The Religious Vision of Rev. Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes

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(This is an article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel that originally appeared in a book he edited, *From Strength to Strength,* Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1998, pp. 21–28.)

Dr. Mendes served as Minister of Congregation Shearith Israel from 1877 through 1920. He continued to be associated with the Congregation as Minister Emeritus until his death in 1937. During the course of these 60 years, Dr. Mendes established himself as a remarkable communal leader, scholar, and author.

Born in Birmingham, England, Henry Pereira Mendes grew up in a family well-known for its history of producing religious leaders. Indeed, his father Abraham was Minister of the Jewish congregation in Birmingham. H. P. Mendes received his early religious education and inspiration from his parents and as a young man served as Hazan and Minister of the Sephardic congregation in Manchester. While in New York, he studied and graduated from the medical school of New York University. In 1890, he was married to Rosalie Rebecca Piza.

Dr. Mendes was proud to be the religious leader of the oldest Jewish congregation in North America. From this base, he promoted numerous communal and social ideals and causes.

He was one of the leading Orthodox rabbis in the United States. Although he was Sephardic, he won the good will of the entire Orthodox community, including the

Yiddish-speaking immigrants. He was a founder and the first president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (1898). He was also one of the founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary (1887), which he and his collaborators intended to be an institution that would produce English-speaking Orthodox rabbis.

While staunchly Orthodox, he worked with all Jews for the betterment of the community. He was among the founders of the New York Board of Rabbis and was one of the early presidents of the organization. In 1885, he helped organize a branch of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in New York. He also was instrumental in the founding of the YWHA in New York, as well as Montefiore Hospital and the Lexington School for the Deaf.

Dr. Mendes was proud of the fact that Theodor Herzl asked his cooperation in organizing the Zionist movement in the United States. Dr. Mendes was elected vice-president of the Federation of American Zionists and a member of the actions committee of the World Zionist Organization. He advocated “Bible Zionism” or “spiritual Zionism”—an idea of establishing a Jewish State founded upon the principles and ideals of the Jewish religious tradition.

A prolific author, Dr. Mendes wrote essays and editorials, children’s stories, textbooks, sermons, prayers, dramatic works, poetry, and commentaries. His writings were imbued with the love of the Bible.

Rabbi Bernard Drachman, a colleague of Dr. Mendes, described him as “an ideal representative of Orthodox Judaism.” He praised Mendes’ “absolute freedom…from anything approaching narrowness or sectarian bias within the Jewish community.”

Dr. Mendes served Shearith Israel with outstanding devotion. He was a champion of the synagogue’s traditions. At a time when reform and change were the popular catchwords, Dr. Mendes was an eloquent voice for tradition.

The religious vision of Dr. Mendes is reflected in the titles of his main books: *Jewish History Ethically Presented* (1895), *The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented* (1895), and *Jewish Life Ethically Presented* (1917). In 1934, he prepared a little volume of prayers and meditations for home use “to promote and facilitate the habit of prayer.”

Dr. Mendes’ religious outlook was deeply steeped in the Hebrew Bible. The verses of Scripture served as the basis of an ethical and compassionate way of life. In *The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented,* he demonstrated his method of thought.

He began each section with a citation from the Bible, and then provided the traditional lessons that were derived from the text. He then added his own elaboration of moral lessons that could be rooted in the biblical text. And then he offered a series of biblical quotations to close each section.

For example, in dealing with the third of the Ten Commandments (Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain), Dr. Mendes provided the traditional explanations of this commandment. It is forbidden to use God's name in a disrespectful way, for a false oath, or for any wrong purpose. Likewise, this commandment is violated whenever one says prayers without concentration and reverent devotion. Dr. Mendes added the ethical component: "We take His name in vain, or to no purpose, if we speak of God being good, just, merciful, etc., without trying ourselves to be good, just, merciful, etc." We must be loving, merciful and forgiving, in emulation of God's ways.

Dr. Mendes then offered a number of extensions to this commandment:

> We are children of God. We are called by His name. When we do wrong, we disgrace or profane His name. Hence a disgraceful act is called *Chilul Hashem*, a profanation of the Name. And just as all the members of a family feel any disgrace that any one of them incurs, so when any Hebrew does wrong, the disgrace is felt by all Jews. We are known as the people of God. We assume His name in vain unless we obey His Laws….We take or assume His name in vain when we call ourselves by His name and say we are His children or His people, while for our convenience or ease we neglect religious duties which He has commanded us. (*The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented,* revised edition, 1912, pp. 59–60)

In elaborating on the commandment to honor one's parents, Dr. Mendes stated:

> To honor parents, ministers of religion, the aged, the learned, our teachers and authorities is a sign of the highest type of true manliness and of true womanliness. Respect for parents is essential to the welfare of society…..Anarchy or the absence of respect for authority, always brings ruin. Respect for all the authorities is insisted upon in the Bible. (p. 64)

In discussing the commandment prohibiting murder, Dr. Mendes noted that “we may not kill a man’s good name or reputation, nor attack his honor. We do so when we act as a tale-bearer or slanderer.” He goes on to say that “we may not kill a man’s business….Respect for human life carries with it respect for anyone’s livelihood. We may not make it hard for others to live by reason of our own greed” (pp. 65–66).

