



# THE *torch*

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## A Tragedy For Scholarship

On Monday morning, April 18, 1966 a raging fire threatened to destroy the largest and most significant library of Judaica in the world. The library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America contained the most significant resources for Jewish Scholarship.

Twenty percent of the library was completely destroyed. Fortunately most of the remaining eighty percent can be saved intact or through various processes. However it will take a great effort to rebuild the library to its former size and literary status.

We feel a personal attachment to our Seminary Library. At the recent Convention of the National Federation, there was an overwhelming expression that each individual should share in the tasks of salvage and reconstruction by contributing toward the restoration, replacement or micro-filming of the many volumes which make up this precious and great treasure house of our people. Such contributions may be sent through the Men's Club, Synagogue or directly to the Library of the Seminary.

## The Convention

The thirty seventh Annual Convention of the National Federation which was held May 1-4 at Grossinger's will be hailed as a milestone in our history.

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# The Language of Prayer



By JEFFREY TIGAY

In a recent issue of *The Torch* (Winter, 1965) Rabbi Rudolph J. Adler discussed the history of the Hallel. Reading over the Hallel one notes that it contains a number of themes which constantly recur in Jewish prayers. Some examples are: God's greatness, His generosity, miracles, the repudiation of idolatry, the redemption of Israel. These themes are familiar because they recur so frequently. But familiarity has not assured their continuing relevance, for to many the basic themes of Jewish liturgy seem trite, its ideas trivial.

A case in point is the repudiation of idolatry. Psalm 115:4-7 reads: Their idols are silver and gold,

The work of men's hands.  
They have mouths, but they speak not;  
Eyes have they, but they see not;  
They have ears, but they hear not;  
Noses have they, but they smell not;  
They have hands, but they handle not;

Feet have they, but they walk not;  
Neither do they speak with their throat  
All of us would agree that one cannot make a god of wood and stone. Yet in this day and age idolatry hardly seems to be an issue. The idea is

no longer so exciting, its truth no longer so vital, that it requires such frequent repetition in the prayers by which we approach God. In 1966 repudiating the worship of wood and stone seems irrelevant.

The solution to the problem of relevance in prayer is to be sought in our approach to the language of prayer. A literal understanding of religious language is the road to irrelevance. As in the case of poetry, true meaning lies beneath the surface. Words are symbols, and to discover the profundity which they signify, we must probe more deeply than we are accustomed. Prayer must be understood like poetry because it is poetry. T. S. Eliot has written, "The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse."\* To this we might add the striving to adopt other aspects of poetry as well, symbolism not the least.

The psalms of the Hallel provide us with several examples, of which I have selected three for illustration, of themes which must be understood poetically, symbolically. I believe that

\**Selected Essays of T. S. Eliot*, New York, 1950, p. 34

inquiry will show that language which seems so common that we take it for granted can in reality convey the profoundest meaning.

1. In Ps. 113, having invited the worshipper to praise God, the Psalmist points out that, although He is exalted above the heavens He is intimately concerned with the world. In vv. 7-9 we are presented with specific examples of how God cares for man: He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,

And lifteth up the needy out of the dunghill;

That He may set him with princes,  
Even with the princes of His people.

He maketh the barren woman to dwell in her house

As a joyful mother of children.

These examples of divine assistance involve nothing miraculous. No earthquakes or bolts of lightning bring about the seemingly impossible. Instead the poet has borrowed his examples from familiar human experience: the poor man who rises from poverty, the childless woman who achieves motherhood.

How are we to understand these cases? If we take the verses literally, as merely expressing the view that the poor can get rich and the barren woman can conceive, the idea seems true, but quaint and not very exciting. But if we understand these cases poetically, as symbols, we will find that they imply far more than we have seen. Taken as symbols these cases signify the availability of divine help no matter how difficult the situation. The bonds of poverty and even physical disability can be overcome and need not imprison any man. Such divine assistance requires no breach of the laws of nature, no dramatic and

miraculous *deus ex machina*. It comes, as in our psalm, in the realm of normal human events, and God's involvement may not be obvious. God's assistance to man comes not only, nor even primarily, in spectacular and crucial incidents, but rather in what the daily prayerbook calls "Thy miracles which are daily with us, Thy wonders and goodnesses which are at all times, evening, morning, and noon"—in other words, in the normalities of everyday experience: in the resources and dependability of the physical world; through man's own body, mind, and heart; and through other men—through society and the benefits it confers on its members, and through man's sciences, arts, and religions. When we understand our psalm symbolically we find that it constitutes an optimistic declaration of faith in the availability of such aid and gratitude for its presence in our world.

