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"Are Ye Not All Children of Mine?" Yom Kippur sermon.  
September 1953.

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## ARE YE NOT ALL CHILDREN OF MINE?

On Yom Kippur afternoon, during the Torah reading, we read the story of Jonah from the Bible. What is the true moral behind the tale? Why do we read it on the holiest of days?

Jonah was a prophet who was ordered to go to a far off city in Babylonia called Nineveh. He was ordered to preach a message of doom and destruction to the evil and idolatrous people of that city, with the proviso that they would be forgiven if they would repent of their sins and reform their ways. Jonah attempted to avoid this responsibility by fleeing from it. He boarded a ship and attempted to run away from his assignment. Why?

Jonah was sensitive and full of pride. He did not want to be made the laughing stock of the people of Nineveh by coming to them to preach their doom, only to have a merciful God repeal this threat when the people would repent. His own vanity was at stake. If he were to preach doom, then he wanted doom to be executed. God rebuked and chastised him for this, saying that if people made sincere



repentance, then they were entitled to sincere forgiveness. This, of course, fits in beautifully with the basic motif of Yom Kippur and provides one reason why the story is read on this day.

But there is another underlying theme, which is even deeper in significance. Jonah was of the Hebrews, and asserted this fact very proudly, even boldly, to the sailors on the ship on which he was fleeing, when they asked him his religion. "Ivri Onochi", he replied--"I am a Hebrew" he responded to their challenge. It is good to see that he was proud of his heritage, and yet there is implicit in the answer the feeling that he had a chip on his shoulder. He seemed to be saying that no other race or tribe or nation or faith was as good as his. And from this, we obtain the second clue for his disobedience. In his narrow chauvinism, he did not want to give the Ninevites the opportunity to repent and be received by God. The great and overwhelming message of the Book of Jonah is that God rebuked him for this

narrowness. God is a universal God, for whom all the sons of men are his equal children.

The parable in the fourth chapter is very startling. Jonah was sitting outside the city wall of Nineveh, sulking and bemoaning his mission. It was hot and God caused a plant to grow quickly, whose broad leaf provided him with shade from the broiling rays of the sun. Then the plant withered and died overnight and Jonah cried out in grief at the destruction of nature's creature. Whereupon God answered him and said, "You had pity on the plant, for which you did not labor, which came up in the night and perished in the night. Should not I have pity on Nineveh that great city wherein are more than six score thousand persons that can not discern between their right hand and their left hand and also much cattle?"

God was telling Jonah, through the biting sarcasm of the parable of the plant, that Nineveh meant as much to him as any other part of creation. Furthermore, with a



hundred and twenty thousand babies, that is people who were not old enough to know the difference between their right and their left hand, <sup>Nineveh</sup> must have had a million or more adults, and also many innocent animals. This great assemblage of living things, whether Jewish or not, was important to God. Here is the most tremendous message of universalism, of the brotherhood of man, of the equality of all living beings, which is to be found anywhere in the Bible.

It is to the great glory and honor of our sages that of all the chapters of the Bible which they could have selected for reading on Yom Kippur day, they included in the liturgy this story which preached the brotherhood of man. On the day most significant to loyal Jews, there is told a story which is not confined in its elements of mercy and pity and forgiveness just to the Jews, but is so broad as to include the entire human race under God's gracious care. If we were to search far and wide thru the religions of mankind, we could find no more striking example of the

breadth of vision and broadness of thought than this example of the Book of Jonah being read on a particular sectarian Holy Day.

Of course there is nothing unusual or inconsistent about this. The authoritative attitude of Judaism has always been that all men, as children of God, are brothers-- and that the rules of justice and humanity are not limited by national or religious <sup>boundaries</sup> boundaries. The Jewish concept of considering itself the chosen people never implied any superiority over others. Chosenness meant that the Jews accepted the burden of living by God's ethical laws. All others could do the same.

Isaiah said: <sup>(Chapter 19)</sup> "Israel be the third with Egypt and Assyria, for the Lord of hosts hath said: 'blessed be Egypt my people and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel my inheritance.' "

Here the traditional enemies of ancient Judaea--Assyria on the north and east, and Egypt on the south and west--the two nations between whose upper and nether millstones ancient Israel was often crushed-- are held by God to be equal partners in His



concern and affection. This is a remarkable statement of universalism in the face of the strife and travail which accompanied Israel's march through history alongside those two powerful neighbors.

(Chapter 4)

Amos, even broadened the base of brotherhood, wiping away all distinctions of color between men. "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, o children of Israel? sayeth the Lord." The prophet was saying that God loved Israel, his favorite, no more or no less than He loved the Ethiopians. This is a tremendous demonstration of the equality of all men in the sight of the creator.

