

ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE WEST LONDON SYNAGOGUE ON THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURATION OF THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF SYNAGOGUES IN GREAT BRITAIN, ON 30 SEPTEMBER 1956†

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Mr Chairman, Members of the Staff, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We, plain and simple members of the Anglo-Jewish Community, are gathered here today to congratulate the Association of Synagogues on a signal act of faith. For the opening here and now, in London, in 1956, of a Jewish Theological College, is nothing less than an act of faith, faith in the continuance of Anglo-Jewry, faith in the value of a college, faith in the existence of Jewish Theology. It is to my mind not only a great, but an astonishing, act, and I find it the more astonishing in that it is an act of affirmation; and since the contemporary Jewish scene is in many respects not one of affirmation but of abdication, each element in this triple affirmation invites emphasis.

As for the first, faith in Anglo-Jewry – in this Tercentenary year, our community has shown itself, perhaps not unreasonably, self-complacent. But all its anxiety has been concentrated in and about its past; as if it has seen its salvation, and could now depart in peace. By this act of founding a new College, the Association of Synagogues is showing anxiety about, and belief in, the future.

As for the second, faith in a College – a College, I suppose, is a place of education in which younger and livelier minds are brought into contact, through the older and more experienced, with traditional wisdom. But the prevailing cry in world-Jewry today is to throw out the traditional and to start

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† This article originally appeared in *The Synagogue Review*, Volume XXXI, Number 3, November 1956.

everything afresh. The Association of Synagogues, by founding this College, is showing it believes that there is still virtue in our traditions and that it is worthwhile to try and hand them on.

The third is faith in the existence of a Jewish Theology, and this paradoxically enough, is perhaps the hardest of all. For theology, I suppose, can be most easily understood as the theory of religion; and to found a Jewish *Theological* College implies a belief in the existence of a Jewish *religion*. I suppose an Association of *Synagogues* could hardly believe otherwise! And yet an impartial observer of world-Jewry today could be pardoned if he expressed a pleased surprise; for everywhere, and not in Anglo-Jewry alone, even our *religious* leaders seem ready to interest, and inform, both themselves and their congregations, about everything except religion. The Association of Synagogues, in opening a Jewish Theological College, has earned our gratitude in drawing our attention to the existence of at least *some* connection between Jewry and Judaism.

I say then that this is a great day. I cannot do justice to the themes it suggests. But before addressing myself to them even in the desultory manner which lies in my power, I wish to congratulate the Association most warmly for having raised them; and in particular for having raised them not verbally only, in public speeches or pious pronouncements, but in the concrete, living, everyday fact of a new institution. True, its beginnings are small. We have been taught, however, not to ‘despise the day of small things’: ‘the small one shall become a thousand’.

The beginnings are small but the task is great: and this small College will become great if it rises to the greatness of the task. As for the task itself, there is no secret about it; it is to interpret Judaism for our time and place. And it is some of the implications of this phrase, and some of the obligations which it suggests, which I propose to consider with you now.

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First a word about Interpretation. The dictionary meaning is obvious. It is an explanation, exposition, making clear. But what is explanation? How things are made clear? I suppose that making a thing clear is to bring it close to the understanding, to show that it is not, as it might have appeared, really strange; but that it is something which, in view of wider knowledge, we could have expected all the time. We understand a thing when we see it as a particular instance of general truth or rule. We press a switch and a light appears in the ceiling. But we cannot be said to *understand* what has happened until we know something about the general behaviour of electricity.

You may say: 'But why should I bother about *understanding*? I only need *results*. It is quite enough for me to know that if I turn on the switch, the light is given in the room'.

That is of course true while things go right. It is not good enough when things go wrong. When you turn on your switch and you do *not* get light, you begin to wish you learned how to mend a fuse.

