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ASPECTS OF THE BASIC JUDAISM

OF

RABBI MILTON STEINBERG

by

Joseph Levine

Thesis submitted in partial  
fulfillment of requirements  
for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-  
Jewish Institute of Religion  
June, 1959

Referee:  
Professor Abraham Cronbach

## DIGEST

This thesis, Aspects of the Basic Judaism of Rabbi Milton Steinberg, contains nine chapters, titled as follows:

- 1) Milton Steinberg - A Subjective Portrait,--the author's attempt to report his appraisal of Steinberg's personality as reflected both in Steinberg's writings and through impressions gained by speaking to people who knew Steinberg personally.
- 2) The Case For a Religious Interpretation of the Universe -- Steinberg's arguments in favor of a God centered religion.
- 3) Faith Plus Reason Equal Religion -- devoted to Steinberg's resolution of the problem in favor of both.
- 4) Milton Steinberg on Anti-Semitism -- devoted to an exposition of the development of the problem and Steinberg's program to combat it.
- 5) Judaism vis-a-vis Christianity -- Steinberg's treatment of Jewish-Gentile relations and social and religious differences.
- 6) The Contemporary Jewish Scene -- a compilation of Steinberg's thinking on the development of Jewish society, and some of the problems faced by the American Jewish community.
- 7) Milton Steinberg on Ritual Observance -- Steinberg's defense of ritual practice.
- 8) Toward the Good Life -- devoted to an exposition of Steinberg's views on the topic.
- 9) A Subjective Postscript on Certain Ideas of Milton Steinberg -- directed to the author's evaluations of certain of Steinberg's ideas as reported in the thesis.

This thesis is an attempt on the part of the author to understand the thinking and attitudes of a prominent rabbi who exerted great influence through his writings and preaching both on the American Jewish community and on the Rabbinate.

THIS THESIS IS DEDICATED

TO

SOL H. BLANK

Son Of

SELIGMAN the Scribe

GREAT GRANDFATHER IN ISRAEL

On The Approach Of His

93rd BIRTHDAY

APRIL 10, 1959

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to acknowledge the assistance I have received from the following persons who were good enough to share with me their reminiscences about Rabbi Steinberg: Mrs. Edith Steinberg, Mrs. Miriam Lyman, Rabbi Ely Pilchik, Rabbi Abraham Cronbach.

I am especially indebted to Mr. Arthur Cohen who graciously shared with me some of the material he has collected for his intellectual biography of Steinberg.

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CHAPTER ONE

MILTON STEINBERG - A SUBJECTIVE PORTRAIT

"With Pity For The Living"

## MILTON STEINBERG - A SUBJECTIVE PORTRAIT

Rabbi Milton Steinberg was a unique personality. His books, his personal influence, may be obliterated in a few generations. The ways of history are devious and often cruel. But even should that take place, should all of his writings and efforts be forgotten, this world will still be a little bit better for his having lived in it. Such is the immortality of a fine, sensitive human being.

I should like to record in this section of my thesis some observations about a man I never met. This will not be history because I shall not evaluate achievements or trace movements. This will not be biography because I have not dealt with the vital statistics of his brief life; this will be a tribute, an appreciation if you will, dedicated to a man who, through his writings, touched my existence and brought blessing into my life.

Many of my statements will be colored by what people who knew him personally have told me about him, yet I shall not quote these people directly. Quotations would neither serve my purpose nor add fresh insight. The only reason I mention the fact that I have spoken to people about Milton Steinberg is to note that when these people spoke to me, their eyes shone with love and respect. But even more important, they did not tell me any thing new. True, some one may have added a fact that I had not come across previously or an incident that was not common knowledge. During all of these interviews I had the strong feeling that I already knew the man we were talking about through his writing, because I could not help but feel that

Milton Steinberg put something of himself into his sermons and books above and beyond what the average author shares with his readers.

Although it may seem strange in a composition of this nature, I will include footnotes, not to "prove" my contentions, but so that, should anyone read this paper and feel so disposed, he may glance at the sources which have led me to write this essay.

I recall that my initial impression upon reading one of Steinberg's writings was its refreshing candor. In a field cluttered with apologetics, it was a delight to find a man who would state both sides of the argument, and where a piece of evidence did not support his thesis, he was frank to admit it. For example, he made no bones about the fact that the existence of evil was a rock upon which many pious teeth had been shattered.

"But what about the evil of the world? Can the God-idea account for that? Not entirely, and not to anyone's complete satisfaction. This fact unquestionably counts against faith."<sup>1</sup>

Steinberg was fond of quoting John Stuart Mills' dictum that no proposition is disproved until it has been refuted in its best form.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Steinberg was infallible. I am sure that in the course of his writings he did not always succeed in this resolve. No man can, simply because in adopting one point of view we automatically build up a series of defenses and rationalizations that buttress the position that we wish to uphold. Milton Steinberg was no exception. However, I am convinced that to the best of his ability, and with great integrity, he made the effort to meet each

issue squarely. As far as I can see, Steinberg never avoided an issue and when aroused, this man who could write poetry in prose, could and did dip his pen in fire. He could sear his pages with the white heat of indignation. Not the "me-too-ism" of bandwagon causes, but the single voice raised in anger in behalf of an ideal in danger of destruction. It might be argued that it was only to be expected that a Rabbi would bring to bear whatever talents or eloquence he had at his command in behalf of the Jewish people in the dark days of the thirties and forties. Therefore, we will disregard the larger Jewish issues and focus on only one. Without entering into the merits of the case, I suggest that Steinberg's denunciation of Commentary magazine<sup>3</sup> is a prime example of intelligent indignation in action. No quotation can recapture the tenor of the article, but even a cursory reading will show how Steinberg could get mad and still make sense!

The second and even more powerful attraction for me in the writings of Milton Steinberg was their sensitivity. When Steinberg was writing history he attempted to be factual and concise. When he wrote his sermons and addresses he retained his wide learning and enriched it with insights that were both perceptive and poetic. Some of his views changed with time. As he grew older he discarded some of his early optimism about human nature and the terrible capacity for evil and destruction that lay like a coiled serpent in the hearts of men.<sup>4</sup>

He, who was truly a simple man, could sense the unspoken message that people transmitted with their eyes. I realize that this is

a bold statement, but I believe that it is true. I think that anyone who reads the opening passages of God and the World's End:

"The challenge to the God faith assails me on all sides...It shrieks at me from the radio and the headlines of newspapers...I see it lurking in the eyes of my congregants, sometimes as a flash of impatience, sometimes as an anguished, unspoken hope that in me there may reside a wisdom which shall make the tragedy of our age intelligible..."<sup>5</sup>

will agree that more than the fine hand of the master homiletician is in evidence.

Steinberg's sermons were more than beautiful speeches. Even in print, they reached out and touched one's heart and mind at the same time. One would find himself nodding in agreement and saying, "It's true." One might disagree with his position on ritual or Zionism, but when Steinberg wrote about life and its sorrows he spoke heart to heart, not as a superman above the pain and confusion of daily life, but as a fellow pilgrim on life's highway. He wrote:

"Let us no more tear ourselves from each other - hate, resent and seek to hurt. The world is cold enough. Let us rather huddle together for warmth, hold hands for comfort..."<sup>6</sup>

For the most sublime example of Steinberg's compassion, I refer the reader to A Pity for the Living.<sup>7</sup>

From time to time, not very often, Milton Steinberg used his own life for illustrative purposes in his sermons, sheer suicide for

the average preacher. Milton Steinberg was not the average preacher. I am convinced that when he spoke in the first person it was because he felt that it was the best way to communicate his message. And it is the tremendous sincerity of the message as well as its content that speaks to the reader. I can only conjecture what it must have done to the congregation to have their Rabbi say:

"Perhaps it is no use trying to reach out into  
your hearts behind your polite faces - You will leave here  
and go about your normal lives - no faith  
no nobility  
no beauty  
no vital Jewishness. \*

God of divine things will mourn. You were so close  
to me and now you are gone. But I say that it need  
not be if you will destroy illusions and act." <sup>8</sup>

Could any other illustration have served so well to show how vitally important Jewish education was to Steinberg, than his confession:

"For years I have watched Jewish homes grow less  
and less Jewish, seen custom after custom disappear...And my heart has grown sick - sick at the  
misfortune that has befallen us - at the ghastly,  
empty future that faces us." <sup>9</sup>

Milton Steinberg's sermons came alive because Milton Steinberg

\* The abrupt form of this quotation is due to the fact that this sermon is partially in outline form. The idea expressed is clear nevertheless.

loved life, but not in a naive way. He did not shut his eyes to its harsher aspects and gruelling frustrations.<sup>10</sup> He saw life for what it was and loved what it had to offer. One of his sermons (I suspect that when he wrote it he knew that his life was coming to an end) might well be called a poem dedicated to the joy of living. It was called To Hold with Open Arms.<sup>11</sup>

There was yet another aspect to this man. An aspect that did not have much opportunity to appear in his writing because he wrote on somber themes in bitter times. But it was there and from time to time it slipped into the open. The word wit or humor does not do justice to this trait. I would have to call it a sort of tongue-in-cheek, winking-at-life attitude that is more twinkle in the eye than a definable characteristic.

"Suppose you should be walking down Broadway after dinner, with 10 minutes allotted to the consummation of your cigar while you choose between a diverting tragedy and something serious in the way of vaudeville. Suddenly a hand is laid upon your arm. You turn to look into the thrilling eyes of a beautiful woman, wonderful in diamonds and Russian sables. She thrusts hurriedly into your hand an extremely hot buttered roll, flashes out a tiny pair of scissors, snips off the second button of your overcoat, meaningly ejaculates the one word 'parallelogram!' and swiftly flies down a cross street, looking back fearfully over her shoulder.

"That would be pure adventure. Would you accept it? Not you. You would flush with embarrassment; you would sheepishly drop the roll and continue down Broadway, fumbling feebly for the missing

button. This you would do unless you are one of the blessed few in whom the pure spirit of adventure is ~~not~~ dead.

