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A RABBI'S VIEW OF CHRISTMAS

An Address to
The Nebraska Clothing Company
Christmas Breakfast
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by
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I am deeply conscious of the honor you have bestowed upon me by inviting me, a Rabbi, to bring you a Christmas message on the eve of this great festival. Actually, this is a mark of the greatness and blessing of America wherein dwell men of many faiths and where maturity and wisdom allow us to exchange views with one another in an atmosphere of acceptance and friendship.

More immediately I must pay my respects to Mr. Otto Swanson and Mr. John Swanson who have made the Nebraska Clothing Company an example of liberalism and brotherhood in the commercial life of our city. By their hospitality to me this morning they have unknowingly fulfilled for me a long time ambition to comment on the spiritual meaning of Christmas, a festival which I do not observe.

It may be for the very reason that this festival is not part of my own religious observance and exactly because Christmas has not been closely intertwined with my own personal religious experience that I may be able to share with you a fresh insight into its message and its limitless potential for the enlargement of human goodness.

The objective outside view often has more merit than we admit. The mind that approaches without preconceived notions surely comes closer to the truth than those who follow blindly after the habit of a lifetime of perfunctory observance.

I have often noted that among my own people those who have converted to Judaism in their mature years and, therefore, come to their Faith afresh, often possess a zeal, a fervor and a knowledge that makes the religious life of some born Jews appear pallid and lifeless by comparison.

I

And so, dear friends, I confess to you that while I am not a Christian and while I can not call Jesus my Savior, I do get excited about Christmas.

Quickly let me say that my excitement over Christmas is not the reflection of my wholehearted joy in our own festival of Channuka which is so often, as this year, concurrent with the Christmas season. Let it be clear

that the two festivals - Christmas and Channuka are in no way related either in history or in meaning. Nor is my enthusiasm stimulated by the atmosphere of hurry and excitement, the decorations and frantic preparations for Christmas observance all about us. It is not the ordinary Christmas spirit that moves me at all.

To be sure I am not opposed to gift giving or gift receiveing! In observance of our festival of Channuka we Jews celebrate for eight days; and customarily we exchange gifts with our loved ones and friends. The children especially expect gifts on each of the eight successive days when at evening in our homes another candle is added to the Channuka candelabrum accompanied by blessings and song.

Gift giving at Christmas follows good tradition. The Gospel records that the Wise Men brought gifts to the cradle of Jesus in the manger. But I am reminded by one of your own group, undoubtedly thinking about the mercantile problems following Christmas, that the Bible says absolutely nothing about Jesus returning his gifts the next day!

But note well: The Gospel does say specifically that the Wise Men came First to worship and then they presented their gifts. First they brought the gift of their hearts; only then did they offer material symbols of their love and trust.

Permit me to say, then, to you who are merchandizers and sales people that were I a Christian minister rather than a Rabbi, were I a celebrant of Christmas rather than a Jew who views the festival from the outside that there is nothing I would resent more strongly than the use of commercialism as an end in itself. So many appear to forget entirely the wonder and majesty the mystery and deep spirituality of Christmas marking the birth of the Christian Savior. It is only this exalted spiritual content that excites my own religious sensitivity as an observer of Christmas.

I know that today will be a wearying one for you. But tonight when the doors of your store are closed behind you, I would be pleased to know that

you have entered a wholly new, a completely different Christmas than that of the hectic weeks and months through which you have just passed.

Will not your homes be the more tranquil, the nearness of family and friends the more precious, the quiet and spirituality of your Church the more welcome when you leave the outer Christmas spirit behind you and enfold the inner spirit of Christmas within you?

From my point of view -- and I trust you will agree -- there can be nothing more tragic nor more shocking than the wholesale transformation of the most deeply penetrating article of Christian faith, the birth of the Savior, into a materialistic orgy of sensual and physical delight.

This bothers me only because you and I, Christian and Jew, are in our singularly unique ways searching for the same things: How to know God, how to persuade people to do His will and to bring thereby an era of universal justice and peace to our troubled and sorely frightened world.

