

Four Tales a Sermon - Some Stories Handed Down By the Jewish Rabbis

Young Oon Kim
April 1977



You have heard many sermons before. But have you ever thought about how many ways we preach to each other? Think about all the different methods we use to express our beliefs and seek to guide others.

Some people write novels to point out the desperate human situation and awaken the masses to the need for reform. Some compose poems which confess their faith in God or convey revolutionary ideals. Artists paint or compose music or carve pieces of sculpture or write plays in order to convey their ideas and ideals.

Then there are some who preach by action. Their deeds become powerful sermons. Perhaps there are persons in this congregation who have never stood in a pulpit or given a speech in public. Yet they preach by what they do. Simply by being themselves they even influence over others. They inspire and comfort those around them by their warmth of heart and radiant spirit. So there are wordless, speechless sermons which transform human lives.

In preparing my three books on world religions, I learned that in every faith there have been noble souls who lived in conformity with God's righteousness. Every religion has its prophets and saints whose lives shine with divine goodness. This morning let me tell you some stories handed down by the Jewish rabbis. So my sermon today will be in a story form.

The first story goes like this. Once upon a time long ago, a Roman lady asked a Jewish rabbi, "What is God doing now? After creating the world in six days, as the Bible says, what else was there for God to do? How has He spent His time since creation? What does He do today?"

The rabbi replied, "God is still very busy. He is making ladders." This answer surprised the lady. "Ladders? What for?" The rabbi replied, "God makes ladders so that people can climb up and down. Every person in our world is on his way up one of those ladders or on his way down. We spend our lives ascending or descending. But the important thing to know is that when you are at the bottom of the ladder you should laugh and when you are the top you should cry."

Of course, the woman was puzzled by this strange advice. Why laugh when you are at the bottom and why weep when you reach the top? So she asked the rabbi to explain what he meant.

If you are at the bottom of the ladder, there is only one direction for you to go. You are on your way up, so you should rejoice. Your life will improve. But why cry when you reach the top of the ladder? Ordinarily people are delighted to reach the top. They are successful, they say. They have accumulated wealth or obtained high position or won fame. Yet, as the wise rabbi knew so well, that is just the time to worry about the future. If you have reached the top, you may soon be on your way down.

When a man gets all his heart desires he can so easily become puffed up with pride. He becomes self-satisfied and complacent. His character gets corrupted and a darkness of spirit overcomes his soul. Success can spoil a man and when that happens he starts going down life's ladder.

In Korea, Il-Han Yu founded one of the nation's great pharmaceutical companies and became a multimillionaire. But he was wise enough to recognize the danger of riches. When he died, he willed all

of his vast fortune to charity rather than to his children. He didn't want to corrupt his children with the dangerous effects of unearned wealth. He wanted them to climb up the ladder on their own. Il-Han Yu was one of those rare noble characters who knew both the value of money and its evils.

Now for my second story. Once in the distant past there was a great tribulation among the Jewish people and many suffered terribly. In desperation a famous rabbi prayed to God for help. God told him that if he wanted to save his people he should go to a designated place, make a special fire and offer a certain prayer. He went to the spot God had told him about, kindled the fire as he had been instructed, and offered the prayer. The tribulation passed and the Jewish community was saved.

Many years went by and again the Jews underwent savage persecution. Although the great rabbi was dead, the Jewish leaders went to his disciple beseeching him to help his people.

The disciple recalled what his teacher had done previously. He could remember how to make the fire, and what to pray, but he had forgotten the place to go. Desperately, the second-generation rabbi lit the fire and said the prayer. God immediately removed the persecution because the disciple had at least fulfilled two of the necessary conditions.

Again, in the third generation, the Jews faced a crisis and the leaders appealed to the disciple of the disciple of the great rabbi. He remembered the stories of what his predecessors had done and he had memorized the special prayer.

Unfortunately, he didn't know where to go or how to make the fire. Desperately the rabbi prayed: "O God, I am unworthy to ask for your special favor. My people face certain disaster but I don't know where to go or how to kindle the fire. All I recall is how my master and his master prayed. Please save my people even though I can satisfy only one condition." God heard his prayer and the crisis passed.

During the fourth generation the Jews were again faced with extinction and the leaders of the community went to the disciple of the disciple of the disciple of the wonder-making rabbi. However, by this time all that was remembered was the story. Yet again God intervened and saved His people because at least someone remembered the story of what He had done to save them.

Gone are the days of Moses, Joshua, David and the prophets. Out Jews continue to keep their faith and stand fast in spite of persecution because they are inspired by their stories.

The same can be true for those of us in the Unification Church. For some of us, heaven has often felt so close and God has delivered us from numerous calamities. So today we can be sustained because we recall what God has already done for us in the past; and in the future our members will be inspired because they remember our stories, especially the story of Rev. Moon. As the years go by, people will be comforted and renew their faith simply because they recall what God did for you and me in times of utter darkness. Our stories will be a blessing to those who follow after us.

