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3 We Cannot Study All of It

The Dormant Codes

The nearest thing to an encyclopedia of Judaism is the Babylon Talmud, a work in twenty immense tomes touching on almost every human activity. Law codes extracted from the Talmud, like the *Mishna Torah* of Maimonides and *The Ready Table* of Caro, run to many huge volumes. Mastery of them is a lifetime job for specialists. We cannot hope, of course, to deal with the subject on such a scale.

But we can sensibly undertake a more limited job. When the commonwealth fell and the Temple was destroyed, many sections of the law became inoperative, including the criminal, agricultural, and priestly codes. This does not mean that Jews stopped studying those sections. You can hear close reasoning today in any yeshiva in the United States or Israel on the rules for proclaiming a new moon at the Temple, or the four classes of damage in Talmud law. The spirit and sense of Judaism are so woven through the entire Talmud that serious students of Judaism try to learn all of it. But most laymen encounter little of this theoretical part of the faith. We can study here the things that affect daily action.

By tradition Judaism has six hundred and thirteen com-

mands. This formidable figure is fairly well known. It is less well known that most of those commands are in the dormant codes of farm, temple, and criminal law. A meticulous pietist can perhaps find a hundred precepts that touch life today. The Jew who holds to a couple of dozen key observances will probably be called orthodox. Quite a drop: twenty-four instead of the frightening six hundred and thirteen. This is the kind of fact that I think one needs in reaching an adult estimate of Judaism.

I am not saying, and let nobody take me as saying, that by keeping up a few formal practices one can meet in full the call of the law of Moses, and for the rest go about a busy modern existence with an easy mind. I say that to have Judaism in one's life the price is not total withdrawal from existing manners, thoughts, and activity; nor is it the taking on of a way so tangled and strange as to be paralyzing; nor is it self-isolation from the common human destiny. These are popular misconceptions.

The Vilna Gaon's Weakness

They tell a story of the Dubno Maggid, the famous preacher of the east European ghettos. Once he was asked by the mighty scholar called the Vilna Gaon to tell him his faults. The maggid at first declined. When the Gaon pressed him, he at last spoke somewhat like this: "Very well. You are the most pious man of our age. You study night and day, retired from the world, surrounded by the rows of your books, the Holy Ark, the faces of devout scholars. You have reached high holiness. How have you achieved it? Go down in the market place, Gaon, with the rest of the Jews. Endure their work, their strains, their distractions. Mingle in the world, hear the skepticism and irreligion they hear, take the blows they take. Submit to the ordinary trials of the ordinary Jew. Let us see then if you will remain the Vilna Gaon!" They say the Gaon broke down and wept.

The clear intent of our law is to enable a man to live in the world and yet hold his faith close to his daily thoughts. The lama and the monk withdraw from society to keep a

religious vision bright. Our faith teaches us to stay in the world, but to stamp our hours with seals of commitment. The result is, in a way, a troubled life. It can never be wholly of the moment, wholly fashionable. One's secular pursuits come under the constant review of the Law, in a slant light. The winds of doctrine blow and shift, fads come and go, and one watches all this with a resistant irony, even when one is swept up. But, on the other hand, one's religious ideas face the daily scouring of commerce and of common sense. To survive they must have substance.

The Core of Judaism

I have on my desk a letter from an agnostic friend, part of a running correspondence many years old. Says he, "What is the *core* of being a Jew: to be different in living habits, or to practice a moral way of life based on behavior toward other people? To imply that in some significant measure the terrible problems of social existence on a crowded planet are solved by refusing to eat lobsters seems irretrievably petty to me."

The pious reader may not agree, but I think this is excellently put. Once I think I made a similar point, though much more crudely, about naval service. I had been a midshipman for a couple of weeks, and I was nailed with a demerit for incorrect use of words. I growled to my roommate as the tyrannical ensign walked off, "How will it help beat the Japanese if I call a staircase a ladder?"

I eventually learned to do so. It is not my impression that I thereby advanced the surrender ceremonies in Tokyo Bay, say from September fifth to September second. But I am pretty sure that I became a useful naval officer in part by learning the lingo; and whatever minute service I gave toward that surrender, I gave it as a naval officer.

