

*Rosh Hashanah 1957*

*Helping God to Use Us*

Some time ago, it was my privilege to discuss religion with a number of young people. They were all devout and observant. I asked them whether they had ever considered what approach they would take to convince others to share their views and live as they live. What ideas would they have to communicate to those who differed with them in order to establish a basis for belief in God and Torah? One suggested that it would be necessary first to convince an irreligious person that there is a God. If one could but carry conviction with regard to the existence of God, then everything else that religious living required would follow from the one premise. Another suggested that it would be most important to convey to a non-believer a belief in the existence of a soul, the belief that there exists independently of the body a spiritual essence which could survive the body after death. Particularly in an age which is so preoccupied with psychosomatic medicine and the interdependence of body and spirit, it was necessary to indicate that while there may be this interdependence, there nonetheless is an entity which survives the physical substance of man. This person felt that if conviction with regard to the existence of the soul could be communicated to the irreligious, they, too, would accept the truths and the practices of religion more readily. The third youth indicated that it was difficult to communicate conviction with regard to the existence of God or soul, but the one point which he would stress most is that God communicates with man, that God reveals Himself unto man. This premise is especially important to Judaism, for without the belief in Revelation, the Torah would lose much of its binding power.

The answers which the children gave me were very impressive. However, I shocked them when I told them that I would start with none of these approaches. I told them that I would begin with an

altogether different premise. I would want to convince the non-believing Jew first and foremost that the Jewish people as a people have served a unique purpose on the face of the earth; that they have served this purpose even unwittingly; that they have served this purpose most often without even participating in the process; and that by merely being Jews, they have played a unique and significant role in human history. If I could but convince people of this unique role of the Jewish people, I could then proceed to ask them who gave the Jewish people that role. Once I had convinced them that the role was given unto them by some Force beyond themselves, I would be in a position to bring conviction with regard to the existence of God and the existence of a spiritual substance in a person which might constitute the basis for the independent existence of a soul. I could also explain the unique role of the Jewish people by reference to a unique work, our Torah, given unto the world by God.

Friends, it is precisely this thought that I should like to convey to you this morning in my message for the new year. I should like to have you share with me the conviction that the Jewish people, whether they will it or not, have always played a unique role in human history and that they are still playing it 'Twere as if from time immemorial, we, by merely being Jewish, were to serve as the gadfly of the conscience of the world. 'Twere as if we were an irritant, a challenger, a heckler, to what in every age has been the accepted God for worship or the accepted philosophy for living. Abraham, our first patriarch, served that very purpose in his day. Everything he said and did represented a challenge to the prevailing ideals of his time. But also after Abraham, the same situation prevailed. Let us take Rome, as an example. There was a time that Rome dominated virtually the entire civilized world and the Romans represented a point of view that was progressive. They boasted that they did not interfere with the religious convictions of any of the peoples that they conquered and ruled. They were experts in international law and administration. They were empire builders. In the achievement of imperial purposes, they wanted the people under their control to enjoy a modicum of autonomy, provided they paid homage to the central authority at Rome. This was a form of international organization which was

so successful that for eight centuries peace was preserved in the Mediterranean world. That peace became known as the Pax Romana. Yet, friends, as we study Roman history, we discover that while the system was acceptable and workable for all peoples, there was one notorious exception. The Jews could not be made to fit into the system. This central authority ultimately called for its adoration and worship. What started as a democracy, ultimately became monarchy and empire. And because Jews could not accept the respectable thesis of the day, Jews were persecuted, and the central authority of Rome felt impelled to suppress the Jewish religion. We had many martyrs in that age, many of whom we memorialize in our High Holy Day prayers.

