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"My God and I." Yom Kippur sermon. 12 October 1948.

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## "MY GOD AND I"

Sermon for Yom Kippur Eve, October 12, 1948

Tonight is considered by many Jews to be the holiest night of the entire year. It is the time when men come to ask for forgiveness. It is the time when people gather to confess their errors, and to make atonement. They seek peace with God and gather in the Temples and Synagogues of the world to achieve this end. In Israel, soldiers will lay aside their arms and take up their prayer books. In the camps of Germany, Jews will forget their anxieties and their hopes, turning instead to matters of the spirit. In France well-dressed Jews will walk to the great Rothschild Synagogue on the Rue de la Victoire, while in the ghettos of Casablanca and Oran and Tripoli, ragged Jews will crowd into small hovels, also to express their fears and beg for forgiveness. Everywhere that Jews live, rich and poor alike, in magnificent Temples and tiny out-of-the-way corners, the haunting strains of the Kol Nidre, which we have heard so beautifully rendered this night, will rouse their souls and inspire their spirits to seek union with the Almighty.

Out of all of this tremendous mood of prayer and supplication, out of the tears and the yearnings and the pleadings and repentance, out of the wailing and the crying and the dignified recitals, what emerges? What is it that we really seek on this night? To answer in the simplest terms, Jews, who are highly civilized people, are seeking always to improve and better the world in which they live. They seek this night to take one more step on the ladder of man's progress toward a goal. Long ago, in one of the sacred books, a prophet said that the Jews were given the choice of life or death. They were admonished to choose life, and to repudiate death. This they have done.

With a fantastic imperturbability and a dogged optimism, Jews have fought their way constantly up the ladder. They, and all other men, might



very easily have done differently. Things might just as well have gone in the way of destruction and downhill retrogression, as well as along the path of an uphill fight toward progress. People might just as well have chosen the path of evil as the path of goodness. However, as a result of the simple belief of our religion that God is good, and that God will help men achieve the goals which the human race desires, our people have continued to lend their efforts to the struggle for human progress. And there is no denying that such progress has been made. We have discarded and left far behind the practices of child sacrifice and sacred prostitution. Polygamy has gradually passed away. Witchcraft and sorcery have been replaced by sound and rational thinking. Certain bad habits have dropped off, even, as our tales, which we once had, have atrophied into appendixes, to become only a worry to the patient and a source of income to the surgeon. Mankind has improved, I am convinced, in spite of the gas chambers and crematoria. This was part of the black heritage of the cold Teutonic Forests, which most men are trying to leave behind them.

Yom Kippur, as a sacred Holiday, simply underscores and emphasizes the fact that we are not yet satisfied that mankind has improved enough, and that there is still evil to overcome. Thus, on this Holy Day, we gather every year in order to give ourselves another injection of hope and enthusiasm and faith in the future. If we did not believe that things were moving toward goodness in the long run, then we would not now be concerned with the problem of examining evil which still exists. Evil becomes subject to annual scrutiny and revision, because we do not wish it to overcome us.

We become impatient with the fact that evil cannot be uprooted from the earth. We wonder why it is that men cannot learn once and for all to be good and only good. We ask the question that Job asked - Why does the good man seem to suffer and the wicked man seem to prosper?



Or, again, we ask the question which is so beautifully stated in the 94th Psalm - How long will the wicked exult, how long will it take before wicked men shall be crushed from the face of the earth? The first few verses of this Psalm are worth reading, since they express the mood of impatience on the part of men with the problem of evil as it exists. The first seven verses read thusly:

"O Lord, Thou God to whom  
vengeance belongeth,  
Thou God to whom vengeance  
belongeth, shine forth.  
Lift up Thyself, Thou Judge of  
the earth;  
Render to the proud their re-  
compense.  
Lord, how long shall the wicked,  
How long shall the wicked exult?  
They gush out, they speak arro-  
gancy;  
All the workers of iniquity bear  
themselves loftily.  
They crush Thy people, O Lord,  
And afflict Thy heritage.  
They slay the widow and the  
stranger,  
And murder the fatherless.  
And they say: 'The Lord will not  
see  
Neither will the God of Jacob give  
heed.' "

