

"GOD IS ALIVE"

PART I: MAN IS DYING

An Orthodox Rabbi has more important things to discuss with his people from his pulpit than the latest fads and fashions in contemporary apikorsut. But when such movements are sponsored^{so} by theologians, and are widely discussed in the daily press and in weekly news magazines, it is important to comment upon them and offer whatever guidance may be forthcoming from the sacred sources of the Jewish tradition.

A number of Christian theologians, climaxing a development that has been about a quarter of a century in the making in their circles, have put forth their ideas in a manner as shocking as it is honest, and as scandalous as it is forthright. Instead of clothing their atheism in artificial, long-winded, technical terminology, they have accepted the slogan first coined by a German philosopher of the last century: "God is dead".

The words sound too blasphemous to repeat; the lips hurt and the tongue aches when such words are recited. Yet that is just why they make such good copy for the pseudo-sophisticated weeklies, and tempt young professors of theology to break out of the stifling atmosphere of the ivory tower and into a breath-taking sensationalism. For that is just what this is -- sensationalism. These theologians have made so much noise with their smart slogan, that nowadays one expects to look for news of theology not in the Religion section,

but in the Obituary columns.

Their criticism of the "old fashioned religion" -- especially if we seek to apply it to Judaism -- is a crude caricature, almost vulgar in its insinuations. They have set up a straw man and now knock it down. No intelligent Jew ever thought of God as a man with a white long beard who lives in a castle beyond the sun. No half sophisticated human being who believed in God ever imagined Him as orbiting the globe in a space ship. Any imputation of such primitive concepts to religious folk of ages past, is merely a species of intellectual dishonesty.

What do these theologians mean with their intemperate slogan? I believe they are saying one of three things.

First, they are preaching atheism, pure and simple. Second, they are ascertaining a form of deism. That is, they reject the idea of divine personality. They believe in a God, but one who has no relations with man; He is conceived as an immanent principle, an impersonal power. A God of this kind, cannot reveal Himself to man, nor can man pray to Him. He is caught up within the natural world. He is not supernatural.

Of course, contrary to what we are being told about how brand new all this is, it is really old hat. Atheism and deism have long histories, as long as monotheism itself. And both are equally inimical to and obnoxious in the eyes of Judaism, for they deny everything in Torah from "In the beginning God created" to the

end of the Pentateuch, that God revealed Himself "in the eyes of all Israel". Neither creation nor revelation makes sense to an atheist or to a deist.

For whatever such information is worth, and for whatever perverse consolation it may offer, let it be known that this intellectual dishonesty of preaching a religion which no longer believes in a personal God, was first advocated by a group of Jews in our neighborhood; and that far from signifying the death of God, Heaven forbid, it commenced for them their own slow spiritual strangulation. If the new ~~breed~~ of Christian theologians believe that they are original innovators when they speak of a "religionless Christianity", they are in error; they have been anticipated in the Jewish community by the Reconstructionists when they proposed "Judaism as a Civilization", and "naturalistic religion", in which it was taught that one can be "Jewish" even though he clearly denies the existence of God as Judaism has taught it throughout the centuries. The consequences of this kind of belief have now been exposed for all the world to see: a form^{of} clergyman who openly preaches agnosticism or atheism, deletes every mention of God from his service, even from the Shema -- and yet is accepted as a bona fide member of a non-Orthodox rabbinical association!

However, there is a third meaning or interpretation of this slogan that does deserve to be taken seriously by believing Jews, for it raises a problem that touches each and every one of us.

According to this third meaning, there is no denial of theism, the belief in the existence of a personal God. However, it seeks to understand the profound sense of loss, by man, of the experience of God in modern life. Why, it asks, does modern man no longer encounter God as personally and as intimately as he once used to?

The question is a real one, and it will not do for us merely to dismiss it with contempt. For some reason, modern society and modern life are such that we usually fail to establish dialogue with God, we fail to feel Him as deeply, for instance, as our grandparents did. Our inferior Jewish education is no answer to or explanation of the problem. Several generations ago even a semi-literate old lady who barely could read her prayers, and certainly could not understand them, nevertheless was moved by them to a profound religious experience with her Maker. Prayer was a moving experience, and it was not out of the ordinary to see a tear shed even by one who was intellectually an ignoramus. Today, even our children are more literate in Judaism than were some of our ancestors. Yet how often does one notice a tear in our synagogue, except on the occasion, Heaven forbid, of personal disaster? What has happened to our lives? Why has God, who is alive forever, abandoned so many of us? The problem, then, is not God, but man.

What does Judaism have to say to this very real challenge? I suggest three answers.

