

1954
Kol Nidre

Days of Awe

Our fast of Yom Kippur has begun and for some twenty-five hours we will mortify our bodies and deny them food and drink. Some Jews will even abjure sleep and remain awake all night reading the psalms and studying Torah. Yet, friends, one misconception I must correct. Too many of us are under the impression that the fast is punishment for sins we have committed. This conception is not authentically Jewish. One of my own great ancestors, Rabbi Ezekiel Landau of Prague, author of the classic “Nodah B’ yihudah,” protested vehemently against Jews who deem it important to torture themselves on the Day of Atonement and even add to the forms of suffering already required by the Law. Rabbi Landau argued that we fast only to induce that feeling of physical weakness and helplessness that will in turn induce submission of the soul to God and feelings of remorse for sin. The tormenting of the body for our sins is not penitence. Only masochists punish themselves. Judaism, on the other hand, seeks only that we cultivate the mood in which we may readily recognize our personal inadequacy, confess our sins and resolve never to commit them again.

Thus, friends, let us understand a basic truth. The purpose of the fast is to create a mood - a mood of helplessness and dependence upon God. And I know of no message that needs to be stressed more in our generation.

For let us ask ourselves - why isn’ t our generation as religious as generations that have preceded us? What has changed in human nature that makes us seek God so much less than our ancestors did? We are not all great intellectuals. And even among the great intellectuals of the past there were also many pious, devout people. The greatest of scientists and philosophers not only sought

God but prayed to Him. Yet we, who are neither as learned nor as profound, can get along for years without religion. And even when we do attend the synagogue occasionally, it is usually to perform a duty. We do not want to be conspicuous by our absence, or we do not want it said of us that we are evading our obligation to the Jewish community.

What has happened to us, friends, is not that we have become so much more philosophical than our ancestors were, but rather that our mood has changed. Emotionally we are different - and not intellectually superior. For basic in religious experience, basic in faith, is man's feeling of helplessness, man's feeling of personal inadequacy. Our ancestors had this mood. The problems of life and death, the challenge of raising children, even the need for making a living made them feel humble, and in their humility they craved guidance from God. But we, their children, are never humble.

What can't we do? We are masters of our fate and captains of our destiny. We control the air above and the earth beneath. We not only fly; we even make clouds and hope someday to dispel them as well. Perhaps we will soon engage in interplanetary transport and dominate the universe. The resources of the earth we magnify - even atomic power is at our command. We are proud of our achievements. Who did it all? We! We, with the might of our arms and the genius of our brains! Who needs God any more? Instead, man sits on God's throne. Man is king. And what appeal can religion have for us? On Yom Kippur we recite in our prayers a contrast between *Melech Elyon*, the Supreme King, and man, the *melech ebyon*, the lowly, pauperized king, but we do not mean what we say. We are, in fact, not sure that there is any God but ourselves. That we ourselves are gods we do not doubt.

That is why religion has no appeal to us. We are of an altogether different temperament than our forbears. They were humble; we are arrogant. They felt the need of God; we can get along without Him. We know how to do for ourselves all the things which once prompted man to search for God. Only when we are about to die do we, perhaps, realize that for once there is something we ourselves cannot control and we turn to God. But until we are about to die, we know it all and can do it all. And deaf are our ears to the prophet's demand that we walk humbly before our Maker.

Therefore, I say to you, friends, that the significance of this day lies not in the fact that we are to punish ourselves. Nay, this holy day is to induce a mood - a mood of humility and a mood of helplessness. As we become weak and frail in body, we are to learn that man is not king of the universe but rather a stupid, blundering fool who has learned to play God, and because he played God so long and so well, he now stands on the brink of his own destruction. Humble men don't go to war. Humble men don't seek world domination. Humble men also inspire humble children who do not crave the excitement of juvenile delinquency and even murder. Humble men are happy to share with others - for they know not when they themselves will be in need. But we are not humble. We rule the universe - we have no need of God.

