

"THE STARRY NIGHT"

(A-178)

"Religion should change with the times." I am sure that everyone in this congregation has, at one time or another, been accosted by this ubiquitous slogan. I know that I have had to contend with it ever since my first youthful venture outside my native Williamsburg.

"Religion should change with the times." This is the kind of profound platitude that everyone who utters thinks he has invented. Like ^{so many other} ~~most~~ cliches, which at first sight seem to possess so much wisdom and upon reflection ^{PROVE} ~~are~~ utterly vacuous, this popular motto is thoroughly banal. It offers simple bromides for enormously complex problems. It issues a fog of vague and imprecise but terribly up-to-date sentiments, where clarity and analysis are called for. It has as much to offer to religious philosophy as "twinkly, twinkle little star" has to contribute to the science of astronomy.

Does this mean that we are "against change?" Of course not. To be against change is to be against life, because we are always moving, always changing, always either growing up or growing down, progressing or retrogressing. Change is the law of the universe. Life is always in flux. A great Greek philosopher once said that life is like a river, always changing and moving, and, because of its constant motion, you cannot step into the same

river twice. Whereupon another Greek philosopher offered his opinion that so constant a state of flux is it in, that you cannot step into the river even once...

So we do not deny that life does change, and we do not even piously wish that it would not change. But we do maintain that intelligent human beings try to balance change and continuity, motion and stability. Just as complete immutability spells petrification and stagnation, so constant changeability implies fickleness, unreliability, ~~instability~~, and irresponsibility. Thus, for instance, all of us want our children to change: to study, to grow physically, to better their characters, to improve their personalities. We want them to be weaned from us protective parents, to have their own careers, to marry and build their own homes, and to make their own reputations in life. But -- we also want them to be stable, always to remain honorable, responsible, loyal, to keep a word and a commitment once made, and to maintain throughout life their love for parents, brothers, and sisters. Is anyone ready to abandon these latter qualities with the facile argument that honor should change with the times? -- or love should change with the times? -- or friendship, or character, or integrity?

Certainly there is change. But a man cannot spiritually or psychologically survive change that is so radical, so abrupt, so unceasing that there is no continuity or stability in his life. He must have something in life that is fixed, some reference point by which to measure new ideas, new promises, new demands, and new phenomena.

That fixed point is Torah. The Psalmist~~s~~ sang, "Thy word is a lamp unto my foot, and a light unto my path" (Psalms 119:105). Of course we use our feet ^{to} ~~and~~ tread on different paths in life. We live neither in a forcibly imposed East European ghetto, nor in the voluntarily self-isolated communities of Western Europe, but in open and pluralistic and technological U.S.A. -- and it is an exciting and adventurous life. Our feet stake out new paths constantly. But the lamp and the light for our feet and our paths are the same -- Torah and mitzvot. Without them we stumble, we lose our way, and our adventure turns into a horror and the excitement into unbearable anxiety.

The more a society is in a state of change, the more it needs some ^{anchor} ~~core~~ of permanence to give it a sense of stability. When I don my tallit or tefillin, when I hold my lulav and etrog, I suddenly am aware of myself as standing in the grand tradition of my parents and my grandparents and their grandparents before them. I perceive myself as part of a great and noble historical continuum which emerges unshaken from the vicissitudes of the various ages. These observances are both symbol and essence of my roots. And, indeed, in the performance of the Jewish mitzvot I am aware of my roots such that no matter what winds may buffet my branches, no matter what storms may swirl about me, I remain firm and stable~~l~~. I feel like a tree, not like a mushroom which appears out of nowhere and disappears into nothing. Thus, the tallit and the teffilin, the lulav and the etrog, kashruth and Shabbat, are more important here

and today than they were in Volozhin or Pressburg or Hamburg of a hundred years ago. Our life in these times is obsessed by veneer, by the appeal of the new and the fashionable, by the attraction of tomorrow's style. Marshal McLuhan, for all his sensationalism, has enunciated a truth in his famous statement that "the medium is the message." Considering the proliferation of the various new media in our times, our mind is bombarded by all kinds of ^{novel} ~~new~~ and ~~effervescent~~ ^{evanescent} messages, so that the timeless verities are displaced from our consciousness. We have become the generation of the spiritually dispossessed, and our own permanent values have turned unstable and illusory. We are thus perpetual adolescents, in eternal transition. With all our scorn for the hippies, we must acknowledge in gratitude that they point to a problem that is ours: they, on the margins of society, are the psychopathic symptoms of our inner pathology, our inner emptiness, our inner sickness. We are so caught up in change, so enamored of motion, so mercurial in our spiritual orientation, so volatile in our ethical lives, so fickle in our culture, that we are left without identity, without self, without reality. And it is against this emptiness that the hippies attempt, so ^{pathetically} ~~pitifully~~, to reassert the eternal and stable truths of love and beauty and simplicity. It is a pity that their "flower power" has no roots.