First, we should not expect to have a sustained intimate

relationship with God, constantly and uninterruptedly. Such expectations are too high, if we demand of ourselves, that this personal experience, this intimate I-Thou relationship with God, be constant and continuous. Man is too finite and mortal, ^{and} God is too great and infinite, for such a relationship to prevail without any interruption. Our great mystics spoke of the phenomenon of ratzo ve-shav, a principle of alternation: the deep and profound communion with God exists for but a short while, and then suddenly man's spirit recoils and he is possessed by a feeling of emptiness and distance and remoteness, only to reestablish ^{and} contact once again. This is revealed in the very structure of our blessing. Thus, we address God intimately, in the second person: "Blessed are Thou ..." and then, suddenly, we revert to speaking not to but about God, in the third person; "who has sanctified us with His commandments...", asher kideshanu and not asher kidashtanu. What we are taught, therefore, is that we ought to strain ourselves to experience the presence of God, especially in prayer, but that we cannot expect to remain on that high level in a sustained fashion.

The establishment of this contact with God does not come to us naturally; it demands constant effort and initiative of us, even if we know that we often fail. A great Hasidic rabbi was once asked by one of his followers: why should I pray if I do not feel inspired? Is it not better for me to wait until I am ^{renewed?} ~~so inspired?~~

Is it not better for me to wait until I am so inspired? The Rabbi answered with a parable: once, there was a small hamlet, far off the beaten track, centuries ago. One day, the townsfolk discovered that none of them had the same time as the others on their clocks and watches. Since they were certain that no one had the right time, they put away their time-pieces and decided not to wind them, ^{because,} ~~since,~~ in any case, they were all wrong. One particular person decided that he would wind his watch, although he was certain that the timepiece was not giving him the correct information. After several months a traveler chanced upon the hamlet, and was surrounded by all the inhabitants who pressed him for information about the outside world. After he satisfied them, they asked him, "do you know the correct time?" He did, and he informed them of it. They all ran for their clocks and their watches to set them, but discovered to their dismay that the watches had turned rusty, and the hands of the clocks could no longer be moved. All, that is, except for this one man, who had -- irrationally! -- kept his watch wound. He merely lifted the crystal, set the correct time, and was the only one in the town who thereafter had a watch that worked! So, said the Rabbi, even if we do not feel inspired, even if we feel that spiritually we do not have the right time, nevertheless, we must wind our watches --that is, we must continue to pray and pray and pray. If we wind the watch of the spirit regularly, then when the time comes that we will feel closer to God, we will know how to pray, how to approach Him, how to be attuned ~~with~~ ^{to} the Author of all Time. Man cannot always show the right time spiritually. It is enough for him if he can pray devoutly and genuinely only occasionally, only, in fact, once in his lifetime. But for this, he must pray everyday!

The second reaction that I believe Judaism would offer, is the assertion that this enstrangement from God is a part of God's own plan.

The climax of the Tokhahah, that list of dire biblical punishments we read twice a year, is: "and I shall hide ~~My~~ face from thee." God enumerates the many disasters to which Israel will be subject, the worst of which is: that God will hide His face from us, He will abandon us to the impersonal and inexorable forces of nature and history. Hester Panim, "the hiding of the face," is the inaccessibility of God to man who searches for Him. It means that it will be much more difficult for man to contact his Creator than it ordinarily is. The punishment of Hester Panim is national-historical in nature; that is, it may last for centuries. Of course, individuals with only one life to lead are often impatient and interpret this inaccessibility as the absence of God. But one must take the long view. The difficulty of being religious is in many ways a punishment for having once abandoned God when it was much easier to be religious. Individual people, born, raised, and dying in this long and tragic period of alienation from God, this era of Hester Panim, soon conclude that God was never available, perhaps that He never was! They fail to appreciate that God is "hiding". No wonder, said the Besht, the biblical expression is, v'anokhi haster astir panai -- a repetition of the word "hiding" in the expression "and I will hide ~~My~~ face from thee." Even the very act of hiding will be hidden from man! Not only will man find God unavailable, but he will even find the concept

of God's inaccessability to be inscrutable !

The third explanation is that the alienation from God is not due to sin, as a subsequent punishment of the hiding of the face, but may simply be a reflection of the quality of the times in which we live. There are ages when it is easier to be religious, and ages when it is more difficult. Naturally, greater virtue accrues to one born in the twentieth century and who is devout, than to one born in the tenth century who remains religious. Ours is an age of great complexity. We live in a society of science and technology in which man has been granted vast new powers. Most of the civilized world is, in effect, one large urban sprawl. In a large city, it is difficult to recapture the primitive sense of immediacy which is so important for a true religious experience. It is difficult not only to be religious, but to be truly religious is the sense of a deep personal awareness of the presence of God.

