
Fundamentals of Judaism

Selections from the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch
and outstanding Torah-true thinkers

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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HUMANISM AND JUDAISM

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Towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th Century, rationalism was rampant and absolute indifference to everything religious had become the essential characteristic of the majority of persons of culture. The contrasts in religion and faith were sharply accentuated towards the close of the 19th century. Just as, internationally, the leaders cast hostile glances across the frontiers, constantly preaching peace, yet ready at any moment to strike and ever on the alert to ward off or anticipate defensive attacks by offensive resistance, so the expressions of religious and sectarian differences seemed to assert themselves with unexampled ferocity.

Two currents emerged between which, owing to the extremity of their divergence, no reconciliation appeared possible. Inflexible fanaticism was opposed by the equally rigid materialism of worldly conceptions. The fanaticism of affirmation was opposed by the much more baneful fanaticism of negation. The latter abhorred the conception of God in every form—even in the most amorphous form of immanence—and branded all belief in a detached, extra-mundane God with the stigma of complete denial of science. The Torquemadas of faith were equally matched by the Arbuez of unbelief. Faith and knowledge, in ever-changing combinations and commutations, were mingled into a very exilic of spiritual life.

PURE HUMANISM

In the midst of these swaying currents there sprang into life, and still exists, a quiet community of men which counts its members among all cultured nations. They are linked in a close

spiritual comradeship which lifts them above all political and religious boundaries, and beyond all secular or temporal limitations. They are bent on the glorious and sacred task of the elevation of man and the advancement of human welfare. These are the people who hold the belief that, without tying themselves to a definite confession of faith, it is quite sufficient to have the consciousness of God in one's heart and to lead an honest, upright life. This, they feel, is sure to create that peace of mind which only the satisfaction of having honestly done one's duty can impart.

This we call the standpoint of *pure Humanism*. Does Judaism recognize this principle? Does it admit its justification and reality? How does it look upon the Gentile, not in any way converted to Judaism, but who believes in God and who faithfully fulfills all the dictates of justice, humanity and morality?

A reference to the Bible will prove that it is precisely Judaism, precisely the Torah, which supplies the very origin and basis of the conception of pure humanism in its fullest realization and its most positive assertion.

MAN

The Torah, that book which the Jews, despite unparalleled martyrdom, have cherished through thousands of years as their highest treasure and the key to their own and all humanity's redemption, does *not* preface its teaching with a declaration such as this: Prior to the Revelation on Sinai or to Abraham, all men were doomed and incapable of attaining salvation. On the contrary, it begins with the elevating doctrine that *all men are created in the image of God* (Gen. 1, 26). For it is not the *Jew* but *man* who is represented as the highest aim of creation. It is not the *Jew* but *man* on whom the "Adam"-character is conferred.

Yet in this doctrine the whole destiny of the human race is stated. For "Adam" does not mean "clod of earth." Ethymologically the word "Adam" is not derived from "Adamah," earth, but "Adamah" is obviously derived from "Adamah," earth, being designated as the "soil of man," the domicile and the bearer of man. Man, by his very origin, does not entirely belong to the earth. According to the researches of profound Biblicists and philologists "Adam" represents man in his highest dignity, as the "trustee of the divine glory on earth," as the "seal of God

on His creation," as "God's representative on earth." All this, implied by the word "Adam," is *not* said of the Jews; it is said of—*man!*

In this same Bible, too, it is said that *man*, not the Jew, has been formed "in the image worthy of God." And again, not of the Jew, but of *man*, it is said (ibid: 15, 7) "God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living personality."

MAN'S HIGHER DESTINY

Thus the biblical anthropology, which only knows one ancestor for all races, bestows a two-fold superiority on all men, through their descent from Adam: the possession of a soul which is not made from the dust of the earth, and of a body whose formation, in spite of its analogy with the animal organism, the Creator meant to be specifically different from that of the animal body, rendering it fit for its higher destiny.