Whenever the problem of evil is discussed, someone is almost always certain to bring up the question regarding man's freewill. There are those who are quick to excuse man and absolve him from the responsibility of his deeds, by arguing that if God is omnipotent and if God really controls the universe, then He also controls the deeds of men, and therefore He is responsible for evil, not man. This is a very serious theological problem and has been analyzed and investigated through all centuries of theological concern. Modern scholars are now able to look back over the vast accumulation of textual material and quotations, and are able to deduce that the predominant thinking on the part of all of the rabbis since the days of the Talmud and post-Talmudic writings has leaned toward the decision that man does possess freewill to determine his own destiny. There are a few scattered quotations which might be found to support the theory that everything is predestined and preordained, but by and large the great bulk of evidence seems to indicate that our sages felt that man had the will to control his own actions.

Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai expressed it in very pithy fashion. He said: "God can be served only by free moral agents, and not by slaves". In this sentence he tried to indicate that men who feel that they are slaves to fate or destiny or luck will become automatons, and cannot truly serve the cause of justice and righteousness, which is the cause of God. He wished to stress the fact that God can be served only by men who are free agents in making the moral choice between good and evil.

Maimonides, many centuries later, one of the greatest Jewish scholars who ever lived, said the same thing in these words: "Every man is granted freewill. If he desires to incline towards the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so; and if he desires to incline



towards the unrighteous way, and be a wicked man, he also has the power to do so. Give no room in your minds to that which is asserted by fools, and also by many of the ignorant among the Israelites themselves, namely, that the Holy One Blessed be He, decrees that a man from his birth should be either a righteous man or a wicked man. Since the power of doing good or evil is in our own hands and since all the wicked deeds that we have committed have been committed with our full consciousness it befits us to turn in penitence and to forsake our evil deeds. The power of doing so is still in our hands."

These words of Maimonides are rather harsh, in that they call those people ignorant who do not understand this thesis. He states most emphatically that God does not decree from birth that a man should either be righteous or wicked. The power of deciding our destiny is in our own hands. The fact that Maimonides comes to this conclusion, at a time in our theological development when there were no radical tendencies, but rather very conservative thought, is strongly indicative of the fact that his words represent the general trend of greatest thinkers and rabbis over many hundreds of years.

I indicated before, that there were some opinions to the contrary. One of the most dramatic and most poetically stated of these is the prayer called Unesaneh Tokef. It offers absolutely contradictory testimony. It was uttered by a certain Rabbi Amnon of France who spoke it as he lay dying in martyrdom, affirming his faith in the God of Israel. It draws a picture of the Lord as a shepherd, counting His sheep, reviewing the deeds and determining the destiny of every loving soul. It becomes very specific and in magnificent words it describes how God **actually** decides the fate of every human being. The last paragraph reads thusly:



"On New Years day the decree is inscribed  
and on the Day of Atonement it is sealed,  
how many shall pass away and how many shall  
be born; who shall live and who shall die;  
who shall attain the measure of  
man's days and who shall not  
attain it; who shall perish  
by fire and who by water; who  
by sword and who by the beast:  
who by hunger and who by thirst;  
who by earthquake and who by plague;  
who by strangling and who by stoning;  
who shall have rest and who shall go  
wandering; who shall be tranquil and  
who shall be disturbed; and who shall be  
at ease and who shall be afflicted;  
who shall become poor and who shall  
wax rich; who shall be brought low  
and who shall be exalted."

