

MARY BAKER EDDY AND THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH SCIENCE

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In order to fully understand the thought of Jewish Science founders Rabbi Morris and Tehillah Lichtenstein, we need to examine the historical context in which they lived. In the 1920s in New York City, the Christian Science movement founded by Mary Baker Eddy was attracting many people, Christians and Jews alike, who were dissatisfied with the organized religion of their day. While many ministers and rabbis understandably regarded Mary Baker Eddy as a threat, the Lichtensteins did not respond in a merely defensive manner but sought to appropriate, as Jews, what they considered valid and universal in Christian Science. In this talk, I try to look at Eddy with a degree of *verstehen* or objective sympathy in order to grasp what made her such a powerful religious force.

Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) was an influential American religious leader, noted for her groundbreaking ideas about spirituality and health, which she named Christian Science. She formulated those ideas in her book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, first published in 1875. Four years later she founded the Church of Christ, Scientist, which today has a worldwide following. In 1908 at the age of 87, Eddy launched *The Christian Science Monitor*, a leading international newspaper, which has been awarded seven Pulitzer Prizes.

Mary Baker Eddy was a highly controversial figure in her day, lionized by her followers and demonized by her competitors. More recently, feminists have seized on her memory for their own purposes. So we must ask, who is the real Mary Baker Eddy, and what can Jewish Science learn from her story?

Born on a farm in Bow, New Hampshire, Mary Baker was intermittently ill as a child. By the time she was in her thirties, she had suffered the loss of her older brother and tutor, her first husband, and her mother. Due to poverty, she had to turn her son over to a friend to be raised, and when this friend soon moved West with the boy, Mary didn't see him again until he was an adult.

In 1853, at age 32, Mary married again. Her second husband, an itinerant dentist, with his long absences and philandering did little to ease her isolation. Along with depression, she continued to struggle with bouts of physical illness. As a result, she sought alternative forms of treatment, as conventional medicine was simply not restoring her health.

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In 1862, as the Civil War raged, Mary sought help from Phineas Quimby, a popular healer in Portland, Maine. Her health markedly improved under his treatment, which included a combination of mental suggestion and what might now be called therapeutic touch. She continued to learn all she could from him, and they ended up collaborating, with Quimby claiming that he learned as much from Mary as she did from him. For her part, Mary concluded that Quimby's methods were not divine, but secular techniques.

A turning point occurred in 1866, when a severe fall on an icy sidewalk left her in bed in critical condition. Mary was now 45 years old. Quimby had died just one month earlier so she could not turn to him for help. This latest of a long series of illnesses and tragedies in Mary's life might well have accelerated her downward spiral. Laying on her bed, in her dark night of the soul, she asked for her Bible. While reading the account of healing in the Book of Matthew in the New Testament (chapter 9, verses 1-8), she found herself suddenly well and able to get up out of bed on her own. It was at this moment, later called "the Great Discovery," that she discovered Christian Science.

The Bible story that had such a profound impact on Mary was that of Jesus healing a man who was paralyzed. First, Jesus addressed the man, saying, "Courage, my son! Your sins are forgiven!" Then Jesus said, "Get up, pick up your bed, and go home." So, "The man got up and went home...."

As in this Biblical narrative, Mary's great discovery begins with her own healing. For the next nine years, she studied the Bible intensely, engaged in a teaching and healing ministry and published *Science and Health* in 1875. In this book she marked out what she understood to be the science behind her healing method, a method that she called "divinely natural" and repeatable. She remained a member of her Congregational church, hoping to reform it from within. However, Mary was way ahead of her time, and the Protestant clergy rejected her teachings.

The second half of the 19th century was a time of scientific materialism, especially after Darwin's discovery of evolution. This Zeitgeist de-legitimized paranormal phenomena, and mainstream Christians were embarrassed by the stories of miraculous healing in the Gospels. Churches had become arid and rationalistic. Mainstream Protestants emphasized social activism and the ills of the new industrial society such as sweatshop labor conditions. They focused on the Kingdom of God on earth, not the Kingdom within.