Now let me tell you a third story. A certain rabbi lived a long life filled with deeds of piety and charity. When he died, God Himself was waiting to guide him to heaven. "You have been so devout and so good to your fellowman" said God -- "that I personally want to welcome you to paradise". When the rabbi heard these words, he replied: "I cannot take credit for all these nice things you say about me. If what you say is true, then my parents, my wife, my brothers and sisters deserve to share the reward." God thought about it for a moment and said, "Rabbi, you are right; because they helped to make you what you are I shall welcome them too into heaven."

Then the rabbi added: "But there are more: my teachers, my friends, my fellow rabbis and my pupils. They too are responsible for my life so have a right to share its reward." "I agree," said God. "They too will get to heaven." "And there are more," said the rabbi. "What I am and the good I have done is due to the land in which I have lived, the government which has protected me, and all my fellow citizens who have provided me with food and clothes and other necessities. How could I have been good without them?" "Yes," answered God. "I must let them_ share your company in heaven. Is that all?" "No, not quite," replied the rabbi. "For what I am I owe something to everyone who ever lived. If I deserve heaven, they do too." God nodded His approval. Everybody would finally enjoy the blessings of heaven because everyone in some way gave help to those who had become masters of the spiritual life.

Thus, this rabbi made it possible for everybody to receive God's blessing. How different it is with people these days. If something is successful, you find them eager to take credit, "I did it all on my own!" they boast. On the other hand if something goes wrong and a project fails, these same people try to shift the blame to others. "It wasn't my fault," they say. However the man God admires and praises is like the rabbi in our story. He always thinks of others first. He is willing to share the credit for his successes. He recognizes that even his virtues are largely the result of what others have done for him. Consequently, he wants to share his blessings.

My final story comes from Elie Wiesel, the noted Jewish writer who was sent to a Nazi concentration camp at age 14 and survived. He has dedicated the rest of his life to encouraging his fellow Jews to keep the faith, no matter how terrible their troubles.

Wiesel tells us that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob once wondered how their fellow Jews were making out on earth and got permission from God to come back for a brief visit. When they arrived here they discovered the Nazi concentration camps and gas chambers where 6 million Jews were being exterminated.

They were so horrified by what was going on, they rushed back to heaven and asked to have an audience with God. "Why are you letting this take place?" they demanded. "Where is your justice? Where is your love?" God listened and said nothing.

Abraham asked, "Are you too weak to stop these terrible things? Are you not the God almighty and Lord of history?"

Isaac asked, "Perhaps the adults have sinned against you and deserve to be punished. But what about the innocent children, tens of thousands of them murdered? Explain that to us: justify Yourself, if You can!"

Jacob added, "Perhaps You do not care about what happens. Do You have no love, no compassion, no decency in Your rule of the world?"

The patriarchs heard nothing from the throne of the Most High. In response to their questions, their doubts, their accusations and their anguish there was only silence. God said nothing because there was nothing He could say which would make any sense.

So Abraham, Isaac and Jacob decided to leave heaven and return to be with their children on earth. No matter how meaningless or ugly the world may be, at least men can stick together and suffer together.

It is true, says the novelist, that God could give no rational explanation for the Nazis. Even He could say nothing; but if the patriarchs could have seen God they would have seen the tears running on His cheeks. And if they could have seen God as they left heaven for earth, they would have noticed that He was going with them.

For 4000 years Jews have derived their strength from their complete faith in the invisible God and their sense of Jewish solidarity. First of all, they emphasize total faith in God and nobody else. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy. God is one God and Thou shalt love the lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy strength." That stirring confession of faith from Deuteronomy is called the Shema and has become the treasured possession of every devout Jew. It's the first lesson every child learns. He says it at the beginning and end of each day. On his deathbed, these will be the last words he utters. Thus has faith in the living God alone been impressed on Jewish life and thought for thousands of years. Put your trust in God alone -- that is the chief message of Judaism and Christianity as well. The second precept is equally important: "Love your neighbor as yourself." In the Old Testament, God says, "I prefer mercy to sacrifice (Hos. 6:6), Jesus taught the same lesson in his Sermon on the Mount: "If, when you bring your gift to the altar you find that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift before the altar, first go and make peace with your brother, then come back and offer your gift."

Throughout her long history, Judaism has emphasized the cardinal value of absolute trust in God and its corollary: love and respect for one's fellowmen. Because Jews combined these two basic emphases, they could stick together and survive innumerable trials. Solidarity has been the chief strength of the Jewish people and their solidarity has kept God from ever deserting them.

Similarly, if we combine complete faith in God and love for our neighbors, God will never abandon us. However, if we fail to live in truth and goodness before God and our fellowman God's will can never be fulfilled on this earth.

As Elie Weisel's story suggests, even God was touched by the fact that the patriarchs left heaven to be with their people. Because Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wanted to suffer with their descendants, God was moved to be with them.

What then is the Jewish message for us today? Always remain devoted to God, and remember that no one can achieve lasting happiness by himself. A wholesome religion requires both vertical faith in God and horizontal care for our fellowman. Let us therefore be so attractive to God that He cannot help but bless us.

I love to tell stories about God and how He works.