I fancy that most of us here today, in regard to Judaism, stand in much the same position as our hypothetical user of electricity. We press the usual buttons and touch the usual switches and all is well, until there is a breakdown. Then we do not know what to do. We have never gone beyond the perfunctory phrases and actions to which we have been accustomed and with which we have grown up. On an occasion of crisis we are left in the darkness, without help and without hope. The light does not come. The fuse has blown. But we have never troubled to think, to try to understand. We cannot help ourselves. Now a College is a place where young people are taught, or helped, to think: and that is a first and principle reason why we should welcome the new foundation. For, as Berkeley remarked, 'the clearest light is ever necessary to guide the most important actions'; and he then goes on with the famous words which cannot be quoted too often: 'He who have not much meditated upon God, the human mind, and the *summum bonum*, may possibly make a thriving earthworm, but will most indubitably make a sorry patriot and a sorry statesman', and (this is my addition) a sorry Rabbi and Minister of religion.

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But let me pursue my analogy (like all analogies, a bad one) a bit further.

When the electricity goes wrong and you cannot mend it yourself, you solicit the services of an expert, the electrician. If you are lucky, you find one; and I suppose it is the same with religion. You visit your Minister and get him to help you, if you can, if *he* can.

But you will find that there is a difference between our technological and our spiritual needs. The technological need is completely external. It is a matter of comfort or convenience. If the electric light collapses, we can use a candle; or go to bed in the dark. But if our religion collapses, if our hold on eternity collapses, if our world of values collapses, then we *cannot* do without; yet – and there's the rub – we cannot get it repaired by calling in somebody from outside. *Internal* collapse is repairable only *internally*. Outside help may show the way; but it is a way we have to walk ourselves. The wisest minister of religion, the most experienced spiritual guide cannot do the job for us or in our place. As Pascal said of the supreme crisis: We die alone.

I am speaking of religion as a real issue, as expressed for example in some of the Psalms: 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God'. 'My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee'. 'Out of the depths have I cried unto thee'. It is an issue which, in our own day, has become real increasingly, and not for Jews alone but for Jews *as well*. Rightly or wrongly, and especially now, people are sick to death of being told of the triumphs and beauties of science. There is a yearning for something else, a something far more personal and intimate, something which will not lead to physical disruption and world destruction but to spiritual harmony, both for individuals and for man as such: 'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee'. It may be envisaged as a razor's edge, or as a feather bed; but the seeking, and often the finding, is a fact. And of course there may be seeking from the other side: God may be looking for us. (It is a quaint Rabbinic conceit that God is more God when Jews are more Jewish). And it is little to the point to breathe the blessed word 'sublimation', or to invoke the Oedipus complex. Whatever the cause may be, there exists, in most men and women, the urge to come to terms with the universe; a desire to worship, and to find fulfilment in something which is not the product of their own hands. To put the matter crudely: we make the hydrogen bomb and we know we make it; what we *want* to know is: who made us. More subtly: the things we value and strive for point to a perfection beyond ourselves which we must enter into relationship with for our very soul's sake.

If theology is to mean anything, it will have to take account of *this*; and there follows from it an important practical consequence for the structure of the new College. For theology, the theory of *religion*, can be allowed no longer to be considered a subject for specialists only. It is a concern for every single one of us; and that not indirectly or from a distance but directly and intimately. The new College therefore must in principle be open to all, future expert and layman alike.

That this is in accordance with Jewish tradition is clear. Judaism has lived only because it has never been allowed to become a closed shop: 'Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters'. The words of the Rabbis are explicit: 'Say not: there are sages; there are great men; there are prophets. In Torah all are equal'. 'It is the inheritance not of priest nor of levite, it is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob'. Our tradition does not understand any other conception; and I notice a recent article on the crisis in Theology by Canon Vidler (*Encounter*, September 1956), in which he reaches a similar conclusion.

If theology is to have a future of any consequence, we may hazard the conjecture that it will have to cease to be an almost clerical monopoly. It will have to win the interests of layman. It will have to command their intellectual respect and to capture their imagination, and then give them their free scope to take the lead in theological thinking.

‘And by laymen’, he adds, ‘I do not mean men already in the pew’. Like the Rabbis, he seems to mean just us – you and me, the ordinary man.