In today's Sidra we read of Jacob gathering his sons to tell them what will happen in the end of days, that is, to give them the benefit of his spirit of prophecy. Yet, he fails to do so. In the words of the Rabbis,

אברהם ראה את יום מותו ונתנוהו לנביא
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Jacob wanted to reveal the end of days, the time of the

redemption, but suddenly he discovered that the Shechinah, the divine presence, had departed from him. In other words, Jacob experienced individually what we, in our age, are experiencing collectively -- the eclipse of God, the flight of His presence.

In a remarkable interpretation, the "Baal Haturim" discovers in the dialogue between Jacob and his sons an element that is ^{happily} ~~extremely~~ relevant to our theme. Jacob, terribly upset by the sudden failure of his prophecy, his loss of God's presence, turns to his sons accusingly and says: perhaps the absence of the divine spirit from me is your fault, perhaps you have sinned and that is why I am being punished. ~~And~~ ^{our} According to ~~this~~ author, he points out to his sons that of the letters that make up all their names, there are two letters missing: **G** and **h**, the root of the Hebrew word **חט**, sin. In other words, perhaps they are so unrepentant that they refuse to acknowledge some sin they have committed, and are hence still considered as living in sin. But their answer to their father is: No, it is not because of any sin of ours that you have been denied the gift of prophecy; because if you search further, you will discover that there are two other letters which we do not have in our names, and they are **3** and **7**, the Hebrew word for "the end," ^(א) ~~א~~ In other words, the time of redemption ("the end") which you sought to reveal ^{is missing.} ~~What they meant~~

to say was that the absence of the divine spirit ~~and presence~~ is not always the result of sin, but sometimes of the fact that the proper time for it, the gradual period of the maturation of man in God's presence, ^{ה',} the ~~the~~ ^{ה'} has simply not arrived. ^א Some periods of history are such that the reason for the absence of God is economic -- too much affluence -- or political or social or, as in our own times, a combination of all these and the cultural-scientific element. Whether our age is the one or the other is a matter of conjecture. But the fact remains that the loss of awareness of God's presence is neither unprecedented nor unanticipated. Certainly then, the problem is: how can man keep alive?, and not, Heaven forbid: Is God alive?

How, then, can modern man recapture this feeling of ^{ה' נאמר} of the closeness of God and His reality to him? Is it, indeed, important that he do so? This we shall discuss next week, please God, in an attempt to add a prescription to our diagnosis. What we shall discuss then will touch some of the foundations of our faith.

To summarize, the first two interpretations of this sordid, sensationalist, and shocking slogan, are such that we who are loyal Jews stand immovably opposed. We reject and deny atheism no matter what quarters it issues from: Marxist, secularist, agnostic, Protestant, Reform, or Reconstructionist. Our very name "Jew" and "Israel" contain, in the Hebrew, the names of God. Our very existence is the greatest argument for the existence of a Creator. Furthermore, we stand unto death for the affirmation of a God who lives in Israel, the God of personality, of ^{א"ל נאמר}.

Let us conclude with a comment on the beginning of today's Sidra. We are told that ^{ה' נאמר}, the days

of Israel, or Jacob, drew near to die. The first Hebrew word we mention is normally translated as "and they drew near." However, according to the Midrash, this has another interpretation. God, as it were, said to Jacob " וַיִּקְרַב הַיּוֹם ", the day itself struggles against you. What the Midrash meant was that the Hebrew word Va-yikravu comes ^e ~~out~~ ^{not} from the root karov, meaning near or close, but from the root kerav, meaning battle or war. Jacob, at the end of his days, having left his roots in Caanan and come to Egypt, discovers that his very days are doing battle to him. The yemei are offering kerav to Israel; Jacob, and the eternal principles for which he stands, is in a life-and-death struggle with the spirit of the days, with what is known as modernity, with the Zeitgeist. And yet -- Israel survived!

We Jews bore the message of God to the world in any and every form of hostile environment. We feared neither the sword of Islam nor the stake of the Christian, neither pillage by the pagan ^r ~~not~~ calumny by the Communist. In all ages, the rebellion against God was heralded as modern, timely, as the latest ^{and} ~~in~~ the best in human progressive thought. In all these periods, we, like our father Jacob, were willing to give battle to the hayom, to the yemei -- to what was considered as timely and up-to-date. In spite of all difficulties and ridicule, we now know that what was once considered modern and timely has soon been swept into the refuse cans of history, whereas, in the words of the Rabbis, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אָמַר "our father Jacob never died!" He lives on!

We today too shall, with the help of God, affirm God against those who, perversely, deny God even in the name of God -- so help us God!