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Yom Kippur sermon. "Judaism: The Hope of the World." 1959.

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SERMON -- YOM KIPPUR -- 1954  
 "JUDAISM -- THE HOPE OF THE WORLD"

by Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman

We come on this pregnant day to this grand and glorious place with expectancy in our hearts and with yearning in our souls. We seek the grand theme, for the mood is solemn. The message today could speak of personal growth and maturity -- each person's individual striving toward the stars. It could equally well speak of collective striving towards the answer to the highest philosophical questions -- who are we, what is our role, what is the meaning of our existence as Jews.

This Yom Kippur I prefer the latter, for it is the natural corollary of the idea I started to develop on Rosh Hashonah. You will recall that I spoke then about the kind of Judaism we could have in America in the future, and the paradoxes we would be obliged to solve in order to attain that goal. But all the hard work is justified only if there exists an utter conviction about its worthwhileness.

Let the thesis for today then be the question of Judaism's importance and relevancy in the modern world -- nothing less. When the great figures of Protestantism gathered from all over the globe this past summer at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, their theme was "Christ -- The Hope of the World" and they analyzed its details with fervor. Without engaging in polemics, it occurs to me that an equivalent phrase "Judaism -- the Hope of the World" deserves at least equal attention. Christians say that a belief in Christ as the Saviour is the best hope for confused mankind. If you can accept this, you can find peace in this world and salvation in the next. This message, they say, is applicable to everyone, and they seek with sincerity to bring its benefits to the uninstructed through missions of world-wide proportions. What message does Judaism have for the whole wide world?

One of the great mystics of our day, Professor Abraham Heschel, has coined this sentence: "We are the most challenged people under the sun. Our existence is either superfluous or indispensable to the world; it is either tragic or holy to be a Jew." Is all the suffering for naught? Is our history really a

meaningless routine of constant suffering, without rhyme or reason? Was the skin stripped from Akiba's quivering body in a Roman arena merely as a senseless act? Did the martyrs go to their death in the hideous blood-bath of the Crusades for nothing? Did the furnaces roar in the 20th century (and we have forgotten so soon) in a ghastly echo of stupidity? Is Jewish life pure and unadulterated suffering -- or is there some most high and holy purpose for which we live and die?

Many of our people have felt, at all time in our long existence, that it was simply tragic and meaningless. There were those who never understood why we were singled out for persecution. There were always those who were sickened by the brutality. There were some who were afraid of the personal consequences for themselves and their children. Pain is real and the human mind resists it. He who runs from it and seeks refuge is not to be condemned. Those who were unable to contemplate living their whole lives under a cloud of hatred sought escape through assimilation, conversion, disappearance.

There were others who were not so much afraid of the pain and the blood as they were depressed by the feeling that there was no sense in a special Jewish identity. There were always those intellectuals who were convinced that Judaism had nothing special to offer any longer, that world culture was superior, and that only a stubborn obstinacy stood in the way of a merger with the great outside currents of human endeavor.

In ancient days, there was once a man by the name of Elisha ben Abuyah. He lived in Palestine in the days of the Talmud and felt that the enormous achievements of the Greek-speaking world around him offered more answers for a man seeking pure reason than did the narrowly confined regulations of Jewish law. He left his land and his faith to search far and wide in the Hellenistic world for answers. He dabbled in the learning of the Greeks, thinking that there was much superior in this broad culture of art and reason and logic. At the end of a long life, he found himself unsatisfied, unfulfilled, for he learned the lesson that life cannot be built upon a foundation only of mathematics and philosophy. Life demands also acts

of faith, and so at the end he made the circle complete as he came back to Judaism. He began the long walk home, to try to end his life upon a combination of faith and reason, Jewish religion and Greek science, which might provide a compounded answer to his tremendous yearnings.

The Jews in Spain in the 14th century who accepted baptism in preference to the stake were afraid of the pain and persecution. Elisha ben Abuyah ran from the faith of his fathers because he saw broader horizons. Of both these categories we have ample example and many witnesses. These are the people who felt it was tragic to be a Jew, or incomplete to be a Jew, and they sought ways out.

