

## **“THE GOYIM’S DEBT TO JUDAISM”**

**By Tony Perrino**

Because our Jewish friends have been observing their high holy days this week, this morning I want to examine **“The Goyim’s Debt to Judaism.”**

I know that the word **“goyim” is a slightly derogatory designation for non-Jews**, the more proper term being “gentile.” But I chose to use the word in my title to impose a self-inflicted poetic justice upon those of us who share a history which has inflicted terrible injustices upon the Jewish people.

It has been especially unjust, indeed downright absurd, for those who call themselves Christians to express anti-Semitic attitudes. Christianity owes Judaism: it’s entire Bible (written by Jews) most of its theological concepts, and, of course, the person of Jesus, himself.

That latter fact is one which many of his followers only grudgingly admit, as is evidenced in the story of the Sunday school child who came home greatly distressed to ask her mother, **“Is it really true that Jesus was a Jew?”** The mother replied reassuringly, “Yes, dear, but don’t you fear, **God is still a Presbyterian.**”

The reality, that there is more truth than humor in that story, was reflected when the Vatican Council thought it necessary to “exonerate the Jews of deicide.” i.e. to proclaim, after all these years, that they were not responsible for Jesus’ death.

**What generous hypocrisy!** What they should have done was ask for forgiveness for nurturing such a notion for centuries, and thereby contributing to the cruel persecution of the Jewish people. The gas chambers of the Nazis were psychologically built on that tardily corrected judgment.

But my purpose this morning is **not** to discuss anti-Semitism. Nor is it to make a political statement about Israel’s foreign policy, with which I frequently disagree. What I want to do is describe the unique contributions which Jewish religion has made to the belief systems and values of Western Civilization..

As one historian put it, “It took 1600 years to recognize that our literature, science and architecture had their roots in Grecian civilization. It may take another few hundred years to establish that the spiritual, moral, and ideological roots of western civilization are imbedded in Judaism. To put it differently: **the furniture in the western world is Greek, but the house in which (we) dwell is Jewish.**”

**We are indebted to Judaism for three, crucially important ideas which follow each other logically, as well as chronologically.**

**They begin** with the realization that the Jews were the first people to articulate the idea of **ethical monotheism**: the thought that all life was created by, and is subject to one sovereign Being, and, therefore, **all human beings and nations are subject to the same rule of law.**

That this idea is not yet fully understood, is reflected in the **bedtime prayer** of the youngster who said, “God bless mommy and daddy, and by-the way, God, this is goodbye; tomorrow we’re moving to Texas.” Well, there are those who consider Texas a God-forsaken place, but **not** the theology of ancient Judaism.

Indeed, while the Greeks and the Romans were still harboring a pantheon of primitive gods, while the Anglo-Saxons were living in caves and drinking blood out of skulls, and the Egyptians’ monotheism was devoid of moral character, the Jews proclaimed an **ethical** monotheism which governed all nations and peoples.

By the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. the Jews conception was that of a God who wanted from humans --**not** burnt offerings and pious prayer, but in the prophet Amos’ words that **“justice roll down like the waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.”**

**We are indebted to Judaism for the first clear expression of an ethical, as opposed to a magical, approach to religion.**

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**Which leads to the second, crucial concept** contributed by the Jews: **a dynamic view of history**—which saw the unfolding purposes of that moral God—as **something in which human beings can share**, and, in so doing fulfill their lives.

In many religions, “salvation” is an individual matter: the devout seek to dis-associate themselves from the corruptness of this world and thus achieve **“purity of spirit.”** There is no sense of responsibility for making the world a better place.

In sharp contrast to this was Judaism’s insistence that **the very reason for religion** is to show us how we can share in the building of a better world and thereby gain enduring significance for our days.

We can do this as individuals, and we can do it as a group. That is what the Jewish idea of **“the covenant” is all about.** The Hebrews saw themselves as “the chosen people,” chosen **not** for privilege, but **called to responsibility.**

This belief is communicated with humor in a cartoon which depicted a Jew, standing in a desert, speaking presumably to God and saying, “Let me see if I have this right: we get this barren strip of empty wasteland, and **they get all that oil?!**” The Jews clearly were “chosen” for responsibility, not privilege.

And so, at the **Hannuka Service**, commemorating the **Hebrew struggle** for freedom, Jewish Congregations read from the their prayer book: “I am a Jew because in all places where there is... suffering.. the Jew weeps; I am a Jew because in every age, when the cry of despair is heard, the Jew hopes; I am a Jew because, **for Israel, the world is not finished:** human beings will complete it; **human nature is not yet fully created, we are creating it!**”

The fact that **this “calling” has been the guiding metaphor** of the Jewish people is reflected in these statistics compiled by a sociologist: “There are approximately four billion people on this earth, of whom **less than half of one percent** are classified as Jews. Statistically they should hardly be heard of, bystanders of history. But the Jews’ influence is totally out of proportion to their numbers . No less than **12 percent of the Nobel prizes in physics, chemistry, and medicine have gone to Jews. And the world’s list of great names in religion, science and philosophy is staggering. (e.g. Einstein, Freud, Spinoza, to name only three.)**

I suggest that this belief, that we are responsible for sharing in the creation of a better world, is **THE foundation** of human **efforts at social reform** in western civilization. We are greatly indebted to Judaism for that “calling.”

