

Delivered in 1962 on Yom Kippur eve

The Sin of Habit

On this holy night of the year I want to discuss with you only one of the many sins with regard to which we must do penitence. That sin can be described generally as the sin of habit. True it is that human beings can hardly be expected to dispense with habit altogether. If we did not rely on habit we would find living well nigh impossible. Moreover, there are good habits which we ought to certainly cherish, and there are bad habits of which we ought try to rid ourselves. The sin that I want to discuss, however, is the sin that is ours because we so often do the habitual, because we indulge in routine performance, because we constantly accept sameness without seeking elements of novelty.

On the New Year I discussed with you one difference between human beings and animals. Animals have no enormous potential for good and evil as human beings do. Tonight I want to call your attention to the fact that another major difference between human beings and animals is that animals cannot help being creatures of habit and instinct. We human beings, however, can transcend the habitual, the monotonous. We can introduce diversity. We can reconsider a situation and adopt a new course, a new fashion, a new pattern, and even mould a new image. It is this creative capacity with which God endowed us that makes us superior to the beast. Yet in so many ways we reveal our basic animality, and without thoughtfulness, without inspiration, without individuality, we yield to the habitual.

I need not tell you that there is no woman in this congregation who would appreciate or respect an annual gift which her husband would give her on her birthday or anniversary if the gift came as a matter of routine, because the husband had left a standing order with his secretary to remember the occasion and place an order for some souvenir. No parent would appreciate this kind of re-

membrance from a child, nor would even a teacher cherish an expression of esteem from a pupil that was not spontaneous and not the result of some creative act on the part of the donor. Yet, to such an extent are we the creatures of habit that even intellectuals frequently find themselves adopting courses of action and embracing patterns of thought that are habitual. Even when circumstances change and the realities warrant a new look and a new approach, they find it difficult to extricate themselves from that which they had been doing for a long time. Take for example in our own day, a very great spirit in India and a distinguished religious leader, Ghandi, who had become aware of the effectiveness of the hunger strike in his strife with the British Empire. He was effective. Yet when he was asked about the plight of Jews in Germany he did not have the depth of heart or mind to consider a different kind of situation and make a new proposal. He thought that what the Jews should have done was simply to engage in a hunger strike against Hitler. He had one solution for the world's ills. Little thought did he give to the fact that while he was warring against the British Empire, he at least had a foe that had some respect for moral law, while Jews were engaged in a war with a foe who would have taken great delight in beholding their starvation. As a matter of fact, the Nazis themselves introduced starvation as a weapon for the extermination of the Jew and there was no mercy and there was no compassion. Similarly, Bertrand Russell, a distinguished philosopher, developed certain programs for pacifism during the first half of the century. His approach made sense in the 1930's - it made less sense in the 40's, and it makes no sense whatever in the 1960's when we are dealing with a foe who has no respect whatever for any of the values which we cherish as civilized human beings. Yet, Bertrand Russell with his sympathizers in the British Empire can only resort to techniques to which he was committed at an earlier date in his career as a philosopher and a political thinker, and somehow he cannot alter his position even in the face of a new reality.

In politics we encounter the same inability to change policies. The United States is engaged in a very desperate cold war with the Soviet Union. On every front we are losing. Yet our State Department finds it impossible to give its position a "new look." Al-

most all its personnel remain prisoners of habit. At Santa Barbara, in the Center for Democratic Institutions, new ideas are being advanced. We are urged to change our conceptions even of foreign aid. We are being cautioned that the word "democracy" cannot mean to Africans and Asiatics what it means to us. And yet with respect to these continents we are deporting ourselves as if we were dealing with Western Europe in the first half of this century. It is very difficult for even great men to change their point of view; they become addicted to a particular course and are ultimately plagued by sameness, by routine attitudes which have become very much a part of their lives.

Now in religion this plague has become one of our greatest curses. There are many who look upon Orthodoxy as requiring Jews to be the creatures of habit and routine. This is not true. On the other hand, while there are rituals in Orthodoxy that are mandatory, Orthodoxy tries to stimulate every Jew to inject an element of personal creativity into his performance. Routine and habit are deadly to the religious life and experience of all people, and especially to Jews. Orthodoxy would like to have every Jew inject into his Sabbath and his festivals an element of newness. Every Seder service should yield a new question and a new answer. Our prayers must not be perfunctory and every communion with God should always have some spontaneity about it. That is why we have a mandate in Talmud that one may not make his prayer a matter of habit. And that is why, as one of my colleagues, Dr. Melech Schechter, so well said, even our recitations of sins we do as a matter of habit and we do not mean what we say. That is why our Sages were wise enough to include in the list of sins one which deals specifically with the routine recitation of sins committed, the routine confession, the meaningless mouthing of words.

