

Children of Three or Eight

In the literature of the Bible and in the literature of the Talmud, we are assured that whenever we want to return to God, the road is open. (*See Talmud B. Makkot* 10b) However, in a few instances, penitence is of no avail. Thus, for example, if a man should say, "I will sin and on every Day of Atonement I will confess my wrongdoing and obtain forgiveness," he is not forgiven. (*.Rambam Hilchot Teshuvah* 4:1) Penitence involves genuine remorse and a firm resolve not to repeat the same transgression. Consequently, any conduct which reveals the absence of genuine remorse vitiates the possibility of atonement.

In still another instance, penitence is of no avail. We are told in Deuteronomy that the day will come when the Jewish people will suffer great hardship and they will understand that all the evil was visited upon them because they had forsaken God. Yet, though they will recognize that it is the hand of God that bears down heavily upon them, this recognition will not help them. On that day, God will hide His face from them and not come to their relief. (*.Deuteronomy* 31:17-18) Now, why isn't their recognition of God as the one who is meting out their punishment adequate as penitence? Are they not thus acknowledging that their worship of false gods and their adoration of pagan practices have brought them to the brink of disaster? Isn't this awareness of the bankruptcy of idolatry enough to open the road to God's forgiveness? Why should God, nonetheless, hide His face from His people?

To this question, the great Chasam Sofer makes reply which has much meaning for us in our own day. The Chasam Sofer tells us that for Jews the recognition of God's might and power is not enough. The mere fact that a Jew is ready to acknowledge that God exists does not constitute penitence. For Jews, the true road

to penitence is described in an earlier chapter of Deuteronomy in which it is said that after all their tragedies, the day will come when Jews will want to return unto God, and they will return. However, it shall be by *hearkening unto His voice*. (*Deuteronomy 4:30*) On such a day, it could be said that they will have practiced penitence. Simply to admit that God is, simply to concede that He exists, is not religion. For us, religion begins when one is ready not only to acknowledge God's existence, but also to fulfill His Will and practice in our daily lives. That is why it will never be enough for a Jew merely to allege that God is King, or that it was because of God's anger that disasters had befallen him. He will have to take one additional step. He will have to open his heart to God's word and fulfill God's Will.

Friends, it is this message that I want to communicate to you on this Sabbath of Penitence, for when we hear much discussion in our day about a religious revival, it is important that we understand what we mean by religion. True, the day has come when more and more people are willing to admit that there is a God. There are countless scientists who, because of their own research into nature, because of their own inquiries into the universe, have reached some kind of dead end which impels them to admit that there is a Creator. They must concede as a hypothesis that there is a force behind all forces, and a designer underlying all designs. All of the theological arguments which were discarded a century or two ago by philosophers are being restored to popular discourse. They are being given a new dress, so that day after day we read of new books containing the admissions of prominent and renowned scientists that their agnosticism or atheism of an earlier day is no longer intellectually respectable. However, that does not make the scientists religious. It may be gratifying to many pseudo-intellectuals to learn that scientists, too, are willing to concede that there is a God. It may even give some religious people an assurance that they crave that they are not being old fashioned when they believe in a God, since scientists, too, make the concession. Yet, this is not religion in any mature sense of the term.

Certainly we Jews who first brought to the world the conception of one Creator are grateful to the scientists for confirming that which we knew four thousand years ago. However, if we stop there,

we are being disloyal to our heritage. We are only inviting that which was described in the Book of Deuteronomy as God's hiding of His face from us. To be religious, one must go further. If one does not go further, then our conception of God is so primitive that we indeed regard Him as some kind of prima donna who wants us to be aware that He exists and seeks no more of us. Yet, it is precisely that kind of religion that is prompting many to believe that there is a religious revival in the world. It is that kind of religion that is making many believe that we are on the threshold of a new era in religious living. But this is nonsense. I need but cite a few illustrations.

We know that throughout the country there are hundreds of thousands of people who are members of fraternal orders, Elks, Masons, Pythians, every one of which is dedicated to the cause of brotherhood. Every member must also admit that he believes in the existence of the Supreme Being, otherwise he could not take the oath of initiation. Yet, it is also well known that in all of these fraternal orders there is an appalling lack of brotherhood. Some of these fraternal orders have lodges which will not admit Jews or Negroes. Often, Jews and Negroes must organize lodges of their own. That every member believes in God means nothing more than that all give lip service to the Creator. However, to what extent has their belief altered their lives and prompted them to recognize their own hypocrisy within the halls of their own lodges?