This point is of fundamental importance. The teaching of the Bible thereby confers upon men the power of self-control. If, therefore, every man is called upon to subordinate his sensual instincts and appetites to the dictates of the moral law, no super-human or unnatural exertion is demanded, but only that which is consistent with his real nature. This means *moral* freedom whose prerogative is thus granted to all human beings. Such moral freedom is explicitly proclaimed in the words: "Unto you is its (sin's) desire, and you shall rule over it" (ibid: 4, 7). These words, addressed to Cain, the first offender, admit the power of sin over man, when man yields to it, but describes it as a "longing" to be ruled by him. "God has permitted sin to be enticing, not that it should rule over you, but that you should control it—not crush or deaden, but master it. That is its design and purpose. (S. R. Hirsch's comment.)

This also applies to the Divine blessing (Gen. 1, 28) pronounced—not upon the Jew but upon man—in the words: "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it." They laid the foundations for the whole social development of the human race. Marriage, family, society and property were declared by the Creator to be institutions purposely designed and rendered sacred by Him as indispensable to the attainment of humanity's aims. Thus the Bible emphatically refutes all

mistaken representations of these institutions as the results of arbitrary human arrangements, or as conventions among men and controlled by men.

MORAL FREEDOM

These blessings bestowed upon man, his lofty destiny and the freedom of action conferred upon him by his character as a descendant of "Adam," have *remained* the inalienable heritage of humanity. The Torah knows nothing of any curse laid upon man after his eating of the forbidden fruit, or of his nature having become sinful. Not upon "Adam," but upon "Adamah," the earth, as the soil of man, the curse descended, i.e. a check was imposed (ibid 3, 17.) This was done "for his sakes," for his benefit, so that in the school of self-denial he should grow to the full and free attainment of human destiny.

The Bible shows us man created outside Paradise, and then placed within Paradise, in order to make him appreciate the need for an education of tests and trials, so that he could regain Paradise. The eye enlightened by the Bible will therefore not look upon labor, hardship, renunciation and struggle as curses, but as the ways and means to earn this blessing. The Paradise on earth, destined for all mankind, is described by the Prophet as "The new Heavens and the new Earth, which I will create." The whole history of nations, under the rule of God, is the road to this goal (Isaiah, LXVI, 22.)

Yet man's nature and moral freedom, his capacity to do justice to his mission at all times, have by no means changed by the alteration in his environment. Take the words of the prayer which the Jewish child lisps every morning, and which the man grey with years still murmurs at the close of life, preparing to render account of himself to his God and Father—the words of the Jewish faith:

"My God, the soul which you have given me, is *pure*. You have created it. You have formed it. You have breathed it within me and you preserve it within me. You will take it away from me some day, and will restore it to me in time to come.

While my soul is within me I will devote all my power to you, Ruler of *all* time, Master of *all* souls. Blessed be you, oh God, who will restore their souls to the bodies of the dead."

These words, according to the Jewish teachings, *all men* may

pronounce: "The glorification and elevation of earthly life to divine standards by means of the moral force that was given to every man as an inalienable heritage: that is the essence of the divine book and the divine rule" (S. R. Hirsch's comment, Israel's prayer, Page 85.)

The Biblical teachings of the inherent purity and moral freedom of *all* men are of the greatest significance. The Torah thus refutes all rationalistic arguments concerning the extraordinary character of the divine justice which imposed upon human beings duties which they could not possibly fulfill by reason of their sinful nature, and inflicted upon them punishments for sins which they could not help committing.

By the same doctrines all Jewish proselytism is shown to be inconsistent with Jewish teaching. The Torah never looks upon men outside the Jewish faith as men doomed to damnation whose only hope of salvation would be their conversion to Judaism. All that is necessary for them is to become *pure* men, not Jews. By the faithful observance of general human duties they will, as His children, earn their share of the grace of their and our God. Jewish history knows but one example in which this principle was violated under a dreadful illusion, and not out of religious but out of political considerations. Never has an outrage more severely been avenged. It was the conversion of the Idumeans. The accursed reign of the bloodthirsty Herod was the outcome.

