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PIETY AND PRAYER IN THE JEWISH HOME

THERE is no need, I think, to justify this inquiry into the Jewish home. Not only are the Church's roots in the Israel of old, but there is — even over the great gap of faith — a singular kinship between Christians and the Jews of today, between Abraham's children according to the spirit and his children according to the flesh.

THE POSITION OF WOMAN

The home is fashioned by father and mother. Like the frame which bears up the house, like the roof which shields and crowns it: such is the father. But what are frame or roof without the life within? There is no head without the heart, no father without the mother. Yet it has been said that Judaism is a "male religion," stressing the role of the father and of the father alone, that to the Jews of old the man was a limitless lord and his wife his slave.

But this is hardly fair. True, the Jews — in this no exception, rather the mirror of humanity — have not always understood the ways of God, not always done His will; there was, all through their ancient history, the outside pressure of the pagan cultures surrounding them, and there is always the hardness of the human heart. Often, all too often, woman has been held of less account than man. Even today, the morning service has a man pronounce this blessing: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a woman."¹ On him it is that, in the main, religious obligations fall; his, not hers, are the chief burdens of the Law.

Still, here are some highlights showing what the woman, the mother, meant to the Jews of old. The matriarchs, Sara, Rebecca and Rachel, ranked close to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the fathers of Israel. A Jewish legend tells that all the while Sara was alive, a veil of cloud, the sign of God's nearness, hovered over the entrance to her tent; a light burned within from Sabbath to Sabbath; and the door was opened wide in hospitality. When she died, the cloud disappeared, the light went out, the door was closed. But on Rebecca's coming, veil, light and hospitality returned; God was near again, in signs and also in the neighbor, His image.² There would have been

¹ Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (revised ed.; New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1948), p. 21.

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no freedom from Egyptian bondage without Jochabed, the mother, and Miriam, the sister, of Moses and Aaron, without the mother and the maiden who thus became the co-saviors of their people.

A time came when the brave men, the warriors, were gone, and it was then that Debbora, the Judge, by her valor led and protected the people, who called her "mother in Israel."³ Then there was Huldah, the woman prophet; the apostate King Achaz had had the sacred scrolls burned, but when later a single copy of the Torah was found, it was to her, in preference to any man, that it was taken.⁴ The reign of the only ruling queen, Alexandra Salome, was marked by peace; there were no wars, prisoners were freed and exiles called home.

Though there is the prejudice of men in a saying like this: "He who follows his wife's counsel will fall into Gehenna," like Achab, who was led astray by Jezebel,⁵ there is deep respect in the utterance: "He who loves his wife as himself, and honors her more than himself, of him Scripture says: Thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace. . . ."⁶ And there is delicacy in the advice not to wrong one's wife and cause her to weep, for her tears are frequent and her hurt comes near to God: even though the gates of prayer be shut, the gate of tears is never closed.⁷

Of Rabbi Joseph it is told that on hearing his mother's footsteps, he was wont to say: "I will arise before the approaching Shekinah."⁸ In Jewish theology the Shekinah is God's majestic and tender presence among men, His dwelling on earth, His glory. So this is really what the rabbi said: "I shall rise before my mother, in whom God is present on earth."

MALE AND FEMALE — GOD'S IMAGE

Indeed, father and mother belong to one another, for man and woman belong to one another. When God created, in His image and likeness, the creature that is His dearest, "male and female He created them; He blessed them, and called *them* man."⁹ Thus it is said in the Bible. The two of them are called man, the two of them to-

³ Micha Josef bin Gorion, *Die Sagen der Juden* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), pp. 288-9.

⁶ Sanhedrin 76b; Job 5:24.

⁴ Judges 5:7.

⁵ 4 Kings 22:14; 2 Par. 34:22.

⁷ Baba Mezi'a 59a.

⁸ Kiddushin 31b.

⁹ Baba Mezi'a; 3 Kings 21:25.

⁹ Gen. 5:2.

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gether are God's image. Therefore, it is taught among Jews that "he who has no wife dwells without joy, without blessing, and without atonement." And others add: "Without peace, without life."¹⁰

A father *is* not without a mother, a man ought not to be without a wife, marriage is a divine command — this is Jewish teaching down the ages. For when God made man, He bade him to be fruitful and multiply.¹¹ He created the earth not a waste, not to lie idle, the rabbis like to say in quoting Isaias; He formed it to be inhabited, He shaped it to be man's home.¹² Celibacy, therefore, is frowned on and rejected. And this is quite understandable, for the proper appreciation of sacred, consecrated celibacy came with the wedding of God and man in the Incarnation; it is given only to those who fully embrace Christ.

