



THE TIMELESS CHALLENGE OF THE PROPHETIC HEBREW TRADITION

Commencement Address by DR. MAXWELL SILVER *at the*
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COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND BANKERS HAVE AT LEAST ONE redeeming failing. Despite their usual levelheadedness, they like to take a gamble once in awhile — a “fier,” as it is called in Wall Street terminology.

Thus President Glueck took quite a gamble in extending to me the very honoring challenge to deliver the baccalaureate address tonight, though he was fully aware of the fact that I have been out of the active ministry for many years, the exact number of which I should not care to advertise, for fear of offending my still lingering youthful vanity.

I have a sneaking suspicion, however, that what really decided my otherwise levelheaded colleague to take the mentioned risk was his — and my own — pleasant awareness that ever since I left the active rabbinate, I have persisted in making Judaism my beloved intellectual avocation.

Francis Bacon has provocatively spoken of the “idols,” by which he meant the false opinions, or prejudices, which have functioned as road-blocks in the minds of people to sounder and more fruitful thinking on the subject of the new science of his day, of which he spoke with that characteristic early-modern optimism which appears quite “dated” today.

Bacon’s provocative thought inclines me to speak of another species of idols, or prejudices, affecting another great subject, namely, the Prophetic message of religion — those great historic insights of our Hebrew Prophets that are deeply embedded in what may properly be called the Prophetic Hebrew Tradition, which, through Christianity, has become the Hebrew-Christian Tradition of the Western World. These idols, too, have func-

tioned throughout our modern era, and to this day, as road-blocks in the minds of people to the challenge of that tradition which, scandalous as this assertion may appear to the superficial skeptics of our time, I still find of timeless value to the comprehensive well-being of modern man. That category of idols, I would describe as the Idols of Retarded Adolescence.

And if one has any doubt that even our mid-twentieth century man is definitely suffering from the general ills of retarded adolescence, he need but note the sorry spectacle of this twentieth-century man standing daily, despite his unprecedented scientific and mechanical achievements, in imminent fear and helplessness on the brink of race suicide! Truly, the great mountain of modern science has labored long and furiously, and has produced less and worse than the proverbial mouse!

Spurred by his new scientific knowledge and, even more so, by what our modern anti-religionists call the "dark side of religion" — the unfortunately undeniable sorry accompaniments of organized religion, or the Church — its tyranny, superstition, social reaction, and its historic wars against science and enlightenment — modern man, after the end of our medieval era, was prepared, with the characteristic short-sightedness of the adolescent, to throw overboard, lock, stock and barrel, all the timeless values and insights of religion at its prophetic deepest and noblest.

A critical look at these modern idols should prove most enlightening.

The greatest idol of our modern time is, of course, idolized Science. That science, pursuing by the aid of its own methods its legitimate function of exploring our material universe, is man's great ally, no enlightened religionist can or wishes to deny. But to naively believe that science *alone*, divorced from the great insights of man's broad and deep personality, can give us ultimate knowledge of our universe and bring us utopia and soul-fulfillment, is tantamount to converting science into a vicious road-block to man's comprehensive well-being.

This is especially the case when our all-out worshippers of science are tempted, as they often are, to rush out from their laboratories to proclaim themselves, on the basis of the always tentative nature of their new findings, omniscient philosophers. I have in mind those well-known varieties of our "nothing-but-ers," whose profound wisdom may be summarized as — God, Man, man's mind, conscience, personality, are not the spiritually significant, ever-mystifying, awing realities that we have been led from man's long experience to believe them to be, but are really something else — "nothing but" this or that "natural" something or other.

In a philosophical essay, "The Modern Temper," by Joseph Wood Krutch, which graphically gives an at once significant and depressing version of our so-called "modern temper," I find an intriguing chapter, entitled "The Disillusionment with the Laboratory." So, even the Modern Temper has at last begun to suspect that the very knowledge, so laboriously, nay, so religiously, garnered in the sacred scientific laboratory is ultimately questionable! It cannot give us the real, ultimate knowledge of our universe. Quite a shock to the Modern Temper! Not so, however, to the insight of the prophetic thinker of all times, who has always looked elsewhere for that ultimate knowledge.

