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RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE HOME<sup>1</sup>.

It is a favourite commonplace with preachers—I have done my part in spreading it—that the centre of gravity of Jewish religious life has been shifted in these latter days from the home to the synagogue. The statement requires some modification.

In the first place, whatever shifting of the centre of gravity has occurred has been partial, not general. There are unquestionably many Jewish homes in which religion is on the wane. But there are also many, I am glad to think, in which it is as vigorous as ever. If there are families who are thrown back upon infrequent visits to the synagogue for the sustenance of a feeble spiritual life, there are others for whom attendance at the house of God is but the outcome and the complement of private devotions. At both extremes of our social organization, and at countless points between them, are to be found examples of a domestic religious life sufficiently strong to stand alone, if the need were to arise, without the buttress of public worship. In this respect the poor are no better off than the rich, nor the rich better off than the poor. It is easy to indulge in cheap generalizations, and affirm that the West Ender who bemoans the spiritual destitution of the Ghetto, exposes himself to the retort anent the mote and the beam. A little thought will show the fallacy of such contrasts. There is doubtless more ceremonial observance in the Ghetto. But if it would be wrong to infer from the fact that there is less religion among the poor, it would be equally wrong to infer that

<sup>1</sup> A Paper read before the West London Synagogue Association on June 30, 1901.

there is more. The truth is that the extent to which ceremonial is put to religious uses is largely a matter of individual temperament. While some people cannot get on religiously without a great deal of it, others can comfortably dispense with all but a minimum. And if Whitechapel is not to be blamed, but praised, because it gives effect to its abundant need for ceremonial, Hyde Park must not be censured because, feeling that need less, it shows greater reserve in the expression of its religious sentiments.

Secondly, it may fairly be questioned whether such a shifting of the centre of gravity as that to which I have referred is possible—possible, that is to say, without involving the danger of instability. The preachers who repeat the commonplace with which I started, do so with no satisfaction. If Judaism has come to this pass, that it has to depend for its existence upon its public worship, then I fear it is in a bad way. The meagre proportions of the average congregation are a solemn warning against the comfortable illusion that the synagogue may be trusted to replace the home as the citadel of religion. It is not accomplishing this task now, and it never will accomplish it. It is obviously idle to suppose that one Kippûr in the year, even with a Passover thrown in, can furnish the materials of a healthy religious life. It may save a man for Judaism; it may rekindle in some measure his Jewish consciousness; it may keep him within the pale. At most it may prove him to have the promise and the potency of religion. But that is all. Much more is needed to make him a religious Jew, one consciously living his life under the influence of Jewish ideals.

The synagogue then, by itself, can do little for religion; though, joined to a mightier, because a more continuous, a more pervasive force, it may do very much for it indeed. The true stronghold of Judaism, even in these days, is the home. In the ages of persecution Judaism lived a vigorous life because it had this fortress in which to entrench

itself. The Jew in his wanderings often had no synagogue. But wherever he halted, he had some semblance of a home, which his religion at once ennobled into a sanctuary. The "domestic shrine" was for him no empty phrase. The home was almost as truly God's house as the synagogue itself. The symbol that was displayed at the doorpost proclaimed the fact to him in mighty tones. Deprived of his synagogue he was able, nay, he was bound to carry on its worship in miniature in the "little sanctuary" which he set up with his family tent. Sabbaths and festivals could live independently of the house of prayer, for their advent was honoured by special domestic rites. Nay, in every detail the home was a temple, and the commonest incidents of family life were transfigured into worship. The table was an altar, the food a sacrifice, the parents were priests, the children a congregation. It is impossible to exaggerate the part which the home has played in the preservation of Judaism.