The Jew has his particular answer. We believe that man strives to know God by reaching constantly up to Him, by our sanctification of every act of life to His service, by our observance of His divinely revealed ordinances and commandments that describe our relationship with the Almighty and a life of goodness here on earth with our fellowmen. What God has revealed to us is the imperative to search for knowledge of Him.

But Christian tradition responds, as it were, with the opposite emphasis. Traditional Christianity teaches that in the birth of Jesus, God became man. He walked and talked upon this earth with man. He instructed him and gave him an immutable model of the perfect life. He suffered and died for man's salvation. In the infant baby Jesus was God, Redeemer and Savior of man. That to me, merely the observer, is the wonder and mystery of Christmas and the unique spiritual approach of Christianity.

There is no question in my mind of choice. For me the way of Judaism satisfies my soul and in Judaism do I believe I can best fulfill the will of

my creator.

But there is equal certainty in my mind that the way of Christianity is equally valid and absolutely necessary and vital for mankind. Our world needs both.

The identity of God and Man is not accepted by the Jewish mind. But in this belief I see the very opposite extreme from anything material or temporal. It is pure spirit. In the re-enactment of the Christmas story, through legend and Scripture, by observance and sacrament, men in the Christian tradition can touch the Divine. That to me is the only gift really worth opening on Christmas day. And once that gift is held in your hearts -- it is not returnable!

II

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are dealing here with the very core of religion -- your religion. And we have been talking about one sacred day and its message.

Again let me refer to your set of terms. The day after Christmas is one inevitably of psychological letdown and, for you, of commercial problems. You will have "returns" and "exchanges" and "complaints." The measure of your success will probably be how many of these you do not get.

Is it possible that many do the same thing with the spiritual gifts received on Christmas? After Christmas how much of an "exchange" is there of the goodwill and fellow-feeling of Christmas for more customary conflict and callousness?

What is it that makes men take their most human and, therefore, their most divine impulses evoked by the birth of the baby Jesus and "return" them, so to speak, for less than human hatreds and prejudices?

Remember that it is the same baby Jesus in the days and years following Christmas who, when he grows to manhood, says in the tradition of his Jewish teachers: "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

With Christmas we associate some real acts of charity: We give food and clothing to the underprivileged; we bring toys to little children who have no playthings. We have well organized drives to aid needy families; there is home and institutional hospitality for the lonely and the bereft. We offer gifts to those who serve us. On Christmas men try to level some of life's most striking distinctions. Master and servant, employer and employee, rich and poor, wise and simple, all try to say Merry Christmas to each other in sympathetic human terms across the barriers of their differences. All this on Christmas.

And then? Then come the returns and exchanges. The words of the infant Jesus on Christmas inspire goodness, kindness, justice and mercy. But when Jesus becomes the thundering prophet ~~of~~^{of} righteousness he speaks to deaf ears while his worshippers go right on temporizing with social injustice, indulging prejudices, ignoring underprivileged brothers and building ever more fearful and contemptible methods of human extermination. Such is, I fear, the spiritual exchange following Christmas.

Let me, then, wish all of you much more than^a Joyous Holiday.

Let me wish you an understanding and continuing Christmas.

With your Jewish neighbor who finds earth to be sanctified by aspirations heavenward, let Christmas impell the Christian to recall his contribution to our common spiritual treasury by accepting as real and lasting that precious bit of Heaven brought to earth in the birth of his Savior.

And as the infant wails of the newborn Jesus in a rude manger warm your hearts with love and understanding, let the mature and vital words of the same infant grown to manhood be equally compelling as he urges a life of compassion:

"Truly, I say unto you: As you did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40)

This is a fearful, terrifying and dangerous world in which we live. But we also inhabit a world of greater promise and potential for goodness,

happiness, and health than any other generation of men has ever known.

The direction we shall follow -- toward annihilation or toward life lies in the strength of our spirit to direct the use of our physical and material power.

Let us grasp and hold fast to that spirit.

May you be strengthened by those who spoke to us with the inspiration of God in their hearts, whether it be Moses saying:

"Be strong and of good courage, fear not ---- for the Lord thy God, He it is that doth go with thee." (Deut. 31:6)

or the real message of Christmas in the same tone:

"But straightway Jesus spoke to them: Be of good cheer; it is I --- be not afraid." (Matt. 14:27)

AMEN

