

THE QUEST FOR THE SUPERNATURAL

My words this morning are a profession of faith and confidence, in which I hope I am not alone.

For a long time now, religion and faith have been in decline in Western civilization. But like Rabbi Akiva who smiled and was happy when he beheld jackals loitering in the ruins of the Holy Temple, because now that the prophecy of doom had been realized the prophecies of consolation must follow, I believe with perfect faith that the fortunes of faith itself will change. Things will get worse before they will get better, but they will get better. Before long, אֵלֵינוּ יָבוֹא, in our lifetime, the disrepute into which religion has sunk in our world will lift like a fog in the morning sun, and genuine religious faith will survive its inadequate institutions now crumbling in the Western world.

The last two or three years have been particularly depressing, as even supposedly religious teachers have succumbed to the pressures of agnosticism and secularism. The so-called "radical theology" has, דָּבַר אֵל, written the obituary of the Creator of the world and proclaimed the death of religion as it urged the secularization of religion and welcomed triumphantly the emergence of the "Secular City." But in the last six months

or year this mood of despair and dejection has vanished, and this weird secularization of religion has become obsolete. Radical theology has proved to be only a fashion, a fad that has failed.

I believe that the deterioration of religion in Western civilization will end, if only because religion is a vital dimension of the human personality and an irrepressible facet of the human soul no less than the thirst for beauty or the curiosity of knowledge -- and much more so.

If I speak of "religion" in general, rather than focusing my attention on Judaism as such, it is because to a large extent history has proved as completely correct the contention of Rabbi Judah Ha-Hasid of 800 years ago that *ה' יושב עמנו* *וה' יושב עמנו*, that Jews often follow Christians; and that, therefore, if Christians are agnostic, Jewish faith is weak, and if the gentiles will return to the sources of faith, so will Jews.

My confidence that religion must experience a renaissance is based upon good Jewish doctrine: that man is created in the "image of God," and that man, therefore, yearns for the God Whom he images; that man's very being is in this state of longing for the Creator, which Rav Kook refers to as the constant and unceasing prayer of the soul; and that, in the words of the Prophets

of Israel, *וְכָל הָעוֹלָם יִכְרֹז לַיהוָה*, all the world will eventually acknowledge the sovereignty of the Lord.

Put in another way, we might say that man naturally quests for the Supernatural. By supernatural I do not mean miracle-making, the suspension of natural law, or some kind of magic. I mean quite simply God Who is above nature because He created it. The verse, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," means that the Jewish God is a supernatural One: He is above nature, having called it into being.

Man knows intuitively, in his very bones as it were -- *אֵלֵינוּ* -- that there is more to existence than what we encounter in society, in office or factory, in the family; that there is something more to life than the physical and the psychological and the technological, than our petty pleasures and pains. And this knowledge must eventually be translated out of our unconscious, out of a dim and vague awareness, into the full consciousness of man as faith in the Almighty.

Several weeks ago there appeared a new book, A Rumor of Angels, by a distinguished sociologist, Peter L. Berger. In this book, the author pleads for an acknowledgement of the supernatural, and purports to find what he calls "signals of transcendence" in everyday life. Some of the examples he gives include: hope, which refuses to acknowledge the finality of death; the

universal revulsion when confronting that which is monstrously evil, such as the powerful and intuitive feeling that such as an Eichmann is outside the community of men; and even the sense of humor.

I would add certain other phenomena that have appeared in most recent times, and that do not seem at all related to the thirst for transcendence -- but they are disguises for it, and symbolize for me the quest for the Supernatural, the desire for something more than the material and the technical, more than the affluence and the comfort which society gives us in abundance. We will notice this not in the adult generation, which has unfortunately learned to accept life and society on its own terms, but in the young.

I am fascinated by the rejection of our self-centered and self-indulgent society by the children of the rich, who are willing to abandon all the pleasures and the comforts that their parents have forced on them, and are willing to live in "pads," in abject poverty. In the beginning of this revolution of the young, many of them sought "flower power," a touch of gentleness and humanity which they found missing in this over-organized, over-affluent society which has made a god of science and the rigid laws of nature. They searched for love, and even if they did not find it, the search itself is important. They showed a willing-

ness to sacrifice for peace, even if their politics may be questionable. They demonstrated a readiness to do battle for civil rights and for the betterment of the lot of the poor. They never had to struggle in order to be affluent, and so they are able to judge it more objectively: and they find it wanting, they refuse to accept it as an end in itself. They have told their parents, by action if not by words, that the satisfactions of wealth are illusory, that ultimately they are meaningless, that there is something in the human soul that restlessly searches for that which transcends mere material wealth and comfort.