This incisive insight leads me directly to a brief consideration of another great idol of our modern age, namely, idolized REASON. The Prophetic Hebrew Tradition, at its perceptive best, never disparaged the God-given illumination which our faculty of reason throws upon all phases of man's life. But who else but the rational dogmatist will claim that even our great rational faculty has not itself definite limitations?

In a most unexpected source, I recently came upon a surprising confirmation of those limitations of reason which its modern worshippers have naively or willfully ignored. I refer to that provocative chapter, entitled "Mystical Insight," part of a recent book, called *Four Ways of Philosophy*, by the natural-

istic philosopher, Irwin Edman, Columbia University professor of philosophy. I mention a few of the highlights of that chapter, almost verbatim:

The very reasonableness of reason itself remains undemonstrable. The most empirical of thinkers must begin with data and assumptions which he can neither prove, nor refuse to accept. The most rational philosophers are in the end compelled to leave their logical procedures behind and resort to some such mystical vision of the Ultimate as the mystics try to communicate. For, mystic intuition forever outruns intellectual discourse, and intellectual discourse forever remains inadequate to express what men wish to convey as the reality above all others, which they feel to be somehow there, and somehow in them, and they in it. Such being the case, philosophy as mystical insight will endure, and will, at its crowning clarity, cap all other philosophies not given to mystery. In it, men will find what reason has never given them — certitude, peace, joy, or as our Prophets described it, *Shuvo Vonachas*: serenity and confidence in existence.

The substance of things may never be known, but the nearest approximation to it may be by that kind of knowledge, that close, warm sympathy, which *divines* rather than rationally or scientifically analyzes the life of things. This being the case, the poets, the saints, and the mystics, are conceivably our best teachers. For the way of understanding may be through sympathy, rather than through reason. There are sources of power and joy that are more primary than the mind. Mysticism is the insight of the poet and the saint and the moral genius. They are closer to reality than the cautious inferences of prudent men.

Those who doubt the reality of mystical insight should open their eyes to the undoubted fact of the all-pervasive presence of mysticism, not only in morality and religion, but also in all great art, of which it is the ultimate creative inspiration. Mysticism is the driving force, too, behind the enthusiasms of

our social revolutionists, even of our materialistic-minded Communists, whose “road to Moscow” for inspiration to convert the whole of mankind to the classless society reminds one very strongly of that celebrated mystical “road to Damascus” which beckoned St. Paul to convert the whole world to Christianity.

Not only the genius, but even the average person experiences, on rare occasions, mystical communion with the All, or Life of things. That experience comes to him at those privileged moments, when his awareness is sharp, as on a cloudless summer afternoon, in the quiet of a mountain lake, or at a concert at the close of an adagio, when the auditorium is hushed, and a clear chord is sounded that might “reach the ears of God.” But a chord heard, a landscape seen, a person embraced, might at some contemplative moment seem simply as variations of the more absolute theme of Being itself.

In the realm of morality and religion especially, even the common man recognizes the authority, both unmistakable and preternatural — as Edman puts it, or supernatural, as the theist would less evasively put it — with which the mystically inspired moral and religious prophets speak. The great moral and religious prophets in the history of mankind, this naturalistic philosopher continues, spoke powerfully to men because their words carried the accent of a power and source, deeper and more primary than themselves. They were, as we say, inspired. Their words carried conviction, because they seemed to speak a language that was more persuasive than mere intellectual argument. They addressed others out of the depths of the stream of Life. Their communication was not by intellectual proof, but by contagion, the contagion of a reality responded to by the depths of personality, which their charged words touched.

Now, I ask, if all this is true, why need the earnest seeker for God, even in the twentieth century, give up the quest magnificent in despair just because science, or reason alone, cannot lead him to the way to God? Availing himself of whatever help science and reason can give him — and reason can give him

much — has he not every philosophic right in this transcendent quest confidently to go beyond their limited knowledge to the more incisive resources of that ancient but still conceivably valid way of philosophy of mystical insight, or, as our Biblical Sages called it, *Hokmah*, or moral wisdom, wherein there has always lain, except for the superficial rationalistic dabblers in religion, the fountainhead and ultimate source of religion at its deepest?

