

The Movements of Judaism and their Founders
RABBI MORRIS LICHTENSTEIN AND JEWISH SCIENCE
August 26, 2016

Shabbat shalom!

Well, here we are nearing the end of August, and though the temperature has again been in the upper 90's today, I figure in another four or five months things should start to cool down a bit.

Aside from the beginning of school – and of course Nathan's bar mitzvah tomorrow – the end of August also brings us to the end of this year's Summer Sermon Series, in which I've been presenting on some of the great religious movements of Judaism. What I've tried to show is that Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Hasidic, Jewish Renewal, and Humanistic Judaism have all grappled, each in its own way, with the challenge of adapting to the modern world while retaining the core values of Judaism; each has sought to inspire the spirit and elevate the soul. Each has struggled to find the best way to ensure Judaism's survival in a world filled with options, many of them attractive to American Jews eager to embrace modernity even at the cost of undermining their Jewish identity.

Such was the case with Christian Science, which in the early 1900's was expanding rapidly with its mixture of tolerance and spiritual insights. Mary Baker Eddy, a prolific author and nationally prominent speaker, had founded Christian Science in the late 1800's, as well as a newspaper – the Christian Science Monitor, in 1913. She also published innumerable pamphlets; her audience included both Jews and Christians, and her teaching that spiritual well-being had a direct impact on one's health made sense to a lot of people.

I have a stack of her tracts in my office; here's one from 1915, titled "Then the Full Grain in the Ear" – whatever that might mean – and here are some of her quotes: "Happiness is spiritual, born of truth and love. It is unselfish; therefore it cannot exist alone, but requires all mankind to share it." And: "The purpose of Christian Science is to turn the thought of all mankind from sin and distress to a better knowledge of that law of God which heals sin and distress. The spirit of Truth seeks out good where it may be found..." Who could object to that?

The answer is that Rabbi Alfred G. Moses objected. Rabbi Moses, serving in Mobile, Alabama – his father Rabbi Adolph Moses had been our rabbi here at Temple Beth Or –

felt that Judaism carried a similar message, and he felt compelled to respond to the growing influence of Christian Science. Exactly a hundred years ago, together with his colleague Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, they created the new movement of Jewish Science; within a few years Morris Lichtenstein and his wife Tehilla institutionalized the movement, founding the Society for Jewish Science, still active to this day. I had my own connection to Jewish Science, serving their main congregation in the NY area for a couple of years as part-time rabbi after my ordination in 1975.

One more historical footnote before I describe Jewish Science: Morris Lichtenstein, the founder and author of their basic texts and prayer books, died in 1938, and his wife Tehilla became their spiritual leader until her own death 35 years later, leading their congregation on the Upper West Side of Manhattan for those 35 years virtually as rabbi – except for the title – long before the first woman rabbi was actually ordained in 1972.

“Affirmative prayer” is a key to understanding Jewish Science. Adherents believe that prayer does not require belief in a supernatural God who can suspend the laws of nature. Rather affirmative prayer is considered to be a method to access our own inner powers – the divine within, so to speak – but not in a supernatural way. Rabbi Lichtenstein taught that the origins of affirmative prayer can be found in the Book of Psalms, and that affirmations are best offered in silence.

I remember well my experience with Jewish Science, including two sets of High Holy Days. Silence was indeed important, and their services included long periods of silent meditation – made it easier, actually, for me to conduct the services! I recall one gentleman, then in his mid-90’s, who attested that it was Jewish Science who had kept him alive.

Much like Christian Science, Jewish Science holds that prayer is not just the key to inner happiness, but also to physical well-being. Minimizing the role of ritual – which Reform Jews of the time felt to be a very attractive feature – Jewish Science emphasizes the power of “auto-suggestion.” But unlike Christian Scientists, Jewish Scientists are fine with seeking medical help, when necessary.

Rabbi Lichtenstein, in his books and talks, explained that “Jewish Science pursues no foreign Gods, nor is it antagonistic to any branch of Jewry. It calls to all the Jewish people, to all of them, who in the stress of modern life have felt the lack of spiritual blessings.” And he wrote: “Jewish Science is thoroughly, completely and uncompromisingly Jewish. Nor is it a cult. It has only one textbook and only one, and that is the Bible, the Holy Scriptures of the Jew.”

It seems to me that Jewish Science has much to commend it. We now know scientifically that there is indeed a close correlation between physical health and spiritual well-being. I have seen much evidence of that in my own rabbinate. And although a Jewish Scientist might be aghast to hear it, their teachings about spiritual health are also reflected well in the teachings of Hasidic Judaism and our Jewish mystical tradition, in terms of the unity of creation; the God within, and the *kavvanah*, or utterly focused devotion, which is far more important in prayer than any text we might use.

The Society for Jewish Science congregation in New York – one of several remaining in this country – holds “healing hours” each day. Today’s Reform Jewish communities, with all of their emphasis on social action and programming and education, increasingly have adopted healing services and the use of guided meditation and spiritual practices as part of what we need to do to reflect the spiritual needs of our people. Here in Montgomery, we introduced a healing service on Yom Kippur afternoon a couple of years ago; it was beautiful and very moving, and last year the number who attended was about double from the year before.

Jewish Science never attracted very many adherents. For starters, they had to convince American Jews that Christian Science was not for them. This became easier after the Christian Science Monitor and Christian Science generally turned increasingly anti-Semitic in the 1920’s. Jewish Science really thrived in the pre-war period, though the leaders of Reform Judaism – who, after all, had the most to lose (not there’s any competition) – called Jewish Science “twaddle” and “quackery.” But though thousands did respond to the movement’s teachings, sought out its rabbis and practitioners and listened to their radio broadcasts, their actual membership never passed a thousand.

Truth to tell, today’s Reform Judaism, and certainly the Jewish Renewal Movement I described a couple of weeks ago, have adapted and adopted most of what Jewish Science sought to teach us. Jewish Science had a mission to teach optimism, belief in the power of the individual, and the possibility that if people only had the right attitude, they could solve their life’s dilemmas. We are, whether we acknowledge the lineage or not, heirs to that teaching.

I think, by the way, that closing my Summer Sermon Series with Jewish Science precisely on the eve of Nathan McKinney’s bar mitzvah is fitting, given the way Nathan and his family have brought together so many streams of Judaism in their own lives, including the teachings of spiritual health and the power of positive thinking that have indeed long been a core part of our faith.