But even Rabbi Amnon, who makes the strongest case for the fact that man has no control whatsoever of his destiny, still concludes his prayer with one sentence which is printed in large capital letters in all prayer books and which is recited in ringing loud tones by all pious worshippers. In this concluding sentence, he indicates that no matter how minutely the destiny of man is controlled by his shepherd God, still there is a possibility of altering that destiny. Even Rabbi Amnon thus admits of the possibility of freewill. His last sentence reads "BUT REPENTANCE PRAYERS AND CHARITY AVERT THE SEVERE DECREE."



Thus, man's life and fate may be predetermined, and everything he is to do may be foreordained, yet there is always the loophole which provides for control and independent action on his own part. Man may by prayer, repentance and charity avert or alter the decisions which have been made regarding him, and by his own freewill he may modify and nullify the severity of any decisions made in advance, and may still regulate his own life if he introduces these three virtues into his conduct.

The most important consideration is therefore brought to our attention. Man may do evil as the result of his own choice, which is the predominant view; or evil may be planned for man, if you accept the theory of predestination; but in either case, righteousness can become his choice and the forces of righteousness are always present to help him correct his ways. In the Tractate Shabbat in the Talmud we read these words: "Whosoever desires to pollute himself with sin will find all the gates to sin readily open for him; and whosoever desires to attain the highest purity will find all the forces of goodness ready to help him." The fact that there are forces of goodness in the world ready to help man struggle on the path toward the triumph of righteousness, is an important psychological factor. Man may thus have the feeling that he has an ally in his struggle toward good. His own evil inclinations may well be overcome if he employs skillfully and correctly the forces available to him. The great British Jewish scholar, Montefiore, put it this way: "There are indications that the rabbis had given some thought to the question: How far does God help man to be good, On the whole, man's freewill is emphasized; yet while man is free both to do well or evil, for sin the door is just left open to him, while for righteousness he receives aid through the teachings of the Torah and the Prophets."

This aid which is given to man through his traditional heritage



of culture and learning and civilized experience is the single most important factor in swinging the balance toward goodness. Man learns by accumulated experience of history that goodness in social living is the only formula by which he can survive. And conversely, he has learned with awful perspective, that anti-social living will eventually bring destruction to all of organized society. No one realizes the breadth and depth of that problem more than we do in this 20th century. With the threat of the atom bomb hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles, we realize with a tense and terrible breathlessness, that if evil is unleashed upon society, the consequent chain reaction will smash us all into oblivion. Our accumulated experience has always been an aid in helping us to preserve our balance and our good judgment. It is almost the only factor which has prevented the human race from committing suicide up to now.

In seeking to regulate his actions, so that they will be for good and not for evil, man first, has not only the assistance of his own freewill, and second, the aid of his accumulated tradition of teachers and prophets and sages who warn him what is right and what is wrong, but third, he also has the aid of God, to whom he can turn if he will. He can come to God, ask forgiveness for past mistakes, and enlist support for future actions. One of the lines we read during the Yom Kippur liturgy is this: " *אָד/מ דר/י יכנ/י א/י* " which means "On that day He shall make atonement for you". The rabbis ask the question - to whom does the "He" refer? Who makes atonement for man? It cannot be the High Priest, otherwise the High Priest would have been specifically mentioned by name. The great Rabbi Akiba answered the question by holding that the "He" refers to God. Rabbi Akiba exclaimed "Happy Israel! Who is it that purifieth you? Your Father who is in heaven".



This saying of Akiba proclaims man's direct access to God without any mediator whatsoever. When man wishes to have help in determining his destiny, he seeks the aid of God, to whom he confesses what he has done wrong and from whom he asks advice and solace as to how he should regulate himself aright. He goes directly to his God, without intercessor, without intermediary, without elaborate ritual or paraphernalia. And he is promised that when he comes thus as suppliant, God Himself will make atonement for whatever evil man has committed. The great German professor, Hermann Cohen, summed up the tremendous significance of this phrase by saying: "The whole philosophy of monotheism is contained in this rallying cry of Rabbi Akiba". Hermann Cohen felt that the entire Jewish religion and the entire meaning of the monotheistic notion of God and the universe was expressed in capsule form in Akiba's words. There is something sublime and grand in the simplicity of that one statement "On that day He shall make atonement for you."