It must continue to play that part. Our interpretation of Judaism may change, and with it our ideas of what constitutes home-religion. But the primary need remains. Judaism, if it is to live, must be rooted in the hearts of the children, and therefore it must be rooted in the home, whence the affections of the children draw their life-blood. There is reason to believe that we are once more beginning to realize this truth. The decline of home-religion during the past quarter-of-a-century is a fact patent to every one who has eyes to see and ears to hear. The movement is not Jewish, but general. It is part of a larger movement, moreover, which has injuriously affected religion itself. But the sensitive gaze will detect symptoms of a happy reaction. The tide of unbelief, which seemed to have submerged the thinking public three decades ago, has begun to flow back; and the Jewish mind, ever sympathetic to external influences both for good and for evil, has been caught in the ebb. The clear insight that has enabled thoughtful persons of every creed to see that the teachings

of a Darwin and a Spencer, a Tyndall and a Huxley, are not necessarily destructive of religion, has found its counterpart, doubtless its consequence, in a renewed disposition on the part of Jews to give the things of the spirit their rightful place among the realities of life. The indications of the change may be faint, but they are unmistakable. Congregations are certainly not larger, but they are inclined to be more devout. A new standard of teaching seems to be demanded from the pulpit. Those sermons appear to be most satisfying that help to reconcile the soul, oppressed by the cares of life, with the great verities of religion, with the conception of a just and loving God. The preacher is thanked more than ever for what are called "helpful" discourses, for words of comfort and encouragement that send some bruised heart to fight its battle anew with the fortitude that faith in the Unseen alone can give. This is a sign, not of blind belief, but of that "will to believe" which is incomparably more valuable. People at any rate listen while the preacher justifies the ways of God to men; not so long ago they would have been indifferent or impatient. A reawakening of interest in the Bible and Jewish history is also among the signs of a better day. Twenty years ago a Jewish Study Society in England would have been an impossibility. Finally, there is the improvement that has taken place in recent years both in the quantity and quality of Anglo-Jewish devotional and religious literature. All these are facts which, without exaggerating their significance, we may fairly regard as containing the promise, at least, of a religious revival. Judaism, then, we may justly hope, has not fallen so low as to have to depend upon the synagogue alone for the sustenance of its religious life. Its beliefs and ideals are once more taking root in the heart. But if the new movement to which I pin my faith is a reality, it will grow in healthy fashion. It will be no superficial manifestation. It will strike its roots downward. It will take its rise in the home, the spring

of all wholesome activities, the nursery of every exalted sentiment.

Thus I approach the practical side of my subject. I ask you to bear with me while I attempt to show how the new aspirations, in the existence of which I am sanguine enough to believe, may be realized, how the religious life of the home may be cultivated and deepened.

A religious life, as we usually understand the expression, is impossible without prayer. And so, without prayer, there can be no domestic religious life. The morning devotions are the foundation of the day's moral and spiritual activities, just as breakfast is the foundation of the day's physical and mental labours. It is the inspiring "send-off" given us by God himself as we set out on another stage of our life's journey. Upon that point we are all agreed. If there is to be religion in the house, it must have, as its starting-point, solitary prayer, the daily submission of one's need and oneself to infinite wisdom, the communion of "the alone with the Alone." But shall there not be collective worship as well? May not prayer in one's chamber be advantageously supplemented by family devotions? I would say Yes, for the sake of the children more especially. In former times, we are told<sup>1</sup>, the Bible and the Prayer-book were regularly studied by Jews in family conclave. Nay, the pious Israelite of old, wrapping himself daily in his *talith*, would recite the whole of the morning service; but he loved to have his boy by his side, though the child was old enough to repeat only a few sentences. For us the Prayer-book is no longer sacro-sanct, and we have assumed the right to choose our devotional materials for ourselves. But the old idea that brought parent and child together in prayer may well survive. There is something beautiful in this spiritual bond. The family stand together in the presence of God. That sacred communion unites them, and becomes the type and suggestion of a spiritual kinship transfiguring, rather

<sup>1</sup> Abrahams' *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 131.

than transcending, the ties with which nature has bound them together. Through periodical family worship the home becomes hallowed ground in the sight of its indwellers, in the sight of the children more particularly. For them too prayer itself is clothed with a deeper sanctity, a heightened loveliness, by being associated with the parents. And their reverence for it lives when childhood and youth have long passed away. The prayerful habit is often fed by filial sentiment. The man goes on praying because years ago he used to pray at his mother's knee. He loves the act because she taught it him. The memories of childhood give it an added consecration which forbids him to let it die. Family prayer, moreover, is an excellent preparation for the public worship of the synagogue. Even in these days when children's services are beginning to be the fashion, it is well to have family worship both as an introduction and as a supplement to them.