**The third, crucially important idea which can be explicitly drawn from Hebrew theology—is the concept of human freedom.**

Because the Jews emphasized the necessity of our serving the purposes of God, they believed everyone must be free from the dictates of lesser authorities that they might be responsible **only** to that divine Reality.

This conviction was evidenced in the behavior of **the Hebrew prophets**. While in other nations, as recently as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the King was regarded as divine, and his word was “law,” in Israel a prophet could stand before the most powerful of ruler and condemn his wrongs. The King might hate the man and wish him out of the way but, because Jewish theology supported the idea that there was a **higher law**, before which even Kings must bow, the prophet’s freedom was protected.

And so, when Nathan stood before David, pointed his finger at the ruler, and said, “**Thou art the man..**” who has done wrong, the King trembled and repented.

And in recent years, when **Martin Luther King** exposed the injustices of racism in the America, he stood in that tradition of the Hebrew prophets, especially when he faced the armed Alabama sheriff and said, “**Shoot me, or stand aside.**” The fact is that our nation’s protection of free speech, which allowed him to condemn those wrongs, rests upon the Jewish idea that individual freedom is **a sacred right**.

It is no accident that organizations like **The American Civil Liberties Union** are predominantly made up of Jews. They know from painful experience how important it is to protect freedom of expression and have always been on the forefront of that struggle. As their **Passover Ritual** puts it:

**“We gather year after year to retell this ancient story. For, in reality it is not ancient but eternal in its message and its spirit. ...we see ourselves as participants in the Exodus, for we must dedicate our energies to the cause there begun. In our day we shall defend the heritage of liberty.”**

And they have! The Jews were among the first to fight for racial justice, some of them like Schwermer and Goodman literally giving their lives to that cause.

So much for the ideas for which we are indebted to Judaism. I submit that they are fundamental to the character of Western Civilization.

**There is one more observation I would like to make.** Some of us have difficulty affirming the traditional conception of a supernatural God depicted in ancient Judaism. Does that mean that the foundation of our belief in its concomitant values (like freedom) is thereby undermined?

Again we are indebted to the Jews for helping us out of this predicament. One of the characteristics of Jewish theology is a recognition that it is **idolatrous** to make any particular conception of deity an object of worship. Being a construct of human thought, any definition of God is limited and must be subject to continual re-definition. One of their finest philosophers, **Maimonides**, wrote in the 12<sup>th</sup> century!, “the divine is not out there somewhere.. but an inner force, inside each of us... (that) **we create the outer image to help us understand what is inside us.**”

A light-hearted example of their re-thinking theology is contained in the work of my favorite contemporary Jewish theologian named **Stewart Allen Koningsberg**.

Better known to you as **Woody Allen**, the comedian once turned his creative talents to religion-- in a book which re-interprets some Biblical stories.

Here is his rendering of the ancient **story of Abraham and Isaac**, which has traditionally been sermonized upon as a paradigm of piety: (he wrote:)

“Abraham awoke in the middle of the night and said to his only son, “I have had a dream where the voice of the Lord sayeth that I must sacrifice my only son, **so put your pants on!**” And Isaac trembled and said, “So what did you say?” “What am I going to say,” Abraham said. “I’m standing there at two a.m. in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue?”

“Well, did he say **why** he wants me sacrificed?” Isaac asked his father. But Abraham said, “The faithful do not question.” And **Sarah**, who heard Abraham’s plan, said, “How doth thou know it was the Lord and not thy friend who loveth practical jokes?” Abraham answered, “**I know it was the Lord. It was a deep, resonant voice, well modulated...**”

And so he took Isaac and prepared to sacrifice him, **but** at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham’s hand and said, “**how could thou do such a thing?**” And Abraham replied, “**But Thou said.**” “Never mind what I said,” the Lord spake, “Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way? I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou dost immediately run out to do it.”

And Abraham fell to his knees saying, “But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate my only son on thy whim?” And the Lord said, “**What it proves is that some men will follow any order, no matter how asinine, as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice.**”

In a more serious vein, **Martin Buber**, truly regarded as one of Judaism’s great theologians, also reframed the idea of God, contending that the divine is most profoundly experienced in “the I-Thou encounter of human beings.” **He wrote, “Divine Reality exists between persons. The true meaning of loving thy neighbor is not that it is a commandment from God but that through it and in it we meet God.”**

**That, my friends, is both a modern context for our liberal faith and another reflection of “The Goyim’s Debt to Judaism.”**