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I now have to tread very delicately. I have ventured to suggest that the College should be thrown open to all, that is, that laymen too should be admitted and helped to understand; and I have said that that is the Jewish tradition: Torah is for the whole congregation. I am now going to beg you not to limit your students, whether specialist or lay, to the holders of any one type of opinion; and Heaven forbid that you should go further and extract a pledge from your students that they adhere to now, and will never depart from, one particular set of views. That way lies death, intellectual and spiritual; and it is furthermore an insult both to students and staff. To think that you can trust members of a staff only to preach to the converted, and to repeat propositions which they cannot sustain against objection! To think that you only dare introduce to College classrooms men already sworn to one opinion and ready to receive only their customary dope! Opium for the opiated, and from opiators – what a negation of all education! Throw your doors open as wide as you can. Have teachers and students of all colours and ideas. And do not be afraid of heretics and heresies. If you have not got any, they should be specially imported. They wake you up. They are a necessary ingredient in a live world. I remember years ago, when visiting the famous ‘Cal. Tech.’ at Pasadena, being introduced by the then President, a great physicist and Nobel-laureate, to their professor of *Ethics*. And when I expressed surprise at their being a professor of *Ethics* in an institute devoted to the production of working *physicists*, I was told that was precisely why he was there: it was in order that the budding physicist might hear something outside his physics, and so be induced – with luck! – to start thinking.

That is the right way and I hope you will follow it. Widen your purview as much as you can. From small interest you will only get small men. Let me read to you, from a recent first article of the Literary Supplement of *The Times*, some sentences of a great man of letters on one of the greatest of English theologians:

Newman’s mind was world-wide. He was interested in everything which was going on in science, in politics, in literature. Nothing was too large for him, nothing too trivial, if it threw light upon the central question, what man really was, and what was his destiny ...

He seemed always to be better informed on common topics of conversation than anyone else who was present. He was never condescending with us, never didactic or authoritative; but what he said carried conviction along with it ... He was interesting because ... he had something real to say.

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Froude is writing about Newman as a tutor in a College. Newmans are of course not found every day. Nor are they created at will. But I do suggest to you that, whether you find Newmans for your staff or not, a College is a place of education and can learn from general educational experience. Take for example the remarkable book just published (Macdonald, London, 1956) by Dr Erich Meissner of Gordonstoun. Its very name is significant. It is called *The Boy and his Needs*. Fancy that! Here we have an educationalist who thinks that schools exist in order to satisfy those needs. And the needs are primarily spiritual. All good teaching, says Dr Meissner, rests on, and ends in, a world-view, however it may be arrived at. He asserts firmly that too much fuss is made of the conventional cliché that ‘a crisis has overtaken our cultural traditions’. I heartily agree with him. Of course we are in a state of crisis. Men always are. How ridiculous to blame everything on the *crisis*! *We* are the crisis. If only we could activate men’s *minds* and set them on the right aims, the crisis would look after itself.

I say men’s *minds*. We should have the courage to ask with Dr Meissner whether we attach sufficient importance to the truth that men *have* minds; and he notes at once that in our schools (and I should add, in our Colleges) the element of leisure and ease has gone: ‘the boys are driven all the time’. As he points out in a thoughtful paper entitled *The Private Sphere of Education*, it is the *private* life, the life lived *outside* lessons and syllabuses, which is all-important for education. We all drive *and are driven* too much. We have no time to think; and since *we* find no time to think, *others* do the thinking for us and we become the victims of slogans and ideologies. And *that* is the modern crisis, in Judaism too: the copy-book attitude to life created by our gramophonic civilisation.

We thus come back to the reason why we should welcome the foundation of the new College. It creates an opportunity for, and gives stimulus to, *thinking*. But thinking about what? I turn to my third theme, Jewish Theology.

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It is customary in some circles to question the very existence of a Jewish Theology. It would certainly seem true that there are very few Jewish Theologians. It would appear that the College is stopped at the very start. It has nothing to work on or think about.

