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Book Review: 'Where Judaism Differed' by Abba Hillel Silver

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Abba Hillel Silver: WHERE JUDAISM DIFFERED *

WHEN a man at the eve of his life writes a religious testament, one is bound to listen with respect. When the author of this testament is a noted rabbi, who for many years pleaded and struggled that his people might live in their ancient land in dignity and freedom, one's interest is doubled. And when he presents his testament not just as a personal statement of the religious ideas that have ruled his life, but as a modern apologia of Judaism, one's expectation is heightened even more. This is Rabbi Silver's testament: Judaism, or Judaism as he sees it, is a most desirable, indeed a superior faith, for it teaches reasonableness and enjoyment of life, prefers this world to the next, avoids any either-or attitude, rejects the thought that man is in need of salvation.

Needless to say, Rabbi Silver, to whose oratory the Zionist movement owes so much, is eloquent in his apologia. Vivid and moving is his account, for instance, of how the ancient Israel differed from the nations around her. To her God, not nature, was the "Thou"; her God was a holy God, to whom the orgiastic rites of Israel's neighbors, the prostitution in their temples, indeed the whole sensual worship of paganism, were abominable. It was Israel which introduced into the unbridled world of old "the beauty of holiness." Hence the Jewish sages could say: "He who is not shamefaced—it is certain that his ancestors were not present at Mount Sinai" (*Nedarim*, 20a); "There is nothing more beloved of God than *zeni 'ut*," that is, modesty, the delicacy of the chaste man (*Pesikta Rabbati*, ed. M. Friedman, 185b).

Again, Rabbi Silver confronts the biblical attitudes toward the poor and toward manual labor with those of pagan antiquity. Freely to give to those in need was God's bidding to Israel: "The needy will never be lacking in the land; that is why I command you to open your hand to your poor and needy kinsman in your country" (Deut 15:11). While Cicero wondered what use there was in being kind to a poor man, Isaiah denounced the rich and mighty who "grind the

faces of the poor" (3:15). For Cicero, the labor of the hired man was degrading, unbecoming a gentleman; but for the psalmist, to eat the fruit of one's handiwork was favor and happiness (see 127:2). To this praise the ancient rabbis added: "A man must work with his two hands before God will bestow blessing upon him" (*Tan. Huma*, ed. Wilna, 52b).

Rabbi Silver also adverts to Israel's reverence for human life. So much was it in contrast with the antique practices of abandoning the aged and exposing infants that the bewildered Tacitus noted: "It is a crime among the Jews to kill any newly born infant" (*Hist.*, I, 5). Compassion is thus a mark of the true Israelite. In the words of the Talmud: "Whoever is merciful to his fellow men is certainly of the children of our father Abraham, and whosoever is not merciful to his fellow men is certainly not of the children of our father Abraham" (*Bezah*, 32b).

Here and elsewhere in the book, Rabbi Silver conveys feeling and warm conviction. But he is less convincing on the basic assumption of his book that the way of the Israel of old, the teaching of the great rabbis of post-biblical days, and his own religious belief—largely that of Reform Judaism before World War II—are identical or at least fully continuous, each an advance on what went before. To call them all Judaism, without distinction, is to beg the question.

An example will justify, I hope, my objection to Rabbi Silver's indiscriminate use of the term "Judaism." Scripture makes abundantly clear that Abraham was not a man who sought out his God; that he was all he was through the grace of God who called him; that God did not set His love on Israel because she was a people great in numbers; that He did not give her possession of the promised land because of her merit or integrity of heart; and that His fidelity to her, transgressor from the beginning though she has been, is for the sake of His own Name (see Deut 7:7; 9:5; Is 48:8–9).