2. Ps. 114 describes the reaction of nature to Israel's liberation from Egypt:

The sea saw it and fled;

The Jordan turned backward.

The mountains skipped like rams,

The hills like young sheep.

The strange behavior of nature demands an explanation, which vv. 7-8 provide:

Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord,

At the presence of the God of Jacob;

Who turned the rock into a pool of water,

The flint into a fountain of waters.

It is the presence of God in this event which calls forth the response of seas and mountains. The God who

controls all of nature, who in the desert supplied Israel with water from solid rock (Numbers 20:1-11), is active in this event, and it is to His presence that nature responds.

In this answer the Psalmist provides us with the key for understanding the many disruptions of nature, or miracles, which we find in the Bible.

Ever since ancient times religious people have been troubled by the miracles in the Bible. The ten plagues, the dividing of the Red Sea and the Jordan, the strange happenings at Mt. Sinai when Israel received the Torah, the sun standing still for Joshua — these and similar stories have troubled sincere believers who found that such events were not part of their own experience and did not seem possible in light of what science has learned about nature.

The simplest answer, of course, was that anything is possible for the God who created and controls nature. Some, in a rationalistic spirit, sought to give natural explanations to the miracles, explanations which would not contradict science (thus of the Red Sea: "Shallow water of this kind may easily be driven back by a strong wind, leaving the sand bare."\*). But the first answer is obvious even to the questioner and really does not remove doubt, while the second merely suggests that the Bible misunderstood the true nature of events.

Many would explain the belief in miracles by printing to the absence

\*T. H. Robinson, *A History of Israel I*, p. 87, quoted by Lewis S. Hay, *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Vol. 83 (1964), p. 398.

of advanced science in the ancient world. Ignorance and unsophistication are supposed to explain why the Biblical man believed in miracles. But this does not explain why the belief in miracles first arose — it merely explains why our ancestors were not more critical of this belief once it had been formed. What was it that gave rise to that belief in the first place? Why were some events described miraculously, others not? What was there about these events that led men to believe that they were accompanied by miraculous happenings?

To this question the seventh verse of our psalm provides an answer: it is

. . . at the presence of the Lord,  
at the presence of the God of  
Jacob . . .

When an event was felt to be so marvelous that men sensed in it the presence of God—or, to express the same idea in another way, when men sensed in an event the fulfillment of the fundamental purposes of the universe—that is when it was believed to be accompanied by miracles of nature. Look at the events described in this way: the defeat of a cruel tyrant and the liberation of a people from slavery; the reception by man of God's law; Israel's arrival at, and conquest of, the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering. In each case the event itself is of such significance, is so convincingly an act of God, that the most dramatic description is called for, and the Bible responds by showing all of nature involved in the event. In other words, miracles constitute a poetic commentary on the nature of the event: a miraculous description

means "we sense God's presence in this event."

This is not to deny that the poet may have literally believed in these miracles. What I mean to stress is that the event itself is of primary importance, the miracle only secondary and derivative. The psychology of the poet is easy to understand: because he sensed God behind the event, he reasoned that it must have been accompanied by the most marvelous phenomena. Because the event was of such great importance, all of nature must take part in it. The poet thought and spoke in the religious language of his age. If the same language is no longer spoken the psalm is no less beautiful, the description no less moving, so long as we understand that the miracle is a poetic commentary on God's presence in great human events.

3. The third psalm of the Hallel is number 115, from which we read the repudiation of idolatry above. The battle against idolatry has played a role in Judaism which is well known. Does this battle strike a meaningful chord in our lives today, or is it but a relic of history, grown unimportant because the battle has been won?

If the battle against idolatry is merely one against worshipping statues, then we would indeed seem to be beating a dead horse. The battle was won long ago, and frequent references to it would express a conviction which no longer plays an active role in our lives.

But from the very earliest times idolatry was seen to be far more than a question of statues. A deeper insight into idolatry is intimated by our

psalm in its description of idols as "the work of men's hands." To Isaiah (ch. 2:8-22) idolatry was sinful because it involved the worship of man's own creation. It was a sin of human pride: rather than worship that which is truly ultimate, the idolater worships his own creation. The idolater believes that man is supreme in the universe, that nothing is more deserving of worship than the creation of his own hands.

Seen in this light idolatry is a sin to which men fall prey at all times and everywhere, we no less than our ancestors. Today's idols are not statues but other "works of men's hands." Some are widely recognized, though we continue to venerate them none the less: success and status, money and power, sex and satisfaction, race and country; others are more subtle, but still idolatrous: we worship institutions and we even worship education; we come to worship our own ambitions and allow them to gain greater importance than our own families. Each of us unwittingly creates his own idols and places them above all other values in life; they gain an importance far beyond their true worth, submerging other values in their wake. The purpose of mentioning idolatry in our prayers is to stimulate a search for such idols, asking ourselves whether we have come to value something in such a way that we have made a god of it.

