They, like their Biblical ancestors, asked questions and gave tentative answers. Then they asked questions all over again. And this, I think, was what kept Judaism a vibrant, dynamic and a consistently relevant faith.

The antiquity of this mood is astonishing. In a little while we will read from the Torah as the Sedra for this Sabbath a truly impressive note to the life of the greatest of our prophets, Moses. If anybody should have been sure of himself, he should. But he was not. In substance Moses, though appointed by God for a sacred mission of leadership and well acquainted with the presence of God asks the question which any one of us might ask: "How do I really know that you, God, are with us?" Then having been assured by God's voice, he pleads again: "Show me, I pray thee, Thy glory." Moses wanted clear unmistakable proof of the presence of God, proof attested to by the testimony of his senses. He wanted the certainty



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we all seek. But he is denied. "Thou canst not see my face," says God. "But I will make all my goodness pass before thee." In essence this is the core of Jewish theology about God. We cannot see God. We can see only what God does. And much of what God does is up to us in terms of our own response and awareness.

So much for the story in the Torah. But the rabbis see more. They see a practical lesson because like us they understood the natural failings of their fellows. And so in the Midrash they say that Moses was denied a vision of God because he deserved to be denied.

He deserved to be denied because when God wanted to show him the whole context of history it is written that Moses hid his face. So when he cries out "Show me Thy glory", when he ultimately wanted to see, God said: "When I wanted to show you, you were not inclined to look, now that you want to look I am not desirous of showing you!"

Petty? I think not. Wise? I think so. For in terms of our religious understanding we get pretty largely what we deserve. And of all disciplines of life a proper continuing respect for spiritual integrity is necessary for spiritual reward. We cannot cry out in a moment of need or curiosity or just when it suits us and be satisfied. Consistent honesty of spiritual search ought precede our religious expectations.

Let me give you three examples of what I think might fairly be called serious questions of honesty in our religious life.

I

First I would call into question our honesty in dealing with the intellectual and spiritual problems of our youth. Last week I listened to a colleague of mine who is the Director of Regional Rabbis for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations tell us at a meeting in Kansas City that in his travels over this land of ours the most serious problem we face is what he calls the "credibility gap" which our young people notice in synagogue life.

If there is comfort in misery, I found comfort in his words. From the conversations which I have with young people of high school and college age I could not agree more. These young people note quickly the vast difference between what their elders say they mean by religion and what they really mean. They note with clarity the vast difference between what we say the synagogue stands for and what it really represents. The young people of our time ask questions. They ask us to look at their problems: problems of faith, of morals, of religious affiliation and enough of us do not want to respond with depth. Like Moses we hide our faces and go about our regular patterns of religious behavior as if nothing were happening. Then when the time comes that a youngster close to us rebels against his heritage or speaks out for himself, then we're ready to talk to him and to examine his problems. And then it's too late. Then he doesn't want to listen.

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February 24, 1967

Reverend Dr. H. H. H. H.

We all ask, "But he is denied." Then cannot not see it. "I have seen it." But I will make all my goodness seen before thee." In essence, this is the core of Jewish theology about God. We cannot see God. We can see only what God does. And much of what God does is to be in terms of our own response and awareness.

So much for the story in the Torah. But the people see more. They see a practical lesson because like us they understood the natural fallacy of their fellows. And so in the Mishnah they say that Moses was denied a vision of God because he deserved to be denied.

He deserved to be denied because when God wanted to show him the whole context of history it was written that Moses hid his face. So when he tried to "show me Thy glory," when he hid his face, God said: "When I wanted to show you, you were not looking to see, God said: 'When I wanted to show you, you were not looking to look, now that you want to look I am not desirous of showing you!'"

Let's I think not. Wise? I think so. For in terms of our religious understanding we get pretty largely what we deserve. And of all the things of this world, the only thing we cannot get out of integrity is necessary for spiritual reward. We cannot get out of a moment of need or continuity or just when it suits us and be satisfied. Consistent honesty of spiritual search ought to be our religious expectation.

Let me give you three examples of what I think might fairly be called serious questions of honesty in our religious life.

First I would call into question our honesty in dealing with the intellectual and spiritual problems of our youth. Last week I listened to a colleague of mine who is the Director of Regional Rabbinic for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations tell me about a meeting in Kansas City that he had traveled over the last of course the most serious problem we face is what he calls the "credibility gap" which our young people notice in synagogue life.

It is not in comfort in misery. I found comfort in his words. From the conversations which I have with young people of high school and college age I could not agree more. These young people note greatly the vast difference between what their elders say they mean by religion and what they really mean. They note with clarity the vast difference between what we say the synagogue stands for and what it really represents. The young people of our time ask questions. They ask us to look at their problems, problems of faith, of morality, of religious affiliation and demand that we not want to respond with doubt. These young people are not looking for about our regular patterns of religious behavior as if nothing were happening. Then when the time comes that a youngster comes to us ready to speak his language or speaks out for himself, then we are ready to talk to him and to examine his problems. And then he is late. Then he doesn't want to listen.

We are not honest. We are not truthful if, as liberals, we do not really meet questions and problems when they are raised not just when the behavior or thoughts of young people touch us or make us ashamed. The "credibility gap" is of our own making. We deserve the rebuff. It's time to stop pretenses.