It need hardly be said that all such worship should be simple and brief. A very few minutes will suffice for it on working days. As to the form of the service, the details may be left to the individual choice. But I would suggest that to a brief prayer or two, a psalm or some other scriptural passage should be added. The Psalm consecrated by traditional use is the twenty-third, "The Lord is my Shepherd." It has long been regarded as the children's Psalm. The first paragraph of the *Shema*, which, by virtue of its associations and its contents, is well worthy of the distinction, should be a fixed ingredient. It would be well to say it, if possible, in Hebrew as well as in English, so as to accustom the little congregants to the sacred tongue. But the rest of the service will doubtless be in English. Even the Rabbins allow us to offer private prayer in any language we please.

I have spoken thus far of morning prayer. But that ought not to complete the devotional exercises of the day. Nor does it. The parent usually sees that the child does not lie down to rest at night without holding speech with

God. But there is an obvious danger in thus hallowing only the extremes of the day. Religion is apt to become a matter of times and seasons instead of an affair of life itself, a spasmodic influence instead of a continuous inspiration. The Rabbins sought to guard against this danger by associating a prayer with every act of the daily life, however familiar, on smelling the scent of a flower, for example, or partaking indeed of any enjoyment. The specific act was thus sanctified, and with it the whole domain of the daily life. Some of the Rabbinic ordinances, that of the Grace before and after meals, for instance, might well retain our allegiance. It may be objected that Grace tends to become a stereotyped formality. It is often said hurriedly, with an eye to the good things that are coming or to the welcome freedom from the restraint imposed upon well-bred children at table. But the objection can be urged with equal force against all devotional exercises that are not absolutely spontaneous. It is for the parent to warn the children against a merely mechanical performance of any religious rite by explaining from time to time the solemn significance of communion, either in word or in act, with the Supreme. My religion classes begin and end their work with prayer. Many of the children take part in it with closed eyes and bowed heads. They do this of their own accord. I have never told them to do it. I prefer to leave the matter to their own initiative rather than run the risk of making them formalists. But whenever I notice that a child's eyes are wandering or that his attitude or manner is unbecoming, I privately remind him of the lessons on the sacred import of prayer which he has so often been taught in class.

I am an advocate, then, of a short form of Grace for children. Properly explained, it helps them to realize the great duty of hallowing secular things which Judaism has done so much to inculcate. Even so commonplace an act as eating or drinking may be done for the glory of God, made one of the avenues to the higher life. Moreover, as

the Talmud finely says, to taste of earthly joys without thanksgiving, is to commit sacrilege. The recital of a Grace over food obviously fosters a sense of dependence upon the divine hand for the most elementary blessings, and with it the gratitude which is its corollary. These are invaluable factors of the religious consciousness; and a rite that helps to furnish them so readily is assuredly worth preserving.

Prayer, however, is not the only aid to the religious life. We Jews, with our religious history before us, certainly cannot afford to forget the truth. Judaism has largely to thank its ceremonial system for its survival. Nay, to speak more generally, ceremonial is the elementary requirement of the average religionist, whatever his creed. His very need of uttering himself in prayer proves it. For what are prayerful exercises but ceremonial? As soon as the religious sentiment becomes articulate, as soon as such feelings as gratitude or adoration or submission find expression in words, we have already entered the domain of ritual and confessed its necessity. But if this need be common to all, how greatly is it increased in the case of children, who can best seize the abstract through the concrete, and to whom religious truth comes home most surely when it appeals to their imagination and their wonder. The old Rabbins, who ordained that the observance of the Seder night should be made as strange and unusual as possible, so that the children might be provoked to ask questions and thus pave the way for the instruction which they had themselves courted, were clearly sound psychologists. And when we remember that Judaism is an historic system, with the moving life-story of Israel for one of its chief inspiring forces, the need of a ceremonial that shall make the past live vividly in the child's imagination retains, even in these days, all its old imperiousness<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Israel Abrahams quotes from Benjamin II the following striking custom, which formed part of the Seder ceremonial:—"A boy, dressed as a pilgrim, with a staff in his hand and a wallet containing bread on his

No ; with all our praiseworthy desire to spiritualize our religion, we cannot dispense altogether with ceremonial observances. They are like the pictures in a book, which illustrate its meaning, and fix its story in the mind ; and the children love them just as they love the pictures.