But there was a rabbi of the first century — his name was Simeon ben Azzai — who taught, in accordance with Jewish tradition, that a man who did not marry was like one who shed blood, because he prevented life from being born. Yet he himself never married. When he was reproached that for all his preaching well, he did not act well, he replied: "But what shall I do? My soul is in love with the Torah. Others can people the world."¹³

To people the earth, to continue, as it were, the work of creation and thus to honor God, is the duty and the joy of a truly Jewish marriage. One of the seven benedictions at the wedding service reads: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast created all things to Thy glory." The bliss of paradise, the primal reign of love in Eden, are remembered when the seventh and last of these benedictions exclaims: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride; who hast created mirth and song, pleasure and delight; who hast created love and brotherhood, peace and friendship."¹⁴

THE ROLE OF FATHER

Of this little world of God, the home, the husband is the head. "Bestow Thy blessings upon the master of this house," a fairly modern rite for consecrating a home implores, and continues: "Bless, O Lord,

¹⁰ Bereshith Rabbah 17:2; cf. Yebamoth 62b.

¹¹ Gen. 1:28.

¹² Is. 45:18.

¹³ Yebamoth 63b.

¹⁴ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 1013.

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his substance, and accept the work of his hands. Keep him far from sin and transgressing. Let Thy grace be upon him, and prosper Thou his labors and undertakings.”

This prayer clearly shows that far from being the mighty lord, the husband and father is God's steward, for there is but One who is sovereign, God. The steward needs to be blessed and given grace, and he needs the Lord's assistance that he may walk in His sight. Of the wife the same prayer petitions: “May Thy loving kindness be with her who looketh well to the ways of her household, and may she be mindful that the woman who feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.”¹⁵

It is the husband, the father, who carries and piles the stones to build the home, while the wife and mother adorns it, creates the spirit within. It is interesting to note that whereas the prayer mentions his hands, his toil, it speaks of her eyes, of her care. He is the master, but no less is she the mistress. When a son or daughter eating at the parents' table says grace after meals, he is obliged to remember them in prayer. “My honored father, my honored mother,” he calls them, words which can also be rendered “my father, my teacher; my mother, my teacher,” or “my lord father, my lady mother.” “May He (the merciful God),” the child prays, “bless my honored father, the master of this house, and my honored mother, the mistress of this house.”¹⁶

MARRIAGE AMONG THE JEWS

It is He, the Lord God, who unites husband and wife. To refer again to the wedding ceremony, near the end of the nuptial service it is said: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who makest the bridegroom to rejoice with the bride.” The same service calls marriage *kiddushin*, which means “sanctities” and is often translated “the sacred covenant of wedlock.”¹⁷ To the Jews, marriage is thus infinitely more than a civil arrangement, more than a contract. It is a hallowing, a consecration.

But some may counter: “Jews permit divorce.” Admittedly, and Christ set it right. Still, it should not be assumed that divorce is

¹⁵ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 1023; Prov. 31:30.

¹⁶ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 977.

¹⁷ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 1011.

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accepted as a good thing. Rabbi Eliezer said: "If a man divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds tears, as it says, And this further ye do, ye cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and sighing, insomuch that He regardeth not the offering any more, neither receiveth it with good will at thy hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously, though she is thy companion and the wife of thy covenant."¹⁸

Before the wedding service, the *ketubah* is signed, a legal document which protects and provides for the wife-to-be in case she is widowed or divorced. This contract, by the way, is intended to make divorce difficult, as is also the bill of divorce, which, with its formality and delay, acts as a deterrent. In the marriage contract the future husband pledges: "Be thou my wife according to the Law of Moses and Israel. I will work for thee; I will honor thee; I will support and maintain thee, even as it beseemeth Jewish husbands, who work for their wives, honor, support and maintain them, in faithfulness."¹⁹

FATHER'S DUTY TO CHILD

Of course, the father is also bound and expected to support his children during their early years, having, on the other hand, a right to their earnings or services. More explicitly, these are a father's duties toward his son as defined in the Talmud. He is to circumcise him; and if he is the firstborn, he shall redeem him, for the Law demands that he who opens the womb of his mother be sanctified unto God, that he be His in a very special way, and that in acknowledgment of the Lord's claim, the son be ransomed.²⁰

In obedience to this law, Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple as the Firstborn of His mother, offering two doves, the ransom of the poor. And Candlemas Day reminds us that in Him this law found its fulfilment and its glory, for, as no other, was He God's. In today's service for the redemption of the firstborn, the *cohen*, a descendant of the priestly tribe, prays: "May this child enter into life, into the Torah and the fear of heaven." And blessing him, he continues: "The Lord is thy guardian, the Lord is thy shade upon

¹⁸ Gittin 90b; Sanhedrin 22a; cf. Mal. 2:13-14.