The ancient rabbis, however, at times pictured Abraham as one who came to know God by the power of his own reason, and they liked to say that the whole world was made for Israel. They preached that the Torah was first offered to the Gentiles, who, wishing to cling to their sins, refused it. On the other hand, when, at Mount Sinai, it was offered to the children of Israel, they not only showed themselves worthy of the divine trust, but could claim that Abraham, Isaac,

* New York: Macmillan, 1956.

and Jacob had kept the Ten Commandments even before they were revealed. It may well be that the rabbis were guilty here of little more than homiletic exaggeration, in order to console their distressed people. But here was unquestionably a shift in emphasis, and no small one.

For Rabbi Silver, Abraham seems to be no longer the one called by God, the prophets no longer those to whom His word came. Instead he writes: "The Jewish people did not adopt Judaism as the Romans, for example, adopted Christianity. They created it" (p. 13). Again: "Judaism created the universal God idea," and "[The God of Judaism] is the ideal and perfect God" (pp. 21, 43-44). This is not merely a shift in emphasis, for neither "the universal God idea" nor "the ideal God" are part of a truly Jewish vocabulary. Certainly the commandment given to Israel not to carve idols was more than a prohibition of representing the Creator in wood or stone; it was a warning not to fancy Him a creature, whether of the hand or of the mind. To speak of Him as if He were a creature of the human, or for that matter of the Jewish, mind is, of course, less naïve, but it is—I say this with sorrow—no less an idolatry, indeed it is a more dangerous one.

No theology can be considered continuous with the faith of ancient Israel if it gives to the creative mind of the people the place that is God's—the God who reveals Himself. And this seems to be exactly the case with Rabbi Silver's theology. It is not my intention to belittle Israel's religious genius, the marvelous instrumentality of her patriarchs and prophets, of Moses, David, Isaiah, and all her inspired men. But nowhere in Scripture is the people as such given a creative role; rather is it accused of being "stiffnecked" (Ex 32:9; 33:4; 34:9; Deut 9:6, 13). True, all too many Gentiles, under the delusion of having been less resistant to the voice of God, have used the biblical reprimand to nourish their complacency; they have said: "We thank thee, Lord, that we are not as they." Worse, they have seized on it as an occasion to abuse the Jewish people. Yet such complacency and abuse, hurtful though they are, are no reason to disregard the people's slowness of response and to assign to them a role that was not theirs.

Having made the people the inventor of faith, Rabbi Silver, quite logically, sees in faith not man's acceptance of the word of God, but

an assumption, opportune and useful for his life. He writes: "Man must live and act always *as if* his life were tremendously significant, *as if* his soul and mind were boundless in their capacities and in their influence, reaching distant shores and extending far into the future" (p. 112; italics mine). No wonder, then, that Rabbi Silver sees sin mainly as "abandonment of status, degradation, voluntary descent into unworthiness and paltriness," as "failure to live up, in each given situation, to the highest moral potentialities in one's self" (p. 112). Here is none of the fire of Sinai. In so man-centered a view there is lacking the special temper of the Old Testament, its awe before the majesty of God, its trembling lest He be offended. One has only to remember the passage in Leviticus (chap. 19), in which the community of Israel is bidden to keep the Lord's Sabbaths, to revere mother and father, to bring peace offerings, to leave the edges of the field ungleaned for the sake of the poor and the alien; in which Israel is told not to steal or defraud, not to lie, not to bear hatred, not to take revenge; in which the people is warned not to turn aside to idols, magic, or lewdness; and in which these and other rules are followed—sixteen times altogether—by the holy and hallowing words: "I am Yahweh; I am the Lord your God."