THE EDUCATION OF MANKIND

There are two other weighty passages bearing upon our theme in the biblical records of the pre-Abrahamitic period: the one a prophetic sentence which opens up for us a perspective of the greatest interest, and the other a divine law given to the human race, which is of immeasurable significance.

The prophetic sentence reads: "As to Japhet God opens his feelings" (i.e. gives them free play (Gen. 9, 27.) The most important section of the Japhetite tribe, from the point of view of the progress of human culture, is the one called Javan, the Greek (ibid: 9, 2.) In the light of this Biblical sentence the ennobling Hellenic art and poetry would appear to serve the higher purposes of Providence. This *esthetic* ennoblement certainly forms only the preliminary step to *moral* ennoblement, which

latter is to be achieved for humanity by the realization of this message of Divine truth through the culturally most important section of the Semitic race. (Vide S. R. Hirsch ad. loc. and "Hellenism and Judaism," *Gesammelte Schriften* II.)

The Law referred to, however, is the statement made with regard to the supreme value of human life. This sentence proclaims man to be the most exalted and inviolably sacred treasure of man, and God to be the Protector of man, who would call him to account for the "blood of man" spilled by the hand of his brother, thus appointing man to become the responsible guardian of man.

Surely it is not without deliberate intent that the Bible records all these facts and teachings in which the status of *man* is so conspicuously stressed, before it comes to the narrative of the call addressed to Abraham. Mankind sank lower and lower. Men, individually, became slaves to their sensual appetites, and, collectively, slaves to cunning and hypocritical tyranny. With their distribution over the earth the history of the world and the education of mankind began. Along with the education by *experience*, education by the word of Divine truth had to come: As the bearer of this truth, and for the salvation and deliverance of mankind, a specific nation had to be trained under God's immediate control.

It was obviously necessary, for the proper understanding of its historic mission, that this people should be enlightened from the outset as to the position and tasks of its fellow-men. Only thus could it be protected against the overrating of its own nationality. The experience of all times has amply shown how easily nations succumb to the danger of looking contemptuously upon everything alien. How great this peril was for a nation deemed worthy of God's direct guidance and raised to an national entity, after having seen the world-power of its dreaded opponents bite the dust! Thus we can easily understand why it is that the wisdom of the Bible keeps anxiously reminding this people, at each step of its development, that *all men are God's children*, and that Israel was called upon to lead the way towards the tree of life, or rather to preserve and transmit to men, in the Divine teaching, the fruit of this tree of life.

For this reason, when Abraham was chosen, the mission entrusted to him and his children was at once epitomized in the words: while all others yearn to be blessed, "be you a blessing";

"through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (ibid 13, 2, 3.) The same injunction or teaching was also contained in the words with which Moses was to approach the Egyptian ruler: "The Hebrew pariah, despised by you, and cast into bondage by you, is My son, My first-born son." For the Hebrew term for first-born, "bechor," ethymologically denoted liberator (S. R. Hirsch's comment), one through whom the hitherto restrained springs of motherhood are released. Not for himself, but for what follows, is he called Bechor. When, therefore, God speaks of Israel as "beni bechor," "My son, My first-born," the underlying meaning is that: *through Israel the generating powers of humanity are opened*; through Israel the march is started in which all nations shall go forth as "My sons."

But above all, at Sinai, when Israel was to be prepared for the revelation, the conception of *all* men as subservient to God's purposes was emphasized in particularly clear and precise terms. "Mine is the *whole* earth" (Ex. 19, 5, 6.) You, however, shall belong to Me, more exclusively even than all peoples, because "you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." By this declaration, the laws which follow are characterized as those which establish Israel's consecration to the priesthood of mankind. Yet any misconception with regard to Israel's position is obviated by the emphatic declaration: "*All* the earth is Mine."