And this attitude is not confined simply to the Bible, but centuries later, in the Talmud, we find untold examples of the same concept, most succinctly summarized in this sentence "The pious among the Gentiles have a share in the world to come." (Sanh. 105a). So it is that the criterion of acceptance by God is not whether one is circumcised or uncircumcised, but whether one is pious. The world to come is not open or closed on the basis of any special

entrance requirements. It is not confined solely to those who have received certain sacraments, or those who follow a certain <sup>religious path</sup> ~~way~~. It is open to all men, says Jewish teaching.

The Middle Ages saw some of the most vicious and inhuman persecutions of the Jews. It would have been no wonder if our fathers had retreated to a position of bitter and vituperative hatred of Christianity. The treatment which they endured at the hands of the Church, officially and unofficially, could very justifiably have made them into perpetual enemies of Christendom. Yet during that most difficult medieval time, the great Maimonides himself remained true to the ancient Jewish traditions of universal brotherhood by saying this:

"The teachings of him of Nazereth (Jesus) and of the Man of Ishmael (Mohammed) who rose after him, helped to bring to perfection all mankind, so that they may serve God with one consent."

Here then is an actual testimony of appreciation of the role which Christianity and Mohammedanism can play in



helping to prepare the world for the kingdom of God.

Apparently there was some feeling that my words on Rosh Hashonah were the words of a Jonah. I gather from the free and frank comments which were offered to me after Rosh Hashanah evening ( and by the way, I do appreciate the candor of the members of the Congregation who will tell me precisely of their reactions) that there were some who felt that I was decrying and derogating all other faiths and all other peoples. This was by no means the case. I was describing the fact that pessimism was rife in the world. I drew a picture of our times as being an age of anxiety and restlessness, wherein men were losing faith in themselves and in their ability to face the future. I said that there was one exception to this-- the exception being Judaism. For in Judaism there is no sense of defeat, there is no sense of despair, there is no sense of loss of purpose. Judaism is a religion which teaches an optimistic belief in the future, in a belief in man, his life, his law, his sense of time. This is a simple truth.

All who are aware of modern trends in Protestant thinking, know that there is a retreat, on the part of Protestant religious intellectuals from the question of evil in the modern world. Niebuhr, Tillich, Barth, and many more leading Protestant thinkers have turned to the old doctrine of "original sin". This doctrine holds that there is evil in man which he cannot erase. Subsequent to the fall from grace of Adam and Eve when they sinned against God, every person born of sexual union between man and woman, is born in original sin. Man can do nothing to take himself out of that state. He can only be removed from it by an act of grace bestowed upon him by a loving God. This is really a philosophy of despair, which was discarded by liberal Protestantism, but is now being revived.

As far as Judaism is concerned, ~~the willingness to~~  
<sup>that</sup>  
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 world is completely unacceptable. Judaism teaches that man can achieve his own salvation, not by waiting for grace from God, but by active and concrete steps of self-improvement,

*Granner*



self-regeneration, and conquest of the evil within him. This was the underlying message of the Rosh Hashanah sermon. It was an attempt to state that Judaism is a great and bouyant religion which can keep man afloat in the sea of despair which surrounds us. We do not retreat from the difficulties of life, but face them fearlessly.

Because there is a difference, however, between Judaism and Christianity on this theological ground, and even though I have a preference for one set of beliefs over another, this does not mean that ~~I am~~ <sup>has</sup> Judaism, ~~have~~ any superiority complex.

Do you remember the great classic of Lessing called "Nathan the Wise"? The emperor Saladin asked the Jew Nathan a difficult and tricky question.

"What human faith, what theologic law, has struck you as the truest and the best?"

Nathan answered: "Sire, I am a Jew."

And the Saladin continued:

"And I a Mussulman;

And here we have the Christians to boot;  
Of these three faiths one only can be true;  
Well, then, tell me your view, and let me hear your grounds,  
For I myself have ever lacked the time  
To rack my brains about it. Let me know  
The reasons upon which you found your faith--  
In confidence, of course--that I may make  
That faith my own.

Nathan was afraid to answer, fearful of a trap in the question. If he protested that his own faith was the best, then the Mohammedan would be insulted. And yet, on the other hand, if he belittled his own faith, then the Mohammedan would wonder why he held to it. He finally resolved the problem by the clever device of telling the Sultan the famous parable of the three rings.