The biblical world is not one governed by a God who remains remote, but one into whose events He enters with "violence" and love. It is a world truly human, and yet transcending that which is merely human. Needless to say, Rabbi Silver knows that the biblical world so sees itself, but this transcendent character is missing from his own approach. On pp. 145-146 he writes: "Judaism was never merely a moral philosophy. It was always a passionate faith. The Torah was a 'fiery law' (Deut 33:2)." Yet a few pages earlier he exalts what he considers Judaism's "faith in human perfectibility" (p. 136). In harmony with this optimistic view, he maintains—obviously drawing a contrast with the New Testament—that Judaism "did not thrust upon [man] a degrading sense of guilt, a perennial reminder of a sinfulness which is forever at the very core of his personality, and a conviction that he is not capable of helping himself through effort, education, and social activity to a better and nobler life" (p. 113). But is the knowledge that we are prone to sin really degrading? The Christian most certainly does not think so, for in mistrusting himself

he relies on grace, and the Lord becomes his strength. Neither did the Israel of old, when "out of the depths" she cried to the Lord, certain that "with Him [there] is plenteous redemption" (Ps 129:1, 7).

I honestly do not know where Rabbi Silver finds the evidence for his "faith in human perfectibility" that is so much part of his creed. Wherever I open the Bible, I read of fear and trembling, of the horror that overwhelms the just man (see Ps 54:6); I read that "the earth was corrupt in the sight of God" (Gen 6:11), that "it is given into the hands of the wicked" (Job 9:24). None other than the pessimist Schopenhauer first stated the difference between Christianity and Judaism—very much, of course, to the detriment of the latter—as a contrast between pessimism and optimism (see *The World as Will and Idea*, 8th ed.; London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, n.d., III, 442). In pointing to Schopenhauer as the father of what I think is a misleading differentiation, I do not wish to imply that this fatherhood necessarily discredits Rabbi Silver's interpretation of Judaism, but I do think worth pondering the fact that many a modern Jewish outlook comes from a source unfriendly to Israel's heritage.

For Rabbi Silver the difference between Christianity and Judaism is that the one is severe, whereas the other is "pragmatic," "balanced," "eschewing all extremes," "not too high-pitched for ordinary human needs" (pp. 134–136). This view, an accommodation to present-day standards, hardly does justice to the faith of the ancient Israel, at whose center was God's call to Abraham to slay his son; nor is it fair to rabbinical Judaism, whose precepts demand continued mortification. "Judaism," according to Rabbi Silver, "does not attempt to alter human nature or to suppress human instincts" (p. 137). Neither does the gospel; rather does it seek to perfect man's humanity through grace, to crucify and thus transform his instincts.

"Judaism," teaching man as it does to love both his neighbor and the stranger, to harbor no hate for his brother and to help his enemy, could "endorse every magnificent word on love which Paul wrote to the Corinthians," Rabbi Silver holds. "But," he goes on, "nowhere is the command given in the Bible to *love* one's enemy! This is contrary to human nature, and as such it is impossible of fulfillment" (pp. 137–138). To bolster up his argument, he cites the anger of the "otherwise so tender and forgiving" Jesus when He denounced the scribes and Pharisees as "blind fools" and "a brood of vipers," and

when, with a whip, He drove the money-changers from the Temple, overturning their tables (p. 138).

What a tangle of misunderstandings! Rabbi Silver confuses love with sentimentality; hence he imagines that if Jesus loved those hostile to His mission, He should have had nothing but soft words for them. Surely he cannot mean that a burning, articulate zeal for the purity of God's word and house is incompatible with good will, that is, with willing the good of those who offend against that purity. Did the prophets who castigated Israel with "a sharp sword" (Is 49:2) love her less than did the false prophets who never spoke but to their hearers' desire? No doubt, Jesus was angry with some of the Pharisees and with the money-changers, but His anger was like His weeping. No sign of helplessness in the face of misery, His tears were power, a sovereign response to the misery before Him. Likewise, that His anger against those who perverted God's saving design was not loss of temper, but inner freedom, becomes evident when one recalls that He was never angered by those who wronged Him, not even by those who condemned Him to death.

