

(14-15-1957)

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"A ROCK, A FORTRESS, A REFUGE"

What ought Religion to mean to a religious person?

A powerful threefold answer was suggested by David and recorded in this morning's Haftorah. Surrounded by the rapacious Philistines on one side and a vengeful King Saul on the other, David faced one of the most critical moments of his life. Upon his survival he offered up a moving psalm of thanksgiving -- today's Haftorah -- which he begins with a simple statement of what G-d means to him. They are three levels of religious experience that he perceived and that remain instructive to modern Jews as well. Ha-shem sali u'metzudati u'mefalti li -- "the Lord is my Rock and my Fortress and my Deliverer," or Refuge.

The first level of religious experience, the first inkling many Jews get into what G-d can and does mean in their lives, is G-d as Mefalti, as Refuge. In times of the greatest distress, it is G-d who holds out hope to us. When we feel utterly abandoned by friends and neighbors -- even by life itself -- the secure fellowship of G-d is our comfort. In moments of profound crisis, when our lives or the lives of loved ones hang in the balance, we come to the synagogue as a refuge, pleading for G-d's divine assistance in our hour of trouble and agony. No doubt for David too at that moment, G-d was Mefalti -- a refuge and a haven.

But while it is true that Judaism allows us to understand G-d as Mefalti, it goes far beyond that. It tells us that G-d is available not only in moments of desperation and abandonment, but throughout the normal course of life, in the little vexities and disappointments as well as the major threats of disaster: G-d is also Metzudati -- our Fortress, He to whom David repaired as to a source of strength in the midst of the turbulence of life, and Who is our assurance of protection against the everyday anxieties that can corrode a

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man's heart as surely as can the major crises. We feel, deep within us, loneliness, or the fears of terrible illness or economic reversal or accident. G-d is Metzudati, our Fortress and reservoir of courage. We are sorely troubled by the strain of everyday life, our relations with colleagues and family. Ha-shem Metzudati. More than an occasional Refuge, G-d is a constant Fortress.

But the difference between the two conceptions of G-d and Religion as Mefalti and Metzudati is not only a matter of major emergencies versus daily minor problems, but essentially one of how we are to achieve the peace and tranquility Torah has to offer to us. "Refuge" implies the idea of escape. The synagogue becomes a "sanctuary" in both senses of the word, and Religion becomes an escape into a different, more serene and unperturbed atmosphere. A Fortress also gives us peace and serenity, but not through escape. In a Refuge you have run away from the battle; in a Fortress you have come to rearm so as to join battle again -- and win. The conception of Religion that is represented by Metzudati is higher, more advanced. The calm center in the middle of a storm, it tells us that life's battles must be fought: you must work for a living, relate to other people, strive for certain goals, be confronted by pain and unpleasantness. When you come to Shul, you come not to avoid the problems of life, but to be inspired and learn how best to cope with them, to strengthen your determination to deal with them honorably and forthrightly. That is a higher, more precious form of Religion. The ^{big} but, sudden, overwhelming crises of life drive us to the synagogue, and then we are right in regarding it as Mefalti. But this should not be for the ordinary rigors of existence, when Religion should be Metzudati.

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But even the Metzudati concept does not exhaust the full intent of what Torah ought to mean to us mortals. There is yet one higher rung towards which each of us must aspire. ^{Both} Mefalti and Metzudati, despite the distance between them, ~~both~~ conceive of religion as serving man. It gives us Peace -- whether as Escape or as Method -- but it is accepted for what it can do for us. Thus is essentially emotional -- self-centered and subjectivistic.

The highest conception is more spiritual and objective. It is selfless in the sense that we simply forget ourselves, we become irrelevant to the great issues. We recognize that there is something that is beyond the self, beyond peace or pain, tranquility or tumult, serenity or suffering.

Religion offers a great deal to man -- but only if man aspires to be more than man. He must aspire to the full vision of the world from the point of view of G-d, rather than from the worm's eye view of man. He must find in religion more than Refuge or Fortress -- assurances of his own Peace and Security -- but, above and beyond them -- Ha-shem sali -- the Lord is my Rock: He is the source of meaning in my life, the ground and guarantee of all values that I cherish.

What do we mean when we say that G-d is the Rock of Meaningfulness, the source of all values? We mean that without Him nothing makes sense. I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that unless there is a G-d, there is no ultimate value to ethics. There is no compelling reason to be honest or kind or ~~honorable~~ or merciful unless it is G-d who commanded it. If not for Ha-shem sali, then Anatole France was right when, in a cynical moment, he rephrased the famous proverb to read, "Honesty, when it's the best policy." If not for G-d, then I may take advantage of my fellow man and exploit the underprivileged if I can get away with it. Only when I am responsive to the Almighty does an ethical life

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make sense. For then I know that I must be ethical because G-d is.