If you agree thus far, my dear and beloved congregation, and you are prepared to tolerate still more my preoccupation on these High Holy days with the nature of religious experience, then let us ponder - What is it that died within us that has made us so arrogant? I cannot deny that ours is the right - even the duty - to conquer the universe. I cannot deny that ours is the right - even the duty - to end drought and disease. Yes - most decidedly yes. But, when in ancient times men made great discoveries, they felt something we do not feel. We simply have no sense of awe. We don't know what it is to stand before a grand spectacle - a beautiful sunset or a breathtaking Grand Canyon, and with awe, hail the Creator and His Creation. We don't know what it is to hold a baby in our arms and in awe meditate upon the miracle of a tiny egg grown into a live, pulsating, loving human being. We don't know what it is to fly in the atmosphere and in awe regard the vastness of space and our puny size by comparison. We don't know what it is to split an atom and in awe confess that we are like passing shadows before the Supreme Being who designed and made the atom.

We know more about nature than our ancestors did. But they stood in awe of what little they knew. We who know so much more ought to be even more impressed with God than they. But instead we become impressed with ourselves. We become impressed with what we accomplished - as if we created the energy in the atom - as if we created the process of gestation - as if we created the planets we shall soon traverse!

And without humility, there can be no awe, and without awe there can be no reverence. What respect do we or our children have for anything past, present or future? What respect for parents? What respect for sacred traditions or sacred objects? We all presume that we know more than our ancestors did. Why then should we revere them? We read the Bible and the prayer-book. For our parents it all made sense. But they were primitive! We have out-grown them. We do not want to accept their nonsense. And our children imitate us. We have no respect for our forbears and our children in turn have no respect for us. Who pauses to think that perhaps great wisdom and invaluable experience is being conveyed to us through an ancestral heritage which we might fathom if we had the humility and the reverence to study and master it!

And this, my friends, is the significance of the Days of Awe. Humility and reverence are their goals. Let us ask ourselves frankly, honestly - can we capture the mood? And if we do capture the mood, how will we retain it? What can we do to hold it for our daily living - and as an example for our children?

I haven't the whole answer, my friends. But two institutions remain in Jewish life whose principal goals are to induce reverence - the Jewish home and the Jewish synagogue. And alas, how these two institutions are losing their character in these days of arrogance and materialistic values. Every Jewish home was once a shrine. You entered it via a *Mezuzah* which signified that it was dedicated to the love of God. Its table was an altar. Salt was on it as a reminder of the salt that always reposed on the altar at Jerusalem. You approached the table with hands ritualistically washed as the priests wash their hands before they bless the Congregation of Israel. You ate and you drank only after having thanked God for your blessings, and when you had finished eating, you thanked Him again. You prayed before you retired for sleep and you prayed when you awoke. And even as parents now remind their children to brush their teeth, Jewish mothers once reminded their children that all that they were and are and ever will be was due to a great Creator whom we were to revere all our lives. Fathers studied Torah with their loved ones, inquired about what was happening at the Cheder, and sometimes would themselves

communicate a beautiful thought or memory from their fathers or grandfathers. Children did not hail their fathers as the “old man” or their mothers as the “old lady.” The table was not a place from which you hurriedly ran, especially on a Friday night, for a date or a movie. Home was not just an address and a place to park your car. Yes, our homes are more beautiful than ever, but they are houses, not homes, quarters not shrines.

And alas, the synagogue too is not what it once was. Synagogues have become big institutions without reverence. Generally they have become big and gaudy - with God playing less of a role than the rich patron, and prayer heard less often than idle gossip and even malicious slander. Thank God, our congregation has resisted the trend. We have striven hard to make our services inspiring. We have tried to make our services induce reverence. We have tried to teach Jews to respect and reverence a shrine of the Lord. We have tried to make the prayers moving and the sermons delivered from the pulpit a stimulus for reverence of the tradition of our people. But even the influence of our synagogue has not penetrated all the homes of our members.

On this goal let us meditate as we fast and let us recapture our sense of awe for ourselves and our children, for our homes and our synagogues, for America and all humanity, Amen!