"At every corner handkerchiefs drop, fingers beckon, eyes besiege, and the lost, the lonely, the rapturous, the mysterious, the perilous changing clues of adventure are slipped into our fingers. But few of us are willing to hold and follow them. We are grown stiff with the ramrod of convention down our back. We pass on; and some day we come, at the end of a very dull life, to reflect that our romance has been a pallid thing of a marriage or two, a satin rosette left in a safe deposit drawer, and a life long feud with a steam radiator."<sup>12</sup>

As I said at the beginning of this essay, I have no idea whether the works of Milton Steinberg will endure, even his memory may fade with this generation. But his ideals, his dreams, will not because they are not the vain hopes of a single individual. His goals were not the narrow goals of little men. His dreams were not for a family, but for a nation and through that people, his people, a source of blessing to mankind. May I refer my reader to the Apocalypse of Milton Steinberg. These are the goals for which he labored and gave his life:

"The reader, I hope, will indulge me if I portray as though it were actualized the future as I hope it, as I am confident it can be made: I see in Palestine a Jewish Commonwealth where the homeless Jews of the world have found rest, where the Jewish spirit has been reborn, whence flow to the dispersion inspiration and the stuffs on which it feeds.



" I see the Jewries of the world, each at ease and firmly rooted in the land of its residence, each unswervingly devoted to the polity and culture of that land and at the same time the bearer and transmitter of a living Hebraism, significant to itself, its environment and the world.

" Most specifically, I see an American Jewry, emancipated along with all other Americans from the restraints of prejudice, secure against violence, free to fulfill itself without hindrance.

" An American Jewry alight with a religious faith hallowed by antiquity and responsive to the mystery of all things, yet sanctioned by the best in modern thought and clean with reasonableness.

" An American Jewry standing four square by Judaism's great moral ideals, sharpening them into the keenest contemporaneousness, applying them boldly, imaginatively -- so that the name Jew is a synonym for the practice and advocacy of justice, compassion, freedom and peace.

" An American Jewry literate in both its heritages, the American and Hebraic, creative in both, cross-blending and fertilizing the two until all devotion to one shall connote blessing for the other as well.

" An American Jewry that in its observances is both reverential of the tradition and awake to current needs, so that the precious freightage of the past is enriched by new gifts in each generation.

" An American Jewry whose household is set in order.

" An American Jewry which, having labored that Zion be rebuilt, now draws waters of joy from the fountainhead of the Jewish spirit.

" I see in sum a Jewry which in its inner life has made of Zionism what it is intended to be, what it is now in some measure, and

what it can become in infinitely greater degree - that is to say, a source of blessing.

" And I see all this set in a new, brave and free world which Jews, together with all men of good will, have helped to set free, laboring as individuals but also as Jews, as members of a fellowship consecrated from the womb to the ideal of a new, brave and free world.

" Should that day arrive, should a better ordering of human affairs be won, and from its elevation a backward glance be cast over mankind's long, weary pilgrimage, what answer then will be appropriate ---?

" Shall not Jewish dreams and ideals, hands and hearts, blood and anguish have contributed to this end so long desired and prayed for? Will it then be a little thing -- will it not rather be accounted a very great thing -- to have played a part, not the largest perhaps but not the meanest either, in the building of the Kingdom of God on earth?" 13

## FOOTNOTES to CHAPTER I

1. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, New York, 1947, p. 13.
2. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, New York, 1951, p. 15.
3. Ibid., p. 136.
4. Ibid., p. 243 ff.
5. Ibid., p. 13.
6. Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg, New York, 1954, p. 54.
7. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, p. 229.
8. Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg, p. 123.
9. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, p. 266.
10. Ibid., p. 10.
11. Ibid., p. 310.
12. Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg, p. 188-189.
13. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 292 ff.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CASE FOR A RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION  
OF THE UNIVERSE

"One Takes a Chance With God"

# THE CASE FOR A RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION OF THE UNIVERSE

Milton Steinberg was a religionist, par-excellance. He believed that religion and the theology upon which a religion was based would in the long run affect human behavior.<sup>1</sup> He believed that without a religious (God centered) interpretation of reality it would be almost impossible for man to transcend himself, that unless a man saw himself as more than a cosmic accident, he would be unwilling or unable to struggle for self-realization, both for himself and for mankind.

To begin with, man must hold some opinion about the make-up of his world and its purpose. Religion answers this need.

"The specific functions of true religion are to be a principal of explanation of the universe, a sanction for morality, an esthetic, and much more besides."<sup>2</sup>

Through religion and the God faith man finds guidance and meaning for his own brief existence. Steinberg conceded that there were "large and solemn" difficulties within and about the God idea; for example, he conceded that the existence of evil counts against faith.<sup>3</sup> Yet, when all was said and done, he felt that the religious interpretation of reality emerged as the simplest, most reasonable explanation "for the mysterious world in which we find ourselves." He admitted that the intellectual structure of religious faith is a hypothesis that seeks to interpret the universe, and like any hypothesis, contains an element of uncertainty. In spite of the evidence in its favor, the theistic conclusion may be mistaken. "One takes a chance

with God."<sup>4</sup> The risk is admittedly great but the stakes are correspondingly high. And the religious gambler wagers his trust in his beliefs. As Steinberg has Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai put it in the prologue of As A Driven Leaf,

"There is no Truth without Faith. There is no Truth  
unless first there be a Faith on which it may be based."<sup>5</sup>

Although Steinberg admits that a person may be intensely devout and yet be little occupied with theology,<sup>6</sup> his own feeling in the matter seems to have been that only a fully reasoned faith grounded in theology would serve the individual and group adequately.

Steinberg inveighed against those whose God concept had never grown beyond the stage that sees God as "an old man seated on a throne somewhere up in the sky."<sup>7</sup> Such a view stunts the individual.

1). In laying out what the mature God idea could offer the individual Steinberg wrote,<sup>8</sup>

"God is the only tenable explanation for the universe...

The world in which we live testifies to divine guidance because our universe is one, dynamic, creative, and rational with elements of purpose, consciousness and goodness."

For while the intellectual reasons for believing in God are not free from difficulties, Steinberg felt that religious faith presented the best answer to the riddle of the universe. 2). Steinberg offered what he called The Emotional Reason for Faith. He contended that:

"man cannot live joyously, hopefully, healthily,  
perhaps not at all, without it."<sup>9</sup>

The God faith gives man the courage to live. It dispels the terrible suspicion that life has no meaning or purpose.

3). The Ethical Reason for Faith - Steinberg felt that the God-belief is necessary to morality because ethical conceptions such as the worth of the individual, human brotherhood, the future regeneration of mankind are not self-evident.<sup>10</sup> He admits that many so-called atheists have lived fine lives of service, but he explains this as due to the fact that often men behave better than their philosophy. But in time the philosophy that tends to depreciate ideals and the human quest will result in immoral behavior. He saw as one of the reasons for the current world crises the moral breakdown consequent in the disintegration in modern man of religious faith.<sup>11</sup>

4). The Historical Reason for Faith - Steinberg points to the slow and painful but nevertheless persistent progress that mankind has made

"from insensibility toward consciousness and knowledge,  
from servitude toward freedom, from brutality and  
ruthlessness toward compassion and conscience."<sup>12</sup>

He felt that this progression testified to God in history. He cited Jewish history in particular as proof that the God faith is life-giving and humanizing. 5). The Mystical Reason for Faith - While Steinberg was somewhat hesitant to endorse non-rational testimony he did feel that mystical experience should carry some weight, though not very much; still he was willing to list it as a category in his

system. Steinberg's personal theology undoubtedly changed with the passage of time. Will Herberg in a review of A Believing Jew<sup>13</sup> points this out very well. However, the personal God concept that he published in the Reconstructionist<sup>14</sup> pamphlet "The Common Sense of Religious Faith" contains his personal faith. He wrote:

"Very often, I think of the world in relation to God in a parable. I imagine a mighty river with currents, waves, ripples, bubbles. Each current, wave, ripple, bubble, I recognize, has an independent existence. Yet each is but part of the stream and carried along by it in its course. What is more, there is more to the river, depths below depths, than is visible to my eyes.

"As are the waves, bubbles to the river, so all things stand vis-a-vis God. Each has its individual identify. Yet each is but a manifestation of Him, pervaded by Him, existing only by virtue of Him, moving with His purposes. Touch anything and you may say: He is here. Yet add all things together and you will not have Him, for He is more than the world.

"When I describe God as Spirit, I mean that He is not only a Power but a "mind." His nature, in other words, is akin to our own. He is rational, which is why the universe is law-abiding. He is conscious with a consciousness like, though infinitely greater, than ours. Indeed He is the source of human consciousness, our private minds being individualization of Him, sparks as it were of His fire.

"When I speak of God as Spirit, I mean further that He is purposive. Whatever the case elsewhere in space, on our planet He has worked through inorganic nature to the plant, thence to the animal, thence to man, through whom He is now driving toward every increasing



freedom, justice and mercy, or, to use a good old theological phrase, toward the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>14</sup> Obviously Steinberg was proud of his theistic hypothesis because he followed his profession of faith with this almost exultant flourish.

"Of my specimen God-idea it should be observed that, without violating in the least the scientific description of the world, it yet satisfies all the needs for which a God-faith is posited to begin with. It accounts for the universe in its most challenging traits: the unity, dynamism, rationality, purposiveness and consciousness in things; it invigorates human morale; it projects and supports morality; it makes the movement of history intelligible; it provides a possible explanation for the mystical experience; it gives hope and direction to life."<sup>15</sup>

## FOOTNOTES to CHAPTER II

1. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, New York, 1951, p. 45.
2. Milton Steinberg, "If Man is God," The Reconstructionist, Vol. 5, #19, January 19, 1940, pp. 13-14.
3. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, New York, 1947, p. 13.
4. Ibid., p. 26.
5. Milton Steinberg, As A Driven Leaf, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1939, p. 13.
6. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, p. 4.
7. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, p. 17.
8. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, p. 11 ff.
9. Ibid., p. 14.
10. Ibid., p. 18.
11. Ibid., p. 19.
12. Ibid., p. 21.
13. Will Herberg, "The Religious Thinking of Milton Steinberg," Commentary, November 1951.
14. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, p. 28.
15. Ibid., p. 29.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FAITH PLUS REASON EQUAL RELIGION

"Faith and Reason Are Not Antagonists"

## FAITH PLUS REASON EQUAL RELIGION

1

In an article written in 1932<sup>1</sup> called Job Answers God which deals with the Fourth Ezra, one of the books of the Apocrypha, Milton Steinberg traces the "religious perplexities of an obscure Pharisee" who refuses to accept the pat theological answers of his day. Ezra's agonizing questions finally provoke an angel speaking for God to demand,

"'Do you think to comprehend the way of the Most High?'