Our investigation of these psalms reveals a deeper level of meaning lying beneath their surface. The rise of the needy to prosperity and the childless to motherhood symbolize the availability of divine assistance in the normal course of human events and

in the face of the most difficult obstacles. The miracles accompanying the exodus dramatically proclaim God's presence in great human events. And the repudiation of idols of wood and stone urges us to repudiate the false gods of our own age. We discover meaning by understanding that prayer speaks in symbolic language. Understanding the symbols requires no research and no special knowledge. They

can be deciphered by any intelligent reader reflecting on the potential meanings of the poetic language. Understanding the poetic nature of prayer enables us to continue in good conscience to use the enthusiastic language first formulated by a poet of long ago. In addition, this type of understanding renders the poetry capable of inspiring and moving us even today.

#### THE NEED FOR JEWISH ECUMENICITY (Continued from Page 17)

ty" would come about. I am however, dubious whether these dreams will be realized in our lifetime. But at least we can be on speaking terms. As Isaiah urged upon us: "Come let us reason together" (1:18).

There have been hopeful signs in recent months. A "trilogue" of the three rabbinic presidents was held under the aegis of the Synagogue Council of America. It engendered a fruitful discussion in which, *mirabile dictu*, the president of the Orthodox group acknowledged the role of Conservative and Reform Judaism and agreed that a monolithic Jewry in America is neither feasible nor desirable. More recently, the American Jew-

ish Congress convened a symposium of three distinguished professors of the leading religious seminaries. All concurred that higher religious ideals ought unite us and transcend institutional differences. Are these signs of thaw? I surely hope so.

When our sages taught us that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of causeless hatred and fanatical partisanship, they were trying to instill in us a love for Jewish unity. We must not permit the temple of Jewish life to be shattered by hatred and rivalry and factionalism. We sorely need Jewish ecumenicity. And I pray that we will achieve it in the near future.



## cross country

ARTHUR S. BRUCKMAN, *Editor*

*EDITOR'S NOTE: In this issue we are reporting only news of the 1966 Convention. The news of the clubs (and regions) which is usually featured in Cross Country will be covered in the next issue.*

### CONVENTION REPORT

The 37th Annual Convention of the National Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs was held at Grossinger's, Grossinger, New York, May 1-4, 1966. This was the first change of the site of the Convention for many years.

There were many innovations in the format of the Convention, which were well received by those in attendance, which numbered over 650. A new high was reached in the number of clubs represented at the Convention. The Convention Committee, headed by S. David Rosenzweig, Convention Chairman, Abraham Satovsky, Co-Chairman, and Al Kaufman, Associate Chairman, was commended for an excellent job done.

The theme of the Convention was "Grant Peace, Well-Being and Blessing Unto the World", to which many of the sessions were addressed.

At the opening session, Sunday night, which was chaired by S. David Rosenzweig, opening remarks were made by the National President, Manny London, and greetings were delivered on behalf of the State of Israel by Michael Arnon, Israeli Consul General in New York. In his greeting, he noted that Israel can be a force for peace throughout the world, and expressed the hope that the spirit of peace through its influence would soon be established in the entire Middle East.

The highlight of the session was a presentation to the recipient of the Annual Award to Norman Cousins, Editor of the Saturday Review. In his address of acceptance, he dwelt on peace in the world, stressing that universal peace can

only be achieved through world order based on international law, which can only be obtained through control of forces and in consideration of the world as a whole.

Shaharit Services opened up the program for the day and services were held each morning of the Convention, which were well attended.

A Special Breakfast Meeting was held on Monday for club Presidents, at which mutual problems were discussed.

The morning session was concerned with the general topic, "Education for Peace". The session was chaired by Herman C. Rothenberg of Cedarhurst, New York, a National Vice President.

Rabbi Stanley Schachter of Ner Tamid Congregation, Chicago, Illinois, addressed himself to the topic, "Is Jewish Religion Relevant for Peace" and Melvin Dubin, co-founder of the magazine "War-Peace Report", addressed himself to "Commitment to Peace—A Jewish Obligation".

Following the presentations, a lively discussion took place relative to present world tensions and, specifically, that positions should be taken on specific events using our religious traditions as guidelines.

The afternoon session was chaired by Harvey J. Lavigne of Millburn, New Jersey, a National Vice President. The session was devoted to a Talmud session with Rabbi Seymour Siegel, Associate Professor of Theology at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The subject was "The Foundations of the Jewish Family". The text used for the session was Masseket Derek Erez—Chap-