Realizing these limitations of reason, we can understand why our strictly intellectualist philosophers were driven to their religious blind alley of a God that is, in the end, but a GREAT ABSTRACTION. Their mistake was to depend upon reason alone for their God-conception, and, having made this mistake, they were led to the other naïveté that, by having made their God-conception more and more *abstract*, and impersonal, they made it more *spiritual*.

The Prophets of Israel were better theologians than our Idealist philosophers. They did not depend on reason ALONE to achieve their great vision of God, even as they did not depend in their search for the universal Ultimate on the blind alleys of external nature alone, as have the naturalistic philosophers. They dug deep into the human personality, which is admittedly more than intellect, and there they discovered that mystic “still small voice” and its great moral wisdom and imperatives. Through their self-sacrificial obedience to that inner voice they gained the mystic insight of personality communing with Personality! On the hard and thorny but soul-fulfilling way of doing justice and loving mercy, they succeeded in achieving what the philosophers failed to achieve, the mystic awareness that they were walking, not with a Great Abstraction, but with a Divine Moral Personality — with a warm “Friend behind phenomena”; that they were walking not with the abstract, impersonal God of the philosophers, but with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — with the God of Israel, of Man — the only God that can give sustaining meaning to the everyday struggles

and problems of confused, doubting, sinning, but ever-aspiring man.

I regret that time does not permit a more detailed account, which I have registered elsewhere (“The Way to God”), of the modern evolutionary, finite-God idea, — for which the old and ever-troubling problem of evil is responsible, with Evolution playing a contributory role. I concede that it is a rationally EASIER God conception than that of the Biblical, and traditionally Jewish, and, incidentally, basically Christian, God-conception of Almighty Moral Personality. But is it as RELIGIOUSLY satisfying to the deeply religious soul as the latter?

I fear that the proponents of the evolutionary, finite-God idea are not as realistically aware as they should be of the fact that in order to hold on even to this Jewishly distorted God-conception, they have been compelled to do a good bit of “mysticizing” on their own account. For Evolution and Reason alone cannot prove the existence of even their pathetic, finite-God. Here we have again the old, naive mistake of our religious worshippers of Reason. May not, then, a greater partaking of that easily available and inexpensive mystical spinach reinforce the champions of the finite-God idea with a measure of Jobian stamina, and give them the strength to re-embrace the rationally more difficult, but the by far more religiously satisfying EL SHADDAI — the good old Almighty God of the Prophetic Hebrew Tradition?

All of which brings me to my last adolescent idol of our modern age which, for many moderns, who have been brought up on the traditional interpretation of the Bible, has served as a great stumbling-block to Prophetic faith. I refer to the false view that the new findings of the so-called Higher Biblical Criticism have disparaged for all time the ESSENTIAL religious-moral message of the Bible.

And this brings me to a remarkable Midrash. And I cannot urge you too strongly, my young friends of this graduating class, to follow the Rabbis’ good counsel, ‘*Ase toroscho keva*’: “Fix

a period for thy creative study of the Torah" (Abot, 1, 15), by making a thorough study, and in the original Hebrew, of our rich Midrashic literature, if for no other reason than that you will find in this great mine of Israel's religious-moral wisdom many a provocative homily with which to embellish your sermons.

The midrash I have in mind is found in Bereshit Rabbah (VIII, 7). It tells a very intriguing story about our beloved Moses. When Moses was engaged in writing down the Torah, as dictated to him by God, he became quite perturbed when he reached the famous verse (Genesis I, 26), "Let us make man in our image, etc." Moses then said to God, "Sovereign of the Universe! Why dost Thou furnish an excuse for the heretics?" — referring, of course, to the us in this verse, which indicates a plurality of Gods. But God cryptically replied: "Write! Whoever wishes to err, let him err!"