¹⁹ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, pp. 1012-1013.

²⁰ Ex. 13:2; Num. 3:13; 18:15.

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thy right hand . . . the Lord shall guard thee from all evil, He shall guard thy soul.”²¹

The father must also teach his son Torah, holy Writ, and the interpretations of the rabbis; he must get him a wife; he must teach him a craft. Said Rabbi Juda: “He who does not teach his son a craft, teaches him robbery.” To these obligations some add – for the Talmud is never without surprise – that the father must also teach his son to swim, for his life may depend on it.²²

Crafts, trades, and all secular occupations were valued not only because they assured a livelihood and so gave independence (a traditional attitude we find in St. Paul the tentmaker),²³ but also because study alone was considered not good for the soul, not good even for study itself. “For the energy taken up by both of them (by study and the work of the hands) keeps sin out of one’s mind, but study of the Torah without work comes to naught and brings sin in its train.”²⁴

FILIAL PIETY

The counterpart of the father’s obligation is the duty of filial piety in the child. The commandment “Honor thy father and thy mother” is interesting for many reasons. In the book of Exodus the father is mentioned first;²⁵ in Leviticus – that is, in the Hebrew text – the mother is given first place,²⁶ so as to show that father and mother are to be honored and revered in equal measure. Another important point is that the concluding words of the commandment, “that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee,” do not refer to the individual but to the community, to the whole people of Israel and to every nation. Only where there is filial piety, respect and reverence, will the days be long, will there be peace.

So precious in the sight of God is the honoring of father and mother, the rabbis do not tire of repeating, that holy Scripture uses the same terms about revering, blessing or cursing parents that it does about revering, blessing and cursing God. “There are three partners in man,” the Talmud reads, “the Holy One, blessed be He, the father, and the mother. When a man honors his father and his mother, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, ‘I ascribe (merit) to them

²¹ Ps. 120:5, 7.

²² Kiddushin 30b.

²³ Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 9:12.

²⁴ Aboth 2:2.

²⁵ Ex. 20:12.

²⁶ Lev. 19:3.

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as though I had dwelt among them and they had honored Me.’”²⁷

With the Jewish sages this commandment carries great weight, and they declare: It is said, “Honor the Lord with thy substance,”²⁸ that is, with what He has graciously bestowed on you. But whether you have substance or not, you must honor, you must care for your parents, even if you have to beg your living from door to door.²⁹ However, if a father or mother were to tell their child to break one of God’s laws, by no means must he obey, for, say the rabbis, “Ye shall fear every man his mother and his father. . . . But it is the duty of you all (parents and children) to honor Me.”³⁰

THE FAMILY MEAL

True filial piety is therefore part of the worship of God, for He must be worshipped not only in the synagogue but at all times, particularly in the home. If three — three men over thirteen being necessary for a corporate act of thanksgiving — sit at table and eat, and do not speak over it words of Torah, they are like idolators, like those taking part in the pagan sacrifices to dead idols. But those who speak over the table words of holy Writ, they have eaten at the table of God, the All-Present.³¹

“Blessed be He of whose bounty we have partaken and through whose goodness we live,” says the introduction to grace after meals. And this is part of the thanksgiving: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who feedest the whole world in Thy goodness, in grace, in loving kindness and tender mercy. . . .” Here the Sephardim — that is, the Jews who follow the Spanish and Portuguese ritual — stress: “Who feedeth us, not from our own wealth, who provideth for us, not from our own work.” Again the Giver of all good things is praised: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, God our Father, our King, our Mighty One, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Maker, our Holy One, the Holy One of Jacob, our Shepherd, the Shepherd of Israel, O King, who art kind and dealest

²⁷ Kiddushin 30b.

²⁸ Prov. 3:9.

²⁹ Yebamoth 5b, 6a.

³⁰ Yebamoth 5b, 6a; cf. Lev. 19:3.

³¹ Aboth 3:3.

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kindly with all. Day by day Thou hast dealt kindly, dost deal kindly, and wilt deal kindly with us. . . .”³²

THE SABBATH IN THE HOME

The great moment in Jewish home life is the welcoming of the Sabbath. This day of rest and joy is ushered in by the mother when she lights the Sabbath lamps or candles. Before kindling them she meditates: “Father of mercy, keep Thou far from us all manner of shame, grief and care; and grant that peace, light and joy ever abide in our home. For with Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light do we see light. Amen.”³³ When they are aglow, she spreads her hands out before the flames as if she were too bashful to gaze at God’s graciousness of which they speak.