Upholding what he calls the middle-of-the-road morality of Judaism, Rabbi Silver states: "The oppressors of mankind can get along much more easily with mystics and visionaries, with dreamers and perfectionists, than with determined people possessed of an obdurate morality of common sense" (p. 143). Henri Bergson, who studied the mystics, their lives and writings, came to a quite different conclusion. For him it is the mystics, fired with a love for all men, a love not merely human but divine, who are the real helpers of God on earth; who are the great men of the good; who, without seeking it, wield a power over men which spans space and time. It is to the great mystics, to saints like Paul of Tarsus, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi, that every deep moral advance is due, and it is they who conquer the might of oppressors. It is they, Bergson emphasizes, who are patterns of mental soundness, who are distinguished by a bent for action, an adaptability to circumstance, a firmness combined with suppleness, a discernment of the possible and the impossible, a spirit of simplicity which overrides complication—in short, by supreme good sense.

What is true of the Christian mystics is no less true of the saints of old. Whom among the Hebrews did Pharaoh, the oppressor, fear if not

Moses, the "visionary"? Who resisted Antiochus Epiphanes, dared disobey his edict, and led the rebellion against him, if not the "perfectionist," Mattathias? Who proved a match for Antiochus if not the martyred mother and her seven martyred sons—animated by a hope that was not of this world? "You indeed, O most wicked man," one of them cried with his last breath, "destroy our present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to life everlasting, we who die for His laws" (2 Mac 7:9). Rabbi Silver is clearly wrong: What the world and its tyrants fear are prophetic men, whom at times they pretend to despise as nothing but "dreamers."

In his apologia for Judaism, Rabbi Silver wishes, I am sure, to be fair to the gospel, but as a matter of fact he is not. He speaks of Jesus' entreaty to turn the other cheek (see Mt 5:39) as though it were a doctrine of unrealistic pacifism and thoroughgoing nonresistance; of His "Woe to you rich!" (Lk 6:24) as though it were a condemnation of private property; of His invitation to the young man to sell all he owned, give the price to the poor, and follow Him (see Mk 10:21), as though it were a condition for inheriting eternal life (pp. 86, 255-256, 122-123). The Sermon on the Mount, the evangelical counsels in particular, are not a new set of rules. What Christ brought was a new leaven; what He sought was the new man, not governed by instinct but transfigured by grace, a man who would more than fulfill the divine commandments (great as they and their fulfillment are), who would try ever anew to imitate God Himself. Rabbi Silver clings to the dated view that Christianity is "a synthesis between the Greco-Oriental and the Jewish religions in the Roman Empire" (p. 96), an opinion never well founded and now, after the findings of Qumran, completely discredited. He labels St. John's Gospel "the thoroughly Hellenistic Logos gospel" (p. 96), as he could hardly do if he gave some thought to the Jewish Memra speculation or to modern scholarship, which has become increasingly aware of the thoroughly Jewish character of this Gospel.

Again, with reference to the Trinity and the Incarnation, Rabbi Silver speaks of a "mythologizing of God" (p. 106), as if there were no difference between myth and mystery. When the Church believes in the three-personed God and in the Incarnate Word, she borrows nothing from the myths of the East or the speculations of the Greeks. If here she goes beyond the faith of the ancient Israel, she truly con-

tinues it. For in the mysteries of God-made-man, He is not seen after the manner of men, but after His own manner. From the first to the last the God of Israel revealed Himself as the One who cannot be fathomed, whose ways are not our ways, whose nature infinitely surpasses our understanding. How could it be otherwise than that our thoughts on God are burst open the moment He speaks and acts?

I can well understand that one for whom man with his limited notions and more obvious needs is the measure of truth, must find impossible a faith which proclaims that a carpenter of Nazareth, who wearied and thirsted, was and is God in the flesh; that, against all human experience, He was born of a virgin; that in dying like a criminal He saved the world; that having been buried, He rose again to life and to everlasting reign in heaven. All this is impossible to a vision confined within the human realm; it is not without reason that at the very beginning of the Christian message there stands the heavenly declaration that nothing is impossible with God (see Lk 1:37).

