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"A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy People." September 1953.

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A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy People

By RABBI HERBERT A. FRIEDMAN
Temple Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun

The late Justice Brandeis once said "I believe that the Jews can be just as much of a priest-people today as they ever were in the prophetic days."

In that one sentence, Brandeis was encompassing the historic role of the Jewish people.

Long ago, just before giving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, Moses had spoken these words of God to the Israelites: "Ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This meant that Israel was to live such a life as to be ever in God's service. Israel was to obey the Commandments and all ritual and moral laws, so that she might be an example to the other nations of the earth. This was to be her mission, and this was to justify her long scene on the stage of history.

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all other nations, rejecting the barbarism and the idolatry, the cruelty and the hatreds which characterized man's conduct in that early stage of human development. In short, Israel was to become a civilized people, obeying certain rules of conduct which would make of her a great force for good in the constant struggle of man toward progress.

Israel reached the peak of inspiration in this role during the time of the great prophets. She flowered forth in a spurt of moral genius, as exemplified in the lives and teachings of less than two dozen men whose strictures concerning kindness and decency, justice and law, truth and honesty have served to inspire all of mankind ever since.

Today we hear on every side that our troubles are not merely material, physical, scientific or military. The sickness in the world today is that of spiritual degeneration. Men are cynical, sharp, suspicious, calloused to the needs of others. On all sides, our leaders tell us that we need a revitalization of moral concepts and attitudes if we are to avoid slipping into a dark age.

President Eisenhower states this theme most often. In all of his major speeches, there are references to the moral law of God, the rule of justice, the need for re-emphasizing things of the spirit.

It is interesting to note that this September, when the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary of America celebrates its 50th anniversary, it will observe that important event by convening a great national conference. This will be called "A Conference On Moral Standards." Educators, theologians, philosophers, psychologists and many other professional men trained in the various disciplines relating to human conduct, will all gather in a great convocation to analyze the moral standards of our

century and to see what steps can be taken to elevate these standards. It is apparent from every sign that this is the most crying need of our generation.

Thus, the ancient message of Judaism has a particularly sharp relevancy today. We were enjoined to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The fact that mankind has slumbered with this slogan rather than implementing it, is but surer indication that its truth is eternal. We have come full circle and realize that the message of Judaism is ultimately the message which will redeem mankind from its woes and problems.

But it is not enough to say that we once were commanded to be a kingdom of priests and a holy people. Brandeis indicates that we can be just as much so today as we were at the time of our greatest flowering 25 centuries ago. It seems to me that Jews everywhere should take this challenge strongly to heart. How can we live again in the world today as a priest-people, basing ourselves on the highest moral principles?

In America, we Jews could be the proud protagonists of the great religious idealism of our past, out of which America herself was actually born. We repeat often that this democracy was based upon Biblical precepts of brotherhood and equality. We Jews particularly should continue to strive for the perfection of that dream in this land, and thus serve the whole human race.

In the new State of Israel, we could make sure that there would be a new growth of religious and spiritual sensitivity. We could try with all might and main to guarantee that once again Torah would go forth from Jerusalem to inspire mankind.

In Western Europe, we Jews, if we were to be a genuinely prophetic people again, would take the lead in urging the unification of nations toward an eventual brotherhood of states and countries. We would fight, struggle, preach and lead in the effort to cross artificial barriers and unite men in one great European family.

In Africa, we Jews could work toward racial peace, which is the great problem of that tremendous continent. For a long time to come Africa will need the voice of clear moral thinkers, to steady her on her rocky road toward emancipation.

And in the Soviet Union and all her satellites, the Jews could regroup themselves into some sort of community structure, however clandestine, to awaken from the enforced inactivity and sloth of the past four decades. There is still a mighty reservoir in Eastern Europe, from which has sprung some of the best Jewish leadership in modern times. Out of this pool could come again the voice of a strong Jewry, urging first their own nations and ultimately the world toward peace.

At this High Holy Day season, if at no other time, most Jews give some passing thought to the matter of their Jewishness. If anyone needs a rationale for his continuing existence as a Jew, let him find it in the ancient-new slogan "a kingdom of priests and a holy people." If we ride our own ship with a firm hand at the tiller, knowing the course we plot, knowing the eventual harbor we seek, then each one of the passengers in the ship has the same definite sense of purpose and direction to his life, both as an individual and collectively.

Judaism once offered great things to the world. It is still virile, its message is still unfulfilled, its goals still unachieved. Let it therefore inspire us in this century as it did our fathers in ages gone by.

1953

A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS AND A HOLY PEOPLE

by

Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman
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She was to be different from all other nations, rejecting the barbarism and the idolatry, the cruelty and the hatreds which characterized man's conduct in that early stage of human development. In short, Israel was to become a civilized people, obeying certain rules of conduct which would make of her a great force for good in the constant struggle of man toward progress.

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But it is not enough to say that we once were commanded to be a kingdom of priests and a holy people. Brandeis indicates that we can be just as much so today as we were at the time of our greatest flowering twenty-five centuries ago. It seems to me that Jews everywhere should take this challenge strongly to heart. How can we live again in the world today as a priest-people, basing ourselves on the highest moral principles?

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