Dr. Mendes constantly emphasized the need for religion to be a steady and constant force in one’s life. True religion is expressed not merely in ceremonials, but in our conduct in all aspects of our daily life. In his *Jewish Daily Life Ethically Presented* (1917), he taught that

> our religion thus requires threefold work from us: we must work for our own happiness, we must work for the happiness of the world we live in, and we must work for the glory of God. Our dietary laws mean healthy bodies and healthy minds to be able to do this threefold work. (p. 57)

He argued that the laws of kashruth, by governing everything we eat, add a spiritual and ethical dimension to this basic human need.

Dr. Mendes wrote.

> Our daily work, no matter how important or how menial, if we perform it conscientiously, becomes equivalent to an act of worship. It therefore means setting God before us as the One we desire to please by the faithful discharge of our daily duties. This kind of recognition of good faith, honesty and honor means religion. Conscientiousness is religion. We must therefore do our work conscientiously. We should derive spiritual happiness out of labor by recognizing that God consecrates labor. (p. 59)

Dr. Mendes often expressed his philosophy in witty epigrams. A number of these were collected by Dr. David de Sola Pool in his biography of Dr. Mendes. The following are some examples of Dr. Mendes’ wit and wisdom.

- In too many homes religion is a farce, not a force.
- I plead, let every man and woman privately commune with God to place his or her heart-needs before Him.
- I plead for Sabbath observance.
- The three greats R's: Reverence, Righteousness, and Responsibility.
- Democracy is the ideal form of government, but it needs ideal citizens.
- Music helps us find God.
- Let us have less fault-finding and more fault-mending.
- Speak to the young; but first to the old.
- To be accorded all of little Palestine is not too great a reward for having given the world the Bible.
- Peace for the world at last and the realization of reverence for God by all men. These are the essentials for human happiness. Zionism stands for them.

Dr. Mendes was an avid Zionist; the focus of his Zionism was the religious and spiritual revival of the Jewish people, so that a Jewish state would become a spiritual inspiration to the entire world. He felt that the goals of Zionism could not be accomplished unless the Jews themselves were faithful to their religious traditions. Moreover, he believed it was necessary to win the support and respect of the non-Jewish world. "That respect we can have only if we respect ourselves by respecting our religion. Here is true work for Zionists: to keep Hebrews true to Jewish life, Jewish law, Jewish sentiment" (letter of Dr. Mendes to Haham Gaster, July 21, 1903, published in *Tradition,* Fall 1995, p. 70).

In spite of his tireless efforts and his eloquent expositions, Dr. Mendes realized that many Jews were turning away from the Jewish religious traditions. Compromises in religious observance were being made for reasons of convenience or ideology. The level of serious Jewish learning was declining. He struggled with singular devotion to raise the Jewish people to a higher level of knowledge and observance, a deep-felt spirituality, a God-inspired ethical worldview.

In 1911, he delivered a sermon at Shearith Israel, after he had recovered from a serious illness. He reminisced about past challenges that he and the Congregation had faced together.

> In looking over the years that have sped, there are times when I think that I have failed to bring religion's holy teachings into the hearts of all this Congregation, and therefore I have failed to do His will.…I do know that I have failed to bring into the lives of all the members of the Congregation that spirituality which alone can make us all sons and daughters of God in the highest sense, that spirituality of life which makes us willing, eager, anxious to do His will.…It is true, and I thank God for it, that many of you are working hard to bring religion into actual life. You strive to have your children as loyal as you are, and as your parents before you were; you strive to bring sunshine into the lives of others; your communal and congregational activities are splendid.…But I repeat, I confess to failure in influencing the lives of those of this Congregation who rarely or never set foot in this holy building; who hold aloof from congregational and communal work; in whose homes Sabbath is forgotten, from whose homes all Jewish characteristics are banished; who forget that constant absence from Sabbath worship, gradually, insidiously, but invariably disintegrates the Jewishness of the home and of all its inmates, and invariably precedes that desertion from our religion which we understand by the expression "he or she has married out."… Let us both try to prove our gratitude to God by doing His will. Then, come sorrow, come trial, come defeat, come death itself, the God who alone knows the human heart, who alone can read the inmost soul, shall judge whether you and I have labored in vain, whether you and I have spent our strength for naught, and in vain—for surely our judgement shall be with the Lord and our work shall be before our God.

In his 60 years of association with Shearith Israel, Dr. Mendes faced many challenges and had many accomplishments. He was proud, yet modest; forceful, yet gentle; spiritual, yet practical. His memory has continued to influence and inspire the generations which have followed.

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