Thus too the penchant for drugs and for the narcotic and psychedelic experiences. I am not referring to the addiction of the poor, who obviously turn to drugs in order to escape the dreariness and pain of life, but the addiction by the rich, who have painfully discovered that money doesn't answer the great questions of life. They are bored to distraction by the meaninglessness and purposelessness of our affluent society, they search for something that they cannot articulate, and they believe that in drugs they will find a self-transcending experience.

The same might be said for the turn to Zen by many thoughtful young people. And, weirdest of all, we now discover that the sophisticates of suburbia have taken, of all things, to -- astrology! Supposedly intelligent people now consult astrologers

and the signs of the Zodiac, instead of taking their problems to the marriage counselor or the stockbroker.

These are aberrations which I cannot in good conscience recommend to my congregation. But they are phenomena that manifest a deep yearning in the human soul which has remained dormant for centuries and which now struggles for release. They say something of great importance to us. In the realm of psychology we know of neurotics and neurosis, whereby certain experiences are too painful and are therefore repressed, only to reappear disguised as symptoms. Similarly, in matters of the spirit the quest for the Supernatural -- what Viktor Frankl has called "The Search for Meaning" -- is often suppressed because of the tremendous cultural pressure which militates against authentic religious faith, and is therefore expressed in a spiritually neurotic fashion in various disguises. Just as a perceptive psychologist can read the symptoms of his neurotic patient and trace back the original suppressed experience, so a spiritually sensitive person can interpret the disguises under which emunah, the quest for the Supernatural, appears in both healthy and unhealthy fashions.

There are moments when I feel that our current fascination with space exploration is such a disguise. I do not, of course, mean to say that there are no scientific reasons for want-

ing to travel out into space; or that the popularity of the space program is not due in some fashion to the simple adventure of it, the desire to cross the hill or reach the peak of the mountain just "because it is there"; or that there may not be military and political and economic forces at work. But the fact that the American public is willing to tax itself so strongly to pay for this program at a time when the funds are so desperately needed to heal the social fabric and prevent what threatens to become a revolution which may destroy all of society -- this bespeaks a deeper feeling that has not yet been consciously identified, let alone articulated. And that is, that we identify with the astronauts and support them because through them, vicariously, we seek to transcend our limited and trivial lives, because we want an adventure that will literally lift us "out of this world."

Professor Loren Eiseley, the distinguished anthropologist, has asserted that the space program is an exercise in futility, much like the construction of pyramids in ancient Egypt. Both were outstanding technological achievements, but did not serve much purpose.

I do not know how right he was insofar as the futility of space exploration is concerned, but I feel that both the space program and the pyramid project were motivated by a search for transcendence, transcendence in space in the first case, and

transcendence in time in the second. The Pharaohs built their pyramids in order to achieve immortality, and the spacemen seek by natural means and all the sophisticated tools of modern science to transport themselves out of this earthly scene -- a disguised quest for the supernatural.

If all these phenomena are indeed cases of spiritual neurosis, masks of the quest for the Supernatural, some constructive and some not so, how does Judaism view this quest, other than the basic fact of emunah, our openness to God, the Supernatural?

Permit me to commend to your attention several instances in which Judaism urges us on to the supernatural not by transporting us to another realm in space or time, but by giving us a sense of the discovery of the transcendent which exists within ourselves, within man and society and family.

The Torah is one such case. Whoever has truly studied Torah -- not just about it -- knows that it is more than law, more than the exercise of subtle analysis. It is rather, as R. Hayyim of Volozhin taught us, a discovery of the supernatural within us, a hint of the eternity that inheres in our minds and in our hearts. So do we say in the blessing we recite over the study of Torah: we bless the Almighty who gave us a Torah of truth רבנו "ני

הוא אלהינו, and implanted in us eternal life. The student



of Torah knows that such study affords him pleasures that originate in another sphere of existence.

The same is true in somewhat diminished sense of the observance of the Sabbath -- not just simple rest or cessation of work, and not just technical adherence to the laws of the Halakhah while we violate the sanctity of the day -- such as turning on the television set before Shabbat and having it assault the soul with its ceaseless static all through the Sabbath. The Sabbath truly observed is, as we say in one of our most delightful zemirot,  
 לַבֹּרֵךְ שֶׁהוּא יְיָ -- a foretaste of the world-to-come.

Married love is another such instance. If it is genuine -- it is almost other-worldly. Under the marriage canopy, as part of the seven blessings, we implore the Almighty, אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
 רַבּוֹנוּ, "Do Thou make these beloved friends happy even as Thou made the creation of Thine hands, Adam and Eve, happy in the Garden of Eden in ancient days." True, self-giving love is an echo from the Garden of Eden. To know that you have someone with whom to share life's cruel blows and with whom to participate in life's unanticipated delights and pleasures, can bring the transcendent joy of Paradise into an ordinary home, even as hatred and the coldness of apathy can turn it into a living Hell.

