

Rabbi's Message

"Sucker Sermon"

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On Passover Jews commemorate many miracles — the miracle of the exodus from Egypt — the miracle of the crossing of the sea — the miracle of Jewish survival through the millennia — the miracle of modern Israel and her victories in four horrendous wars. But this year the miracles ought not be the focus of our attention. Undoubtedly, we could use some miracles — we are in desperate need of them. Can anything less than a miracle bring an end to Israel's aloneness in the world, or the unrelenting hostility of almost all mankind, or the economic woes of the free world because of the energy crisis! Nonetheless, miracles are not the answer. Jewish tradition bids us not to pray for them. We are grateful for those that do occur but we must learn to cope with social and political realities — with natural law — with human nature as it is and as it can be bettered. The Passover story makes this abundantly clear — and it is this aspect of the story with which we ought be preoccupied this year.

How does the Bible denigrate miracles? It tells us that despite the fact that the greatest of all miracles — the crossing of the sea in safety and the destruction of the pursuing enemy — induced in every Jew who beheld the miracle a sense of the reality of God, that faith availed little. It did not last. Shortly after their redemption and their great song of triumph, the Jews were as cantankerous as they ever were, as greedy, and as mutinous. They had had an immediate awareness of God's role in history but that did not change their character, or endow them with a better sense of values, or gird them for the mission for which they had been chosen. Indeed, their discovery of God was no more than the "trip" of a drug addict — a grand, mystical, experience, with a sense of the infinite, with no important consequences when the drug wears off. There are no new insights, no new programs of action, no new resolves. Only a memory — and perhaps a yearning for another "trip" or miracle. It would appear that a faith that truly counts must emerge from hard-headed encounters with reality, from trials and tribulations that are the warp and woof of human existence. Flashes of faith are like flashes of lightning — momentary and transitory. But only a faith that is born of bouts with the real challenges of life has lasting

meaning and impact.

What happened after Israel's Six Day War? Then too miracles occurred. There were numerous declarations of faith in God. But what followed? Addiction to material prosperity. Corruption in government. More preoccupation with the sensuous. Pride, hubris, arrogance — until the sobering reality of the Yom Kippur War. During the Yom Kippur War the religiously committed soldiers wrote a magnificent chapter in the annals of heroism — their comrades beheld it with their own eyes. They saw how a deep faith — born not of miracles but rather of prolonged and anguished preoccupation with the will of God — transforms man and makes one almost superhuman. That is the kind of faith we must seek on Passover. And in its pursuit we must ponder what we must do from now on to cope with the challenges that face us as individuals, as Jews, as Americans, and as members of the human race.

What are the specific values that we must ponder? Not the least important of them is regard for the earth's resources and our readiness to be content with less exploitation of them. We must learn to find happiness in the cultivation of intellectual and spiritual goals rather than the acquisition and enjoyment of material things. We must learn to sacrifice for freedom and justice and prize these ideals more than life itself. We must cherish family and community and crave only the power to do good for others. We must find ways to convert enemies into friends, no matter how impossible this may seem. But it is precisely faith that makes the impossible possible and attainable. Israel Jews and American Jews must rediscover in their ancestral heritage what their faith in God was meant to accomplish. Then all of them together will achieve the ultimate miracle — the transformation of man from a destructive animal to a creature endowed with the divine image. This is the message of Passover for today.