

"UNNATURAL RELIGION"

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We Americans are many times puzzled, and more often shocked, at Soviet Russia's definition of such words as "Democracy" or "Peace" or "Justice". Their grotesque distortion of the meanings of these terms, the great abyss which separates their understanding of these words from ours, leads us to think of the great dangers in practicing certain ways of life in a most unnatural manner. Whether it is Stalin's unnatural interpretation of "Democracy", or Peron's unnatural practice of "Justice", or McCarrahan's unnatural definition of "Americanism", we feel outraged by the sheer unnaturalness of the attitudes adopted.

But if we do take such an attitude of puzzled indignation against perversion of such other lofty concepts, certainly we American Jews should apply the same standards and the same tests to our own approach to our religion. Let us face the facts; the approach of the majority of our Jews to Judaism, is, in many cases, as unnatural and as bizarre as Stalin's is to "Democracy".

It is such unnaturalness in religion which the Bible, in its symbolic language of today's Seder wants to prevent, and against which it agitates. In instructing Moses concerning the building of the MISHKAN, or Tabernacle, G-d says: VE'ASISSA ES HA'KRASHIM LA'MISHKAN ATZEI SHITTIM OMDIM, "and thou shalt make the boards for the Tabernacle of Shittim wood - that is, wood from the Shittim tree - standing up". Now the Rabbis attached a great deal of significance to this prescription of ATZEI SHITTIM OMDIM, standing Shittim wood. This particular type of wood, our Rabbis seem to indicate, symbolizes Judaism and recapitulates all of Jewish history. One Midrash tells us that the reason the Bible emphasizes HA'KRASHIM, the boards for the Tabernacle, with the definite article, is because these ~~part~~ particular boards of Shittim wood were well known to the Jews of that generation. According to ancient Jewish legend, when Jacob went down into Egypt he brought along with him Cedar trees and planted them in the land of Goshen, which was the Jewish part of Egypt. And before he died, Jacob instructed his children that when they left Egypt they were to take along the Cedar wood with them so that Moses would be able to use it in the construction of the Tabernacle. And indeed these were the very boards which Moses did use in the construction of the Mishkan

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The standing Shittim wood was the same that Jacob had originally brought to Egypt. So all of Jewish history, therefore, seems to be epitomized and recapitulated in this Shittim wood.

And another Midrash indicates that not only does this Shittim wood symbolize the physical history of the Jew, but its spiritual biography as well. The drama of Sin and Repentance, of Punishment and Absolution, are also represented by the Shittim of the MISHKAN. For Israel had sinned in the city called Shittim - VA'YESHEV YSROEL BE'SHITTIM VA'YACHEL LIZNOS ES BNOS MOAV, "and Israel dwelt in Shittim and began to sin with the daughters of Moab." They were punished in the same place for that sin. And then they were absolved from the stain of those evil deeds by building a Temple to G-d of which the wood came from Shittim - the Shittim wood of the Tabernacle.

So that when the Bible tells us that the wood of the Temple was of a specific type it does not mean merely to relate an insignificant historical fact which ^{will} ~~can~~ concern only the archaeologists of later generations. It rather meant to tell all of us that this Shittim wood symbolized both the History and the Religion of the people of Israel.

But exactly what does the Torah want to tell us about this sacred symbol of Israel? Here, our Rabbis, with their usual insight and their insight into the unusual structure of Bible sentences, single out the strange word OMDIM, "standing up". Why, they asked, must the Shittim boards be standing upright in their place in the Tabernacle? And, they answered, the Shittim must stand upright, because that is the way it grows naturally. And so important did our Rabbis deem this natural position of the Shittim, that they use this as a general principle for all commandments; and they rule, therefore, that all MITZVOS must be performed DERECH ~~THE~~ GDEILASSAN, the way they grow - that is, in the natural position. Thus, for instance, the Lulav, or palm leaf, and the Hadassah, or myrtle twig, which we use on Sugoath, must be used in their natural position, the way they grow naturally.

The main point, then, of the message of our Sages in their commentary on this verse is that just as the Shittim wood must be in an upright and natural position, so must Judaism, which is symbolized by that wood, be practiced in a natural manner. And, "a natural manner", in this sense, means that first things come first. It means that major values are to be given first consideration; it means that the major portions

of Judaism are not to be subordinated to the minor and less significant elements.

What does this warning against Unnatural Religion mean for us? It means, frankly, extremely much. It means revamping our entire way of life. It means coming to terms with the realities of Judaism, It means not deceiving ourselves and believing that we are "good Jews" when we practice the minimum - and the wrong minimum at that - currently practiced by most American Jews. It means not deluding ourselves and not fooling ourselves.