But unlike Job, Ezra refuses to be contrite and lay his hands on his mouth. With superbly simple insolence he replies, 'Ito dominus meus. I do, my Lord.'"

The right, even the duty, to search and bring reason to bear on the problems that religious faith must inevitably encounter, was never denied by Milton Steinberg. The quest might often fail, yet man must continue to search for knowledge and understanding.

"One may deprecate this persistence of the human heart as a psychological projection of the ego, as philosophic immaturity, as human insolence and impudence in the face of a disinterested physical mechanism. Be that as it may, the giants of human aspiration have made this demand and in their insatiability lay their greatness. This is the basis of the majesty of the Book of Job, of Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound and the dramatic epics of Judaism and Christianity."

2

Milton Steinberg did not subscribe to the view that reason alone could solve all theological problems. Writing in the Reconstructionist, Milton Steinberg described the fall from grace that reason had sustained in the modern world.

"One of the most interesting phenomena in the thought life of the modern world is a revolt against reason."

For from the 17th century on, modern man has put his trust in his mind. He felt that if only he used it adequately, he could solve all of life's puzzles. But in the past fifty years a wave of profound disillusionment has swept philosophical and scientific circles.<sup>3</sup>

Among the hardest hit by this change in attitude was organized religion.

"The boldest and most consequential inclination of the Zeitgeist is toward the rejection of the intellect as an instrument for the attaining of truth in general, religious truth in particular, and certainty on any score most particularly of all."<sup>4</sup>

Milton Steinberg explains the prevailing anti-rationalist sentiments as stemming from the disillusionment that mankind experienced when,

"...after thousands of years of thinking, and after three centuries of blind confidence in the powers of thought, the human intellect has been revealed as inapplicable to certain realms of reality, susceptible to perversion for special ends, incompetent to provide

certainty, and incapable of giving sure direction to man's activity." <sup>5</sup>

Reason alone has proved unable to give man the certainty and guidance for which he had hoped so earnestly. Still Steinberg did not feel that the modern criticisms to which rationalism had been subjected were bad. On the contrary, he felt that the critique of reason, especially that of Henri Bergson, had made a valuable contribution to modern thought. Further, he commended Bergson's treatment of religion because it

"calls fresh attention to the fact that it answers vital needs and that the mystical intuition must not be neglected." <sup>6</sup>

However, where he felt that Bergson had advocated intuition as a substitute for reason, Steinberg took sharp exception. He pointed out the paradox that Bergson used reason to build his case against reason. Steinberg felt that a religion based solely on mystical intuition unchecked by reason, would be capable of all sorts of stupidities. Further, an intuitive or mystical approach to religion that neglected reason would leave unfulfilled another important need that religion fills in the hearts of men, because it would deprive its practitioner of the achievement of a reasoned insight into the scheme of things, to a philosophy of the universe, and of man's place in it. In a scathing review of a book called The Return to Religion, <sup>7</sup> Milton Steinberg repudiated the idea that religion is a crutch for the spiritually disabled. He wrote:

"Those who understand religion realize that it should be not alone a stay for the faltering but a guide and stimulant to those who walk erect. They expect of it that it shall resolve the problems of the universe for them as best it may - but always in conformity with the most rigid canons of intellectual honor."

Steinberg pointed out that to the modern man, the most "rigid canons of intellectual honor" were most closely observed in the laboratories of science. By its analytical, objective methods, science seemed to be above the gross errors into which theology had fallen so frequently in the course of human history. He suggested that perhaps it would be wise to examine the scientific method and use its criterions in evaluating religion for

"in science hypothesis and postulate are employed carefully, under fixed and rigid restraints; whereas in theology, the use of acts of faith has been free and easy. But suppose the same conditions were imposed on the latter as on the former? What would happen then? Either the religious outlook might prove unequal to the test, in which case it ought properly to be relegated to the limbo to which so many moderns have already consigned it; or, on the other hand it might pass muster. Given the latter eventuality, it ought to be conceded a legitimacy akin to that which is allowed to scientific theory..."<sup>8</sup>

Steinberg then goes on to show that even after a theory has met the three scientific requirements of higher congruity, superior practicality and greater simplicity there still remains the fact that there is never an unchallenged Q.E.D. after any assertion.

"It is all hypothesis in one fashion or another, controlled, tamed, disciplined, but hypothesis nevertheless."<sup>9</sup>

Steinberg denied that "science" deals with unchallengeable facts while religion is based on mere speculation, because "Religion and science operate in different spheres, and not as some have suggested, because science deals with the known and religion with the unknown. Both deal with the known, and leap from it to the unknown. The materials are the same; it is the purposes which are different. One confines itself to parts, the other to the whole. One busies itself with the quantitative and the phenomenal, the other with whatever may be outside and beyond these categories. One is devoted to description even when it seems to interpret and evaluate, the other entirely to interpretation and evaluation even when it appears to describe."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, while science is legitimately concerned in the exploration of categories of things, with the phenomena that can be weighed, measured and counted, in short with a description of the physical world, Religion has as its province those areas with which science by its very nature does not concern itself: the area of interpretation.



"There is then, room and need for another activity beyond science. After the descriptions come the interpretations, judgments of moral values, of aesthetic quality, and of ultimate character. It is here that both religion and philosophy function, seeking an interpretation of reality at its core and in its entirety."<sup>11</sup>

So long as religion remained in its proper domain, there could be no conflict between religion and science. It is only when either invades the territory of the other that conflict ensues. Each has sinned in this respect. Religion has at times adopted an authoritarian position that attempted to limit freedom of inquiry, while scientists on the other hand have often displayed a very negative attitude toward

"the quest after a religious interpretation of reality, and indeed, in some extreme instances, with all interpretive and evaluative efforts."<sup>12</sup>

At the conclusion of As A Driven Leaf, Steinberg has Elisha say to his disciple Meir, "Faith and reason are not antagonists. On the contrary, salvation is through the comingling of the two, the former to establish first premises, the latter to purify them of the confusion and to draw the fullness of their implications. It is not certainty which one acquires so, only plausibility, but that is the best we can hope for."<sup>13</sup> And in a passage a few paragraphs further on, Elisha replies to Meir's entreaty that he return to his people and his faith with the observation that it is impossible because his

people insist,

"...on the acceptance without reservation of their revealed religion. And I cannot surrender the liberty of my mind to any authority. Free reason, my son, is a heady wine. It has failed to sustain my heart, but having drunk of it, I can never be content with a less fiery draught." <sup>14</sup>

Throughout his writing, Steinberg sought to maintain a balance between "faith and reason." He felt that each had a legitimate place in religion. He further realized that only insofar as Judaism could be presented as a reasonable weltanschauung, could it appeal to intelligent contemporary Jews.

In most of his writing Milton Steinberg kept in mind those Jews who "on matters of faith, stand at the Temple doors, hearts in, heads out." <sup>15</sup> He was anxious to make the faith of their fathers intelligible to them. But, not at the expense of distorting what he felt to be its essence. He felt certain that the religion of Judaism contained within itself the balance between faith and reason which could satisfy modern man without requiring him to put aside his critical facilities on the one hand or demand that all sense of the "numinous" be suppressed on the other. He developed this point in A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem.

"It is not my intention to suggest that in adapting Judaism to its world setting, one must make it a 'Religion of reason' an outlook composed only of demonstratable propositions, in which furthermore,

all undertones of mystery have been muted. Despite Hegel, reality is not all reason; despite classical rationalists, the human personality is not pure intellect. A religion confined to the logically established, and indifferent to the emotional hungers of men would both misrepresent the universe and feed its communicants stones for bread. Yet, to say that there may be more things in this world than are dreamed of in our philosophies is one thing. To maintain as an article of faith what is contrary to the intellectually probable is very much another. This is not belief but it's abuse." <sup>16</sup>

The balance must always be maintained. Religious thought moves responsibly, creatively, securely when it affirms faith and reason simultaneously.

"Faith to lay first postulates and when the dialectical process has gone far enough, to evoke final, total existential commitments; reason to present the possibilities as to the first postulates and to exercise a never ceasing vigilance against reckless, capricious, irresponsible leaping from them. In sum, the proper rule as to the relation between faith and reason is that commended by Koheleth: It is good that thou shouldest take hold of the one; yea, also from the other withdraw not thy hand...." <sup>17</sup>

## FOOTNOTES to CHAPTER III

1. Milton Steinberg, "Job Answers God: Being the Religious Perplexities of an Obscure Pharisee," The Journal of Religion, Vol. 8, #2, 1932.
2. Ibid.
3. Milton Steinberg, "The Revolt Against Reason," The Reconstructionist, Vol. 1, #7, April 5, 1935, pp. 12-15.
4. Milton Steinberg, "Theological Problems of the Hour," Rabbinical Assembly of American Proceedings, 1949..
5. Milton Steinberg, "The Revolt Against Reason," pp. 12-15.
6. Ibid.
7. Milton Steinberg, "What Religion is Not," The Reconstructionist, Vol. 3, #14, November 19, 1937, pp. 15-16.
8. Milton Steinberg, "Toward the Rehabilitation of the Word Faith," The Reconstructionist, Vol. 8, #4, April 1, 1942, pp. 10-18..
9. Ibid.
10. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, New York, 1947, p. 9.
11. Milton Steinberg, "Toward the Rehabilitation of the Word Faith," pp. 10-18.
12. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, p. 10.
13. Milton Steinberg, As A Driven Leaf, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1939, p. 473.
14. Ibid., p. 474.
15. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 185.
16. Ibid., p. 186.
17. Milton Steinberg, "Theological Problems of the Hour," p. 368.

