

October 18, 1966

Rabbi Asher Zeilingold  
26 Inner Drive  
St. Paul, Minn.

Dear Rabbi Zeilingold:

As I told you over the telephone, I genuinely regret my inability to fly out to St. Paul to lecture to your congregation. However, I am pleased to be able to be of assistance to you in any other way.

The question which you have been called upon to treat at the symposium in your community, "Is Judaism The Only True Religion?," is a thorny one, and one which requires a good deal of preparation.

My own preliminary feeling on this question could best be summarized as follows:

First, we must be clear as to what is meant by "religion." The term, as generally used, comprehends two concepts or interpretations of experience which, while they differ one from the other, are not necessarily in opposition. Christianity, for instance, sees in religion primarily a dogmatic structure, a system of articles of faith, rather than merely "works," by which the Christian usually means ethical deeds. There is, however, a second dimension to religion usually ignored by non-Jews: that of the "mitzvot maasiyot," the practical commandments or observances which, cumulatively, spell out Halakhah, or the Jewish "way." (The concept of "Mitzvah," as Jews understand it, is largely alien to the Christian.) There are some Jewish thinkers today in Israel, as there were in Germany during the beginning of the Enlightenment, who maintain that Judaism is primarily a religion of law rather than of dogma or ideas. I think that by now, however, we have become disabused of this error. It is fair to say that Judaism is, in toto, both a "way" of life which requires certain patterns of behavior both ritually and ethically, and at the same time requires of its communicants the affirmation of certain abstract propositions, such as: the existence of God, His unity, "Torah min ha-shamayim," the chosenness of Israel, etc.



Now, the problem of the exclusive truth of Judaism must be discussed in this framework.

From the point of view of the practical observances, the question would have to be answered negatively. When I am obligated to behave in a certain manner, the sole issue is: the validity of the obligation and my response to it. There is no question of "truth" involved. In other words, it is thoroughly legitimate, and not in conflict with "truth," that I have certain obligations toward a specific individual which other people do not have. The Halakhah recognizes this; it declares that Jews are obliged to observe the 613 commandments (that is the usual figure, although in fact the total number of biblical commandments obligatory today is approximately 40; see Introduction to Sefer Hachinukh), whereas Gentiles are obliged to observe the seven laws of the children of Noah, which, according to some commentators, actually includes about 15 or 20 individual commandments. Now, while we Jews may rejoice in our greater obligations, this is in and of itself no indication of our "superiority." In fact, our tradition declares that a non-Jew who is decent, who observes the Noahide commandments given to him -- which are, in essence, the foundation of a civilized and ethical society -- is entitled to life in the hereafter no less than is a Jew who is observant of his obligations.

However, when we come to the realm of ideas, here I believe that there is no question but that our claim is exclusive: the Torah's affirmations about God, world, and man are true to the exclusion of any opposite opinions. When, therefore, Christians assert the trinitarian dogma, we have no choice but to declare that this is a violation of the Bible's major premise of monotheism and therefore unqualifiedly false. When Moslems or Christians maintain that the Torah of Moses has been superceded by some other prophet, here again we must declare that such claims are false, and that the teachings of Judaism are exclusively true.

I realize, of course, that this kind of statement may offend contemporary sensibilities by its air of certainty and, therefore, bears the taint of mediaevalism. However, I think we make a grievous error if we are willing to yield to the cultural relativism that is the bane of so much of modern thinking and is becoming more and more sophomoric. The cultural relativists who believe that all values are relative, that there is no absolute truth, and



that it is therefore fatuous to seek to discover it, in effect undermines society and decency. According to the major tenets of cultural relativism, Eichmann had a correct argument: given the frame of reference of his own society and government, he committed no wrong. Relative to the norms and values of Nazi Germany, he was simply carrying out orders. If all truth is relative, if there is no absolute truth, can we disagree with that statement? Can we, in our own day, have any argument with the young hooligans who are members of China's Red Guard, who humiliate their elders and kill recklessly? After all, in the context of the values of their Communist society, they are doing what is "right" -- relatively.

The committed Jew, therefore, must seek to walk between two dangerous paths. On one extreme is intolerance and bigotry, which will not abide any opposing ideas; on the other, is a path of cultural relativism, agnosticism, or the kind of "tolerance" which is merely a disguise for an unwillingness to commit oneself and to have the courage of convictions. The literary critic, Lionel Trilling, once said that some people are so open-minded that their brains fall out...

In essence, therefore, the question must be answered as follows: Insofar as the truth that we affirm, we maintain that they are true and all opposing ideas are untrue. Judaism is neither relativistic nor intolerant. The Torah does not prescribe any legal punishment for those who entertain false notions; at the same time it does not consider all values and all ideas equally legitimate. Insofar as the righteous living before God is concerned, however, we maintain that there are various standards. Just as within the Jewish people, there are obligations that devolve upon men that do not devolve upon women, and vice versa, or responsibilities that are relevant only to Kohanim but not to ordinary Israelites, so is it true that there are obligations which belong to Jews and those, much fewer in number, which are pertinent to non-Jews. But this in no way has any bearing on "truth" or falsehood.

In his Code of Jewish Law, Maimonides (according to the correct version of his decision, which is not the same as our present printed text) declares that those gentiles who observe the seven laws of the children of Noah because they are people of inherent decency, or because this is the way they were brought up, are considered "chakhmei umot ha-olam," wise gentiles; but those gentiles who observe these commandments not merely because of personal inclination or early



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education, but because they devoutly believe that these commandments are obligatory upon them and were so declared by God in His revelation to Moses at Sinai, such non-Jews are considered "chasidei umot ha-olam," the pious gentiles of the world. Clearly what Maimonides means to say is this: As long as a non-Jew observes his commandments, then he is living a wise and righteous kind of life, just as the Jew who observes Judaism is considered a righteous Jew. However, when it comes to the motivation for this kind or pattern of life, in other words to the area of abstract affirmations of a religious nature, here it is regarded more meritorious for the gentile to understand why he lives an ethical life: namely, because this is the revelation of the Torah of Moses. If he does not believe in this revelation, then he is merely a "wise" non-Jew, one who lives an ethical life because of utilitarian reasons. But if he recognizes the truth that Judaism teaches, i.e., the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, then he has ascended to the highest level: a pious gentile, i.e., one who not only lives, practically, a noble life, but one who recognizes the exclusive truth of the teaching of Judaism: the revelation of the Torah.

I hope, Rabbi Zeilingold, that I have succeeded in giving you at least a summary of what I think ought to be contained in such a lecture.

My very best wishes for a success in your lecture and in all your creative undertakings on behalf of Torah and Judaism.

Sincerely yours,

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

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P.S. I am enclosing copy of a manuscript that I recently submitted to a journal, and which you may find of some interest.