I hold no brief, of course, for Jewish observances as a whole. It is obviously impossible to use the entire ceremonial apparatus provided in the code-books. Not a little of it is obsolete for one reason or another. But then not a little of it is still living, and deserves to live. A notable example is the observance of Friday night. The gradual decay of this beautiful element of home-religion is being attended with serious spiritual loss. The hallowing of the Sabbath eve has perhaps done more than any other ceremonial act to preserve the religious consciousness in the Jewish mind. Nor is it difficult to account for its power. With the Sabbath there enter into the home that welcomes it those angelic visitants, peace and love. It is the time for family reunion, all the more precious in these days when parents and children see less of each other than of old, and when it is possible almost without absurdity to tell of a child asking with reference to his father, who the gentleman is that carves the joint on Sundays ? And family reunion means the strengthening of the ties that bind youth to virtue. Friday night too is the season of family worship, with all its benign influence upon the religious sentiment. Into its observance ancient practice has woven many a picturesque rite—the solemn kindling of the Sabbath lamp, the benediction of the children by the father, the recital of the Sanctification, the breaking of the bread—symbols charged with impressive meaning for all, but especially full of charm for the young. These acts are

shoulders, enters, and the master of the house inquires : ‘Whence comest thou, O pilgrim ?’ ‘From Egypt.’ ‘Art thou delivered from bondage ?’ ‘Yes ; I am free.’ ‘Whither goest thou ?’ ‘To Jerusalem.’ ‘Nay, tarry with us to read the recital of the Passover.’”—*Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 127.

still precious to many, and those who thus cherish them are assuredly not without their reward.

But whatever its precise details, let the custom of honouring the Sabbath eve continue. For its effects upon the young are immeasurable; nay, they are lasting. The memory of the Friday night of his childhood is the last to fade from the mind of the grown man; it is the last that is dislodged from his heart. Love binds him to the old observance and to the old religion—love all the mightier because, as in the case of prayer, filial sentiment enters largely into it. He clings to these rites with all the more affection because with them is inseparably blended the memory of the parents who presided over them in the dear old days.

But apart from all this, is there not something gracious in the act of consecrating a season out of the week of work and play to the service of the Highest? Granted that some people cannot sanctify the Sabbath day, it does not follow that they cannot hallow the Sabbath eve. And this remnant, at least, of the ancient obedience ought to be saved if the Jew is not to lose something more precious still, and to admit the sordidness of which it is the fashion to accuse him. Heine's *Princess Sabbath* is familiar enough. A maleficent sorcery has changed Israel, the King's son, into a dog.

But every Friday evening,  
 In the gloaming, suddenly  
 The enchantment passes, and the dog  
 Becomes again a human creature,  
 A man, with manly feeling,  
 With head and heart erect once more.

And if the down-trodden Jew of Ghetto-times was redeemed and transformed for the nonce by the coming of his Princess, her advent shall surely do no less for his more fortunate descendants in these days. It will preserve one oasis for them among the all too arid desert. It will keep a corner of their lives sweet and calm and joyous in an age that is

not too cleanly, and which is rather gay than glad. It will give their higher selves a chance; it will give God a chance.

To some of my hearers my language may seem exaggerated. But if so, I can only say *experto crede*. "How you enjoy your Sabbath meal!" cries a Roman emperor to a Talmudic sage. "Yes," is the answer; "we use a wonderful spice." "Give me some of it," says Caesar. "Impossible," is the reply; "for the spice is the Sabbath itself, and only those who sanctify it can appreciate its nameless delights." Yes, it is only those who hallow the Sabbath eve that can understand all the elevating happiness it yields. The old Sabbath poem calls it "a fountain of blessing," and that is exactly what it is. And of that blessing the children necessarily have a goodly share. For they breathe the religious atmosphere that the Sabbath brings into their home, and it feeds and nourishes them.