CHAPTER FOUR

MILTON STEINBERG ON ANTI-SEMITISM

"A Widespread Ambivalence"

## MILTON STEINBERG ON ANTI-SEMITISM

There was no aspect of the "Jewish problem" that did not command the attention of Milton Steinberg. He was keenly aware of the dangers confronting American Israel. From his vantage point, he was able to see clearly how poorly the ark of Jewish survival was manned and provisioned. The storms and calms of succeeding events did not escape his attention. And of all the dangers that faced the Jewish people, Milton Steinberg chose one as the most formidable because it threatened the physical survival of the Jewish people. It was anti-Semitism.<sup>1</sup>

In his brief lifetime, Steinberg saw anti-Semitism grow and expand from a noxious weed in Eastern Europe into a horrible forest full of hate whose roots and branches reached out and poisoned the entire civilized world. He hated it for what it was, and for what it had done to his people. Still he was able to see its wider social and philosophical implications. He realized that intolerance, like disease, is composed of more than its symptoms. He maintained the view that anti-Semitism, like anti-Catholicism or anti-anything, is more than the problem of just a single group. It is rather a problem of society.<sup>2</sup> While it is true that discrimination is aimed at a single (usually small and comparatively powerless) segment of society, its ramifications reach out beyond the group under attack. In a chapter titled Anti-Semitism - A Warning to Gentiles,<sup>3</sup> Steinberg laid it on the line to non-Jews. He wrote that while most Americans were pretty well armed against anti-Semitism, and that there was little likelihood that anti-

Semitism would convert the majority to its gospel of hate, its peril stemmed from another quarter. Steinberg feared that should anti-Semitism break out in this country on a large scale, many Gentiles would turn their backs and be totally indifferent to the fate of American Jews on the supposition that it would be none of their concern. Further, he felt that this indifferent attitude on the part of non-Jews might in part grow out of an almost unconscious aversion to Jews that many Gentiles share.

"I have in mind a widespread ambivalence concerning the Jews...the mood of a non-Jew who is horrified by what Hitler has done and yet feels an impulse of which to be sure he is ashamed, to applaud it; who regards Jew-baiting as disgraceful and yet wonders covertly whether it is not pretty much what 'they' deserve; who protests against a pogrom but will neither employ Jews nor allow them into his country club."<sup>4</sup>

Steinberg hastened to point out to Gentiles the risk they would run by looking the other way. He argued that although they might be exempt from difficulty at the start, it would only be a matter of time before Gentiles would reap the whirlwind as a result of their indifference. He argued that Gentiles would sustain losses in five areas as a result of the destruction of Judaism. First, civilization would lose the learning and genius of a people who had in the past fifty years alone given to the world an Einstein, an Ehrlich, a Bergson, and a "host of others."<sup>5</sup> Second, in closing their eyes to the diversionary nature of anti-Semitism, the non-Jewish world would only be putting off facing

its "real" problems - economic and social. He reminded his readers that there is always someone who profits from anti-Semitism.<sup>6</sup> Third, boldly stated, anti-Semitism is the prelude to the suppression of Christianity. "Synagogues are the first line of defense for churches."<sup>7</sup> Fourth, by its very nature, anti-Semitism is bitterly opposed to the democratic process. No exceptions can be tolerated.

"Liberty, fraternity and equality are universal in reference. Either they embrace all, or they can ultimately embrace none. Let exceptions be made to them and they are done for."<sup>8</sup>

Fifth, flourishing anti-Semitism would exact still another toll. It would fill men with the poison of hate so that their characters would be corrupted. Sixth, the religious heritage of Christianity would eventually go down to destruction with the souls of those who acquiesced to bigotry.

"Anti-Semitism may destroy Judaism by destroying the Jews. But it destroys Christianity also, more slowly but no less surely, by paganizing the Christian personality."<sup>9</sup>

We now turn our attention to Steinberg's views on the nature of anti-Semitism as it affected American Jewry. He attempted in his books to explain the phenomenon to American Jews who had experienced it but did not understand its historical and psychological background. For example, he pointed out that anti-Semitism is a time-honored component of Western civilization, which is unfortunately transmitted by pulpit and Sunday Schools,<sup>10</sup> reinforced by social and economic pressures,<sup>11</sup>



which combined with the animal heritage of man with his propensity to hate and fear the unknown contributed to the survival of anti-Semitism.<sup>12</sup> And last but not least, he saw anti-Semitism as a mask for privilege - a shield for exploitation by unscrupulous persons, or as a device to gain political power.<sup>13</sup> Steinberg traced three "party lines" followed by anti-Semites in history. He showed how when each pretext for anti-Semitism lost its appeal, another was always found. He pointed out that until the present time, every rationale for anti-Semitism was not all inclusive, but has loopholes which made it possible for some Jews at least, to be exempted from its strictures, - as for example, when religion served as the rationale for anti-Semitism those Jews who converted could not be rejected. With the rise of secularism the religious justification for anti-Semitism had become obsolete. Nationalism was then substituted as a justification for the exclusion of Jews from society. Yet this criterion could not close all doors, simply because with so reasonable a criterion as patriotism, a case could and was made for those Jews whose national loyalties could not be impeached. Tangible evidence in the form of medals could be produced. It was only with the rise of modern racial anti-Semitism that all Jews could be rejected, without exception.

"...this latest doctrine blocks out from society every Jew no matter what his character, career or attainments. For it operates on the premise that the fault lies not in will, thought or action but in the very fact of Jewishness."<sup>14</sup>

Reviewing the effects that World War II and its violent anti-Semitism had had on Jewish thought, Steinberg came to six conclusions.

He felt that the scope of the disaster had left Jews with the feeling that they could feel secure nowhere in the world. What is more, Jewish faith in human decency had been severely shaken. For excesses against Jews had been committed by both factions during the war. Steinberg especially singled out the United States government.

"...which for all its pretensions of humanitarianism, could devise nothing better on behalf of the trapped Jews of Europe than such futile and unproductive conferences as the one held in Bermuda in the spring of 1943."<sup>15</sup>

The optimistic faith that Jews had put in education as a means whereby all prejudice could eventually be eliminated was blasted. The realization that people of culture and learning could share the same black prejudice as the common ruffian came as a profound shock.

Both liberalism and Christendom, by their dereliction of duty in not raising their voices in behalf of suffering Israel had lost the confidence and respect of Jews. And last, the Jewish assumption that,

"if he proved himself a useful citizen of the society in which he lived he would be treated decently by it"

was smashed. Steinberg was willing to concede that exceptions to the general rule could be found.

"But the exceptions were fewer than was to be hoped,<sup>16</sup> and not so numerous as to break the sad rule."

If Jews had lost faith in outsiders as a result of their ordeal, they had, Steinberg wrote, developed a "new militancy" in combatting anti-Semitism. He ascribed this phenomenon to two contrasting factors.

One was the example of Nazi extermination camps where millions of Jews had almost passively gone to their deaths, and the second was the heroism of Palestinian Jewry. He believed that the mass of American Jews had resolved,

"Quietly but with determination, not to 'take it lying down.'" <sup>17</sup>

This new attitude was a far cry from some of the more traditional attitudes that existed in this country. Steinberg listed some of the "folk diagnoses" as,

"self-suppression, self-correction and self-Gentilization." <sup>18</sup>

For example, in a tongue-in-cheek refutation of the self-correction diagnosis, he wrote:

"Finally the entire notion of a reform of manners as a cure for the Jewish problem would seem to imply only one program - the setting up of schools of etiquette among Jews...while many Jews profess this doctrine, no Jew is ready to admit that his are the bad manners. <sup>19</sup>  
Where then will pupils be found?"

He rejected these types of handling of the real problem of anti-Semitism because of their staggering naivete as to the true causes of anti-Semitism to say nothing of their tendency to destroy Jewish self-respect. Steinberg was convinced that only an intelligent, well conceived program could hope to deal with anti-Semitism with any hope of having some effect. In line with this, he suggested six steps for Jews to take in the general community. He believed that it would be wise to:

1. counter-educate against anti-Semitism.
2. dispel estrangement between Jews and Gentiles.
3. stand firm in defense of their persons and liberties.
4. join others in opposing social reaction.
5. take an active part in economic reorganization.
6. stand up in defense of Democracy everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

And even should this program be carried into action it would not, in and of itself, guarantee a solution to the problem. In fact, the problem of anti-Semitism would not be solved by Jews alone simply because Jews are not the masters of their future.

"In the first place, they constitute no more than a sliver of the population of any Western land. This is a point of extraordinary importance. It means that no matter how thoughtfully Jews analyze their situation, how courageously and skillfully they handle it, their influence will rarely be decisive. It implies furthermore that their best resistance will be unavailing<sup>21</sup> against a convulsive, mass anti-Semitism."

In other words, the Jew must make the effort to deal with the problem with the full realization that his best efforts may be swept aside like a straw in the wind. It was with a eye to this possibility and the consequent need for a contemporary philosophy to guide the Jew in his everyday life, that Steinberg drew up his four principles for American Jewry. The four principles are self-explanatory. They were:

Principle 1. "The rights and obligations which Jews enjoy in America are theirs as of right, and not through the sufferance

or toleration of anyone. They must not be compromised in even the slightest degree."

Principle 2. "Since anti-Semitism is not created by the behavior of Jews, Jews would do well to stop blaming themselves and one another for it."

Principle 3. "Whatever can be done by Jews to resist anti-Semitism ought to be done with all the vigor, courage, and militancy they can muster. Beyond that, having done their best, they ought to forget about the whole business."

Principle 4. "The Jew needs today, as never before in modern times, a vital and significant Judaism." <sup>22</sup>

I shall close this section on anti-Semitism with a remarkable statement by Milton Steinberg that shows how clearly and dispassionately he saw the problem of anti-Semitism. Referring to the nation that had come close to destroying European Jewry and had unleashed a world tide of hatred that had infected friend and foe alike, Steinberg wrote:

"The Nazis are of course not free from personal guilt for the cataclysm they engineered. But in a sense they were for Germany, as Germany was for the world, no more than a percussion cap, a flash of fire setting off explosive accumulated among all peoples and throughout the ages." <sup>23</sup>

Not flag waving, nor brotherhood week, but a real investigation of the process and causes of intolerance, followed by sound political, social and educational activity could hope to deal with this social problem.