Now, gradually, the meaning of Yom Kippur becomes clearer to us. If men, through their own freewill, and as a result of their own choice, do evil things; but if, as we believe, they have the genuine desire to do good and not evil, then they must look about them for assistance and help in changing the pattern of their behavior. They find this assistance in the traditional experience of civilization and in the personal intercourse with whatever is their own private God. But the last lesson of Yom Kippur must also be learned, that evil does not become recognizable to us until we confess it. Confession is an important part of the whole process of improvement of conduct. When men do not analyze their action and their conduct they are unable to recognize what they have done wrong. This self-analysis, this looking into ourselves for the sake of evaluating our actions of the past year, is an essential prerequisite of any improvement. If we fail to



make confession, but keep our sense of wrong-doing and guilt within ourselves, then we will suffer as did he who wrote the beautiful 32nd Psalm. In the words of this Psalm, we find expressed the anguish of one who keeps within himself, locked up in his own breast, all of the feelings of guilt and remorse. While he keeps these confined to his own subconscious, he suffers and he moans. But when he acknowledges his sin and makes confession of that which he has done wrong, then he realizes that God forgives him, and the burden of complex is lifted from his shoulder. Then, presumably, he is free to begin action which will improve the standards of his conduct for the year ahead. The first few verses of the 32nd Psalm read as follows:

"Happy is he whose transgression is  
forgiven, whose sin is pardoned.

Happy is the man unto whom the  
Lord counteth not iniquity,  
And in whose spirit there is no  
guile.

When I kept silence, my bones  
wore away  
Through my groaning all the day  
long.

For day and night Thy hand was  
heavy upon me;

My sap was turned as in the  
drougths of summer. Selah

I acknowledged my sin unto Thee,  
and mine iniquity have I not  
hid;

I said: 'I will make confession

concerning my transgressions  
unto the Lord' -

And Thou, Thou forgavest the  
iniquity of my sin. Selah"

Tonight, on Kol Nidre, the eve of the solemn day of fasting, the opportunity is provided for every Jew to attempt to overcome the base inclinations within himself; to confess that which he has done and to beg for assistance in his struggle to improve himself for the year ahead. I believe that man would prefer not to do evil, and that the slow history of the human race indicates the validity of that thesis. I believe <sup>man</sup> ~~he~~ prefers to do good, but that through his own freewill he sometimes strays and does things wrong. I believe there is no one he can blame for this transgression but himself. Our religion provides no mediator, no scapegoat upon whose shoulder he can thrust his errors, no individual who will make vicarious atonement for him before his God.