In the same category with the Sabbath eve we may place the Seder night, with all its wealth of old-world rites, all its store of old-world memories, an institution which, more directly than any other, brings us into sympathetic communion with the Israel of the past, and makes us the sharers of his griefs and his joys, his history and his hopes. But every festival, I submit, deserves a more honoured place in the home than is often assigned to it. Too many of us are content with celebrating our sacred days in the synagogue alone, and at a season of light the domestic sanctuary is left cold and dark. Surely if there is one place where "the Feasts of the Lord" should be welcomed, it is under the family roof-tree, where the children gather, children whom the holy guest may nobly inspire with his story.

And if we ought to reverence the consecrated seasons, why not the sacred symbols too? Take, for example, the Mezuzah. Might it not, at any rate, hang at the door of the nursery or the schoolroom, thence to carry its silent message to the receptive hearts within? No emblem makes

more surely for spiritual religion. Reserved as it is exclusively for the home, its characteristic lesson is the duty of sanctifying the home-life by personal goodness. And the gracious lesson is reinforced by the words it contains and by the Divine Name written across it. "The home," it cries, "may be made the abode of God if its indwellers will but enshrine him there by their own beautiful lives." Explain the emblem thus to the child, and you teach him a priceless lesson. It can be taught, no doubt, without recourse to the Mezuzah or any other symbol. But I question whether it can be taught as effectively.

And this suggests a word in favour of the old Jewish custom of consecrating a new house with prayer. It is a graceful and suggestive practice, which, it is good to think, is becoming more widely honoured among us in these days. But those who are faithful to it should not overlook its effects upon the young. At all such ceremonies—for the consecration of the house is only one of its kind—the children should be present. Even if they do not fully realize the significance of the rite, they will have the memory of it to weave into their religious consciousness, and perhaps to become a spiritual influence in the after-years. Who shall say how and when the good seed may germinate in a child's mind?

That ceremonialism is a valuable adjunct to religious training we seem now to be recognizing more clearly. We are beginning to see that a halt must be called to that process of wholesale demolition which has swept away indiscriminately the good with the bad in Jewish practice. A striking instance of this awakening is furnished by our brethren across the seas. A few years ago American Judaism was almost a synonym for destructiveness. But it is manifesting a new spirit. Retaining all its theological liberalism, it is showing signs of a more conservative temper with regard to ceremonial. An attempt is being made in many congregations of the United States to revive long-disused observances, to bring out the old symbols once

more, and by exhibiting their poetic meaning, to win fresh acceptance for them. At present I can discern no symptoms of a kindred movement in this country, but it is time that it came if our religion is not to fade away into a vague and colourless theism.

This again may be a hard saying, coming from me. It may be interpreted as a confession of the inadequacy of Reform, and as an indication of a desire to retrace our steps towards conservatism. But only those who are ignorant of the facts will so understand it. The movement of sixty years ago aimed not at the destruction of ceremonialism, but at its purification. The proof is in our Prayer-book, which retains the *Kiddush* for Sabbaths and Holydays and the Seder Service for Passover. And I rejoice to think that there are still many members of our congregation whose home-life is brightened and uplifted by the hallowing of Sabbaths and Festivals, clinging jealously as they do, especially for their children's sakes, to an observance which has been fruitful in blessing for themselves ever since the days of their own childhood. But even if I were conscious of advocating quite a new departure in the direction of conservatism, I should not be uncomfortable. The true reform is that which seeks for the constituents of its religion within the entire Jewish domain. And he who wanders in a garden ought not to be deterred from gathering a tempting flower because he will have to retrace his steps in order to reach it, and so confess that he has been heedless of some of the beauty around him. The task of the religious reformer is to rebuild. But in a system like Judaism he builds best who does not disdain the old materials.

But this by the way. Earnest-minded parents are sometimes at a loss to know how their boys and girls should spend Saturdays when in the country. Public worship is not available, and while the young people ought to have their due recreation, the day, we feel, ought not to pass without some formal recognition of its sacred character.