Rabbi Silver is not content with what he calls "rejecting treasures"; he attempts a psychological explanation of how the Christian faith was born. This is how he sees its origin: When Jesus' faithful followers knew that their Master had been arrested, tried, condemned, and crucified, they questioned, in this crushing catastrophe, whether He could be the true Messiah, whether His mission had not failed. Soon, however, they themselves supplied an answer to their agony by "believing" that Jesus was not really dead, but had risen, and that He had had to die in order to atone for man's fateful burden of original sin (pp. 97-98). This is an unsound and improbable explanation for the disciples' faith in Jesus as the Christ, raising more questions than it answers. Such an explanation is at variance with everything the records tell. If the disciples had really deluded themselves into believing, why did they not efface from the records their many weaknesses, their dullness of heart? Why did they tell, not once but again and again, how hard they found it to have faith in Christ crucified and risen? If this faith was nothing but illusion, what in all the world could have induced Paul to accept, preach, and die for this faith he had fought so vehemently? If he was nothing but a victim of self-deception, if his experience near the gates of Damascus was nothing but a hallucination, how is it that after it his mind, far from disintegrating, remained so logical and clear, indeed grew even more

firm and mature? So one could go on, asking and arguing, but I shall rather halt here and say that we must all be true to the light given us.

Yet I cannot leave the argument at that; I have to stress once more that I cannot find the light in Rabbi Silver's book to be the light of Scripture. In biblical sources, he maintains, redemption is never redemption from sin; it always "refers to redemption from slavery, from an enemy, from imminent danger or death or exile" (p. 158). This is hardly adequate. Israel's affliction in Egypt, for instance, was not merely bondage of body, but bondage of soul, life among idols. What Moses sought from the oppressor of his people was more than political freedom. It was the freedom to worship the one true God. "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel," he told Pharaoh, "Let my people go, that they may celebrate a feast to me in the desert" (Ex 5:1).

Again, Rabbi Silver thinks belief in the Messiah to be not at all basic, thereby depriving Judaism of that marvelous mark of the Old Testament: supernatural hope. He writes: "While entertaining the hope of the coming of a Messiah, the Jewish people never accepted any specific Messiah. They sensed that the idea, inspiring as a hope, was hopeless as a reality. An actual Messiah is always an unfulfillment, an anticlimax. . . . [Belief in the coming of the Messiah] is certainly not the keystone in the arch of Judaism" (p. 121). In support of his thesis he quotes a fourth-century rabbi and a fifteenth-century philosopher, but passes over in complete silence the overwhelming evidence against it. There is, above all, the twelfth principle of the creed of Maimonides: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and though he tarry, I will wait daily for his coming." Maimonides was not the only one to declare belief in a personal Messiah an essential mark of Jewish faith. The few rabbis who did not list the messianic hope among the fundamental teachings of Judaism left it unmentioned because it was never a disputed doctrine. (See, for instance, Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1896, I, 165.) How could it have been disputed since the Synagogue in every one of her services prays with moving urgency as she does in the Afternoon Prayer: "Speedily cause the offspring of David, Thy servant, to flourish, and by Thy help let his glory be exalted . . . !" Even as early as the beginning of the Morning Service, the Jewish man of prayer professes:

*He at the last will His Anointed send,
Those to redeem, who hope, and wait the end.*

Whether or not Rabbi Silver realizes it, he is at variance not only with Scripture but with the Jewish tradition as well.

Though I cannot feel that Rabbi Silver has done justice to either the Old or the New Testament, to either Judaism or Christianity, I agree with him that "the attempt to gloss over [their] differences as a gesture of goodwill is a superficial act which serves neither the purposes of scholarship nor the realities of the situation. . . . Indifference to one's own faith is no proof of tolerance" (p. 289). He is, however, on weaker ground when he continues: "Loyalty to one's own is part of a larger loyalty to faith generally." Faith is never general; it is always specific. It is faith in the living God or in idols, in truth or in error, in good or in evil. What we must be loyal to, then, is not "faith generally" but the truth as we see it—and we must look at it not with a casual, contented glance, but with an untiringly, even painfully, open eye.

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