There is a second group, a middle group, who felt that there was no answer to this cosmic question in terms of black or white. They were not sure whether it was tragic or holy to be a Jew and they sought to accommodate themselves to both these possibilities. One such was a man of the 19th century. His name was Judah Leib Gordon. He lived in a Lithuanian ghetto. He saw squalor, darkness, poverty, oppression, and he also saw spiritual slavery in the hearts and minds of his fellow Jews. He set out to enlighten the masses and to arouse them to a realization of the importance of general education. He tried to get the Jews to throw off the shackles of medievalism and to join their fellow countrymen of Lithuania in learning the native language of the place and adopting modern manners and modes of life. He coined a phrase which has become famous. He said, "Be a Jew at home and be a man abroad." By this he meant that Judaism was something private and personal, to be practiced at home, but not to be manifested outside. One could live within the framework of Jewish ritual and ceremonial observance within the confines of one's own tent and family. But on the sidewalks and streets of the world one was to make every conscious effort to adjust, to integrate, to assimilate with the total environment. Be a Jew only at home. On the street, be a man -- that is a Russian, or a Frenchman, or an Englishman, interpenetrating the life of other Russians, Frenchmen, or Englishmen, finding common phases for mutual conduct or action, minimizing the differences. His advice was one of compromise and expediency. Such a formula possesses its own inner limitations and obviously proves to be inadequate or offers no guidance capable of long and sustained effort.

Now let me speak of a third group, those few whose number we seek constantly to enlarge, who truly understand the inner crucial significance of this question and who have come to the conclusion that Judaism is not meaningless misery, nor an outdated system devoid of inspiration, but that it has as holy a purpose as can be conceived by man.

I am sure you have all heard of Rabbi Leo Baeck, formerly of Berlin, one of the true saints of our generation. He is more than 80 now, lives in London and travels occasionally in the United States to give lectures. He has seen the complete destruction of his Temple, his people, his old fatherland. A man of his age is not likely to be a blind chauvinist. A man who has lived through the concentration camp at Theresienstadt is not likely to possess an unquestioning mind. This man is wise in knowledge and in experience. His is not a shrill or superficial voice. He writes out of the depth and weightiness of a tremendous life experience. Leo Baeck is one of those who believes that Jewish life is holy, has meaning for Jews, and above all else, has meaning for the entire human race. Listen to the words from his glorious book "The Essence of Judaism":

"Judaism has never abandoned the claim to be the world religion. Were it not replete with the consciousness of this idea, its whole history would seem petty and even incomprehensible. Only by that claim does it gain its heroic character. To suffer for the sake of a narrow idea of limited importance can be seen as little more than honorable obstinacy. Only when a conviction has far-reaching greatness and its defenders are aware of its sublimity, it is heroic for man to live for it alone. By having preserved and still preserving its old spiritual possessions, Judaism maintains its unshakable belief that it is guarding the religion of all humanity. For the prophets who created the idea of a world religion, Israel's life was no isolated experience factor in the life of all nations."

The holiness of the Jew lies then in the fact that his special qualities of spirit constitute a gift from which the whole world can benefit. The world today stands very much in need of Jewish spirit.

The President goes to church almost every Sunday. Is this an act -- a political gesture? What is he seeking? He went to the meeting of the World Council of Churches at Evanston this summer, and, speaking as a private citizen, he told the world what he was seeking. He said, "The goal should be nothing short of inviting every single person in every single country in the world who believes in the power of a Supreme Being to join in a mighty, simultaneous, intense act of faith."

The President of the United States is seeking an intense, mighty act of faith on the part of all the people of the world as an answer to the question of survival and safety. He is as much afraid of atomic warfare as you and I. He knows better than we that it can pulverize and destroy mankind. The greatest need in the world today is to discover some gigantic power within man capable of controlling the gigantic power of the bomb. The President is seeking to find the spiritual strength to conquer the bomb when it destroys us all. Where can he find this? He looks for it in the hearts of every single human being on earth who believes in a Supreme Being. The strength comes only when men are capable of rising above greed, pride, fear -- when they are determined to live by love and faith, not conquest.

The Jews have the greatest spiritual strength in the world. "Not by might nor by power," said the prophet, "but by my spirit." And the spirit of faith has sustained the Jew against bombs for centuries. That bomb which threatens to destroy the whole world is the same as the bomb which has often threatened to destroy the Jew. The world now stands on the brink of the same experience of horror with which the Jew is so often familiar. Destruction stares the world in the face and somehow from within itself it must find a great reservoir of faith which will enable it to outlast the present horror. This is so familiar to us. How often have we stood on the brink of horror and how often have we had to sum up from within ourselves the reservoir of strength with which to meet the onslaught.