In modern terms, the Rabbis' great insight of the timeless nature of the religious-moral message of the Bible, revealed in this midrash, can be interpreted as follows:

"Do not be perturbed, my beloved Moses! The Torah, being the record of a thousand years of the early history and religious growth of Israel, is, in many respects, necessarily the child of its ancient age. It would not be helpful for posterity to alter one word of it, even for the laudable purpose of taking the thunder away from the heretics and adolescent skeptics of future ages. Future historians of the development of the inspired religious message of Israel will appreciate the Bible more so in its unexpurgated form. From this unexpurgated Bible, they will learn at least one great truth, namely, that the Bible's ultimate religious-moral insights, like all great spiritual achievements, were not born overnight, but came to Israel's greatest seers after centuries of their people's deep prophetic experience and profound thought.

"As you know, my beloved Moses, the Bible was never intended by me or by you to serve as a textbook of science, not

even as a manual of exact history. Its main purpose is God and the proper way to God. Its supreme burden is to reveal to man those timeless redeeming human goals that can make man's social life secure and his individual life fraught with great destiny and with transcendent hope. And in its highest expressions, the Bible has eminently accomplished this supreme purpose.

"For this reason, my dear Moses, even the modern so-called Higher Biblical Critics — at least the more mature amongst them — will be enabled, despite of, nay, BECAUSE of, their new Biblical discoveries, to point up to modern man that the Bible still remains mankind's permanent spiritual treasure and ever-inspiring guide to the life of heroic prophetic faith, social justice, universal peace and human fulfillment. There are no more modern human goals by which man can avert his self-imposed doom.

"Write, then, my dear Moses, the Biblical record as given. Whoever wishes adolescently to dissent, let him! He will only be putting to shame, not the Bible, but his own adolescent self!"

How convincingly the incisive insight of this midrash stands out when we compare the Biblical doctrine of the Dignity of Man with the one emerging today from the exponents of our so-called "modern temper."

Our Bible held up for man of all time the great doctrine of the Dignity of Man, based on the prophetic faith that man was created B'TSELEM ELOHIM — in God's image. For ages untold, this lifting doctrine gave man the invaluable certainty of STATUS, of at-homeness in this otherwise lonely universe, no matter how better-known it became through the achievements of science. It gave man the mystic assurance of a Cosmic Moral Companionship — of a Friend behind phenomena — which helped to mitigate his struggles and sufferings in life and his fear of death. It fortified man with the mountain-moving assurance that in his soul-stirring battles for the realization of his social and intellectual ideals, he was not alone!

The exponents of our "modern temper," on the other hand, rushed to what we theists consider the by-no-means philosophically inescapable conclusion, that modern man must, as a sheer intellectual necessity, renounce forever this redeeming Biblical doctrine of the Dignity of Man.

God, in the reality of Whom the so-called pre-scientific man has justified his significant role in the universe and the consequent sense of his dignity, is lightly disposed of by our "modern temper" philosophers with their magic formula that God is "nothing but" the product of man's congenital aptitude for myth-making!

Having thus cavalierly dismissed God, our Modern Temper was inevitably driven to regard man as "nothing but" a speck of cosmic dust of the infinite stellar spaces, which know him not, nor have any regard for his life, his hopes and his ideals. Man is "nothing but" an incident, a pathetic intruder in the universe, forever existing precariously — ALONE — on the sufferance of a hostile or, at best, an indifferent impersonal Nature.

And if one asks the pragmatic query, What has been the result of this supposedly science-inspired, but prophetically un-inspired, new wisdom with its utter disparagement of the spirit of man, as pitifully reflected in so much of our modern literature, the answer is — stark pessimism — a sense of utter futility in man's outlook and individual existence that gnaws at the vitals of man's spirit, that palls his hopes and paralyzes his once-heroic will for messianic achievement.

How desperately, then, the mid-twentieth century man stands in need of the Biblical morale-lifting doctrine of the Dignity of Man as a potent antidote to the pessimism-drenched philosophies of the various versions of our "modern temper" that have turned the spirit of modern man to dust! "Modern Man" evidently can do much worse than to allow himself to be aroused again by the Biblical prophet's spirit-lifting call: *ARISE, AND SING, O YE DWELLERS IN THE DUST!*

And this is the religious-moral message of the Bible, behind

and above all the findings of our Higher Biblical Criticism and of our modern skepticisms. And to the deeply earnest and perceptive person, what an urgently vital, nay, *TIMELESS* message for this hour!