Thus it is Universality, with its broad outlook on the whole of humanity, and the ideal of the loftiness of human destiny which forms the basis as well as the starting point of the Torah in its view of the world. These conceptions were the premises of the Prophets' and the Psalmists' teachings. They also characterize the spirit of the Rabbis and the Sages of the Talmud. It is the same spirit which survives to the present day in the Synagogue as well as in the humble dwelling in which the soul of the lonely Jew soars in prayer to his God.

UNIVERSAL LOVE

If the foregoing represents the point of view of Judaism on the human subject, we have still to consider the practical effect which this teaching had in Mosaic Law and in the Prophets, as well as its continuance in the rabbinical compilation of the ritual.

Justice and universal love are the fundamental principles

upon which the Torah bases all its laws regulating the intercourse between man and man. What then is the measure of legal protection for the Non-Jew, what claim upon charity does the Bible grant him, on the basis of the Divine Law?

The instruction of the Torah has a peculiar method of establishing and explaining general principles by means of concrete examples. It purposely chooses cases where one would least look for practical proof of the underlying principle, thus allowing the generalizing conclusion to involve itself automatically. When, for example, the duty of gratitude is taught, the Torah chooses as example an Egyptian, and commands: "Do not hate the Egyptian." For whatever unspeakable harm they may have inflicted on the Jews later on, at first they granted them a hospitable reception. When it intends to teach the duty of kind consideration and refinement of human feeling the example chosen is a "thief" sentenced to enter into temporary service, so as to atone for his theft. His master is not only obliged to take care of the life and children of his servant, but is warned to exercise the greatest mercy and consideration in his treatment of the culprit himself. When establishing the principle of matrimonial law and the respect and maintenance due to a wife, the Torah chooses as an example the little daughter of a beggar that, under humble conditions, entered the house of a patrician, and was taken to wife by the son.

In considering first the extent to which charity for a non-Jewish brother must be shown, we find in the Torah the case of a man who, according to international law, was outlawed, helpless, friendless, destitute, and in despair. He had become the slave of an alien Jew, had broken the law to the detriment of his Jewish master, and had fled from the foreign country into Jewish territory. Many of our modern highly civilized states would not have hesitated to expel such a vagabond and undesirable foreigner. But, in spite of its alleged lack of charity, the Biblical law ordains differently.

It prescribes (Deut. 23, 16 etc.): "You shall not deliver unto his master a slave who has escaped from his master unto you. He shall dwell with you, even among you, in that place which he may choose in one of your gates, wherever he prefers; you shall not hurt his feelings."

The same law requires the Jew to care also for a brother "reduced in fortune," who may still hold his own "by your side,"

and need not yet look up to his fellow Jew as his generous benefactor. For it is noble to raise the fallen, but it is divine to prevent them from falling. It is highly characteristic that just in this law the Torah inserts the idea of care for the maintenance of the non-Jewish sojourner. "And when your brother is becoming reduced in fortune, and he totters by your side, then support him, even though he may be but an alien who has become a sojourner, so that he may live with you" (Lev. 25, 35).

The foregoing examples will no doubt suffice to illustrate the comprehensiveness of universal love according to the interpretation of the Torah. In an incomparably higher degree the recognition and esteem of human character manifest themselves in the loyal, ungrudging regard for justice towards a brother happy and possessed of means. For it is far easier for the average man to follow the impulse of compassion for the sufferings of the unhappy stranger than to overcome the wretched sensations of envy for the happy and prosperous man. This is why the Torah constructs a case that teaches the lesson most eloquently. It introduces to us the instance of a non-Jew, grown rich in the Jewish land.

"And if a stranger, who has become a sojourner with you, becomes possessed of riches, while your brother that dwells near him becomes poor, so that he sells himself to the sojourner or even to the head of a stranger's family" (Lev. 25, 47 etc.).

