

Rabbi's Message  
"Sucker Sermon"  
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During the last few weeks we read the Joseph story at Sabbath services. Associated with the Joseph story is the notion of seven fat years and seven lean years.

That notion is presently very much in our minds in connection with our personal situation, the situation of the people of the free world, and especially the people of Israel.

Israel's Prime Minister Rabin referred to it when he addressed the citizens of his state and told them that they had enjoyed seven years of prosperity as well as pride. Now the time had come for the tightening of belts, for austerity, and for sober, somber, reckoning with reality. Perhaps the same kind of speech could be delivered by the President of the United States to the citizens of our country. We have enjoyed many years of prosperity during which we were guilty of considerable waste and extravagance. During those years we enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing that we were the greatest power on earth and nothing could stand in the way of anything that Ave chose to do. Now we begin a period during which there must be tremendous conservation of our natural resources and especially our sources of energy. We no longer enjoy that kind of prestige in the world that prompts nations to do what we like. On the other hand, there is not a power on earth that does not delight in downing the United States and flouting its will. Who knows but that there may have to be a total change in our way of life and even in our economic system and as a result we too will be aware of the leanness of the years!

I do not choose to be a prophet, certainly not a prophet of doom. My guess as to what the morrow will bring is as good or as bad as anyone else's.

It is certainly not the view of an expert and I am not so sure that any religious leader ought try to place himself in the position of forecasting events. However, religious leaders have a definite role to play in helping

people to cope with whatever the morrow will bring and it is with regard to that that I should like to express a few sentiments. I divide my message in two parts.

To those of us who are of middle age or in the autumn of our lives perhaps harsh things should be said. We have lived through a depression, World War II, the holocaust, the anguish of the years between World War II and the establishment of the State of Israel, and four wars of the State of Israel within less than three decades. In those years most of us have also seen the wheel of our own fortune turn and sometimes we have been up and at other times we have been down. It is about time that we learned to see things in the right perspective. Life is not one continuous bed of roses. Life is rather a series of challenges and oftentimes it takes courage simply to be. It does not behoove us to become panicky with the appearance of every challenge and every threat to our comfortable, blasé, existence. By now we should have learned the difference between grim, irrevocable, tragedy, and reverses to which adjustment is possible and sometimes even advantageous. In the thirties perhaps a third of the population of the United States faced real hunger every day. Today even with a recession or a depression there may be changes in our standard of living but subsistence will always be available.

In the thirties and the forties we were helpless in the face of the greatest war ever launched against the Jews. Today we are alert to the situation and we are prepared to mobilize real resistance whether in Israel or in the United States or even in the Soviet Union. Of course, many of us had hoped that there would never be need to face the challenges of the thirties and forties and fifties again. Perhaps we deluded ourselves into believing that once we had overcome those challenges they would never appear again. But they do appear again and again in universal history and in Jewish history and we must be prepared intellectually and emotionally to cope with them. Indeed there is even reason to be optimistic because from the perspective of history there has been some progress, some movement forward. Even the situation of the people of Israel today is no worse than that which it was in 1966 and yet so many of us walk around as if we were on the verge of the end, on the brink of disaster. It is this kind of sentiment that must be expressed to those of us who have lived half or more of our life's span.

To our young people who did not experience what their elders experienced it is more difficult to convey the proper attitude. With them one must be more sympathetic. Their parents and their grandparents did everything they could to spare them and to give them the benefit of the good life and now they are unprepared for that which they may have to face. First of all, they deserve a tremendous amount of credit because so many of them have for a long time expressed their criticism of their forebears insofar as their forebears placed too much emphasis on material values rather than on values which are unrelated to things and possessions. True, only a minority of them has been thus critical but this was a sensitive minority that can help the majority to see things in the proper light. They taught us that it is possible to have a good life in austerity and with a measure of privation. Love and friendship, family and community, are more important than things in their hierarchy of values. And more of us will have to learn to share this view.

Second, they will have to reorient their thinking with regard to career areas. I will never discourage any Jew from seeking to become as well educated as he possibly can be. However, Jews will have to learn that learning is for learning's sake and not necessarily a means to a livelihood. In many a Jewish community in Eastern Europe there were many Jews who were learned in Torah but they did not earn their livelihood as rabbis. Presently in the United States many individuals who have attained the Ph.D. degree are learning that that does not necessarily mean that they can obtain employment in the academic sphere. Yet there are careers which Jews have rarely chosen and it may be necessary for us to rethink the situation and encourage our children and grandchildren to be modest with regard to career expectations even while they may be very ambitious with regard to the amount of knowledge they would like to master.

Third, in a world in which the Jew is becoming more and more isolated it will be more important than ever to deepen one's Jewish identity and that means more and more Jewish education. Perhaps this will prompt the American Jewish community to do more for Jewish education than it has done heretofore. This in turn will encourage more Jews to enter the field of Jewish education and improve its quality. More Jews may even seek to serve the Jewish community as Jewish civil servants. True, their

compensation will not be as great as in other careers but this is a career area from which non-Jews will not seek to displace them.

Fourth, Jews will have to become more sophisticated in their civic life. The preservation of democracy and the rights of Jews will depend more and more in the future upon the participation of individual citizens in the civic life of the community. Heretofore it was principally in connection with the public school system that Jews were active in civic affairs. Hereafter it will be necessary to broaden the scope of our activities to promote public safety, the beauty of our neighborhoods, the integrity of the public assistance programs, and many other areas from which threats have come to our democratic system of government.

In essence what I am trying to say is that there will be great changes both in the world at large and in our country in particular. And instead of becoming panicky with regard to these changes, we Jews must learn, as we have always learned, how to accommodate to them and find a way of life in the new situation and the new circumstances. This was what was unique about the Jew. Somehow ours was the genius for accommodating to all kinds of challenges and that is the secret of our survival. Instead of becoming panicky and feeling depressed we should make realistic analyses of the facts and do that which our conclusions require.

One of the most important commandments of the Torah is to survive. To allow one's self to become depressed and to entertain thoughts of self-destruction is sinful. And while I am no prophet as to what the future holds in store for us, I do want to be the prophet of survival.