Text of Sermon Delivered Jan. 19, 1969

Temple Israel by Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks Omaha, Nebr.

"CAN A RABBI BE AN ATHEIST OR AN AGNOSTIC?"

In a suburb of Detroit there is a newly formed congregation. The rabbi is a graduate of the Hebrew Union College. Both he and his congregation have recently raised issues of belief which have commanded attention in the press and certainly demand our careful thoughtfulness.

Publicly, in statements to his congregation and in releases to the press, Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine has said that he does not believe in the existence of a Divine Being. According to some reports he has deleted all mention of God from services in his Temple.

Rabbi Wine says "On the simple popular level I am an Atheist.... But in the sophisticated sense, I don't know. I would object to being called an atheist when it has the immoral meaning that society has often given it."

Rabbi Wine said that he prefers to be called an "Ignostic". He defined that as a person who says of God "I don't know what you mean; I can't tell whether your statement is true or false." Press reports go on to say that the Rabbi contrasted this to an agnostic, whom the rabbi said takes the position "I know what you mean, but I don't know whether it is true or false."

Needless to say, such statements resulted in a storm of controversy both from rabbis and laymen.

Rabbi Leon Fram, the spiritual leader of Detroit's Temple Israel and President of the Michigan Association of Reform Rabbis quite correctly said that there was no precedent in Reform Judaism for disciplinary action against a rabbi. But he also said this: "I should think that the Central Conference of American Rabbis could determine whether (Rabbi Wine) can continue to use the title of Rabbi..... The Union of American Hebrew Congregations could decide whether the Congregation is to continue under the label of a Reform Temple."

Rabbi Leon Feuer, President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, said that there were no theological grounds within the organization for expelling a rabbi. He said that the matter was totally a theological one, stemming from Rabbi Wine's statement that he was not able to define God. He added that the Central Conference of American Rabbis was not contemplating imposing any sanctions upon Rabbi Wine. "There is no unfrocking in Reform Judaism", he said.

Let it be added that Rabbi Wine is not only a graduate of the Hebrew Union College, but holds a Masters Degree in Philosophy from the University of Michigan. He is a well qualified rabbi.

Now, I for one, am thoroughly proud of the fact that neither the Central Conference of American Rabbis nor the Union of American Hebrew Congregations can take or will take any disciplinary action either against the rabbi or the congregation. We Jews have learned through a long history to accommodate wide diversity of thought.

The authority of the rabbi derives from his ordination to teach and from the condition that his congregation accepts his authority. And while it may be that when Rabbi Wine leaves his present post, it would be the rare congregation that would be likely to accept him as their rabbi, no one can take his title, properly earned, from him.

Actually the Union of American Hebrew Congregations has no jurisdiction in this matter, because the congregation is not a member of the Union. But even, if it were, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations is a deliberative body which cannot, in my view, sit in judgment over the theological beliefs of its members. We are free to believe as we wish.

But now arises the much more difficult question posed by Rabbi Wine and his Congregation. Is it really possible for a rabbi who acts in the authoritative capacity of teacher of Judaism and spiritual leader of a congregation to call himself an Atheist? Is a group of Jews who deny the existence of a Divine Being really a Jewish congregation? Can a Rabbi be an atheist or an agnostic?

Surely much of this depends upon a definition of terms. The word atheist means one who is certain that there is no Divine Being. That is, that there is no God. But in intellectual fairness, we must then inquire what we mean by "God". Anyone who has studied the history of religion and particularly the development of Judaism and Christianity as revealed from the days of the Bible to the present knows that the idea of God has continually been changing. The concept of God held by Moses was certainly not that which was held by Isaiah. The God concept of Isaiah was certainly different from that of Moses Maimonides. Maimonides' concept of God was different from that of Buber or Rosenzweig or Hermann Cohen. Should you ask me if I hold the same concept of God as did my grandfather or my great-grandfather I should have to say 'no'. I do not believe in that kind of a God. If you should ask me to entertain the notion that God is a personal supernatural being, sitting upon his throne in heaven and guiding the destinies of the world, in a personal operative sense, then I should have to deny that notion, and I might by those who do so believe be called an atheist.

But, if by God we mean, the purpose, the design, the moral quality of the Universe, if by God we mean the power that makes for human salvation, if by God we mean the source of life and our capacities for growth and self realization, if by God we mean the sense of orderliness and direction which flows through human history, then we, who are liberals, in our thinking and in our definitions cannot be atheists.

The alternative which Rabbi Wine proposes must inevitably lead to a concept of the universe, our world, human history, man himself, the origin of life, the des-

tiny and purpose of human striving, all to be understood as completely accidental and happenstance. To such a chaotic and instable world view no religious Jew could subscribe.

Rabbi Wine himself says "I used to use the word God to refer to Man's potential for moral improvement. I have discovered thru experience that this use of the term is confusing, rather than helpful. I have simply decided to say in plain English what I used to say in obscure theological language."