Evidently this is a case which would make "bad blood" and irritate national sensitiveness. The stranger becomes wealthy, the Jew poor. More than that, the Jew drifts into drudgery under the Non-Jew. His own and his family's religious future might be gravely endangered by his serfdom in heathenish bondage. In such conditions the danger does not appear remote that a powerful national body would intervene and exercise direct or indirect pressure on the isolated stranger to secure the liberation of the destitute Jew from his non-Jewish master. But the law steps in and decrees: Only by doing full justice to the legal rights of the non-Jewish master may the liberation of the Jew be brought about (Lev. 25, 54).

Thus, in dealing with non-Jewish or even with idolatrous heathens, the most painstaking scruple is laid down as a sacred duty. One must expect in man, even if he is a heathen, the inviolability of personal rights.

THE BROTHERHOOD OF MAN

The seed of this law, to respect humanity in the person of every human being, produced a golden harvest in the predictions of the Prophets with regard to history and destiny. They disclose to our sight the higher pragmatism in history, and show us the hand of God at work in the rise and fall of nations. By no means is it only the tears and the blood of the Jew that provoke the fulminating wrath of God to hurl destruction upon the oppressor. The prophetic eye of Isaiah saw not only Jewish corpses around the heroic body of the glorified Nebuchadnezzar (Isaiah 14, 12). It was not only Jewish provinces that the all-conquering Nineveh had sacked and crushed in its progress to perdition (Nahum, 2, 8). Still more characteristic is the Divine Judgment on Moab, visualized by the Prophet Amos, because it had defiled the bones of the king of Edom. Yet Edom was the sworn enemy of Judah. Thus we see that the Bible looks upon the defilement of the bones of an idolatrous enemy as an insult to the dignity of man.

The extreme loftiness of the Jewish conception of the filial relationship between man and God, the possibility for everybody at all times to regain the Divine grace by his own moral effort, are brought home to us by one particular passage in the Prophets. The inhabitants of Nineveh were heathens. God had proclaimed, through Jonah, the fall of the city. The men of Nineveh believed in the message of God, a mighty upheaval overtook them, and they proclaimed a general fast and put on sack-cloth. The movement also reached the throne, and the king arose and commanded a fast and ordered prayers and bade his people "to turn everyone from his evil ways and from the unlawful possessions in his hands." And they achieved it, and God saw that they had abandoned their evil ways, and He suspended their punishment.

The unconditional form of their doom had, from the very outset, appeared to the Prophet unfortunate, and he dared to express this in his prayers to God. That was his reason for shirking his mission, and for his flight to Tarshih. And by what means had the people of Nineveh secured for themselves God's pardon? Had they been converted to Judaism after the prophetic message from Jonah? Not at all. They had only rid themselves of the wrong among them and turned from their evil ways. They had become better men.

How admirably our wise men, the truly sage compilers of the Jewish Liturgy, understood how to preserve amongst their own people, and to foster in thought and in deed, the spirit of profound esteem and recognition of humanity, as the very quint-essence of the brotherhood of man!

Thus, according to the Rabbis' teachings, no prayers, when said at home, in the morning, afternoon or evening, are aptly concluded without expressing the idea of looking forward in prayer to that great dawn when all men shall gather around God, to whose dominion all of them shall willingly submit in united allegiance. In public service special expression is given to this thought, at the end of each sub-division of the service, in the Kaddish-prayer. Public lectures of Torah or Talmud are likewise not concluded without the reminder, by the Kaddish-prayer, of Israel's call to act as priests of mankind, which constitutes the very purpose of the study of the Torah. And at the departure of the Israelite, his friends, as their last mark of affection, at the side of the grave, unite in the same prayer with the same purpose in their minds. Thus the son, during the year of mourning and on the anniversary of a parent's death, in remembrance of the mission received by his people, steps forward and recites in front of the community this same prayer of Kaddish.