Or, take, for example, the entire problem of desegregation in the South. How can a person who really respects religion feel when he reads the statistics that there are more so-called religious people opposing desegregation than irreligious people? How can one feel when one discovers that psychologists who studied the situation report that among church-goers there is a higher percentage of people who believe in the inequality of man than among those who are unchurched? Can one really regard this kind of church-going as church-going that is religious in character? Or is this the kind of church-going which involves only recognition of the fact that there is a God, plus a weekly perfunctory visit to a place to symbolize that one acknowledges His existence, without permitting that belief to challenge any of the prejudices or habits or attitudes which we have learned to cherish?

Or, take still another situation. We in this great metropolitan area were given the spectacle these past few months of hundreds of thousands of people going to Madison Square Garden for a religious revival. They sought the inspiration of a great preacher who would bring them God's salvation, and many were converted. Many were moved to admit that they know there is a God who forgives their sins. That was all. Yet, you know the tragic instance of one man who after having been saved committed murder within twenty four hours after conversion. Perhaps his being saved was a prelude to the crime, or perhaps it gave him the strength that he needed to consummate the crime that he had planned. This may be an abnormal instance, but at least it makes us realize the extent to which religion can be meaningless when it is equated with nothing more than the belief in God, the profession that He exists.

However, for us Jews the mere recognition of God's existence is not of great consequence. What is important is the performance of His Will. This insight has been captured in a few sentences written recently by one of the greatest psychologists of our day, Erich Fromm. Erich Fromm would have us understand that the conception of contemporary man with regard to religion is like that of a three year old child to his father. The child of three cries for the father when he needs him, but otherwise the child is quite self-sufficient when he can continue to play. Contemporary man's attitude to religion is exactly that. We cry for God when we need him, but otherwise we are quite self-sufficient, and as we do what we want to do, we ignore Him and His teachings. If we would rather be like men of truly religious cultures, we would try to be like children, who are at least of the age of eight and need their father as a helper but who also feel that the time has come for them to adopt the father's teachings and principles in their lives. That is religion on a mature level - the extent to which man, *because* he believes in God wants to change his life that it may be consonant with God's Will.

That is what the Chasam Sofer sought to teach us. Tshuvah - penitence - does not mean being a child of three, but at least growing up to being a child of eight. To practice penitence is at least to move up from one who simply recognizes God as a helper and otherwise is quite ready to ignore Him, to one who wants to change one's life because one believes in God.

That, friends, is the challenge that I must articulate on this Sabbath of penitence. How long will all of us continue to be children of three instead of growing up to be children of eight? How long will we think that we are religious simply because we admit that there is a God? When will we recognize that we haven't begun to be religious until we make some change in our lives, until we abandon some habit, until we alter some attitude, until we do something that we haven't done before, or stop doing something which we had been doing theretofore? Not until then have we really proved that for us the belief in God is something more than mere recognition that He is, but actually a commitment that will change our lives in one way or another.

There is a very charming story about a man who drove up to the synagogue one morning, and as he drove up, he noticed that the people were beginning to leave. He was somewhat disturbed, for he realized that he had come too late. He addressed the first person that he met and asked the simple question "Is the service all done?" However, he was amazed at the reply that he received. The answer was not in the affirmative. The answer was, "No, no, not at all. The service is all *read*; we first start the *doing* now."

That friends, is an important point to remember. To come to the Synagogue and experience the sense of belonging to God is one thing, but that is not yet *doing* the service. That is not yet being religious. The real service - real religion - begins when we have left the synagogue, when we meet with our fellow-man, when we meet with the members of our families, when we establish our homes and conduct our business or our profession. It is there that we do the service that God wills us to do and that is the challenge that I leave with you on the Sabbath of Penitence.

To what extent will we only read services, and not practice them? To what extent will we continue to be children of three, rather than children of eight or ten in our outlook on religion?

Most of us are parents, and we feel peeved when our own children regard us as individuals from whom they need only take. We resent mature children who do not understand that parents would also like to have their wishes respected in the different areas in which parents and children have interests in common. How long will we continue to treat the Father of all mankind in that same shabby fashion? How long will we continue to call upon Him when

we need something, and when the need is satisfied feel that there need be no further contact? We owe it to ourselves to consider what our relationship to God shall be. If it is no more than a relationship between a three year old child who wants things, then contemporary man will have to concede that his religious experience and motivation are infantile. If, however, God will help us to act at least as eight or ten year old children, who are aware of the fact that there should be a reciprocal relationship between parents and children and that it is important for children to reckon with the will of their parents, then contemporary man will begin to think of reckoning with the Will of God and do the things every day of his life which have no purpose other than to indicate that he is submitting himself to the Will of God.

With such thoughts, we could not help but become more observant. We could not help but add things into our home which are done only because we feel that we want God's Will to prevail and to enrich our lives, and as we do these things we will fathom God's Will more and more, and our lives will be enriched in more directions than we could possibly visualize. This should be our prayer and our goal on the Sabbath of Penitence.