Then the Roman empire collapsed and there came in its stead the age in which Christianity dominated the scene. This was the faith of the Mediterranean world, the faith that presumed to bring unto all humanity a God of love who wanted human brotherhood. This was the faith that regarded the Old Testament as inadequate, because it did not sufficiently stress the importance of love. This was the faith that preached the gospel of loving one's neighbor as one's self. Again, however, with one exception — love for everyone but Jews. By merely being Jews we were again a gadfly and an irritant. The love could not extend unto the one people. On the other hand, there had to be discovered some kind of rationalization for the hate that persisted in the hearts of Christians for the Jewish people. This rationalization ultimately took form in the Christian idea that Jews should suffer, because this is evidence of their sin in rejecting the son of God as the Lord. Somehow the Jews again became a gadfly to the respectable thesis of the Christian world that it represented the God of love and the ideal of brotherhood.

With respect to Mohammedanism, we have the same situation. Even when we come down to the age of the Reformation — the revolt against Rome and its church in the days of Martin Luther, we discover that Martin Luther complained about the way in which the Catholic had treated the Jew. He thought that it would have been so much better had the Jews been treated with kindness. With kindness, the Jews might have become converted to Christianity. However, when Martin Luther, presumably a man of

toleration, became annoyed that even his gospel had failed and that his toleration had yielded no results with Jews, he became as bitter an anti-Semite as ever the world had known. From the very beginning of Protestantism, too, we have been an irritant and a gadfly, from Martin Luther down unto the present, when many Protestants meet in international conventions and wonder whether the existence of the State of Israel is not a threat to their ultimate hope that Jews will be converted to Christianity. From Martin Luther to the present, we have been a challenge. 'Twere as if we were a perennial heckler of the rest of the world, a perennial heckler asking them whether they really mean what they say, whether they really are sincere with regard to the convictions they profess having.

That applied, however, not only to Christian groups. We can turn to philosophies that are presumably not at all committed to a religious ideology. There came the age of democracy with its glamorization of equality and fraternity. There was to be absolute equality irrespective of color, or creed. Yes, in a measure that has been achieved, and we Jews are certainly passionately devoted to the cause of democracy. We are passionately devoted to it because of our own tradition, because the ideals of democracy are derived from the heritage and the ethic that are ours. But somehow even into the democratic scheme of things, the sincerity of the democratic peoples is challenged by this perennial heckler, the Jewish people, the gadfly of the conscience of the world. Absolute equality there shall be for everyone, but for Jews. With regard to Jews, there is always a problem. There always had been a problem and the problem continues. The United States, for example, our own beloved country, has decided that it must do everything in its power to prevent communism from taking over other nations, and so we are providing arms to all the nations of the earth that promise to resist Communism — to all nations in Africa, Asia, and Europe, wherever they may be — to all countries but one. The State of Israel. Somehow the State of Israel is in a different position, and our State Department finds itself in a position where it can hardly explain the situation. But so it is! One step further. When was it ever heard that the American uniform worn by all American soldiers should not be entitled to respect by everyone? The

American uniform was always a badge of pride and honor. Everyone who wore it knows that it was so described and so glorified. Yet the American uniform can be a badge of honor for everyone, but a Jewish soldier who, when wearing it, may, nonetheless, be denied an opportunity to serve his country in countries like Saudi Arabia, where the United States is willing for oil to sacrifice the dignity and the honor of its uniform, when it is worn by Jews. So even in democratic countries, we Jews have been a heckler.

I do not say that we have been the only heckler, but throughout history we have been the most consistent and the most perennial of all the hecklers to the conscience of the world. This summer it was, alas, my sad privilege to have visited in a country with a totalitarian philosophy, but still a philosophy committed to the equality of all peoples, a philosophy committed not only to political and civic equality, but to economic equality as well — equality for everyone, no matter what his national or ethnic background. But again, not for Jews. Jews are in a different position. Somehow the Jews even there became the hecklers, the gadfly to the conscience of the Communist leaders. Perhaps it was because Stalin did want to become what the emperors of Rome once aspired to become—gods of the universe, that he had to depress the condition of Jews. Jews from the time of Abraham were the professional hecklers of all those who pretended to diety. Perhaps that was his reason. But again, by simply being Jews, we had become a gadfly to the conscience of the Soviet Union. It was not because Jews weren't willing to embrace communism. Indeed, it was not because Jews weren't willing to do everything that was expected of them, even if it meant forgetting God and their religion. However, simply by being Jews, we constituted a challenge to the powers that be.