HUMANISM IN THE JEWISH YEAR

A specially characteristic feature of the service of the great Jewish National Festivals, that should be mentioned here, is that in an apparently casual manner the importance of fostering the remembrance of all humanity in our prayer on national holidays is spontaneously and clearly expressed.

On all festivals of a joyous character the cheerful frame of mind is manifested in the singing of the Hallel, a song that for this reason may properly be described as a national hymn. But the ritual for the *Passover* Festival prescribes that on the concluding days, and hence also on the intermediate half holidays, the Hallel is chanted with the omission of two Psalms. Why? The seventh day recalls the memory of the crossing of the Red Sea. The miraculous escape was, however, associated with the entire destruction of a whole nation's young manhood. It is true that they were on the point of re-enslaving a people that had just regained its liberty. Nevertheless: "The works of My hand are drowned in the sea, and should you, Israel, rejoice?" Is this

not the purest spirit of humanism, an elevation of the mind, free from any confessional or national restriction? Is it not the sentiment of the true cosmopolitan, the true priest of all mankind, which is expressed in this simple ritual stipulation at the celebration of Israel's national birth?

On the *Shavuoth* Festival, the anniversary of the revelation on Sinai, the ritual brings before the Jewish eye the sublime, magnificent figure of a woman (Ruth), a picture radiating with magnanimous humanity. This stalwart, unselfish woman from Moab, grand in her trust and love of God, became the mother of Obed, the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David.

We have none in whom the spirit of Jewish divine and humane teachings has become so vivid, and produced such blossoms of lyrical composition, as in David. To the present day his laments and his rejoicing alike reverberate in the hearts of men. In Synagogues and in Churches it is his words that elevate man's minds to God.

And every Shavuoth the genealogy of this David—on whom all hopes for redemption are centered—is presented to the Jew, and it is avowed that—non-Jewish, even Moabite, blood flows in the veins of this David! This thought must undoubtedly have preserved in Israel absolute broadmindedness and the complete absence of prejudice.

What is the Jew's foremost thought on *Rosh Hashana*, the Jewish New Year's Festival? His first wish, his first prayer, is not for his own welfare or that of his family and immediate surroundings. It is for the whole human race that his first prayer is uttered, culminating in the fervent hope that they should all be united as men, around the common father, in a league of eternal peace. This is his first prayer: "Oh, fill their hearts with the fear of God, all whom you have created, so that they *all* should look upon You in reverence and prostrate themselves before You, and form a united band to do Your will."

The great gift of *Yom Kippurim* is at the same time its indispensable condition: self-recognition, repentance, firm resolve to reformation, but, first and foremost of all, amends for any offense towards man, leaving nothing undone to obtain the pardon of any fellow-creature whom the penitent may have hurt, humbled or otherwise injured.

The sun has declined and the Minchah-prayer is about to begin. For that moment the wise ordainers of the Liturgy knew

no nobler message than the reading of Jonah. It is the great message of the importance of morality as the basis of individual and universal salvation.

The idea underlying the sacrifices that were offered on *Suk-koth*, that national High Festival of all festivals, was the far-reaching proclamation of Israel's relationship to the whole human race; that is to say, that at all times one and the same Shepherd of Life rules the fate of Israel and the nations of the world.

"In subjecting every action to the Divine Will, the contrasts of diversity in the worship of God will gradually disappear. And in the end Israel and the whole human race, "by the fulfillment of the Law given them for the discharge of their tasks, the Sinaitic for Israel and general human laws for all mankind, *will become one in the worship of God, by their fulfillment of His will on earth*" (S. R. Hirsch).

These are the rays of the morning dawn, the great dawn of humanity, which shine upon us through the gloomy clouds. They show to the present age which, at an ever-increasing pace, runs the risk of losing its God altogether, that a safe foundation may be found for pure and unfettered humanity in the firm soil of revelation.