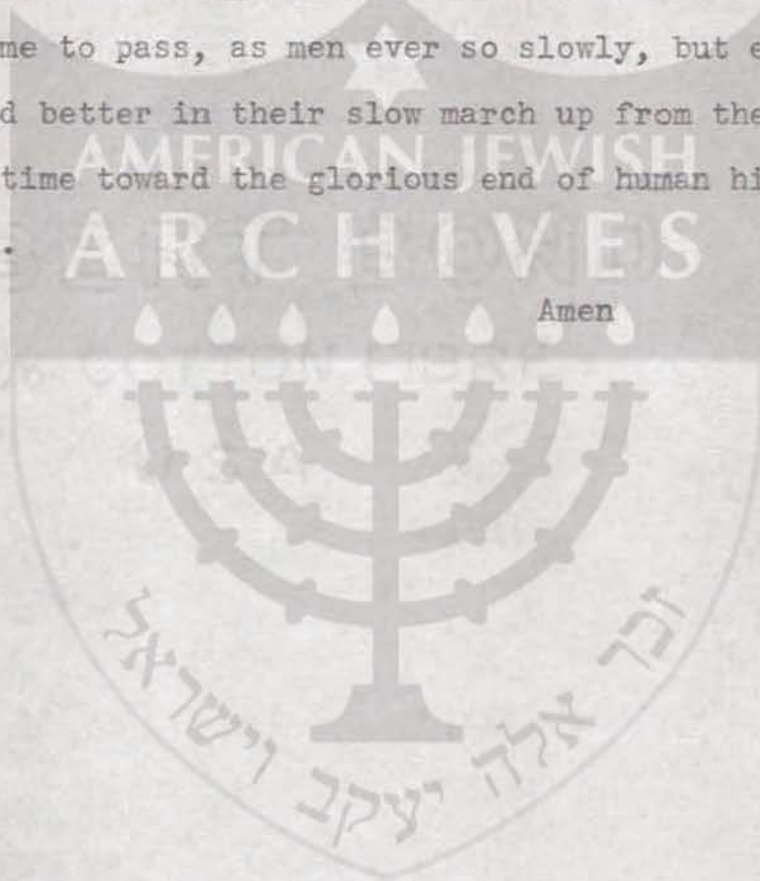
I believe simply that each man must struggle with his conscience, try with all the power of will and strength and morality which he possesses to have the good within him overcome the evil desires, and that this one time each year he must approach his God face to face with the beseeching cry of a suppliant begging help. I believe that when he calls out of the depth of his soul, **out** of the conviction of remorse, out of the desire to improve, that God will listen and will grant his prayer.

It is to be wished perhaps that men would not wait for formal occasion once each year to perform this process. It is to be desired that men would understand, in their dark blind struggling yearning search for goodness and progress, that this process must be



something which should permeate their every daily existence. With some people that is indeed the case. But with all of the others of us who have our faults and our weaknesses, let us at very least take this one opportunity when our mood is the most tender and our ideals the most aspiring, our yearnings the most acute and our senses the most sensitive, to speak face to face with our conscience so that indeed the ultimate triumph of truth and righteousness upon earth may someday come to pass, as men ever so slowly, but ever so surely, grow better and better in their slow march up from the dimmest beginnings of time toward the glorious end of human history which is promised us.

Amen



File under

High Holy Days  
1948

Collect all Rosh Hashanah  
+ Yom Kippur sermons  
into this one file



YIZKOR 1948-5709

Story of Rabbi Meir & wife  
Berunia & two sons (two jewels)

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ה'תש"ח / ה'תש"ח

ה'תש"ח / ה'תש"ח

God gave God took away  
Praised be Name of God

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In the way of righteousness  
is life  
And in the pathway thereof,  
there is no death.

Ps 12:10

There is no death if  
we have left our mark  
on others.

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# ROLL OF REMEMBRANCE

5708 - 1947-48

## THE DEPARTED OF THE PAST YEAR

Paul Chamison	Max Koenigsberg	Lilly Frankle
Janet Spicer Kelson	Fred Levy	Meyer Burgess
Gustave J. Ornauer	Rachel Coret ? Koratt	Albert Goldsticker
Joseph Goalstone	Morris Milstein	Archie Weissburg
Goldie P. Schlesinger	Stella Michael	Joseph Halperin
Bertha Frankle	Philip Berland	Rose Widom ? Weedon
Tillie Reckler	Morton David	Peter Kochmann
Ralph Fisher	Bernhardt Klein	Bernard Lowy
Rae Adelman	Miriam Erdman	Annie Herman
Nancy Simmons	Maurice B. Shwayder	Mildred L. Rachofsky
Abe B. Emanuel	Joseph L. Mann	Erwin Lesser
Rochelle Aaron	Anna Snyder	Emma Roseman
Sarah Laskowitz	Nathan Lehrman	Max Fiedelman
Maurice Tauber	Maurice Feinberg	Hattie Kunsberg
Dora K. Waterman	Henry L. Cooper	Julius L. Marx
	Robert B. Rosenbaum -	