The same is true for all the commandments. The mitzvot give us a slow, gradual but sure insight into the world of the

Metzaveh, the One who commands us. A life of commandments offers us a glimpse into a higher realm, whether within us or beyond us. All of Judaism is thus, in the final analysis, a quest for the Supernatural.

(For some Jews this slow and sure process is not sufficient for their temperament. Some souls are overwhelmed by a passion for the divine and the transcendent. They are impatient, they crave more direct access to the Supernatural, they are driven by a holy restlessness and a mystic impulse.

Most of us do not experience this craving, especially in our days. Yet historians of Judaism tell us that this is the underside of all Jewish religious yearning, that it is an ever-present undercurrent of the Jewish soul that erupts unexpectedly in various times of history, when the mystic mood grips large numbers of people.

So while we may not understand it, we must be aware of its existence. The Kabbalah has an important and sacred place in Jewish life precisely because it affords greater satisfaction and more immediate rewards of the quest for the Supernatural.

This may answer, to some extent, the question that someone put to me last week when, as the Haftorah for Shavuot, we read the chapter of Ezekiel that deals with maaseh merkavah, the mystic description of the "divine chariot." How is this exotic passage, the playground of mystics for centuries, relevant to us?

Of what importance is it that it was included as the Haftorah of such an important festival?

Yet it is there, and it is there for good reason. For those of us who do probe into the mystic secrets, into the esoteric realms, it allows us to catch a glimpse into 'תורה, the secrets of the Torah. And, perhaps more important, it is an education in religious open-mindedness for the rest of us, the majority, who do not experience such profound yearnings and who are temperamentally indisposed to such ecstatic upheavals. It lets us know that there is such a realm -- and that too is important.

But while there is a mystical dimension to Judaism, it is not crucial to normal, normative quests for the Supernatural.) One can be a good Jew and a holy Jew without being a mystic. Even without the sudden mystical seizure, without the ecstatic outbursts, without initiation into the secrets of the Kabbalah, Jewish law and Jewish life possess the full complement of "signals of transcendence," and they encourage in us the quest for the Supernatural, the hint of the Beyond, the relatedness to the One who is above nature and Who is responsible for it.

Judaism gives us this through Torah and Shabbat and marriage and all the other commandments, which develop us to this awareness slowly and surely, through a fine and gradual perception.

Perhaps this is one of the nuances of Hasidic insight given by the great פ'דג'דמ זג'דן , "The Seer of Lublin," in a characteristically Hasidic interpretation of one word of the priestly blessings which we read this morning.

The blessings begin with the words: "May the Lord bless you and keep you." The last clause is in Hebrew one word: שומר from the word shamor, which means "to guard" or "to keep." But the Hasidic sage suggests that it is related not to this word, but to the word פ'דג'דמ , which means -- "yeast." The blessing of the Almighty lies in this, that the life of Torah and mitzvot is like a yeast introduced into our soul, which causes it to ferment, slowly, quietly, imperceptibly, but always developing, growing, rising, maturing, and elevating. Almost unnoticed, as we add insight to insight, mitzvah to mitzvah, good deed to good deed, kindness to kindness, our very interiority begins to expand, our yearning increases, and the curtain between the natural and the supernatural parts ever so slightly, affording us illuminating insights into the realms beyond and within, giving us an awareness of the transcendent, of the Supernatural, and increasing our love for God Himself.

The blessing of God's presence, our awareness of it, has been denied to Western man for many, many decades and even centuries. But underneath this hard shell of kefirah, there has always frothed the fine ferment of faith, of emunah.

Let us hope and pray and be confident that the time is near at hand, that this irrepressible faith, this unquenchable quest for the Supernatural, this moving response to God, will emerge from the mysterious recesses of man's spiritual unconscious into full awareness and begin to transform all of society. For this is the blessing that follows:  $\text{ה' יתן$ , the Lord will cause His countenance to shine upon us, faith will no longer be repressed only to be expressed in forms that may be sick; instead it will be open, illuminating, as God's face shines upon us. Then we shall be worthy of  $\text{נחמ$ , the gift of  $\text{ל$  or charm which will again grace the inner life of man.

And, above all, we will be heir to the greatest blessing of all: that of social harmony which results from individual men and women who have been restored to spiritual health.  $\text{שלום}$   
 $\text{שלום}$   $\text{ה'}$ , may He grant us that gift, the gift of "peace."