In a society of this kind we need Torah more than ever before. We need a religion which does not change with the times, but which offers the permanence and stability we crave. Religion

should not be a mirror that reflects the crazy whirl of life's mad currents. It should be a rudder that keeps us afloat, that tells us where we are going and guides us there, that helps us attain perspective, and prevents us from being overwhelmed by the empty foam of life. Were religion to change with the times, it would not be worth the effort to stay religious!

I believe that this idea is implicit in a remarkable statement of the Rabbis of the Midrash. They taught that ein melekh ha-mashiah ba ela le'lamed l'umot ha-olam sukkah, that the King Messiah will come to the world only to teach the nations of the world about the sukkah. ^{How strange!} ~~Imagine that!~~ For over two thousand years Jews pine away for the Messiah. For the last eight hundred years or so we sing daily of our hearts' deepest yearnings and proclaim courageously our ani maamin, our belief and our faith that the Messiah can come at any time, any day. And what for? -- to teach the Gentiles how to build a sukkah! Did not the Prophets conceive of the Messiah so much more nobly? Isaiah taught that the function of the Messiah would be to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning forks. Micah taught that Messiah would establish the House of the Lord on the mountain in Jerusalem so that all nations will proclaim, "Come let us go in the light of the Lord." And the Rabbis of the Midrash? -- that the Messiah will come, gather up the nations in the UN, and teach them the prosaic laws of how to build a little sukkah!

What did they mean? I suggest it is this. The sukkah is

a symbol of change. The Rabbis refer to it as dirat arai, the temporary abode. Its very flimsiness is an index of its temporariness. It is a symbol of the makeshift booths which our ancestors used in their journey through the Sinai wilderness. It implies, therefore, transition, transience, impermanence. The very insignificance of its defanot, or walls, and the requirement that the covering or sekhakh be impermanent are further indications of sukkah as a symbol of change and transition. Now, transition is a dangerous period. Consider adolescence and the early years of marriage, or historical transition from one age to another, or economic change and displacements. At a time of this sort, disaster dogs us at every footstep, calamity is just around every corner, man is threatened by being swept up in change and losing his moorings. A world of this kind needs a Messiah, it needs his lesson of how to survive the sukkah! Messiah will teach the world what the Jews always should have known; that we can and must find stability in the midst of change and movement. The halakhah teaches us that in order for a sukkah to be valid, the covering or sekhakh must not be too tightly packed. Specifically, we must be able to see the stars through the sekhakh. Like the ancient mariner who without instruments was able to guide himself by the stars, or like the contemporary interplanetary satellite which moves ^{unerringly} ~~faultlessly~~ through the vast and open reaches of empty space by latching on to a star, so man, caught up in an ever-moving and ever-changing sukkah of life, must be able to see the stars through the sekhakh. That star is -- Torah, faith, God.

When the artist Van Gough was asked about his famous expressionistic painting, "The Starry Night," he said, "I felt a need of -- shall I say the word? -- religion, and so I went out and painted the stars." It is the very permanence of the stars and the solace they offer to an unstable society that makes them the symbol of religion. It is this fixity amidst flux that Torah offers and that Messiah will teach.

The religion of Torah, therefore, does not change with the times. It is not subject to the whims of the public opinion poll. Its strength derives from its perennial reliability.

Nevertheless, we must also stress a corollary: that while Torah is changeless, it must always be relevant to a changing society. It must not be so changeless that it has nothing to do with man who is always in a state of change. Judaism must address man in his changing conditions, it must speak to man of value and faith, of loyalty and honor and meaning, as they apply to his times and his society. But Judaism cannot do this if the teachers of Torah turn their backs on the rest of mankind. This is what we mean when we appeal for the relevance of Orthodox Judaism, and this is our argument with those in our own camp who would cut themselves off from modern society completely. The stars can guide man only when they are visible. If clouds of distrust and diffidence cover the stars, they are of precious little use to man. So, the advocates of Torah must speak to modern man in his own idiom, they must respect

his intelligence, and feel with him in his misery.