Possibly because the navy meant so much in my life, I have always thought that the Jewish place among mankind somewhat resembles the position of navy men among other Americans. Are the sailors and officers less American because they are in the navy? They have special com-

mitments and disciplines, odd ways of dress, sharp limits on their freedom. They have, at least in their own minds, compensations of glory, or of vital service performed. The Jews are not cut off from mankind by their faith, though they are marked different. They have their special disciplines, and—at least in their own minds—their rewards.

I remember being looked up to as a naval officer in wartime; then when peace came and I travelled to take my Reserve cruises, people in trains and planes tended to regard me as an unfortunate misfit. One or two actually said, "How come you're still in?" I think that is essentially the question that agnostics address to observant Jews.

We are still in, I suppose, because we take it on faith that the law of Moses is from God, and our observation tells us that the patterns of the law help keep our tiny folk in life, in the grand sweep of history. We share the hope of our fathers that out of our tiny folk, in some way none of us can foresee, the light of lasting peace will someday come. I cannot produce the Messiah. But in my sons, as Providence allows, I can produce two informed Jews who will keep alive that hope beyond my life.

My friend's question, then, answers itself. The core of Judaism is right conduct to other people. The Talmud (if I am not growing too anecdotal here) tells that a Gentile came to the Rabbi Hillel and asked to be taught all Judaism while standing on one foot. Hillel's colleague, Shammai, had driven the man from his door, taking the question for a baiting impertinence. Hillel amiably replied, "What is offensive to you do not do to others. That is the core of Judaism. The rest is commentary. Now carry on your studies." The man became a convert.

The core of a nuclear reactor, or of an apple, or of a religion, is not all of it. We make few core-decisions day by day. Life is too packed with running trivialities, with mechanical repetition. Judaism does not let that part of life go. It weaves commitment, and therefore at least formal significance, all through one's day. It is perfectly true that Gentile and Jew alike have sometimes taken the forms for the core. Hence on one hand the agnostic disapproval of the faith because of its "petty concern with ceremony."

Hence on the other hand the ultra-orthodox who will not recognize the state of Israel because its government members are not all pious. But if a way of life be judged by its misinterpreters, which way will stand?

Self-Isolation

How can we sensibly isolate ourselves? The world around us is where we live. The peoples of the world are our brothers under God. Our Scripture teaches that God made all men, not just Israel, in his image. Sacrifices brought by Jew and non-Jew burned on the altars of the two Temples. "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me," cried the prophet Amos in the name of the Lord, "and did I not deliver the Philistines from the land of Caphtor?"

Our own eyes tell us what Moses told us: that but for the Torah we are the most insignificant of the nations. What else can we show against the wisdom and the genius God has given to the world? Did we produce Socrates or Aristotle, Shakespeare or Cervantes, Newton or Galileo, Bach or Beethoven, Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Dickens or Tolstoy, Gandhi or Lincoln? Are we to stay out of planes because the Wrights were not Jews, or keep our hands from electricity because we have no share in Faraday, Maxwell, and Edison? Does this absurd misconception of Judaism not collapse into powder at a touch?

Our place in the world, I believe, depends on what we contribute to mankind. We have contributed the Torah, the Mosaic vision of right conduct and of first and last things. It is our life, and the length of our days. As we keep that flame burning, it seems to me, we earn our right to survive as a people before God and men.

Understanding this, we approach the vision as our fathers did, through a structure of symbol and discipline. To the newcomer, this structure is a maze. But enter it we must. To get to the heart of the matter, we have to study the seals that Judaism has stamped on life; the commentaries, as Hillel put it, on the core of the Torah.

The first set of seals is on Time.

4 *The Sabbath*

A Steep Start

Logic compels us therefore to start with one of the most involved and ramified symbols of Judaism; one moreover that goes much against the grain of current manners and habits of thought. Perhaps it is just as well for the climb to begin steeply.

Sabbath law comprises one of the largest tractates of the Talmud. There are uncounted millions of words on the subject in Hebrew literature. Yet the reader certainly knows the few words that are decisive: the first chapter of Genesis, and the Fourth Commandment.

The opening pages of Genesis were, of course, the ground of the nineteenth-century war between theologians and scientists. Now the guns are still, rusting broken here and there in tall grass; the dead are buried; the smoke of battle has long since cleared away. We see a quiet green plain, which has a new look to our eyes because of the struggle that was fought out there. The scientists won. The theologians went down crying that their infamous victory would mean the extinction of the Bible. That extinction has not come to pass, nor is it visibly closer. But the world certainly understands Genesis differently.