But is this true? What after all *is* theology? It is a reasoned account (*logos*) of God (*theos*); and since Judaism has quite a lot to say about God, I fail to see

how it can be said *without* a theology. It may be that its account (or accounts) of God is not offered as dogma; that it is not expressed in the terms of a technical philosophy; that – ultimately – it is not completely self-consistent. But is it essential to theology that it should be dogmatic; or that it should be metaphysical; or that it should offer a final system of ‘incontrovertible truths’? I should have thought that by the very nature of the case it should be, on the contrary, tentative, questioning, pointing to a direction rather than describing a goal attained. Since God is God, he is not man. It is not therefore a matter for surprise that man’s mind should not be adequate to give a complete account of God. But since we have been endowed with minds and have *some* thought of God, we have ground to hope that the *best* of our thinking about God is at least better than our worst.

And we have a store of material to work on: if God is in the darkness, we can at least draw near. For the more difficult Rabbinic material we laymen have in English excellent help in the books of Israel Abrahams, Claude Montefiore and George Foot Moore. But there is open access (for each in accordance with his understanding) to the very source of all sources, the Scriptures; and what lawgiver and prophet and psalmist have told us offers considerable matter for study and reflection. It may be experience at second hand; and our own day has seen, both in Jewish and non-Jewish circles, a revival of interest in what is alleged to be the immediate experiences of the mystics. On which my personal view is that, great though the mystics may be, the authors of the psalms and prophecies were even greater; and they are to my mind less pretentious, and even – dare I say it? – more human, and more mature. But I am not here to enter into polemics. Study what you may and what you can. But to say that Judaism has no doctrine of God is arrant nonsense. If Judaism is anything at all, it is just that: a doctrine of God.

It is also of course a doctrine of man. But the doctrine of man is not primary. It is derivative. It depends on the doctrine of God. And that is why certain recent movements in Jewry should give us pause. The deification of man and his achievements is for Judaism the ultimate blasphemy. It is the negation, or rather the abrogation, of Judaism. Even the Jews are not God. They are the *people* of God, and their destiny lies in that.

It may be that God made a mistake in choosing us. In the good old Palestinian pioneering days it was a standing jest that he certainly made a mistake in choosing Palestine; he should have chosen Switzerland or the Riviera! But whether or not it was a mistake to choose us, choose us he did; and Judaism, which is *not* to be identified with the survival of Jewry, means just that, the choice and its implications. I should say in fact that, since Judaism is linked indissolubly with God, no study of Judaism could be anything *but* theological.

But for that very reason I incline to mistrust the word Theological in your title. It seems to me very misleading. It hints that there can be many sorts of Judaism and Jewish learning of which the theological is only one. It suggests the 'branded article', like the goods advertised in the so-called national dailies. But Judaism is not a branded article. It is a universal doctrine entrusted to a specific people.

And so I hope that what we are greeting the first beginnings of today is a general College of Jewish learning. For although it is an error to question the existence of a Jewish *theology*, it is true there is very little *specific* Jewish theological *literature*. Even if there were, it would be in the category of *applied* learning; and surely the experience of every educational venture shows that you should never try and start at the *applied* end. Even in the fetish of the modern world, science, it is a truism that *pure* science comes first; and if you fail to foster *pure* science – and the 'pure' scientist – you will soon have no science to apply. So I hope that you will not concentrate on Jewish Theological literature (that is, if, and in so far as, you can find any). Concentrate on Jewish *learning*. And you will soon find that you cannot move an inch in the path of Jewish learning without meeting a trace of God. In the very beginning (need I remind you of the primary teachings of Judaism?) God created heaven and earth; and the rest of the Bible is only a variegated commentary on that stupendous affirmation.