Our Sages tell us that this emphasis on newness is the very heart of Judaism. (See, for example, the emphasis in the daily prayer on blessing God for renewing each day.) It is for this reason that we fix all our religious festivals on the basis of the movements of the moon which is seen anew every month. It is because of the fact that in this instance we can, with our own eyes, behold an experience of newness in nature that we compute our calendar on

the basis of that phenomenon. Moreover, our Sages say that this has been the unique capacity of the Jew. No matter how many times we felt defeated and frustrated, we were reborn and started anew. This capacity to introduce newness into one's life is therefore uniquely human and uniquely Jewish and we are not being human when we so live that all of our performance is the product of routine.

Now, on this holy night of the year, I am making a simple plea to everyone to become a human being who can transcend the habitual and rethink a situation, so that in everything we do there will be one aspect, one nuance, which represents the product of our own ingenuity. And in no area is there more routine performance than in the area, alas, of Jewish philanthropy. This should have been an area that requires constant rethinking of our own situation and other people's situations; our abilities and other people's needs; and yet in almost every instance when one approaches a Jew for a contribution his immediate question is, "What did I do last year?" Patterns are established at one time and no matter how needs and circumstances may have changed there is sameness in that which we do. I cannot tell you what tragic consequences this commitment to sameness can have.

This was brought home to me most dramatically when in Norway this past summer I became aware of a tragedy which is almost too dramatic for mere verbalization. In one of the concentration camps where Norwegian Christians and Norwegian Jews were being held there was a pile of some two hundred corpses. The surviving inmates of the camp noticed, however, that there was one hand moving in the pile of cadavers. They rushed over to the Nazi commander and said that someone was still alive. The Nazi commander said he could do nothing about it; he had already reported two hundred dead; all the papers had been made out; everything had been entered in accordance with the prescribed routine and he could not undertake to make a change. The hand continued to move, and finally one man said that he had an idea: there was another pile of cadavers in regard to which no report had as yet been prepared - why couldn't they take a cadaver from the unreported pile and exchange it for the human being who still lived? That was done - permission was granted, and that

human being still lives and is a very distinguished citizen of the community of Oslo, Norway.

Friends, we may loathe and denounce the Nazis for their unrelenting discipline and the meticulous manner in which they follow through on every routine. Even in a matter of life and death they do not care to deviate. But why should we loathe and denounce them when we are so similar? So often we, too, are made aware of hands that are moving, hands that beg for rescue, hands that beg for succor, hands that plead for salvation. Yet, our response is one of habit and routine. We are made aware of the fact that a new situation has developed in one country or another, a new need, or a new crisis, new refugees, new escapees. Hands are moving, hands are clamoring, but each year we give the same amount. We learn from the UJA, or from Federation, for example, of new needs, new problems. Yet our response is the same. We invariably ask what did we do last year. Within our own congregation, too, needs change. The number of scholarship cases may increase; the number of children using our club department may increase; the complexion of a community changes. There may be more and more underprivileged. There may be more and more low-cost housing, and there may be a greater demand on our personnel and our facilities. But no matter how different the present may be, so many of us are creatures of habit. We give the same amount, year in and year out, without any consideration of changes.

Friends, with regard to the sin of habit, I ask you to do penance.

However, it is not principally with regard to money that I make my plea. I make it principally with regard to our religious life. The one thing that prevents so many of us from coming closer to our faith, closer to God, closer to the tradition, closer to our great ancestral heritage of learning, is habit. We are embarrassed to make a change. Sometimes it isn't even laziness or indolence. It is simply embarrassing to us to have anybody think that we are going to do something unusual - that we are going to do something different - that we are going to do something that our neighbors and friends and associates do not do. And that prevents us from doing the right thing even when we feel we want to do the right thing, even when we want to start embracing so much from which we

have heretofore been estranged. And that is why I plead with you. Learn to transcend habit, learn to transcend routine. Remember that God endowed us with a spark for creativity, for originality, for novelty, and let us introduce some of it into our own lives. How enriched our lives will become! This is my plea to you on this holy night of the year. Let us make the New Year really *new*.