You and I, of the Reform or the Liberal wing of Judaism, cannot fail to recall with pride that the great contribution which Reform Judaism has made to our historic Faith and to our modern age was just this — that it has eloquently brought forward to modern man this essential, prophetic, timeless message of the Bible and of the Prophetic Hebrew Tradition that derives from that ever-germinal Tree of Life.

In this inspiring historic fact, you, my young friends of the Class of 1951, may find your first constructive inspiration as future rabbis of the Reform or Liberal Synagogue.

And if my analysis of contemporary man's new grasp of the timeless wisdom of the message of Prophetic faith is sound, you should find still further inspiration in the religious propitiousness of our present *Zeitgeist*. Perhaps we have at last arrived at the religiously challenging moment when modern man, after he had his long but futile spree with his new gods, and found them wanting, is at last prepared, if wisely guided by his religious leaders, to seriously re-explore the timeless elixir of Prophetic faith and its redeeming human goals.

And yet another mighty aid is now at your service, namely, the trenchant and far-flung inspiration of the ringing historic event of the New Israel, which has already done so much to arouse the long-dormant souls of our Jewish indifferentists to the eternal pull, grandeur and inspiration of Jewish tradition. There is a great nostalgia abroad for a re-identification of the Jewishly-estranged Jew with the warm at-homeness of the ancient traditions of our people.

We, therefore, dare not forget the persistent *TIMELINESS* of this *OTHER* appeal to the modern Jew, while we are engaged in stressing the *TIMELESSNESS* of the universal, prophetic content of Judaism. We have made this grievous mistake in the early

period of our Reform movement, and it has proved costly to the progress of the Reform Synagogue. By all means, let us continue to bring to bear the great imperatives of our Prophets' heroic conscience upon the social and international problems of our day, and, I would add, even more extensively and courageously than we have done to date. But if it is our aim to capture for the Liberal Synagogue the great masses of our unsynagogued Jews, we had better not forget that what equally attracts the modern Jew to the Synagogue is that distinctive traditional Jewish at-homeness by which it may be recognized as a Jewish synagogue. Adapting our ancient Jewish traditions, as we of the Reform Synagogue properly do, need I assure the faint-hearted amongst my colleagues that there is no danger whatsoever that we will be accused of returning to Orthodoxy, no matter how much more profoundly and broadly we introduce the deeply inspiring spirit and practices of our ancient Jewish traditions into our services, our sermons, and into our educational curricula for the young.

With your great emphasis on this, our Faith's DUAL appeal to the Jew, and with the help of a favorable *Zeitgeist*, need I, my young friends of the Class of 1951 of my own gloriously enlarged alma mater, assure you that the rabbinical careers which you are presently entering officially should prove not only a tremendous soul-fulfilling challenge to you, but should also yield great spiritual dividends for religion and Judaism in general and for the wider influence of Liberal Judaism in particular.

To you, then, the members of this graduating class, which is particularly close to my heart because of the happy accident that a certain young man, very near and dear to me, is a member, and I trust, not an unworthy one, of it, let me extend my warm and hearty *tses'chem l'shalom*. May God's great peace be yours as you are now about to leave these sacred halls of learning; *uvo-achem l'shalom*, and may that great inner peace follow you when you arrive at your respective congregations or at other sacred fields of duty.

On, then, to your highly promising opportunities to bring to American Israel and to the larger American community the timeless message of our Prophetic Hebrew Tradition — that timeless CHALLENGE which is directed at once to our modern superficial and futile skepticisms, to the deeply indwelling mystical endowments of man's personality, which point God-ward, and to our redeeming sense of the Dignity of Man, which ever fortifies him with the conviction that mankind CAN move those mountains that lie athwart its challenging way to the Kingdom of God on earth, and that the individual soul CAN achieve that prophetic serenity and confidence in existence if he but sacrificially join in mankind's heroic march to that Kingdom.