Fortunately, we Jews are not the only one to have recognized our unique role. About a century ago, a very distinguished senator of South Carolina, a non-Jew, recognized this same role that we Jews were playing in human history. I quote from a speech which he delivered. "There is a river in the ocean. In the severest droughts it never fails, and in the mightiest floods it never overflows. The Gulf of Mexico is its fountain, and its mouth is in the Arctic seas. It is the Gulf Stream. There is in the world no other

such majestic flow of waters. Its current is more rapid than the Mississippi or the Amazon, and its volume more than a thousand times greater. Its waters, as far out from the Gulf as the Carolina coasts, are of an indigo blue; they are so distinctly marked that their line of junction with the common sea-water may be traced by the eye. Often one half of a vessel may be perceived floating in the Gulf Stream water, while the other half is in the common water of the sea, so sharp is the line and such the want of affinity between those waters, and such too, the reluctance, so to speak, on the part of those of the Gulf Stream to mingle with the common water of the sea.

“This curious phenomenon in the physical world has its counterpart in the moral. There is a lonely river in the midst of the ocean of mankind. The mightiest floods of human temptation have never caused it to overflow, and the fiercest fires of human cruelty, though seven times heated in the furnace of religious bigotry, have never caused it to dry up, although its waves for two thousand years have rolled crimson with the blood of its martyrs. Its fountain is in the gray dawn of the world’s history, and its mouth is somewhere in the shadows of eternity. It, too, refuses to mingle with the surrounding waves, and the line which divides its restless billows from the common waters of humanity is also plainly visible to the eye. It is the Jewish race.”

Thus it appears that God willed that we play this role, and anyone who studies the history of our people must be impressed with this fact. Now, friends, if we are playing this role, and we cannot help playing this role, then it must be that God has willed it. Indeed, God willed it long ago as His Torah revealed that we would serve this purpose. The truth of Torah is thus vindicated by history and not by faith alone, and the least that one should ponder on the new year is a return to Torah, the book that indicated precisely what would happen in years to come. While our ancestors accepted it on faith, we now have the evidence of universal history to substantiate its authenticity.

Yet, friends, it is more than our role in human history that I want to demonstrate to you this morning. I want to call to your attention something equally significant. If, whether we will it or not, we must play this role, isn’t it much to be preferred that we play

this role consciously rather than unconsciously? If God is going to use us as His tool, should we not prefer to become that tool with our fullest accord? Shouldn't we prefer that we become His partner in His use of us, instead of being nothing else but the unwitting instrument of His design? This to me is the significance of the great story which we invariably read on the new year festival — the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac.

Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, in proof of his devotion. Abraham could have argued with God. After all, it was God who had promised that it would be through Isaac that Abraham would transmit God's will to posterity. Yet, Abraham did not argue. Abraham had already been chosen as the instrument for God's Will and he was prepared to make himself a part of that Will. He was prepared to place his own will in tune with the Will of God. For that reason, he climbed Mt. Moriah with profound resolve to perform God's bidding. That is the theme which we recount on every new year festival. We, too, ought to learn to place our wills in tune with God's. In the final analysis, He shall use us. He has used us, and He is using us. Won't our lives as Jews have so much more meaning if we help God do with us that which He wants done with us? Won't we even understand His ways better if we make ourselves a part of them? Even in suffering, whose suffering has more meaning — the suffering of those whom God uses against their wills, or the suffering of those who are sharing with God the goals that he sets forth?

Most people choose the current of their environment. Jews who are intelligent choose the current which is God's. God has made of us a gulf stream among the peoples of the earth. Let us be part of that gulf stream, leading lives that are exceptional in holiness, as well as exceptional in dedication.