

(The following excerpts are from Chapter 3, "Meet the Rebels Who Changed the World," of *The Partisan History of Judaism* (1951) by Elmer Berger.)

The Literary Prophets exerted an impact on the history of human thought far beyond Judaism itself. A period of five or six hundred years had passed between the time of the Moses story and the time when the first of these Prophets appeared. It is important to realize that during this period ... the Israelitish people completed the process of assimilation. What had developed ... was an amalgam of the early desert religion with many ideas and practices which these people had taken over from the religions of other people with whom they had come into contact. The result, essentially, was a usual religious development of their time.

There was little about the religion of these Israelites that was either much better or much worse than the religions of these neighbors. For example, such institutions as sacred prostitution existed among these people ... An elaborate temple had been built to house the "presence" of Yahweh. An intricate and elaborate service, calling for extravagant sacrifices and a priestly caste schooled in the complexities had been created ... While the entire civilization of these Israelites had a surface glitter of Oriental splendor, the masses of people were but little better than slaves.

Now, suddenly, in the midst of this corrupt civilization, which was on the brink of collapse, there emerged a group of individuals who began a protest against the flagrant social inequities ... The result was to provide the chapter of real genius in Judaism. In this protest against social injustices combined with lofty moral values related to a universal God, Judaism took its place as one of the great spiritual forces of mankind ... This was the first time that men talked of religion in terms of opposition to the oppression of other people and in terms of social values and human relationships.

The Roots of Universalism in Prophetic Judaism

In the earlier period, none of these considerations mattered. All that proved the validity of a religion was whether a people was able to harvest its crops and win its wars. If it failed in these things, they cast around for another god, as the Israelitish tribes probably had done when they were in slavery in Egypt ... Jeremiah, however, was a man who began to talk of religion in terms of relationships of man to man, and of man to society: "If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk with other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land I gave your fathers, forever and ever."

In passages like these, moral religion is already full-blown. Privilege entails responsibility. Material security is not unrelated to moral strength. The stability of a society cannot be measured "by bread alone."

And then, of course, from the prophecy of Micah, which is probably the most famous passage in the spirit of those cited: "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? ... It hath been told thee, O man, what is good and the Lord doth require of thee; only to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God."

But these enduring moral values are not the totality of the contribution of these men. They said that these values derived from God and were the mani-

festations and the demonstrations of the existence of this God, and that the practice of these values was worship of God. But, more than that, they said that this God is not only the God of this people, Israel. These men conceived also the idea of a *universal* God, of one God for all mankind; and these values, therefore, which represented this God, are universal values, applicable to all people. Amos says: "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, O Children of Israel?" saith the Lord."

... The Prophets ... transformed the idea of religion from materialistic pagan ritualism practiced formalistically in return for material blessings, into moral and ethical concepts to be practiced — and this is incidentally one distinctive characteristic of Judaism — in terms of actual living and human relationships. In addition to that, there was the expansion of the idea of a god beyond that of a tribal deity connected with one tribe or group of tribes by a very exclusive, mysterious covenant, which was understood only by a priestly caste, into a God-concept of the application of these same moral values to all peoples.

This is universalism. This ethical monotheism, which is the unique contribution made by Judaism to human thought. Those who are religiously devout and those who are not should recognize these values as the heart of all religion, in its most liberal and intelligent concept in the Judaism and Christianity of the Western world. Everything else — any formalistic additions to the established moral values — are the trappings of religion which I think any man is free to accept or to reject as he may please ... The completely majestic character of the ideas and of the way in which these ideas, as expressed by these men, have influenced the thinking of all generations which have come after them cannot be exaggerated, so completely revolutionary were they for the times in which they lived. •