

The First Verse of the Bible.

[Translated from the German of Dr. LIEBMAN ADLER by Rabbi EDWARD N. CALISCH.]

The heathens cannot accept the first verse of the Bible, because in their conception the gods were created "in the beginning." The "Thorahs" (scriptures) of the heathen world do not begin with a cosmogony, an account of the world's creation, but with a theogony, i. e. teachings concerning the creations of the gods; detailing how one god is born to the other.

בָּרָא "He created." Even this phrase is beyond the heathen. He would have said, "they created."

The heathen could not even have understood "they created," for to create means to make something out of nothing. This power the heathen did not give to his gods. He could only conceive them as giving form and shape to eternally existent matter.

We have reformed our prayer-book by putting the abstract conception of "salvation" in place of the material one of "saviour." The change of "they" created to "He" created was a reformation of greater importance and of far deeper meaning in its time.

The first three words of our Thorah, בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים "in the beginning God created," express a veritable revolution in the world of thought.

It is difficult to conceive how long it might have taken till the human understanding was sufficiently strengthened to comprehend the manifoldness of the creation in at least two conceptions, and to give expression to these conceptions in two words, שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ "heaven and earth."

After this first achievement of the understanding had been recorded in the first verse of the Bible, that then still left incomplete has become more complete, and many misconceptions have been corrected. Divine truths can never be clearly enough perceived, much less expressed and reproduced in words. We have even for the divine only a human mode of expression. Similarly, in the first verse of the Scriptures under consideration, אֱלֹהִים which is the combination of all the blind, senseless powers of nature that have been attributed to Deity, becomes later "the sole Creator, Sustainer of the World, a God of providence, intelligent, most high Being, free from all weaknesses and passions, who wishes no services for His own benefit, and only asks that men cherish the light of His truth and live virtuously. Likewise the misconceptions of שָׁמַיִם "heavens" have been corrected. The Isaiahic prophecy, "the heavens will vanish like smoke," (Is li-6) has been fulfilled. A heaven such as the ancients had we have not. Much less have we seven heavens.

It was in its day a great intellectual achievement to refer all creations back to two conceptions. In the course of time human thought grasped all creation in one conception, and has therefor only one word, universe—or the more expressive—cosmos.

When we lift up our eyes to the glorious firmament, which the ancients called heaven, we, no less than they, are filled with reverential awe. Our souls are no less attuned to joyous meditations as we think of the Creator of this grandeur, of this ether, which in shadowy

night glistens in indescribable beauty with countless radiant worlds and in which our earth aways like a feather. The firmament arouses in us, as did the thought of heaven in the ancients, emotions of reverence and veneration for the Ruler of the Universe, even though it be no longer to us, as to them, a fixed canopy, the nobler half of creation, a dwelling-place for the higher spirit-world. True, the word of God stands forever, but the conceptions of it change. The word שָׁמַיִם means to us what lies beyond the conception of the senses, what the spirit inexpressibly sees, what the heart inexpressibly feels. The animal part of mankind belongs to the earth;—his higher feelings and emotions, his ideal world, that which goes beyond the desire of mere animal enjoyment—thought, faith, hope, the yearning for a better knowledge of His essence and law, in order to live and strive in accordance with it—these are his heaven. To acquire what we need is earthly; but to acquire in honesty and integrity, even in the most strained conditions, to limit one's needs that honesty and integrity may not be endangered, that is heavenly. To live in marriage relation is earthly; but to live in love and truth, and peace and harmony with one another though it be a daily and hourly sacrifice, is heavenly. To be father or mother is earthly; but to rear children with all one's power and with many sacrifices, to lead them in the fear of God and the path of virtue, to be not only the joy of the household and the natural pride of parents, but to imbue them with the consciousness of their holy responsibility, to make them good men and good women, that is heavenly. To live for one's self and kin is earthly; but to deny one's self enjoyments that the needy may enjoy—to labor that the weary may rest, to plan that others may live, is heavenly. To go with the majority is earthly; but to oppose the masses in the cause of truth and better knowledge, to stand alone in righteousness like a rock against the thousands of heaving waves of public opinion that rage round about, while doctrines tremble and principles totter—that is heavenly. Cares for temporal welfare are earthly; but to strike for eternity and to sacrifice for immortality is heavenly.

This heavenly capacity is created as is the earthly. It was the creation of the first day, and, as with things terrestrial, the five succeeding days treat only of the development of the creation of the first day; likewise in the creation of things celestial, the development became later apparent.

Heaven, oh mankind, you carry in head and heart. Some have only a piece of a heaven, others have seven heavens. To one the heaven is clouded, gloomy, and dismal, to another radiant with glorious tints. Rabbi Akiba died as a martyr in unspeakable torture, but with seven heavens in his heart. Hadrian, his emperor, ended his life with his heart's heaven shrouded raven-black, though he had the supreme of earthly enjoyments. God created heaven and earth. But just as the earth became only gradually known to mankind, just as a large and beautiful portion of it was discovered only after thousands of years, and just as to-day there yet remains a great deal to be still discovered, so too in the heaven of the

heart, and mind, and social life, progress means to discover and clear off more of the heaven in us—a heaven of more knowledge, of more mind and heart-culture, of more patience, and brotherhood, and harmony in social intercourse, and in the intercourse of nations and empires.

This is the sevenfold light, the new heaven promised by the prophet of the Messianic period. Ever to strive to approach it is the duty of our earthly existence.

Petersburg.

The Montefiore Literary Circle elected the following officers at its last meeting:

President, Mr. E. Eigenbrun; vice-president, Miss Mary L. Rosenstock; secretary, Mr. Sol. Reinach; treasurer, Miss Senora Kadden. Mr. I. Cohen read a very able criticism prepared by him upon the debate at the previous meeting.

Miss Cora Reinach is spending the winter with friends in the North.

A lecture will be given in the near future under the auspices of the Montefiore Literary Circle for the benefit of the poor of Petersburg. Rabbi Edward N. Calisch, of Richmond will probably be the speaker of the occasion.

Miss Senora Kadden spent several days this week with friends in Richmond.

Notes by Our Travelling Correspondent.

Through the efforts of Mr. M. Kaufman, Chairman of the Charlottesville School Board, that city is about to open to the pupils the largest and most commodious public school building in the State. All grades will be accommodated in one building, arranged in the most approved manner, and equipped with the most recent appliances.

The liberality of the people of Charlottesville and Staunton in subscribing to THE JEWISH SOUTH far exceeded our expectations. Seven Jewish students are attending the University of Virginia.

Staunton has a neat synagogue.

Considering the number of Israelites in the town, there are very few children.

The beauty of the situation of Staunton, particularly impressed me, whilst the many spacious stores and handsome residences would do credit to a city of much greater population.

On last Friday we saw the beautiful vistas among the Blue Ridge Mountains as we sped along on the Chesapeake and Ohio train beneath a cloudless sky. But on our return Sunday, the mountains were enrobed with clouds, presenting withal fantastic aspects.

What a favored State is ours being both traversed by the mountains and washed by the sea.

J. L. E.

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