

ENVIRONMENT.

A SERMON BY RABBI EDWARD N. CALISCH

And all these curses will come and pursue thee and overtake thee, until they destroy thee, because thou hast not hearkened to the voice of God, to observe the commands and ordinances which he commanded thee.—*Deut. xxviii-45.*

MY FRIENDS :

In the discourse of last week we endeavored to make clear the power and force of heredity. We attempted to show its influence upon our lives, and to call to your attention the fact of the double duty of pure and righteous life, for the sake of those who come after us, as well as for our own. It was demonstrated how the true meaning of the blessing and the curse, lay not external to our acts and to our lives, but were an integral part of them, coming from them, as inevitably and as inexorably as effect follows cause. The choice of blessing or of curse, for ourselves and for lives yet unborn, lay in our hands.

There is one thing however that cannot be lost sight of in this connection; a something whose influence is as powerful, and whose existence is as much a factor in our lives as heredity itself. It, in fact, acts with heredity, sometimes intensifying the power of it, and sometimes, altogether negating it. That something is environment. Heredity and environment are the static and dynamic forces of existence. The one seeks ever to drive the race along the pathway of conformity to type with unbroken speed and unceasing regularity. The other holds it, checks it, diversifies and varies it, while between the two, good, honest, normal average is born.

What environment produces, heredity sometimes perpetuates and transmits through succeeding generations, to be opposed and mayhap nullified and replaced by new results from new environment.

The influence of environment has been manifest in all ages and in all activities of life.

Among the dumb animals we see traces of it on all sides. The same ineffable and fathomless Wisdom, that created and guides the universe, has laid the impress of its all-beneficent power upon even the lowest and tiniest of creatures. To each and all was given the power of conforming to conditions, of yielding to environment. The sightless fish in the caves of earth, the broad, spongy foot of the "ship of the desert," so fitted for traversing its sandy wastes, the tireless wing of the sea-gull, the sure and nimble foot of the mountain goat, the talons and beak of the bird of prey, are all of them evidences of the marvellous Grace, which fitted each creature to its environment. And man, no less than his dumb fellow-creatures, has been subject to environment.

For it has moulded men's habits, directed their thoughts, shaped their conduct, influenced their ideals, and made itself felt in even their religious conceptions.

As one writer has well said, "India is the predestined home of the contemplative. By no accident or artifice, but simply in consequence of its climatic conditions, India followed a path of a religious evolution, the ultimate outcome of which is the thought, that

conscious life is a burden, a fatal error of the creative power—a curse; while contemplation, meditation, inactivity, are the cardinal virtues, pointing the way to salvation from the limitation and load of conscious life."

Those familiar with the conditions of Asia Minor, Syria and Greece will have no difficulty in tracing the path of their respective religious thought.

In the narrower relations of individual life the results of environment are no less powerful and no less apparent. It affects our physiology, our mental processes, our moral growth.

You perhaps may recognize in some slight degree the influence that is exerted upon a child by his surroundings at home, by the school to which he goes, by his playmates, his schoolmates, his teachers, his neighbors, the streets through which he passes frequently, the street in which he lives, but you do not realize to its full intensity how these things react upon the spiritual life of the child, how the soul's health or disease, its growth or decay, all its changes for better or for worse, are being determined by the varying conditions, which encompass the child.

You speak of home training, of the good and healthy power of it, and you refer to the lessons taught, the admonitions given, the corrections or encouragements openly and purposely given, but you forget that this intended and palpable training has less effect by far than the influence which is exerted by the atmosphere of the home itself, unconsciously acting the child, and being all the more powerful, because of its non-recognition. The word unthinkingly spoken, in anger or in heated moment, the deed done under passionate impulse, the thoughtless gesture, the modesty of carriage, or the wantonness of conduct, these form the atmosphere of the home, and the real educational power of it.

That which is not intended for childish ears is just that which childish ears most frequently catch. That which they should not remember, is just that which is the longest retained. What parent or elder brother or sister of you has not been surprised by a child suddenly bursting out with a word, a phrase, a thought that you had never dreamed had been understood or heard by the child, but which had been caught, treasured up and now returned to you with the full force of abruptness? How many of you cannot recall a gesture, an act or a step that had been made by you, that you hoped the child had not seen, or if it had seen, had not understood or remembered? And yet that very act or gesture was more firmly impressed on the mind and heart of the child than many of the most laborious efforts of training.

A flower needs pure atmosphere, sunshine, breeze, warmth, moisture. If it be given these it will thrive and grow, and bloom into fragrance and beauty. Deny it these and it will be a sickly bud on a sicklier stalk. The most precious of all flowers, the sweet buds in the garden of humanity, need also pure atmosphere, clear, sweet air and warming sunshine, if they would thrive and grow into the fragrance and beauty of pure and well-ordered lives. Do you give it to them. Give them an atmosphere of pure and reverent thought, of true and modest speech, of noble motive and generous deed, and you will give them an environ-

ment for enduring blessing. But if you let the atmosphere be poisoned with irreverence and tainted with sin, if you let the dust of doubt, and vice and falsehood float in the sunshine of their lives, if in place of warm and vivifying affection and the life-giving breeze of healthy, honest action, you let the heavy and dull miasma of neglect and indolence blight the bud, then you are giving an environment that will be for a lasting curse. And the choice of it lies in your hands.

Nor does this apply to childhood alone. Adolescence and maturity are no less subject to the force and influence of environment. At home, abroad, in your pleasures and here even in this house of God are we affected by what is near us and around us. You come here, not to be amused, not to be entertained, not to be diverted,—but to pray, to seek communion with your Maker. For this you must bring with you earnest and serious thought, profound and reverent devotion. There can be no trifling, no levity, no thoughtless conversation, nor unwilling and reluctant presence. You must feel as did the psalmist when he said, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'let us go unto the house of God,'" (Ps. cxxii-1). There is the key-note of the melody that should fill and make up the atmosphere of the house of prayer. Let there be reverent joy and humble gladness. Let there be devotion and earnestness. Let those who enter feel at once the influence of sacred surroundings and the touch of holy environment. Nor let this alone be felt by you, do you each contribute your share thereto, and then will you realize the blessing of earnest and soul-uplifting faith.

May this be the grace of God, be for you all. May your homes be the abiding place of love and envired evermore by undisturbed peace.—Amen.

Good For the South.

In perusing the annual report of the Montefiore Keshet Home for the Aged and Infirm we experienced a sense of pride and gratification when we found that among more than forty inmates the entire South had furnished but one. Not that we behold in this fact a sign of prosperity and wealth; on the contrary, we know that the South has for several years felt more keenly the depression in trade and finance than the West and North. We do, however, feel proud of our people in this part of the country that they do take care of their old men and women, and that the relatives of indigent old people are not so eager to cast them off and to remove them from the family circle "to send them to the Cleveland Home." Many a sad history is connected with the life and experience of some of the inmates of that home, a history of base ingratitude and heartlessness, a history of imposition practiced upon the management of that noble institution. Also the local charitable institutions throughout the South deserve praise for the solicitude and generosity which they manifest towards the aged recipients of charity, enabling them, if they have no relatives, to live among their friends and townpeople in comparative ease and comfort.—*Jewish Spectator.*