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But perhaps you are going to fight shy of the Bible? Jewish Colleges seem to have that general habit; and the result is seen in the lack of Biblical students among the people of the Book. I do hope you will not follow that disastrous path. Without the Bible you will be lost. 'Turn it over and turn it over for all is in it'. We have all heard (or perhaps we haven't) the story of the old-fashioned Rabbi who, confronted with the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, dismissed it indignantly as a Christian interpolation! It often seems to me that this story symbolises the attitude of many of our Jewish institutions of learning towards the Bible as a whole. It would seem to be frowned upon as for 'external use only', as it were; for 'export', '*bon pour l'occident*'. The attitude is wrong, and against both the spirit and the letter of the Rabbinic tradition which it is often supposed to represent. May I delay a few moments and elaborate this important point? Please forgive me if I make myself appear learned (which I am not), and throw my net wide.

I start from a conventional opposition, that between *Halacha* and *Aggada*. It is generally accepted that the peculiarity of Judaism, its characteristic mark,

lies in *Halacha*. *Halacha* would seem to mean 'walking'; and it is connected with the 'way in which we should walk' and the 'walking in God's ways' of which we hear so much in the Pentateuch. Opposed to 'walking' – *Halacha* – is 'telling' or 'talking' – *Aggada*; and *Aggada* includes all the poetry and the myths and the ethics and the philosophical speculation which lies outside *Halacha*. In the many revulsions felt in Jewry against the laborious detail of *Halacha*, *Aggada* was often seized on in its place; with the result that, instead of surfeit of 'walking', there came – dare one say it? – a surfeit of *talking*.

It was the Hebrew poet Bialik who pointed out most vividly that the opposition between *Halacha* and *Aggada* is a false one. *Halacha*, said he, is only petrified *Aggada*. You do not walk anywhere (as it were) without a preliminary talk; and the natural issue of the theoretical activity of talking is the only practical activity of trying to get somewhere, i.e., of walking.

This is an eminently sensible attitude, and re-affirms the essential bond between thought and action which both the one wing of Judaism who are so insistent on ritual acts, and the other wing of Judaism so insistent on moral ideas, tend to gloss over. *Aggada is Halacha* – in preparation; *Halacha is Aggada* – in act.

It is this master-idea of Bialik which I present to you now with an amendment, or rather with an addition by way of amendment. We should learn the deeper truth that *neither Halacha nor Aggada* are primary. The primary factor, or primary activity, is something else. It is what is called *Midrash*; and it is *from Midrash* as the primary and initiatory activity that there flow *both Aggada and Halacha*. As you all know, there are found in our literature both *Midrashe Halacha* and *Midrashe Aggada*; and it is only by accident that in popular use the word *Midrash* has become identified with the latter, the *Aggada*.

It is *Midrash* then which is primary, and *Midrash* means a 'seeking'; and the object of the 'seeking' is none other than the meaning of the Scriptures. It is this the *seeking out of the meaning of the Scriptures* which is the source of historic Judaism of whatever variety it may be.

I may remind you that meaning is not given at once: it is revealed only slowly in the experience of the generations. As time flows on, the important gradually rises into view, the unimportant sinks into oblivion. What was once thought unimportant may be seen to be important; what was once central may fade away into a distant periphery. The process, an unending one, is of selection and re-selection; of change of emphasis which at times might amount almost to rejection, at times to revolutionary revival.

That is the reason why the study of our earlier literature is so illuminating. It shows us the process in its classic form. And the process begins at the very beginning, in the Pentateuch itself. One whole book out of its five, Deuteronomy, proclaims itself to be a 'repetition of the Law'; and it is this *in idea* a *Midrash*, a

seeking of the meaning, an exposition of the other four. As *Midrash*, as every reader of Deuteronomy knows, it issues into both *Aggada* (moral discourse) and *Halacha* (practical command), the two being not two at all but one in the indivisible unity of principle and practice which makes Deuteronomy the noble creation it is. But the process did not stop with the creation of Deuteronomy. It went on, as *Midrashic*, activity is always going on; and just as Deuteronomy can be understood figuratively as a *Midrash* on the rest of Pentateuch, so there is preserved a specific Rabbinical *Midrash* on Deuteronomy.