## FOOTNOTES to CHAPTER IV

1. Milton Steinberg, The Making of the Modern Jew, New York, 1948, p. 253.
2. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 83.
3. Ibid., Ch. 4.
4. Ibid., p. 87.
5. Ibid., p. 88.
6. Ibid., p. 89.
7. Ibid., p. 89.
8. Ibid., p. 89.
9. Ibid., p. 90.
10. Milton Steinberg, The Making of the Modern Jew, p. 254.
11. Ibid., p. 255.
12. Ibid., p. 257.
13. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, p. 55.
14. Ibid., p. 60.
15. Milton Steinberg, The Making of the Modern Jew, p. 266.
16. Ibid., p. 267.
17. Ibid., p. 269.
18. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, p. 66.
19. Ibid., p. 70.
20. Ibid., p. 82.
21. Ibid., p. 82.
22. Ibid., p. 91-99.
23. Ibid., p. 64.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### JUDAISM VIS-A-VIS CHRISTIANITY

"Anyone <sup>may</sup> become a Jew, but no one  
has to do so in order to be saved."

## JUDAISM VIS-A-VIS CHRISTIANITY

It is to be expected that a Rabbi whose goal was to aid Jews to come to some understanding within the Jewish tradition would have to deal with Christianity in the process. And this is exactly what Milton Steinberg did on several levels. As was his custom, he approached his material historically and analytically. He employed his usual courtesy and tact, but he did not mince words. Christianity was to him a poor synthesis of Judaism and Hellenism. While Christianity abstracted from the Greek world its dogmatics, theology and some of its forms, it failed to absorb Greek aesthetic values, the intellectual freedom and the spirit of scientific research that marked Hellenism.<sup>1</sup> In those areas where he felt a legitimate difference existed, he set it forth with candor. The opening sentence of his first book, The Making of the Modern Jew,<sup>2</sup> sets the scene.

"The Christian world has alternately hated and idealized the Jew; it has never understood him."

Some of Steinberg's most vehement writing is to be found on the topic of the Christian treatment of the Jewish people. He pointed out as an irony of history the contrast between Mohammedan and Christian treatment of Jews.

"By their very religion Moslems were enjoined to intolerance...The very heart and essence of Christian doctrine were ostensibly love and tolerance. In practice, no Christian love was wasted on Jews."<sup>3</sup>



Steinberg boldly painted a picture of "Christian malevolence" that crushed Medieval Jewry. He indicted Catholic clericals who poisoned the folk attitude toward Jews. He exposed the crusaders as less than "gallant knights clad in shining armor." In a few pages he conjured up the horror that the middle ages were for the Jews of Europe.

Steinberg then turned to the question of the almost miraculous survival of Jewish life, despite terrors and atrocities. His theory was that Jewry survived for no more strange reason than economic necessity.

"The howl of the injured purse soon drowned out the  
<sup>^</sup>stident insistence of the pulpit...The Jew was protected  
<sup>^</sup>often for theological reasons - more often for economic -  
 but rarely on the grounds of mercy and humanity." <sup>4</sup>

Beginning with the loss of their civil rights during the first crusade in 1096, the Jew was changed from a citizen into a chattel. He lived among Gentiles, not by right but by sufferance, not even as a human being, but as the property of individual princes, as a piece of living property, an investment that could pay dividends. <sup>5</sup>

While the picture he paints was somber, Steinberg did give credit to those non-Jewish individuals who, during the darkest days of medieval Christianity, at great personal risk, attempted to protect the children of Israel. <sup>6</sup> Yet, in spite of these individuals, the facts of history stand out starkly, and cast a shadow across the path of Judaism, even today.

"...Of all institutions contributing to the inculcation  
 of hostility toward Jews, organized Christianity has been

in the past and regrettably still is the most consistent and potent offender." <sup>7</sup>

This fact, combined with the heritage of the Middle Ages, have left their mark on modern Jewish psychology, with the result that a suspicious attitude toward the Gentile world is still prevalent in Jewish thinking. <sup>8</sup> A suspicion that was not dissipated by official Christendom during World War II. While he paid tribute to the "glorious exceptions" in which Christians attempted to shield Jews from the all devouring Nazi death machine,

"the exceptions were fewer than was to be hoped, and not so numerous as to break the sad rule." <sup>9</sup>

To summarize, Steinberg strove to acquaint his Jewish reader with the facts of Jewish history. He attempted to point out how theological and economic pressures affected the course of Jewish history and development. He showed how even some of the reprehensible characteristics that the Christian world had ascribed to Jews down to the present day grew out of life situations which many times were brought about by Christendom itself.

"Medieval bishops, dukes and church councils have no slight share in the fact that the twentieth century Jew proves to be successful in his management of a department store." <sup>10</sup>

He never claimed that Christianity was to blame for all Jewish difficulties. His aim was to bolster Jewish morale by pointing out that there was valid social and historical basis for many of the problems that the Jew faced in the contemporary world.

We now turn our attention to Steinberg's comments on some of the religious aspects of Christianity and its bearing upon Judaism. Steinberg felt that Jews should be sufficiently acquainted with the faith of their fathers to appreciate its genuine value and, even further, to be immune from committing the blunder of accepting depreciatory evaluations of Jewish achievements. Steinberg exploded with usual sharpness on this matter. He took the French Jewish philosopher, Henri Bergson, to task in the course of a review for his ignorance of what Steinberg felt should be basic Jewish knowledge.

"Incidentally, this reviewer experienced not only a sense of disappointment but on occasion one of sharp irritation. For all Bergson's erudition he still does not know what every Jew ought to know, namely, that the Christianity of Jesus was not an original contribution but an expression of the current Jewish morality and religion of the first century. It is annoying to find a Jew of international importance ignorant of what Gentile scholars have long admitted, and possessed of the exploded notion that Judaism in contrast with Christianity is an inferior religious system."<sup>11</sup>

I believe that Steinberg shared the view of the "modernist" who prefers not to put religions in contrast with one another.<sup>12</sup> Were it not for the fact that Christian religious thought exerted so strong a pull on his people, Steinberg would not have entered into comparisons and evaluations between parent and daughter faiths. From time to time, Steinberg felt called upon to discuss differences of religious philosophy

between Judaism and Christianity from his pulpit, never to depreciate the Christian position, but to state the Jewish attitude and incidentally to counter-educate in an area where widespread misconceptions about the nature of the Jewish religion existed.<sup>13</sup> Steinberg felt that Jews could be better Jews if, beyond a knowledge of their own faith and tradition, they understood the areas of disagreement between Judaism and Christianity. In a chapter titled "Israel and the Nations," in his book Basic Judaism, Steinberg systematically set forth what he considered to be the Jewish attitude toward Jesus and Christianity. He made no attempt to minimize the differences. He pointed out where and why Judaism rejected certain Christian contentions. Where he felt that Judaism embodied a value of unique worth, he said so. For example,

"Anyone may become a Jew, but no one has to do so in order to be saved...On which very consequential point Judaism stands in sharp contrast to historic Christianity."<sup>14</sup>

Toward the end of the chapter, Steinberg wrote,

"Now Christianity is, of course, infinitely more than those of its tenets and traits to which Judaism objects. Furthermore, it is entitled to be judged in terms of its strengths rather than weaknesses."<sup>15</sup>

I believe that this paragraph sums up Steinberg's approach to all schools of thought, religious and secular.

He made the effort to keep abreast of contemporary Christian religious thought. He read extensively in the area of contemporary Christian theology. From time to time he found ideas that appealed to him. For example, in discussing the anti-intellectualism of Kierkegaard,

he found a valid protest against a rationalism which rarified the living God of religious faith to an abstract idea.<sup>16</sup>

On the whole, however, Steinberg felt that Judaism was possessed of a superior religious system.

"Sanity and spiritual realism - these are special endowments from which Christianity, at least traditional Christianity, is by inheritance debarred. In Judaism's case, mystery may attend, but no absurdity mars the simple lines of its essential faith nor the elemental humanness of its moral aspirations."<sup>17</sup>

And therefore, religious Judaism is in a better position to deal with the core themes of religion.<sup>18</sup>

## FOOTNOTES to CHAPTER V

1. Emily Solis-Cohen Jr., ed., Hannukah, the Feast of Lights, Philadelphia, 1937, article by Steinberg, "Judaism and Hellenism," pp. 5-16.
2. Milton Steinberg, Making of the Modern Jew, New York, 1948, p. 19.
3. Ibid., p. 38.
4. Ibid., pp. 64-65.
5. Ibid., p. 67.
6. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 47.
7. Ibid., p. 46.
8. Milton Steinberg, Making of the Modern Jew, p. 133.
9. Ibid., p. 267.
10. Milton Steinberg, Basic Judaism, New York, 1947, p. 132.
11. Milton Steinberg, "The Revolt Against Reason," The Reconstructionist, Vol. 1, #7, April 5, 1935, p. 14.
12. Milton Steinberg, Basic Judaism, p. 104.
13. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, New York, 1951, p. 273-274.
14. Milton Steinberg, Basic Judaism, p. 99.
15. Ibid., p. 113.
16. Milton Steinberg, "Theological Problems of the Hour," Rabbinical Assembly of America, Proceedings, 1949, p. 365.
17. Ibid., p. 407.
18. Ibid.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH SCENE

#### PROBLEMS AND APPRAISAL

"They stand heart in, head out."

## THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH SCENE - PROBLEMS AND APPRAISAL

With the exception of a few scholarly papers, everything that Milton Steinberg wrote was directed toward, or dealt with, those American Jews who had not satisfactorily resolved the problems of Jewish identity both on the individual and on the communal level. The chaotic state of the American Jewish community, with its rivalries and duplication of functions, was a source of great irritation to him. He recognized its dire implications both on the local and national scenes.<sup>1</sup> \*

It was his opinion that no Jewishness is complete without religion.<sup>2</sup> He often referred to a group of people who stand at the synagogue's door, "heart in, head out."<sup>3</sup> As a result of his Reconstructionist convictions, he never based his appeal exclusively on religious grounds. He was keenly aware that the synagogue exercised a minimal influence in the community. He deplored the secularist tendency of the times. At the same time he acknowledged that more than the irreligious zeitgeist was to blame. For example, in commenting on a situation that arose in Louisville, Kentucky,<sup>4</sup> where the local congregations had adopted a plan to bar those Jews of the city who did not belong to a congregation for reasons other than poverty, from the ministrations of the local rabbinate -- Steinberg wrote that while Louisville was to be commended for taking cognizance of the serious problem, the real problem was how to awaken in Jews the religious spirit that would make for revitalized contact with the synagogue. As

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\* We will not pursue this point further because it would lead us into an involvement with questions beyond the scope of this paper.



one of the reasons for the disaffection of many Jews with the synagogue, he pointed out that only "men of means" were able to feel at home in it. Further, if the synagogue denied its services to the unaffiliated, would it not alienate that large segment of the community which it should be striving to reach?

