

Rabbi's Message
"Sucker Sermon"
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Fifth Avenue Synagogue

Days of Awe

I shall never cease to marvel that Jews associate their most solemn festivals of the year — the New Year and Day of Atonement — with fatalism. Fatalism is not only Hellenic rather than Hebraic in origin but it is also the very antithesis of what the holidays are designed to inspire. If the holidays have any meaning at all it is that every man is the master of his fate and captain of his destiny. What we cannot rationalize or control we attribute with a sense of frustration and resignation to God, to “mazel”, to fate. But our tradition insists that almost everything is within our power — even God responds to our will, our thoughts, our actions. It is this theme that I deem most important for many of our contemporary dilemmas — personal, national and international. It begs for reaffirmation today and continuous application to numerous problems that besiege us.

That Jews associate the High Holy Days with fatalism is understandable. The most appealing hymn in the liturgy — the delight of cantors and the heartthrob of the elderly — is the “Unsaneh Tokef.”

“On the New Year there shall be inscribed and on the Day of Atonement there shall be sealed — how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who by fire and who by water, who by ...”

Indeed, Jews were always so moved by this prayer that when during the course of the year someone died by violent or accidental means, they were wont to reconcile themselves to the tragedy with a moan and say, “That is the Unsaneh Tokef.” They forgot both the prayer’s prologue and epilogue which place the accent on man’s ability to avert evil decrees. They forgot that the author of the prayer describes how above all the din of the heavenly hosts on Judgment Day, thin, small, voices can be heard, and man affects the verdict at least as much as God.

I

Why must one stress, especially today, Judaism's insistence that man is not the helpless victim of forces or situations which engulf him? It would appear to many that a generation that has placed a man on the moon would be least in need of reassurance about its capacity to do the remarkable and to fulfill virtually anything it craves. Yet, paradoxically it is this same generation that so often avoids any kind of action, or even decision-making, by resorting to the excuse that one can hardly do anything that will affect the overwhelming forces or currents in which one feels "trapped".

We are constantly justifying inertia and non-involvement by saying that we are too puny, too insignificant, to influence the course of events.

We behold the mad rush of nations to bankrupt themselves by the manufacture and purchase of munitions. Who are we to stop it?

Huge sums of money are diverted to expensive projects whose usefulness is altogether problematic while health and urban needs are sorely neglected. Who are we to reverse the trend?

I

Anti-Semitism, and especially anti-Israel propaganda, is on the increase. An invidious combination of oil interests, new leftists, and Soviet and Arab bed-fellows, is fanning the flames. What can one Jew do?

The powers, or the activities, of which we disapprove, are so colossal that we feel helpless in their face. We feel caught in their thrust — as a fatalist feels he is the pawn of the gods — and we deem ourselves impotent to do anything about it.

But Judaism — especially as reflected in the prayers of the New Year and Day of Atonement — prescribes differently.

Thin, small, voices are heard above the din of even the heavenly host.

Faith moves mountains. Righteousness moves even God. Evil decrees can be averted if man will but take the right steps.

True, what we do may also be to no avail. There is no assurance of success. But even to speak up for the right is already to act righteously. And we need some such acts for our own self-esteem, our own consciences. Moreover, who knows but that one such voice will be joined by a multitude, or evoke a miracle, or even reach the ears of those who have the power to make a change.

Judaism urges protest and action against evil.

Let us remember. Did any nation ever face a more formidable array of power than did Israel on the eve of its six day war? Was anyone's situation ever more hopeless?

Yet, Israel made a decision, acted, experienced a miracle, and acquired land and power it never dreamed it could.

So, too, must all human beings feel in the face of what appear to be the insuperable odds of evil. Even if we are alone in our protest against injustice, or the mad course of a majority, we must speak up. We must make our voice heard. We may thus prompt others to think, to reconsider. Policies may be changed. New decrees may be forthcoming.

Our Days of Awe beckon us to righteous action—not resignation. We must never accept evil as inevitable. Evil is to be extirpated. Sin must be branded as such, confessed, and a new direction given to human affairs.

II

However, it is particularly with regard to our interpersonal relationships that we are inclined to be inert and resign ourselves to a fate with which we are unhappy but feel helpless to alter. In our homes, in our occupations, in our communal setup, we feel "trapped" and nothing is more destructive of human personality than the sense of despair that accompanies that feeling. Yet are we really as unable to act as we think we are? Given a marital situation that begs for improvement. Given parents and children who are

alienated from each other. Given a career or a position which affords one with no satisfactions. Given community involvements which do not accord with one's most basic aspirations or commitment.

What stops us from seeking change or guidance that will help to reshape our lives and open new vistas for us? True, much may be absolutely fixed and unalterable. But forty years of counseling with people has convinced me that so many people can help themselves to improve their lot. They must first be made to verbalize their discontent and then from their own articulation of their plight there emerges the discovery of silver linings which can be used to reconstruct relationships. So long as we are alive we can convert frustrations into challenges and challenges into meaningful achievement. Ebbing loves can be rekindled. Hostilities can be converted into friendships. Educational opportunities that are available can refashion lives and careers.

A first step is usually the abandonment of false pride. One must also abandon one's dogged insistence on one's own righteousness. This our sages called the recognition and confession of one's sin or failure, and a firm resolve to start anew.

Family life can be reconstituted. The hearts of parents and children can be drawn nearer to each other. A lift can be given to one's occupational pursuits. One's Jewishness and one's humanity can be deepened.

This is penitence.

III

In essence this is the call of the High Holy Days. Sin or failure need not be permanent. No one is altogether doomed because of earlier mistakes. One can do something about every situation for a tomorrow that is better than yesterday.

The prayers are our stimuli. The sounds of the shofar are our goads. The time we spend in the Synagogue is for introspection. The choice is ours — we can choose the good and live meaningfully, abundantly, or we can choose evil and die, spiritually if not physically.

Let us choose life!