For one thing, it means that American Jews will have to break out of the narrow frame of being members of a Kaddish Cult. Certainly the Kaddish is one of the most beautiful and sacred of hymns ever composed. Sometimes, perhaps, we ~~shall~~ ^{shall} discuss in greater detail the background, ~~origins~~ origin and meaning of this lofty prayer. But by taking it out of all proportion, by reducing all of prayer, and indeed all of Judaism, to the rattling-off of this hymn, American Jews have developed a most unnatural type of Judaism. Perhaps out of charity to the sacred hymn itself we should call it not a Kaddish Cult, but a Death Cult. A Rabbi, and particularly a Rabbi in this neighborhood, cannot help but feel bitter about this Unnatural Religion that he must daily observe and put up with. I know all the excuses and apologies. Kaddish and Yizkor "brings them in" at least for a short period. But, my friends, this is the most brutal perversion of Judaism since the days of that charlatan Jacob Frank, the false Messiah who later converted to another faith. Judaism was conceived of and always has been a religion of Life. Our G-d is EL CHAI, a Living G-d. Judaism is the pattern with which we are to weave the fabric of Life, not the fabric of shrouds. We do not worship the dead and we do not glorify Death. Judaism appeals to a desire for life not a fear of death. Judaism has 613 commandments which are the ingrediants of a prescription for living, a prescription for living and not ^{a prescription for} ~~an~~ embalming fluid. Judaism speaks in the lofty accents of ethics and morals and worship and service and Shabbos and Tefillin; Judaism sings the song of neighborly love, not the dirge of death. There is so very very much to our religion, if practiced naturally; there is so much that is beautiful and sacred and vital, and only one small part of that great Way of Life involves the Kaddish or the prayer for the dead. And yet so many of us American Jews have insisted upon the unnatural way. We have displaced SHMAH YISRAEL with YISGADAL VE'YISKADDASH. How degradingly unnatural it is for a man to come in to a synagogue only to say a Kaddish, and to refuse to put on the Tefillin, the

Teffillin in which are contained the profession of G-d's Oneness and the commandment "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy G-d, with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might." What sort of depraved religious mentality the American Jew must have to enter the House of G-d on Shabbos and say the words YISGADAL VE'YISKADASH SHMAH RABBAH, ~~may~~ "May the Lord's great name be exalted and magnified" and then to leave that synagogue and desecrate the very Shabbos which the exalted and magnified Lord, Creator of all men, has commanded. What religious hypocrisy, what a distortion of spiritual values! In other words, what an Unnatural Religion. The Shittim wood ^{no} ~~on~~ longer stands upright. In the Tabernacle of American Jewry, top is bottom and bottom is top; Judaism has suffered its most grotesque caricature.

A recent article in Commentary tells of a prosperous Jew in some town in the Midwest, who all his life had made it a point to stay away from anything Jewish. He had even gone as far as attempting, unsuccessfully of course, to flirt with the local Presbyterian Church. But when he died he must of course be buried in a Jewish cemetery - an event which drew the following comment from one of the town's Jews; "GELEBT VIE A GOY, ~~UN~~ GESHTORBEN VIE A YID", "Lived like a Gentile, died a Jew". The natural result, of course, of a denatured Judaism which unnaturally empties religion of its most glorious content, and raises the cult of Death to the rank of the First Article of Belief and Chief Dogma. Unnatural in its ugliest form.

I could go on and on, giving a hundred examples of how "Judaism" in American has become an Unnatural Religion. I could mention the MISHEBERACH'S which have assumed more significance than the Reading of the Torah; "Kosher style" foods which replace Kashruth itself; Talmud Torah and even Sunday Schools which represent the maximum of Jewish Education; and so, on and on. To be brutally blunt, but perfectly honest, we must admit that the unnatural Judaism of modern America represents a morbid reversion to the primitive types of black magic, tribal death worship, and straight superstition. One wonders at the type of reaction we could expect from, let us say, a Jacob who brought the Shittim wood from Canaan down to Egypt, or of the early Israelites who tended to it with so much devotion while in bondage in that country, or of a Moses who with tender affection carried that wood across the Red Sea and into the great Sahara, there to build a Tabernacle of ATZEI SHITTIM OMDIM, of Shittim wood, the symbol of the religion of

Israel, standing upright DERECH GEDELIASSAN, the way it naturally grows; one wonders what their reaction would be if they were suddenly to find themselves in this Tabernacle of American Jewry with Continuous Memorial Services from early morning to late afternoon at which you assure your dear departed parents of Eternal Rest and Peace, provided you mumble a few magic words and clear your conscience with a pittance for a donation. Unnatural, my friends, disgustingly unnatural. Certainly not the DERECH GEDAILASSAN, the natural way of growth, of our great faith and tradition.

My dear friends, if my words today sounded a bit harsh do not feel that they are the bitter syllables of desperation. For there is yet much hope. Unnatural as our growth has been until now, the Shittim wood of America can yet resume its normal posture. KI HA'ADAM ETZ HA'SADEH, for Man is as the tree of a field. The seed of Judaism was planted in this contingent not very long ago. And the young sapling, crooked though its growth may be in the first stages, must eventually straighten out and grow firm and upright in the way that nature has decreed according to the law of G-d.

Benediction:

TZADIK KA'TAMAR YIFRACH,

K'EREZ BA'LEVANON YISGEH

May the righteous spring up like a palm-tree;

May they grow as tall and as straight as the Cedars of Lebanon.