When the Rabbis of old complained that Torah munahat be' keren zavit, Torah lies neglected in a hidden corner, they did not mean for us to crawl into that corner with it and turn our backs on the world. Rather, they meant for us to take Torah out of that keren zavit and bring it into the center of the world scene, into the maelstrom of daily events, into the midst of the raging torrents of the times, and with it to offer man abiding faith and enduring stability.

Of course, by the same token, over-emphasizing relevance can destroy this stable character of religion of which we speak. For instance, Reform Jews are now debating the composition of a new prayer book. They discovered that 20 or 30 years ago they issued a new edition of their prayer book and included special prayers for coal miners. Twenty-five years ago this was terribly relevant. Nowadays, the problems of coal miners are simply no longer significant; the whole issue is obsolete. When you are too relevant, you turn religion into a newspaper; and nothing is as meaningless as yesterday's news...

Torah, therefore, must not be a sealed book written in an ancient and undecipherable language, nor must it be a running commentary of religious journalese. It must be the sefer hayyim, the Book of Life. That is a difficult task -- to be permanent and yet relevant, changeless and yet germane. It means that while affirming the unchanging nature of Halakhah, we must be able to explain it in terms of a changing society; that while teaching the timeless

truths of Torah we must relate them to issues that are timely. Above all, we must not be afraid to say that we do not have all the answers, and yet we must never cease searching for them.

In this, we of modern Orthodoxy, we who are associated with Yeshiva University, with synagogues such as The Jewish Center, with the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, with journals such as TRADITION, and movements such as Yavneh, have not always been successful. Sometimes we are too timid, sometimes too bold; sometimes too immature, often too inexperienced. But it is our sacred task to pursue the mission that has been given us. It may be that we will never perform our task to the complete and adequate satisfaction of all our critics, even of ourselves. But then, we shall work and work and work at it until the Messiah comes -- and it is he who will teach the umot ha-olam, the nations of the world, the lesson of the sukkah. And if they are willing to learn -- why, so will reluctant and recalcitrant Jews...

Perhaps, indeed, the sukkah of modern Orthodoxy is not what it should be. Perhaps we have not yet completely learned how to see the stars through the sekhakh, how to live in a world that is always changing and yet with complete and utter loyalty to a Torah which abides eternally. But if we have failed so far, we pray, during this great and happy festival, ha-Rahaman hu yakim lanu sukkat David ha-nofalet, "May the Merciful One establish for us, for once and for all, the weak and wobbling sukkah of David." Amen.

Addendum to "STARRY NIGHT" - not included in original sermon.

In addition to being changeless and yet relevant, a third point must be made about our whole tradition and the problem of change. It is suggested indirectly in an article by Stephen Schwartzschild in the Spring-1967 issue of TRADITION. It is an important point, for it is usually overlooked. That is, that Torah and Halakhah are revolutionary in nature. They represent the realized ideals of the Kingdom of Heaven; they are the norms of the Messianic age. If they sometimes seem incommodious to contemporary man, it is that man today lives in unredeemed exilehood, whereas Halakhah was created essentially for a transformed world. The Halakhah works towards that transformation of Messianic redemption.

Thus, for example, Shabbat is the way the Halakhah has taught us to use leisure -- something which is far more abundant today than it ever was, and will probably be a permanent feature of the Messianic age. Kashruth teaches man how, in an ideal society, he ought relate to the animal kingdom. In fact, if it is seen in context, from Adam through the prophecies of Isaiah, we will realize that Kashruth is a concession to man by the Torah from the background of its vegetarianism, both primeval (Adam was a vegetarian) and eschatological (thus, the prophecy of Isaiah about lamb and wolf lying side by side).

Other such examples may be given. Thus, we now understand in a new light the statement of the Rabbis about Messiah coming to teach the world how to build a sukkah. It is the most prosaic-seeming aspects of the Halakhah, such as the simple architectural

problem of building a sukkah, that contains within it the seeds of the Messianic kingdom. When the Messiah will come, we and the entire world will appreciate that it is the Halakhah, symbolized by the sukkah -- that which is unchanging amidst change -- which has all along been the goad to a radical change and revolutionary transformation of our society.

It would therefore be criminal to change the Halakhah and accommodate it to our unredeemed times. Were we to do so, we would lose the most noble and inspiring challenge to change ourselves in the most radical way we know.