We speak of Reverence for Life. But why? If not for our recognition of G-d as Creator, what is Life but a fortuitous combination of large protein molecules that occurred quite accidentally in the dim past when an electrical discharge triggered a complex reaction under proper chemical conditions? Only when I acknowledge that "In the beginning G-d created" does "Thou shalt not murder" make sense in a real, meaningful way. For then murder becomes the destruction of the Image of G-d, and pain caused to a living being becomes an offense and an act of wanton cruelty against the Lord Himself.

The Rock of Religion is high up, above the din of life's petty concerns, above our trivial dreams and picayune strivings. It is the very foundation of our world-view. It means to tell us that without *G-d* all my world would collapse to meaningless void, like a house topples when you suddenly pull out its foundations. Without G-d my Rock, Life is just a wild whirl through chaos, a brief spin through senseless activity, only a short respite from eternal oblivion, defined by two dates on a forlorn tombstone in some distant, lonely, rain-drenched graveyard.

Perhaps you might think that this highest conception of Religion, of G-d as Rock, is altogether theoretical and abstract. But it is not. It goes to the heart of life itself. For while Judaism does frequently give us Peace and Serenity, it may at times ask us to surrender Peace. And at such times you can tell the men from the spiritual boys, the Refuge and Fortress Jews from the Rock-Jews. For only he for whom G-d is a Rock as well as Fortress and Refuge will remain ethical under the severest test, even where his possible sin will remain undiscovered. Only such a person will retain a firm, enduring respect for life and loyalty to G-d even at the expense of personal

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pain. Is it easy to defy the whole world and their ridicule and mockery? Jews had to do it in ancient Rome when Tacitus called them lazy because they observed Shabbat, and stupid for not killing their aged and their female infants. He was a modern ... But only a Sali-Jew could risk such ridicule and remain true to Torah. And only the Rock-Jew of 1960 will risk the inconveniences of Kashrut, the economic limitations imposed by Shabbat and the intellectual complexities of belief in Revelation. He who wants only Peace and Tranquility, the Jew of Metzudati and Mefalti -- he will visit the synagogue and pray sincerely; for the Refuge and Fortress Jew can understand prayer. The Rock Jew understands more than that, however. He knows that G-d intrudes into our lives not just as guarantor of safety, but also as the guarantor of meaning; ^{as One} He, who, because of Him, life and existence, love and pain, make sense. His Judaism, therefore, transcends prayer alone and permeates all of life. In a word -- his life is patterned on Halakhah, on the fullness of Jewishness that give meaning to life and is based upon it.

Noah was a man who conceived of G-d as Mefalti, a Refuge. Religion was for him a stable ark in the torrential floods of life. Job, despite all his philosophizing, sought in G-d Metzudati, a Fortress against the constant stresses and strains confronting him.

Yet they, despite their virtues, are not the models set for us by our tradition. Who is? Abraham is one. He was ready to sacrifice his only son -- and thus his Nachas, his immortality, his peace -- for his belief in and loyalty to G-d. G-d was to him Sali -- a Rock. He strived not for inner peace, but for higher truth.

Moses was another. He abandoned a life of ease as a royal playboy in the palatial gardens of Pharoah and voluntarily chose a life of turmoil and

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trouble. For the sake of G-d he rejected a life of safety and security -- the refuge and the fortress -- and threw himself heart and soul into the creative quest for fulfilling G-d's cause in the world. No wonder G-d told him Hinei makomiti ve-nitzavta al ha-tzur: Behold, there is place for you beside Me, stand up upon the rock. For Moses G-d was a Rock, and therefore G-d invited him to stand beside Him -- on the rock ...

When, this morning, we read of Israel at the Red Sea, we read too of their spiritual progression and religious growth. First we are told "and Israel saw the great hand which G-d had wrought upon Egypt." Their first great insight into Divine Providence was that of G-d as Refuge: He miraculously delivers His people and fells the enemy in one powerful stroke.

The second step was an advance towards greater religious maturity.

"And the people feared the Lord." They developed an awareness of G-d ^{a consciousness of} throughout the year, His constant protection. The Lord is my fortress.

Finally, there came the highest level of spiritual comprehension:

"And they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses." Thus they came to a higher, more pervasive, profounder insight. They came to Emunah, to true faith, to the highest spiritual rung: "The Lord is my Rock." Only then, when they have "come of age" religiously, Az yashir, "then, Moses and the children of Israel sang this song unto the Lord." Only then -- do we succeed to a life of shirah, of song and worthwhileness and true happiness.

For then life is not only peaceful, but also poetic;

not only serene, but also singing;

not only secure, but also sacred;

not only safe, but also saintly.