Later, psalms are said. Psalm 95: “O come, let us sing before the Lord; let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.” Psalm 96: “O sing unto the Lord a new song; sing unto the Lord, all the earth.” Psalm 97: “The Lord reigneth; let the earth be glad,” and many more. A hymn is sung hailing the Sabbath as a bride, a queen.

Come, my beloved, with chorus of praise,
Welcome Bride Sabbath, the Queen of the days.

The fourth stanza of this hymn awakens the people to await the coming of the Messiah, and it is well to know that He is called the “Son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite.” A metrical rendering of the stanza reads:

Rise, O my folk, from the dust of the earth,
Garb thee in raiment beseeming thy worth;
Nigh draws the hour of the Bethlehemite’s birth,
Freedom who bringeth, and glorious days.³⁴

Another custom on the eves of Sabbaths and holy days is the blessing of children. With his hands on the head of each of his sons, the father says: “God make thee as Ephraim and Menasseh”; then

³² Lewis N. Dembitz, *Jewish Services in Synagogue and Home* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1898), p. 341; Hertz, *Prayer Book*, pp. 967, 973-975.

³³ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 343; Ps. 35:10.

³⁴ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 357.

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with his hands on the head of each of his daughters: "God make thee as Sara, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah." And over each of his children he pronounces: "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; the Lord turn His face unto thee, and give thee peace."³⁵

Having greeted the Sabbath angels: "Peace be unto you, ye ministering angels, messengers of the Most High," he recites, in praise of his own wife, the ode on the perfect woman, so familiar to us from the Mass: "A valiant woman, who can find her? For her price is far above rubies."³⁶

On this follows the *kiddush*, the consecration of home life with wine and bread. Holding up a cup of wine, the father, the master and the priest of the house, prays: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who created the fruit of the vine," and having added an homage to God for the gift of the Sabbath, he drinks, and gives the cup to his wife, who drinks and passes it to their children and to all at the table. After all have washed their hands, the father takes a loaf of bread and gives thanks: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth." Then he cuts it, takes a bit for himself, and distributes morsels to the others.³⁷

The Sabbath is to the Jews a "memorial of the work of creation" and a "remembrance of the going forth from Egypt."

What is meant by "memorial of creation" is perhaps best illustrated by a Talmudic legend which says that when God called the world into being, the world — that is, matter — eager to fulfill His will, went on expanding till the Holy One, blessed be He, halted it. With the rebuke "Enough!" He brought it to a standstill and gave it its boundaries.³⁸ Likewise, in the life of man, matter is often a runaway, rushing to fulfill the law it has received, and thus it threatens to overwhelm man's spirit, to crush his soul. But man, made in God's image, is endowed with the strength of a creator; he has been given the Godlike power of saying "enough," of calling a halt to matter, to the

³⁵ Num. 6:24-26; Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 403.

³⁶ Prov. 31:10-31; Hertz, *Prayer Book*, pp. 405-407.

³⁷ Hertz, *Prayer Book*, p. 565.

³⁸ Hagigah 12a.

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pressure of the outside world, to the crowding of every day. In saying the "enough" of the Sabbath, the "enough" of holy rest and prayer, man is the victor.

The Sabbath is also in memory of the going forth from Egypt, for there, in the land of bondage and drudgery, the Israelites were slaves. But rest in God, the serene peace of the Sabbath, song and exultation, renders them free. Surely the beauties of the Sabbath lead our thoughts to the Sunday, the greater Sabbath, in which they are enriched, enhanced, transcended; in which we have the victory, the joy, the grace and freedom of the risen Christ.

JEWES AND CHRISTIANS

More could be said about divine service within the Jewish family, particularly about the celebration of Passover, but I hope I have made this point: that we should be mindful again of the dignity of worship in the home. To the Jews the home is a sanctuary, in which the mother, who lights the candles of the Sabbath, is an angel of light, and in which the father, who blesses the wine and breaks the bread, is the priest. Though the divine mysteries of the Mass are and will always be the center of our worship, there are no reasons against, rather all reasons for, the revival of old customs and the creation of new ones.

Indeed, all reasons are for it. Both home and world need such a revival and creation. The home will not be a sanctuary unless sacred celebration makes it so, and the world will not become Christian unless there are, over all the lands and in every city, islands of prayer and praise, of joy and song.

The eve of Sunday must stand out again, and on Sunday our houses must be centers of rejoicing and of peace, of the singing of psalms and the reading of Scripture. The liturgical seasons must again become part of family life. Candlemas Day, Easter, Pentecost, and many, many other days must be important dates in the calendar of the family. When I say dates, I *mean* dates—when the family keeps tryst with the Lord.

JOHN M. OESTERREICHER