I have cited this incident at some length in order to illustrate the point that in spite of his deep religious convictions, Steinberg was able to see and understand sympathetically the problems and viewpoints of those with whom he did not agree. It was this openness, and his willingness to state both sides of any question, that lent his writing on American Jewish problems their freshness and vigor. Steinberg felt that the "unchurched" were not completely lost to Judaism. In fact, in some cases, he suspected that they felt a strong attraction to their faith which could lead them back to the synagogue if only they could be convinced that (a) their heritage contained great aspects of truth and beauty that would enrich their lives,<sup>5</sup> and (b) that they could re-affirm the Jewish religion without having to surrender their minds to concepts and convictions that stood at odds with modern thought.<sup>6</sup>

Steinberg believed that Judaism could and should enhance the lives of Jews. He was convinced that by stimulating Jewish culture and religion, the Jewish heritage could be preserved in America and that America in turn would be benefited by this "cross-fertilization of civilizations."<sup>7</sup>

His willingness to concede that there were other areas to Judaism beside religion accounts for his constant appeal to keep from

ruling out of Judaism those people who did not feel any religious conviction.<sup>8</sup> He was certain that Judaism could be served and enjoyed by every Jew, be he religionist or secularist, who was willing to make the effort to live forthrightly as a Jew, although the Jew who had roots in religion would be in a better position to benefit.

Steinberg distinguished in his writings between the different groups of Jews to be found in the United States. He was aware that there existed people to whom Jewish identity was such a painful burden that given the slightest opportunity, they would escape. He deplored the fact that the American culture made it almost impossible for any large scale defection from Judaism. He wrote that he would prefer to see an American Jewry composed of 2,000,000 persons who really desired to be Jews than a community twice as large "which is either cold or hostile to its destiny."<sup>9</sup>

Steinberg identified several contemporary Jewish types. In each case he tried to show the historical background that produced the "type" under discussion. For example, (1). the religious skeptic. He pointed out that while all religious groups had their share of "doubters," the large number of unchurched Jews was due, in part at least, to the fact that the rather abrupt emancipation of European Jewry had not permitted Judaism to gradually sustain and react to the successive theological shocks that Christian religious thought had encountered and come to terms with down through the centuries.<sup>10</sup> While the Church faced the challenges of Copernicus, Darwin, etc., one at a time, the Synagogue sustained the terrific shock of the sudden transformation from the Middle Ages to the modern world. This had resulted

in the bitter anti-clericalism in the first generation to leave the ghetto which had come down to our time in the form of skepticism.

(2). the assimilationist's position was explained as the outgrowth of a loss of location on the part of the Jew who, divorced from traditional behavior patterns and unable to find a suitable apologia for Judaism, "is no longer sure what he is living for."<sup>11</sup> And so on down the line, he pointed to and explained the ostentatious, the chauvanistic, the neurotic, those traits that have been ascribed to Jews and explaining the stimuli which had provoked these responses.

On the positive side, Steinberg traced those aspects of the Jewish tradition that still exist and show vitality in spite of the severe dislocation Judaism has suffered in the modern world. One was the Jewish predilection for charity, which Steinberg saw as a characteristic that remained, even after most other distinguishing Jewish traits vanished. Another vestigial Jewish characteristic was intellectualism. The love of books, developed over centuries, had expressed itself in brilliant academic achievements. This powerful drive weakened with each succeeding generation,<sup>12</sup> yet its effects can still be felt. Unfortunately, the intellectualism that was the outgrowth of the ancient rabbinic traditions of study, had, under the lash of economic and social necessity, been redirected into secular channels with the result that American Jews flocked to universities and colleges to prepare themselves for the professions. In the process of adopting world culture they disregarded and often abandoned the culture and traditions of their people. While individual Jews attained great distinction in the outside world, the cultural and religious life of the Jewish community suffered from indifference and neglect.

The picture of American Jewry Steinberg painted in The Future of Judaism in America<sup>13</sup> was rather bleak. He described a group which was composed of those who were untouched by Jewish belief and were uninspired by traditional moral patterns. These people were trapped in their Jewishness. They formed the dead weight of American Israel.

The second pattern of Jewish living he saw evolving on the American scene was one in which the Jewish group had formed itself into a "Society of Self-Protection and Mutual Aid," organized for the dual purpose of collective defense against anti-Semitism, and the care of the sick and aged. Similar in nature to the first pattern of indifference, the "Mutual Aid" approach is also negative. Steinberg saw as the third pattern of Jewish existence in this country what he termed "the synagogue suspended in space." This view saw Judaism as a religion and nothing more. Steinberg rejected this position as inconsistent with historical patterns of Judaism which stood in contradiction to the actualities of Jewish life. As his fourth pattern, Steinberg pointed to Jewish humanism. He pointed out its positive aspects in terms of Jewish art, music and belles lettres. He rejected secular culturalism as untrue to the historic character of Judaism, because it rejected religion,

"and so long as Judaism remains recognizably what it has always been, there will be no comfort in living a Jewish life unless first peace has been made with God and the God idea."

He saw "religious culturalism" as the only adequate and self-sustaining view because: 1. Judaism is larger in scope than religion alone.

It is a culture and a civilization.

2. Religion is an integral part of Jewish culture, serving as the driving motive and its climactic expression.
3. Jewish religion like the whole of Judaism must be traditional in character if it is to be vital and dynamic.\*

Steinberg was painfully aware that Judaism in America was not very far along in terms of cultural creativity. While he acknowledged that some steps were being taken in various areas of Jewish life to remedy some of the more glaring deficiencies, he did not envision any sudden renaissance of Judaism in America. In fact, Steinberg went so far as to concede that perhaps the process of disintegration had gone too far to be reversed.<sup>14</sup> His view was, on the whole, rather sober. He seems to have felt that the prospects for cultural growth were growing dimmer. In one of his last writings he gave voice to his deep misgivings.

"There is, I believe, still a chance for the achievement of a vital Jewish religious, ethical, cultural, and communal life in this land...The chance however is slim and diminishes rapidly. The alternative is a deJudaized American Jewry, bereft of its God and Torah, its will to live and joy in life, a mass Golem of five million persons kept alive only by the evil spell of anti-Semitism."<sup>15</sup>

Still later, in an article evaluating the achievements of the Reconstructionist<sup>16</sup> movement he admitted that perhaps it was a mistake to

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\* This must not be taken to imply that Steinberg was opposed to making modifications in the tradition where necessary. See his statement in the chapter on ritual observance.

think that American Jewry would "catch fire."

"Perhaps, indeed, the whole notion of an American Jewry finding itself in a sudden blaze, no matter by whom kindled, is too romantic for actuality."

He acknowledged that the way of redemption for American Israel might consist of slow effortful plodding, one step after another.

"In any case, the chilling truth stands: 'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.' Judaism in America has not yet passed its perils or fulfilled its promises."

Steinberg felt that American Jewry was, by and large, practicing self-deception on a massive scale.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Steinberg never denied the right of the individual to surrender his Jewishness if he so desired, but he did feel that the right to reject Judaism should carry the obligation to understand first what is being discarded. He admitted that it was possible for a Jew to come to understand the tradition and still reject it.

"With such an individual Judaism can have no quarrel. It may say to him, go thy way in peace; we shall reason with one another again tomorrow. Judaism has no complaint against honest intelligent, and informed rejection of itself. But Judaism does have a quarrel with the man who accepts no responsibility, who rejects Judaism without a proper understanding of it. It is, in the last analysis, not freedom of thought which endangers Jewish values, but the freedom which some people arrogate to themselves not to think at all."<sup>18</sup>

There is a poignancy and depth of feeling to Steinberg's pleas and polemics on behalf of Judaism that can best be explained (in my opinion) as due to the fact that he had a deep faith that the Jewish people embody a set of values of which the world has need.<sup>19</sup>

Steinberg struggled with all his might to help bring American Jewry to the realization that a unique and demanding destiny was its heritage. He knew better than most the terrific pressures bearing down on the American Jew. Milton Steinberg devoted his life to the task of arming the Jew to meet the challenge of his destiny. I believe he voiced his faith in Judaism through one of the characters in his novel, As A Driven Leaf, when he had him say,

"...The Jewish people possesses a unique religious truth, an unsurpassable morality of peace, mercy, justice and human equality - all indispensable to man's salvation - and, in addition, a Tradition or way of life in which they are embodied. It is for these and their communication to the nations of the world that we have been appointed. No sacrifice on our part can be too great for the fulfillment of so heroic a destiny."<sup>20</sup>

## FOOTNOTES to CHAPTER VI

1. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 200.
2. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, New York, 1947, p. 29.
3. Milton Steinberg, Basic Judaism, New York, 1947, p. VIII.
4. Milton Steinberg, "The Synagogue and the Problem of the Unaffiliated," editorial in The Reconstructionist, Vol. 7, #9, June 13, 1941, pp. 4-5.
5. Milton Steinberg, "Toward the Rehabilitation of the Word Faith," The Reconstructionist, Vol. 8, #4, April 1, 1942, pp. 10-18..
6. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, p. 3.
7. Milton Steinberg, "To Be or Not to Be a Jew," Reconstructionist pamphlet #1, New York, 1957, p. 15.
8. Milton Steinberg, "Jewish Cultural Life in America," Jewish Center, Vol. 20, #2, June, 1942, New York, p. 8.
9. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, p. 135.
10. Milton Steinberg, The Making of the Modern Jew, New York, 1948, p. 230.
11. Ibid., p. 231.
12. Ibid., p. 238.
13. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, New York, 1951, p. 77.
14. Milton Steinberg, The Making of a Modern Jew, p. 312.
15. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, p. 137.
16. Milton Steinberg, "The Test of Time," The Reconstructionist, Vol. 16, #1, p. 25.
17. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, p. 265.
18. Ibid., p. 134.
19. Milton Steinberg, The Making of a Modern Jew, p. 309.
20. Milton Steinberg, As A Driven Leaf, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1939, p. 449.