That there should be some sort of service, however simple, we shall, I trust, all agree by this time. Even in households where daily family prayers are not the rule such a service should be held, first in order to mark the sanctity of the day, and, secondly in order to prevent a violent breach between the religion of the town and that of the country. The home, for the time being, must take the place of the synagogue. Children must not be allowed to think that religion is a matter of geography, and that Sabbath devotions, while quite *de rigueur* in London, may safely be dispensed with—let us say—at Folkestone.

Short devotional meetings, then, ought to be held, at which prayer is supplemented by suitable readings from the Bible and other religious books. Valuable helps for such exercises are fortunately ready to hand in Mr. Alfred Cohen's little Prayer-book, Miss Lily Montagu's newly compiled service for children, Mr. Montefiore's *Bible for Home Reading*, and, for the younger children, the small volume on the Pentateuch written by my wife and her sister<sup>1</sup>. There are also various collections of sermons by Jewish preachers which will furnish suitable passages for reading. These devotional exercises will doubtless take place, as a rule, in the house. But they may occasionally be advantageously carried on in the open air. A lady told me a few days ago that she was accustomed, when spending the summer holidays in the country, to take her children, with their prayer-books and bibles, into the fields or on to the hills. It is a good plan. It ensures variety, and Nature's glorious temple lends its impressiveness to the worship. Wherever they are held, the parent will strive to make these prayerful exercises as unconstrained and as lovable as possible, not only by wise choice of material,

<sup>1</sup> Among other suitable books may be mentioned *Little Miriam's Bible Stories* and *Boys of the Bible*, both by Lady Magnus; Mrs. N. L. Cohen's *Infants' Bible Reader*; Mrs. Philip Cohen's *Bible Readings with my Children*; the late Miss Emily Harris's *Narrative of the Holy Bible*; Mrs. Henry Lucas's *Jewish Year*, and Miss Nina Davis's *Songs of Exile*.

but also by infusing into them as much fervour, as much of his own personality, if I may say so, as possible. The children ought to be able to look back upon these simple acts of worship as some of the most cherished incidents in their experience.

Saturday in the country—I might almost say every day in the country—is an excellent opportunity for those little informal talks on sacred and semi-sacred topics that help so largely to fashion the fabric of religion in the child's heart. That opportunity especially presents itself in the walks that parents and children take together. Direct instruction the wise parent will know how to avoid. The child must gather in the firstfruits of the higher knowledge in almost complete unconsciousness of the fact that he is being taught. And these outdoor walks afford this special opportunity just because the instruction is spontaneous. No books will be used save Nature's eloquent volume. The most familiar objects—sea and sky, meadow and mountain, the shore, the cliffs, the flowers, beast, bird, and beetle—all may furnish texts for little sermons about God and duty. "Speak of them to thy children when thou walkest by the way," says the Bible; and surely it says well. These walks and talks are one of the child's most coveted joys. But, like everything else, they will only be prized as long as they are not overdone. The Sabbath is to be a delight, not a weariness of the flesh. It is to be honoured by play as well as by prayer<sup>1</sup>, by eloquent silence as well as by inspiring speech. Religion we should always have with us, but the religious teacher must efface himself from time to time if, when he does speak, his words are to be acceptable.

A hint, you will say, to myself. I take it, and will only stipulate for a peroration, the preacher's dearest prerogative. I am not so sanguine as to believe that the ideas I have put forward are likely to be adopted by those who have long

<sup>1</sup> Even in olden times Jewish children indulged in games on the Festivals—Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, p. 370.

since built up their home life on other lines. In the religious ordering of one's household it is, I admit, very difficult to begin *de novo*. But to those who have already anticipated my suggestions, this paper may possibly be useful in encouraging and confirming them in their practice. Nor can I forget that the generations come and go, and that one day youth, yielding to one of the most sacred of impulses, will be setting up a home for itself. When that day comes to one or other of my younger hearers I would fain hope that my pleading this afternoon may be found to have fallen on sympathetic hearts.

MORRIS JOSEPH.