While I may agree with Rabbi Wine's logic, I would certainly disagree that the idea or the name of God should be expunged from our vocabulary in prayer or in study for a set of definitions and explanations which must be redefined and reformulated with every utterance of them.

Let anyone read into the word 'God' any reverent sense for life, any definition for the enhancement of the capacities of man for good, every impulse that makes for human improvement and a relationship with the mysteries of the world and of life that he wishes. For me this is worship and for me this is God. This was also the view of our fathers who quarreled not about the concept of God, but insisted only on His existence and meaning for all men. To deny Him was to be classed a "Kafer b'ikar." - "a denier of the root principle" and a faithless Jew.// The matter of agnosticism raises yet a different question. An agnostic is one who is compelled to say in answer to many of the great questions of philosophy, of religion, of life- "I do not know". He knows that human reason has its limitations - that human knowledge cannot understand everything completely. In this sense there are times when all of us must be agnostic. Even the Rabbi. There are times when we must say 'I do not know'. We Jews have never spoken finally and with complete authority and with a sense of absolute and timeless truth about God, or the human soul, or life, or death, or the purpose of existence. One of our great preachers and teachers of a generation ago, Rabbi Emil Hirsch of Chicago, once said: "Judaism has little to learn and less to fear from Agnosticism."

There are many times, and in the context of many problems when Judaism has been openly and frankly agnostic. Job, wrestling with the problem of evil, will not accept the final and logical and rational explanations of his sufferings and his predicament offered by his friends. Rather he says 'I do not know why I suffer as I do, but I will continue to believe that there is a purpose that lies beyond my reason, beyond my understanding, and in this I have faith." Job was an agnostic. But Job was also faithful to God.

With equal candor Judaism has never looked with misgivings or treated with disrespect those who doubt. Doubt is the mother of investigation, of thoughtfulness and of perception. Many a sage and teacher and prophet has doubted the purposes of

God. Abraham argues with God's justice in the earliest pages of our Bible. Moses cries out with doubt when he exclaims to his God: "How shall I know that Thou art with me? Let me see Thy face."

No, Judaism has never put full faith in reason, and as Rabbi Solomon Freehof points out in response to Rabbi Wine, "The prophets of Israel did not arrive at their great world changing messages by a series of investigations and analysis. They were aware of a direct inspiration: "Thus sayeth the Lord".

To be sure, Judaism is a rational religion. But Judaism also recognizes the limits of human reason. For centuries men have debated the point at which reason ends and faith begins. Far more to the point is the understanding that God's will works through human reason. Our thoughts, our actions, our aspirations, our beliefs, all are compounded of the coupling of reasoning and faith. We are not totally rational, nor are we totally irrational. There is a mystic quality to life and toward understanding that mystic quality of life we apply every rational standard of which our minds are capable.

Since we are not a dogmatic religion, proclaiming once and for all that we have the final truth, then we can accept the principal that all knowledge is tentative. Each day brings its new discoveries and new insights into the nature of the world and of human nature. Our faith must change. Our beliefs must change. Our concepts must change to fit new insights and to make the spirit of Judaism compatible with the changing role of Man in the World. Through it all we still believe that there runs a pattern that makes for increasing grandeur in the purposes of human fulfillment. And this some of us call 'God'. And to this God we must personally relate ourselves thru the service of the mitzvats and the love of our hearts.

Let us then applaud Rabbi Wine, not for what he says, but for his courage to say it. Not for his conclusions, but for what he has done to make us think. We shall not excommunicate, we shall not chastise. We shall have no hearings of heresy. Rabbi Wine is responsible only to himself and to his congregation and ultimately his followers will determine the acceptability of his teaching.

I believe that Rabbi Wine has gotten rational philosophy and the teaching of Judaism mixed up. He is not the first to debate the relation between reason and faith or the merits of either one within or outside of Judaism.

I do not believe that a Rabbi as a teacher of Judaism can be an atheist. Certainly not within the broad and liberal framework of Reform Jewish Theology. As Jews we shall always declare: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One!"

I do not believe that in denying any concept of the "Holy One, Blessed be He", Rabbi Wine's congregation can properly call itself a Kehillah Kedoshah - a Holy Congregation of Israel and be a part of the fellowship of the Torah. "God Israel

and the Torah are One"!

I do believe that the Rabbi and all of us at times can, and must be, agnostic concerning many of the great mysteries and puzzles of life.

Meanwhile let us bring to our faith, to our lives, to the great problems of humanity a reverent attitude that we live and breath within the framework of a great tradition, forged out of a personal relationship - a covenant - between Man and God. However understood, this must be our continuing personal relationship with every thought and idea - every impulse - every discovery - that makes for good in the world and in the heart and mind of Man. This we call God and to this God we say "May Thy Holy Name be blessed"

Amen

This is the text of the sermon delivered to the
Congregation of Temple Israel, Omaha, Nebraska,
by Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks on January 15, 1965