Disappointed that the established churches would embrace her discovery, Eddy started her own, which grew rapidly. In 1879 she secured a charter for the Church of Christ, Scientist, established "to commemorate the word and works of our Master, which should reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing."

Mary viewed Jesus primarily as a healer, and not a human sacrifice for sin. Therefore, in Christian Science churches one will not find the cross on display. Because creation is made in the image of God (who is good and spiritual – not material), the reality of being is entirely good and spiritual – not material. In the Christian Science sanctuary in my neighborhood, there are no symbols on display but only the words front and center: "God is love." In Christian Science neither baptism nor the Eucharistic ritual are practiced.

Following the tradition of philosophical idealism and New England Transcendentalism, Mary Baker Eddy's understood God as Mind. The infinite Divine Mind, she taught, is incapable of

beholding evil, disease, or death. Evil and error are illusions. Because evil is the absence of good, it is nothing and thus unreal. Only Truth and good are real. Heaven and hell are conditions that occur in the here and now.

Illness is the result of fear, ignorance, guilt and sin. By eliminating the cause, the effect will disappear. The illusion of materialism ultimately yields to the reality of Spirit – the natural law of harmony which overcomes discord – making healing possible.

Prayer is not directed to petitioning God, but to the process of knowing, understanding and awakening by degrees to spiritual Truth. All things are possible for good through God by knowing, understanding, and prayer.

Over the years Mary taught her system of healing to hundreds of women and men, who in turn established successful healing practices across the United States and abroad. In 1877 she married one of her students, Asa Gilbert Eddy, who gave her the name by which she became best known: Mary Baker Eddy.

Mark Twain, who most historians call an atheist or at most a Deist, had a surprisingly high assessment of Eddy. He wrote, "...it is thirteen hundred years since the world has produced anyone who could reach up to Mrs. Eddy's waist-belt. In several ways she is the most interesting woman that ever lived, and the most extraordinary." [Gill, p. xi]

The popularity of Christian Science caused other religious leaders to challenge the new movement. Reform Rabbi Stephen Wise, claimed that unlike Judaism, Christian Science tells its adherents that one can BE well instead of insisting that they DO well. Wise's major objection to Christian Science was that it required no new duties and made no new demands. He wrote, "This is the aim of religion—not to save people from pain or to spare them burdens but to make them bear every burden and endure suffering with courage and dignity and nobleness."

On the other hand, others felt a need to take a more dialogic approach to Christian Science. Perhaps it had become popular due to a deficiency within ones own congregation. Such was the attitude of the founders of Jewish Science, namely, to recognize the truth within Christian Science and rediscover it within the Jewish tradition.

In her book, *Applied Judaism*, in the chapter, "How to Heal Yourself," Tehillah Lichtenstein wrote:

"It is the chief aim of Jewish Science to satisfy the strivings of the soul, to make it a true mirror of God, Bodily health, mental health, emotional health are essential for the full realization of the life of the spirit, and therefore the healing of the body as well as the healing of the soul are part, or should be part, of the ministrations of religion....and both are manifestations of the love and goodness of God. Jewish Science has accepted its responsibility, and, with gratitude, has shown its followers the way to health through an understanding of the nature of God." (*Applied Judaism*, pp. 202-203)

In mid-life Mary Baker Eddy was to transform her life from one of chronic illness and sadness to one of health, joy, and religious leadership. She was one religious leader who could justifiably say, "I was healed first, before I sought to heal others." Consider that Mary lived at a time when women could not vote and were generally barred from pulpits, seminaries, and the medical

profession. She continued her work until the ripe old age of 89. Two years before her death, responding to “yellow journalism” that hounded her (the tabloids of her day), she started *The Christian Science Monitor*, designed “to injure no man, but to bless all mankind.”

Mary Baker Eddy passed away on December 3, 1910. She was buried at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Hundreds of tributes appeared in newspapers around the world, including *The Boston Globe*, which wrote, “She did a wonderful—an extraordinary work in the world and there is no doubt that she was a powerful influence for good.”

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