II

Or consider another area which I would think with justification can be called a question of honesty in our religious life.

Admittedly, religion cannot survive without ritual. Superficially, most of us assent to that need. We build synagogues and spend enormous sums upon their construction and maintenance. Most Jews in America want a synagogue to be there. They want a rabbi in it. The great moments of life are marked by hurried calls to the rabbi on the occasions of birth and death, marriage, Bar Mitzvah and confirmation, to say nothing of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur which bring Jews to worship as if to a magnet. But what about the life in between those occasions? Then it is as if God were saying: "Let me show you how to live. Let me show you the patterns and purposes of life." But like Moses we hide our faces. We think the pretense to piety is enough. The motions, the formalities are enough. Until we have real need. Until the anguished moment of doubt and despair. Until spiritual strength or rational understanding is needed and then we cry: "Show me" and there is no response. Too late!

There's a real question of honesty here. Are ceremonies and rituals which are so precious to some, so sacred to some, mere acting, superstitious mumbo jumbo to the rest of us? If that's the way we really regard them, that's all we'll get out of them. We ought be more honest. In word and act, we ought mean what we say or not say it. This is a basic question of honesty.

III

Lastly, another question of honesty in our religious life came to my desk just hours ago. It has to do not specifically with the synagogue which of late together with the rabbis is blamed for everything weak in Jewish life. To this I reply that others of our organizations are equally dishonest and this includes not only organizations but families and elders in them as well.

A congregant of ours has written a letter sent to The Jewish Press, but addressed to the Jewish Community. So I feel justified in replying even before it is printed in the Press. He protests that fifth to eighth grade youngsters after having been allowed to play basketball in the Jewish Community Center for four weeks on the Sabbath are suddenly barred from doing so by the protest of Sabbath observing Jews. He points to the wide desecration of the Sabbath not only by work but by the vast number of parents who drop their children at services but do not go themselves, the numbers of women in the beauty shops and markets, the various activities of families with no consciousness of Sabbath being different than any other day of the week.

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III

The letter protests that the 1% of observant Jews have forced the closing of the Center to the rest of the Jews of our Community who have no objection to its being open.

The writer's figures puzzle me. I believe there are far more than 1% involved. And I believe they have their rights regardless of their number. I see no reason for an observant Jew to be denied participation in a Jewish community activity by a Jewish community organization.

But here mine is a point of honesty. Is the Center open or closed? If open, it should be clearly open. If closed, actually closed. Are parents concerned about the religious education of their children? Then let them be openly and completely concerned. If not, let them complain in no fashion. If we want to see the results of religious life, look at it, practice it, be honest about it. Enough of pretense. Enough of turning from the issues. Enough of deception and sham.

Yes, there is judgment in this world of ours. Even Moses had to learn that! God's goodness is in the world. But we must look at it to see it. It's as simple as that. If Jewish life is empty, it is not the rabbis who have made it so, not the teachers, not the honest parents. If Jewish life is without substance we will not get meaning and purpose from Shabbos basketball. We'll get it from honest doubts, honest questions, honest seeking after answers. All of us can say: "Show me thy Glory, O God" if we want to see it. If we hide our faces, the goodness of God will pass us by.

There are questions of honesty involved: in our reply to our young people who really want to know the right way.

There are questions of honesty involved: in the manner in which we pray and perform our sacred rituals.

There are questions of honesty involved: in the integrity of our communal institutions and in the religious behavior of our families.

It's time to answer those questions of honesty with thoughtfulness, with sincere desire to find the glory of God in our lives.

Amen.

Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks

February 24, 1957

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Reverend Dr. Brookes

The latest protests that the life of observant Jews have closed the doors of the Center to the rest of the Jews of our community who have no objection to its being open.

The writer's fingers tingle as I believe there are far more than 1% involved. And I believe they have their rights regarding their number. I see no reason for an observant Jew to be denied participation in a Jewish community activity by a Jewish community organization.

But here we are at a point of honesty. Is the Center open or closed? It open, it should be clearly open. If closed, actually closed. Are parents concerned about the religious education of their children? Then let them be honestly and completely concerned. If not, let them complain in no fashion. If we want to see the Center of Jewish life, look at it, criticize it, be honest about it. Through of pretense. Through of turning from the honest. Through of deception and sham.

Yes, there is judgment in this world of ours. Even Moses had to learn that God's goodness is in the world. But we must look at it to see it. It's as simple as that. If Jewish life is empty, it is not the rabbis who have made it so, not the teachers, not the honest parents. If Jewish life is without substance, we will not get meaning and purpose from Shabbos baskets. We'll get it from honest doubts, honest questions, honest seeking after answers. All of us can say: "Show me thy glory, O God, if we want to see it. If we hide our faces, the goodness of God will pass us by.

There are questions of honesty involved in our reply to our young people who really want to know the right way.

There are questions of honesty involved in the manner in which we pray and perform our sacred rituals.

There are questions of honesty involved in the integrity of our communal institutions and in the religious behavior of our families.

It's time to answer those questions of honesty with straightforwardness, with sincere desire to find the glory of God in our lives.

Amos

Reverend Dr. Brookes