I stand in the presence of my betters and I am not here to express personal preferences. But I say in all sincerity that to my mind, if there is one book worthy of standing by the side of the Biblical book of Deuteronomy, it is the *Midrash deBei Rab*, the noble collection of rabbinic comments, deductions, and moral and religious aphorisms, on Deuteronomy, which goes commonly by the name of *Siphre*.

Be that as it may, the ultimate fount of our theology is the Scriptures the meaning of which is sought out by activity of *Midrash*; and what is required today is not, as some think, a new *Halacha*, or as do others, a new *Aggada*, but a new *Midrash*, a new interpretation which, begetting first a new *Aggada*, might, out of the new *Aggada*, distil a new *Halacha*. The revitalisation of Judaism we are all hoping (and groping) for will not come, as is often fondly asserted, from a convening of a Sanhedrin: constituted authority can never step out of itself. But we have not too far to look for its natural source. Since the primal activity is *Midrash*, the institutional seat of novelty is clearly the *Beth HaMidrash*, the traditional Hebrew name for what we call a College. It is from these 'Houses of Seeking and Exposition' that new life can come, a new life which, through the medium of study and discussion, will reveal new possibilities of interpretation; and it is these new possibilities of interpretation revealed by *Midrash* which ultimately may produce, in the course of time, fresh insight – *Aggada* – and, from the fresh insight, fresh direction – *Halacha*. So it was in the great schools of the past: in Alexandria; in Sure and Pompetha; in Mainz, Troyes, Cordova; in Amsterdam; in Vilna and Volhozen. So may it be here too!

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But I am committing a solecism. I am talking about the centre of the '*Diaspora*'. What old-fashioned stuff, you must be saying; indeed *vieux jeu*! Alexandria, Troyes, Vilna; Philo, Rashi, Mainmonides, Mendelssohn, the Gaon; these all belong to the forgotten past, useful perhaps in *their* time and place, but not for *this* generation. Who wants a College, and a theological

College at that? And why trouble to open a new one in London? Surely all our difficulties, and particularly the spiritual ones, have vanished and are more, being resolved in the State of Israel.

I do not wish to raise here any controversial issues. Time will show one way or another. I am concerned only to point out the *unwisdom* of putting all our eggs in one basket. I have noticed a distressing tendency among our people to reply for everything on the new State. Even Atonement for Sin (unless I misunderstood the *Kol Nidre* circulars and appeals in Synagogue) is underwritten in the name of the State! As for scholars, spiritual leaders, a new philosophy of Judaism – all are to come, all are coming, all have already come, from the State.

Now I do not say they will not. They may. I do not know. But whether they come eventually or not, it is unlikely they will come today, tomorrow, or even next week. And our needs are for today.

Have not our enthusiasts lost their sense of history? Have they not forgotten how long things take to grow? A state; a university; a system of law; a way of life – do they really think they can be produced out of a hat, or in five, ten, or even fifty years? Think of the common law of England; the traditions of classical scholarship; the long background of an ordinary school; the way in which everything depends on something that preceded it – how your teacher took it from his teacher, and his teacher from his. So that ultimately it is all the past which flowers in the present, itself to flower again in the future and the future's future. For the sake of Zion itself give Zion peace; and do not weigh it down with, do not submerge it under, this extravagant load of short-term and unrealisable expectation.

And for a similar reason, just as we have no right to thrust our responsibilities on the State of Israel, so we have no right to jettison the achievements of the Diaspora. The Diaspora flourished long before the destruction of the former State, and it has a great and independent tradition of its own. Is it really wise to throw it all out of the window; or, worse, to burn the lot with however glowing a coal from the hearth of Tel-Aviv? Is our *non-political* persistence of over two thousand years so small a thing that we should be prepared so lightly to agree to its being buried and forgotten with, or without, insult? I am not sure that the first task in your work of *Midrash*, of seeking a new interpretation, is not the rehabilitation of the idea of the Diaspora.

This would involve – but if I were even to begin telling you what this to my mind would involve, I fear I should flutter the dove-cots, or rather rouse the lions; and, since I do not wish to mar the harmony of this joyous occasion, I sit down hastily with my best wishes for the institution and my congratulations to its founders.