CHAPTER SEVEN

MILTON STEINBERG ON RITUAL OBSERVANCE

"Naked ideas are frail things."

## MILTON STEINBERG ON RITUAL OBSERVANCE

"The ideas and ideals of a people may give it significance, but its group habits give it life. For naked ideas are frail things that often die upon being transplanted to a new climate. The mortality risk of an idea clothed in a habit is much lower."<sup>1</sup>

Milton Steinberg saw in Jewish ritual observance, a prime factor in the physical survival of Jewry during the sturm und drang of Israel's trek down through the centuries. "The Law," with its round of custom and ceremonies, its feasts and fasts, helped to make life bearable for the Medieval Jew.<sup>2</sup>

"It was the one element of poetry and beauty in his life."<sup>3</sup>

As long as Jewish life was insulated behind ghetto walls, free from the corrosive acids of skeptical modernism, Jewish theology went unchallenged, and ritual observance was based on theology. When the basis of Jewish beliefs was attacked and began to crumble, the ceremonies that were inseparably bound up with Jewish theology were also called into sharp question. In the closed community of the ghetto, with crowding and isolation from the outside world, the entire community lived at close quarters. Under the ever present gaze of neighbors, even the slightest divergence from traditional customs was impossible. However, in the larger world that opened after emancipation, the Jew who struggled to make his way in a new order was free to do as he pleased. His interests encouraged him to follow non-Jewish patterns. Under the stress of living

in a predominantly Gentile society the traditional Jewish modes of observance were disregarded. While many Jews made the effort to preserve their traditions even at great personal loss, their efforts were doomed to failure in the long run.

"The wheels of industry continued to revolve sacrilegiously, grinding to destruction rite and ritual."<sup>4</sup>

Another powerful motive that aided in the destruction of traditional observances was listed by Steinberg as the quest on the part of some Jews after "selfish and unworthy objectives." In part, this behavior grew out of a sense of inferiority. Because they were not on an equal basis with Gentiles politically, socially or economically, some Jews felt inferior intellectually as well. This led to the blind adoption of alien culture. Other Jews adopted Gentile ways in the hope that it would enable them, and their children, to make their way more successfully in the world.<sup>5</sup> To this combination of motives, selfish and unselfish, Steinberg ascribed the death of Jewish education which he saw as the means by which many of the folkways of Judaism were transmitted.

Steinberg did not advocate a return to the "good old days" of traditional ritual observance. In spite of the glowing picture he had painted of the benefits that custom had bestowed upon Judaism during the middle ages, he admitted that,

"The ceremonial life of the ghetto had become encrusted with all sorts of bizarre customs, rites and superstitions which had lost all meaning and significance."<sup>6</sup>

There was no question in his mind that certain modifications of ritual

practice would have to be undertaken. It was against the complete abrogation of ritual observance that he inveighed. He pointed out that even those who had abandoned traditional ways almost entirely had been forced to reconsider their approach.

"Against the downward spiral of disintegration, forces of reintegration are asserting themselves."<sup>7</sup>

Although he was not overly optimistic about the possibility of a return to ritual practices on the part of American Jewry, he did note that in each of the three groups into which American Israel was divided, efforts were being made either to reintroduce or reinforce patterns of ceremonial behavior, and that even Jewish secularists were undergoing a change of heart concerning ceremonials,<sup>8</sup> because even they had come to appreciate the survival value of ritual.

Steinberg believed that customs and practices were extremely important for the survival of Judaism. Either in their traditional ritual forms or as modified to meet the needs of modern life, customs must be observed. He did not hesitate to call for reform.

"Then there are lacunae in the Jewish regimen, junctures of large significance in the life of modern men toward which religion ought to have something ritualistic to contribute. To such situations historic Judaism, the creation of another age, often has nothing to offer. Reverence may have its place, but so also boldness, the courage to renounce, to remake, to innovate."<sup>9</sup>

So much for the observations of Milton Steinberg on the history of ritual observance. Let us now turn our attention to Steinberg's

personal appraisal of the value of ritual. In the Partisan Guide, he wrote,

"What do I get out of my Jewishness to justify the expenditure of time and energy upon it?...From the Jewish heritage I derive...a system of rituals that interpenetrates my daily routines and invests them with poetry and intimations of the divine. To be sure..I have had to do some tinkering on the traditional apparatus. Despite this, it is a goodly patrimony I have received, goodly in faith, in ethic and in folkway."<sup>10</sup>

We can catch a glimpse of his personal concern with ritual practice and its value in this passage from one of his sermons:

"We all appreciate and admire the Jewish home, with its poetry and beauty. We wax sentimental about the household which is Jewish from the mezuzah at the front door to the pots and pans in the kitchen. And when we picture to ourselves the peace of the Sabbath eve with the flickering candles, the blessing of children, the Kiddush; or when we recall the romantic symbolism of the havdalah at the departure of the Sabbath, we are overtaken by a sense of homesickness, a yearning for the soft loveliness which is Judaism in the home. We know then that we are not satisfied with the homes in which we live; they are only places where we eat and sleep, they have no romance, no beauty and

no piety. We realize that when our children wander far from us in later years, they will have no soul-stirring memories to tie them to us."<sup>11</sup>

In summary then, we may say that Steinberg believed that ritual observance was essential to meaningful Jewish survival. He was in favor of making those modifications that would make ritual observance more attractive and meaningful to modern Jewish life. He believed that ritual:

1. helps preserve Jewish ideas and ideals.
2. brings beauty and poetry into life.
3. aids the Jew to keep his balance and makes the possibility of feeling culturally dispossessed less likely.
4. serves to strengthen family and religious loyalties between succeeding generations, which he obviously had experienced and cherished<sup>12</sup> from his own childhood.

## FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER VI

1. Milton Steinberg, The Making of the Modern Jew, New York, 1948, p. 52.
2. Ibid., p. 91.
3. Ibid., p. 93.
4. Ibid., p. 181.
5. Ibid., p. 184.
6. Ibid., p. 187.
7. Ibid., p. 311.
8. Ibid., p. 312.
9. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 190.
10. Ibid., p. 137.
11. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, New York, 1954, p. 269.
12. Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg, New York, 1954, p. 47.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TOWARD THE GOOD LIFE

"One does live to serve mankind."



## TOWARD THE GOOD LIFE

"For two millennia the teachers of Christianity and Judaism have protested that in their ethic and doctrine they possessed the alchemist's stone that would transmute human character and transform society. After twenty centuries of experiment, men are taking stock of the accomplishments and achievements of their churches, and the balance sheet reveals an appalling bankruptcy... The cause of sweetness and light, liberty and happiness has had no enemy so resourceful and stubborn as the clergy of all countries and faiths...It stood with Medieval feudalism against the rising bourgeoisie...with rugged individualism against a planned rationalized, cooperative economy. In the South it was the great bulwark of human slavery...It has sanctioned war, blessed cannons and enthusiastically preached hate. It has resisted the liberation of women, the liberalization of standards of domestic relations, the assertion of the will to fuller lives by submerged classes everywhere...All this is asserted in full recognition of glorious exceptions to the unhappy rule, with full awareness of the rebels who inherited the mantle of the prophets. The fact is irrefutable - the Church has been one of man's greatest obstacles in his social progress."<sup>1</sup>

We have here one of the most powerful indictments of organized religion on social grounds ever penned by a clergyman. If we were

to rephrase the indictment in positive terms we would have Milton Steinberg's blueprint of what organized religion should undertake as a social action program. He felt that religion should translate its teachings into action.

"A religion that does not attempt to effect its moral values might just as well not have any." <sup>2</sup>

And what held true for the church, also applied to the individual communicant. Steinberg often pointed with pride to the heritage of Israel, so rich in ethics and compassion. In his treatment of Jewish history he sought to show how Judaism had distilled out of its sufferings a passion for ideals and values. <sup>3</sup> The very survival of Judaism should serve to testify to the indomitability of the human spirit. <sup>4</sup> Milton Steinberg knew full well how far short of the "Kingdom of God on earth" struggling humanity stood. Anti-Semitism-Jim-Crowism, the hate and inequality of daily life could not be denied. To Steinberg the struggle for the good life had more than academic interest. He realized that the survival of Jewry was dependent on the outcome of the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism in all of its forms. To point out how deeply involved the Jew was, he wrote:

"Whether they like it or not, they (the Jews) are in this business up to the neck. It is for their hearts that the enemy sharpened his long knife....Between him and them there can be no armistice." <sup>5</sup>

The Jew was involved in a physical-theological struggle that he could not evade, even if he wanted to.

Aside from the question of physical survival, Steinberg pointed out why, on philosophical and religious grounds, Judaism must oppose all totalitarianism, because Fascism was concerned with neither justice nor mercy, but only power and the security of wealth, while Marxism, though genuinely dedicated to social justice, is ready to sacrifice mercy to gain its goal.<sup>6</sup> Steinberg realized that Jewry by itself is almost powerless to affect the course of events. Only as part of a coalition made up of all peoples of good will could the fight be waged with any hope for success.<sup>7</sup> Whether as part of a larger group or alone, a firm allegiance to Jewish moral values would mean that the Jew must

1. often enlist in mankind's most unpopular causes.
2. be a militant democrat and be ready to fight for universal freedom and equality.
3. burn with a restlessness in the "presence of economic affairs as they are, and a passion to remake them into what they ought to be."
4. offer allegiance to the land of his residence, "yet above all peoples he will set mankind; above the enactments of the state, the moral law; above all human authority, that of God."<sup>8</sup>

But what of the contemporary Jew? Did Steinberg see him as a person so imbued with the fire of indignation over the injustices of the world that he would rise up and fight for advanced, even radical opinions? Or had he succumbed to the flesh pots of bourgeois standards? This was his verdict:

"Now in truth, Jews are not especially predisposed toward advanced opinions. On the contrary, they are as a whole quite conventional. I state this fact not to applaud it.