There was once a great man who had a ring of priceless worth. This ring had the mystic power to render dear to God whoever wore the ring with perfect faith. The great man left it to his favorite son, adding that it should be



handed down in every <sup>generations</sup> ~~age~~ to the dearest son, without respect to age or seniority. And thus the ring came down through the <sup>centuries</sup> ~~ages~~ until it reached a father of three sons who were equally obedient to his will and whom he loved with equal love. His overflowing heart could not distinguish between the three and so by his kindly weakness he promised each son in turn that at his death that son would get the ring. What then should he do? He sent for a skilled artisan and charged him to make two other rings precisely like the first, at any cost. When this was done, the father himself could not say which of the three rings was the original..With joyful heart he summoned his three sons, singly and apart, and bestowed upon each one his special blessing and his ring.

6 Scarce was the father dead, when each of the three sons rose and claimed to be the lord of all his kindred. It then turned out that each was in possession of a ring-the sign of favoritism. They wrangled and recriminated all in vain until they brought the case before the Judge. Each of them swore to the Judge that he had received his ring straight

from his father's hand, which was the fact. And each swore further that he had long had his father's promise to bequeath the ring to him alone, which was also the fact. They could not believe that their father had tricked them and thus they argued among themselves.

The first intention of the Judge was to dismiss the case, for it was impossible to solve, but then he gave this advice, which are the climactic words of Lessing's drama:

"But my advice is this;

Accept the case precisely as it stands;

If each of you in truth received his ring

Straight from his father's hand, let each believe

His own to be the true and genuine ring.

Of this be sure,

He loved you all, and loved you all alike,

Since he was loath to injure two of you

That he might favor one alone; well, then,

Let each now rival his unbiased love,



His love so free from every prejudice;  
 Vie with each other in the generous strife  
 To prove the virtues of the Rings you wear;  
 And to this end let mild humility,  
 Hearty forbearance, true benevolence,  
 And resignation to the will of God,  
 Come to your aid, --and if, in distant times,  
 The virtues of the genuine gem be found  
 Amid your children's children, they shall then,  
 When many a thousand years have rolled away,  
 Be called once more before this judgment-seat  
 Whereon a wiser man than I shall sit  
 And give his verdict -- now, begone.

When Nathan had finished telling the tale, the Sultan  
 in a burst of warm affection and rare understanding uttered  
 these words: "Be thou my friend."

Later on in the drama, a Christian monk <sup>said</sup> ~~says~~ to the

Jew: "Nathan, sure you are a Christian, by Heaven you are, none better ever breathed!"

And Nathan replied in the famous phrase: "Alak, Alak! That which makes me a Christian in your eyes makes you a Jew in mine--enough, enough."

That is the answer to Judaism. There is no question of a true ring or a false ring. The matter never arises as to which is the only true revelation of God, or the only true path to God. We believe simply that we have a unique ring, the one which is the best for us. Let every other man believe the same for the ring which he wears upon his finger. God has not tricked us, by promising us all the same thing. There are many mansions in the house of the Lord and there are many approaches to heaven. We live in peace with one another -- each tending his own vineyard--believing that all vineyards are of the Lord's. ~~Each works~~  
~~to achieve the kingdom of God in his own way.~~



So now you have both sides of the coin--both themes in the great symphony. I have said it both ways. We are a people with a fierce sense of pride in its election, its destiny, and in the sweet reasonableness of its religion, which has the capacity beyond all others, we believe, to answer man's crying needs in a confused world. And on the other hand, we are the humble universalists, acknowledging that other men's thinking, other men's disciplines and creeds also represent high striving and are pleasing in the sight of the Lord. We are Jonah, begrudging an alien-faith--and we are Isaiah, embracing all mankind. These are the two sides of our outlook- and both are true and necessary.

Yom Kippur calls us to the great Day of Judgment and on this day, standing before the throne of God, let each man remember that he is both himself and his brother - that he is accountable to be his own best self - and that he is accountable to be his brother's keeper. This is the deepest truth I know.

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So now you have both sides of the coin--both themes in the great symphony. I have said it both ways. We are a people with a fierce sense of pride in its election, its destiny, and in the sweet reasonableness of its religion, which has the capacity beyond all others, we believe, to answer man's crying needs in a confused world. And on the other hand, we are the humble universalists, acknowledging that other men's thinking, other men's disciplines and creeds also represent high striving and are pleasing in the sight of the Lord. We are Jonah, begrudging an alien faith -- and we are Isaiah, embracing all mankind. These are the two sides of our outlook - and both are true and necessary.

Yom Kippur calls us to the great Day of Judgment and on this day, standing before the throne of God, let each man remember that he is both himself and his brother - that he is accountable to be his own best self - and that he is accountable to be his brother's keeper. This is the deepest truth I know.

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