To me it is an occasion for some disappointment. From the heirs of the prophets, better is to be expected than complacency...Jews are pretty much a middle-class urban group, exhibiting attitudes, interests and ambitions typical to their station." <sup>9</sup>

Perhaps we can now see a bit more clearly why he phrased his appeal for enlistment in the good fight partially in terms of self-interest. He knew to whom he was speaking. Steinberg was not a Utopian. While he had his dreams about the better world men might build, he did not subscribe to the view that this or that particular program or plan in and of itself would bring the millenium. Each problem had to be met and dealt with realistically.

"This notion, that problems can be eliminated and that happiness consists in their elimination, I have called the error of youth, of the immature, those who are grown up chronologically, but not spiritually." <sup>10</sup>

It is man's destiny to go from one problem to the next. It should be man's struggle to overcome the negative. Without denying the negative aspects of life, Steinberg pointed to the goals of the good life for the individual. After depicting a case of hollow striving after "success" in life, he listed some of the things worth living for.

"One does live to have friends and cultivate them,  
One does live to undergo the experience of love,  
One does live to think, to dream, to aspire,  
One does live to serve mankind." <sup>11</sup>

In a magnificent sermon for Rosh Hashona called "The Mystic Voice of the Shofer," <sup>12</sup> Milton Steinberg pleaded with his congregation "to

awake" from smug, self-satisfied existence and to look out over the miles of slums teeming with life under inhuman conditions, to see the suffering and misery that blights the face of the land and, having seen, to rise up and battle for a better world. He who does these things, Steinberg declared, does God's work - the work of righteousness, love and peace. To which we may only add "amen."

## FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER VIII

1. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, New York, 1951, p. 61.
2. Ibid., p. 71.
3. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 286.
4. Ibid., p. 283.
5. Ibid., p. 288.
6. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, p. 236.
7. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, p. 288.
8. Ibid., p. 290.
9. Ibid., p. 69.
10. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, p. 284.
11. Ibid., p. 287.
12. Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., From the Sermons of Milton Steinberg, New York, 1954, p. 3.

CHAPTER NINE

A SUBJECTIVE POSTSCRIPT ON CERTAIN IDEAS

OF

MILTON STEINBERG

"With minor reservations."

A SUBJECTIVE POSTSCRIPT ON CERTAIN IDEAS  
OF MILTON STEINBERG

In this essay I have tried to reproduce faithfully certain ideas of Milton Steinberg. Any choice implies rejection. I have purposely omitted several categories of his thought. For example, I have excluded, as beyond the scope of this essay, the Zionist issue to which Steinberg devoted so much time and energy, and the question of the need for Jewish vocational redistribution. Furthermore, I have not had access to all of the existent writings of Milton Steinberg. My presentation and conclusions are based upon (1) the works listed in the bibliography and (2) to a lesser degree, on interviews with several people who knew him personally (see acknowledgments).

There can be no doubt that the overwhelming drive behind the efforts of Steinberg was his love for the Jewish people and his passionate convictions of the ethical value and beauty of Judaism. Steinberg was a polemicist, in the sense that he approached his material with a strong commitment. That is not to say that he would have stooped to falsify evidence in behalf of his brief, but, like any partisan he was selective in the use of the materials he employed, especially in his writing on the medieval period. His picture of the internal life of the ghetto Jewry is positively idyllic.

In The Making of the Modern Jew, Steinberg did not claim to be writing history in the normal sense<sup>1</sup> but with the exception of a few notes crediting the Jewish Publication Society for the use of ethical and poetic material, the book is without the usual scholarly paraphernalia.<sup>2</sup> He included neither index nor bibliography, even in the revised



edition of 1948. Incidentally, both of these lacunae were filled in his Partisan Guide. Unfortunately both volumes of his sermons published posthumously<sup>3</sup>, with a single exception, make no effort to fix the date on which the sermons and addresses were written or delivered, which is another factor that makes an evaluation of the development of his thought rather difficult.

Both The Making of the Modern Jew and A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem are filled with facts and evaluations of Jewish history and ideology that are designed to help the modern Jew to come to some understanding, and develop an appreciation of his cultural-religious heritage. In his discussions of the contemporary problems of Jewry, I feel that Steinberg was in a class by himself. He displayed a willingness to grapple with questions, and to face certain realities that had never received more than homiletical treatment in other quarters. A prime example is his sermon, "First Principles for American Jews,"<sup>4</sup> in which he faced up to the possibility that as a result of rising anti-Semitic pressures American Jewry might be forced into a ghetto.

"If, then, the clouds now on the horizon should eventually blot out the sun, if a violent storm should some day break over us, even if medieval darkness returns and we shall, resisting every inch of the way, nonetheless be forced into ghettos, then we shall still, if we are guided by these principles, have comported ourselves with dignity and courage: we shall have defended both our own rights as human beings and the humane tradition of mankind. And we shall, come the worst, still have in our hearts a doctrine of faith and freedom, of truth, mercy and righteousness by which and for which to live."

As is probably apparent from those sections of this essay that deal with Steinberg's theological and metaphysical speculations, I must admit to an inability to fully appreciate his remarks. At this point I shall include a critique of Steinberg's last major theological work,<sup>5</sup> by Dr. Abraham Cronbach because it succinctly sums up the non-theologian's point of view to which I subscribe.

One who is not a professional theologian would say:

"In the prescientific past, there grew up certain phantasies about the origins of things and about an anthropomorphic Deity. These phantasies were not recognized as phantasies. They were mistaken for accounts of realities.

"But the professional theologian does not say that. The professional theologian tries to make out that those prescientific phantasies had some kind of validity. Thus endeavoring, the theologian piles on top of the ancient phantasies, some phantasies of his own which, like the ancient phantasies, are confused with reality but which, at the same time, lack the clarity, the poetry, and the charm of the ancient phantasies.

"Thus would a person without theological leanings speak, but Steinberg does not speak that way. His frame of reference is akin to that of those writers (Niebuhr, Tillich, Kierkegaard, Barth, Brunner, etc.). He is himself a theologian.

"Such, however, is only one strand of Steinberg's work. The larger area of his career is devoted to matters that are of genuinely human and truly religious bearing."<sup>6</sup>

Steinberg's contention that a non-theistic *Weltanschauung* weltanschauung would

eventually lead to dire results because ethical values are not self-evident does not ring true to me.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, neither good nor evil behavior in the modern world is dictated or influenced by religious predilections. I would cite Hiroshima and the doctrine of "brinkmanship" as prime examples. And along these lines, I could not help but wonder whether it was Steinberg, the philosopher, or Steinberg, the Rabbi, who was speaking when the need to lay first postulates in religion was discussed.<sup>8</sup> It seems to me that religion makes its appeal on more pragmatic and less philosophical grounds. Steinberg himself admitted that Judaism was more concerned with what a man did than with what creed he professed. He made no secret of the fact that for the liberal religionist there could be no certainty based on the intellect alone. He postulated "faith" to take up the slack, which leads me to ask the question, "Could not the tangible aspirations of human endeavor as voiced by, let us say, the Prophets, have served just as well to supplement reason? Why was faith, based on theological speculation chosen as the supplement to reason?" He made no bones about what the role of good religion out to be.<sup>9</sup> I would say that his call to faith weakens rather than strengthens his argument on behalf of a religious interpretation of the Universe.

In his writing, wherein Steinberg drew comparisons between historical and contemporary Judaism and Christianity, I think that he overlooked the important fact that there is no one Christianity any more than there is any one Judaism. There are Christians who are Unitarians, there are Christians who are Baptists, and there are Gentiles who are atheists, just as there are Jews who are Orthodox, Reform and secular.

In other words, there are religions within a religion, and the question of superior-inferior must be answered on almost an individual basis and then with tremendous circumspection.

Because Steinberg was a feeling person who did more than casually discuss the ordeal of his people, he was on occasion unable to separate his strong desires from the cold facts. For example, his bitter disappointment with the behavior of the civilized world toward Jews may have colored his thinking.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Jews could not look to others for aid in their hour of trial may have led to his conclusion that as a result of the horrible spectacle of the slaughter of European Jewry during the World War II, there has emerged among American Jews a new attitude toward the problem of anti-Semitism.<sup>11</sup> I suspect that the "new militancy" he pointed to as a characteristic of post-war Jewish thinking was really a rationalization based on his own strong desires which he had articulated in a chapter titled "Anti-Semitism - An Exhortation to Jews."

"Most of us take anti-Semitism lying down. All too often we are on our bellies when we ought to be on our feet, fighting hard."<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, I feel that Milton Steinberg, more than any other American rabbi of his generation, exerted a tremendous positive influence in behalf of a sensible, clear-sighted attitude toward Judaism. While some of his views may be called into question, on the whole his work stands as a monument to his ideal which was the survival of the Jewish people, not only in the physical sense, or at any cost, but with honor, not as just another ethnic group among groups struggling to survive

against the monolithic pressures of cultural conformity but as a people working with the rest of mankind toward the realization of God's kingdom on earth, so that when that day should come, it might be said that a vibrant living Judaism will have

"played a part, not the greatest perhaps, but not the meanest either." <sup>13</sup>

## FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER IX

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2. Ibid., pp. 109-112.
3. Milton Steinberg, A Believing Jew, New York, 1951, and Bernard Mandelbaum, ec., From the Sermons of Rabbi Milton Steinberg, New York, 1954.
4. Milton Steinberg, "First Principles for American Jews," Contemporary Jewish Record, 1941.
5. Milton Steinberg, "Theological Problems of the Hour," Rabbinical Assembly of America Proceedings, 1949.
6. Dr. Abraham Cronbach, to the author in a private communication, January 10, 1959.
7. Milton Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, New York, 1947, p. 17.
8. Milton Steinberg, "Theological Problems of the Hour," Rabbinical Assembly of America Proceedings, 1949, p. 368.
9. Steinberg, The Common Sense of Religious Faith, p. 9.
10. Steinberg, The Making of the Modern Jew, pp. 265-267.
11. Ibid., p. 269.
12. Ibid., p. 97.
13. Milton Steinberg, A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem, New York, 1945, p. 294.

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