It is not most important that the Jew try to share with the world the secret of the spiritual strength which has saved him again and again? And if we do teach our secret to the world, does not this then mean that our existence is not tragic but is holy of holies, most holy?

What is the secret? The secret of the faith of the Jew, which has enabled him to withstand all shocks and strains, is to be found in five simple tenets of his theology.

First, we have the belief that God exists. This is no mere verbiage. Job cried out in the pain of all his anguish and was happy when God answered him from out of the whirlwind. He was happy because he knew that he was not alone. Men cannot stand to be alone in this vast and impersonal universe. But it is not enough simply to know that there is a God. This God must be close and warm and vibrant and, to the Jew, he was so close as to be called partner. God and man goaded each other on to ever greater effort. God too would be lonely if he did not have man -- peopling his universe. This is an enormous source of human strength, warmth, and comfort.

Secondly, we believe that in the exercising of this partnership, God and man use the tapestry of history. History is the handmaiden, the midwife by which the human race marks its progress. We do not believe, as Toynbee or Spengler suggest, that civilizations live and die without inching forward, however slowly, toward the goals we call Messianic. We cannot accept the blind and mechanistic view of life, for we see all about us the evolution of life forms to ever higher stages. Man is not an accident, nor is history a crazy-quilt tapestry of meaningless jigsaws. If God and man are partners, then they work out the destiny of their aspiration, on the fields of history, which fields may well be bloodied but are not sterile.

Thirdly, we believe that ethics and morality, the good life, the decent treatment of man by man, social justice, are the truest goals which must ever be sought by us. Just as the plant turns its leaf outward reaching toward the sun, so do we Jews turn our spirits outward reaching toward the sun of justice and truth and mercy and peace. We could not long abide if we believed these goals unattainable. We could not long endure the outrages which have been visited upon us, if we did not believe that these too would some day pass as man thrusts his way ever upward and ever forward toward the goals which shall surely <sup>some</sup> day be achieved. Our whole existence is oriented toward the conviction that morality will conquer and that man will someday reach the full maturity of a peaceful co-existence with his fellowmen. We could not live eternally in a world in which evil was bound to reign.

The very proof of this is that those who desire evil cannot long live with us. In the every efforts of evil men to destroy us, do we see the strength of the role we play. Why are we attacked? Because of our long noses? Nonsense! Because our very presence is a galling reminder of civilization to those who would unleash barbarism. Hitler understood that we must be obliterated if his conception of human life was to prevail. He has to destroy us if he were to saddle the world with the rule of brutality. He left behind a conversation which has been recorded by Herman Rauschning, once an intimate, later an opponent, Rauschning tells this story, which is to me the most valid reason for the continued survival of the Jewish people and the Jewish ethic. He writes:

"At an intimate gathering in Berlin shortly after the National Socialists' rise to power, I heard Hitler reveal himself. Hitler was making a murderous assault on every form of higher human culture. Hitler said, 'Historically speaking, the Christian religion is nothing but a Jewish sect. It has always been and it will always remain just that, as long as it will exist!'

He continued fanatically "There is much more behind this. It is not merely a question of Christianity and Judaism, we are fighting against the most ancient curse that humanity has brought upon itself. We are fighting against the perversion of our soundest instincts. Ah, the god of the deserts, that crazy, stupid, vengeful Asiatic despot with his power to make law! That slave-keeper's whip! That devilish "Thou shalt, thou shalt!" and that stupid "Thou shalt not!" It has got to get out of our blood, that curse from Mt. Sinai! That poison with which both Jews and Christians have spoiled the free wonderful instincts of man and lowered them to the level of dog-like fright."

Goebbels interrupted, "Honor thy father and thy mother?" "No!" Every boy revolts and hates his father and must do so to start his own life. This is an immortal law of nature."

Hitler's voice scounded loudly in the small room, "Thou shalt not steal? Wrong! All life is theft."



"I am the Lord, thy God! Who? That Asiatic tyrant? No! The day shall come when I shall hold up against these ten commandments the tables of a new law. This is what we are fighting against: The curse of so-called morals. Against the so-called ten commandments, against them we are fighting. Yes -- Hitler knew that if he were to impose upon the world his concept of the super-race ruling the weak, then he must destroy Judaism, and with it its daughter sect Christianity, for only then could he release the fierce and barbaric spirit which Jewish civilizing ethic had attempted to hold in abeyance since Sinai. We should certainly be as aware of our own role as our enemies have always been.

Fourthly, we believe that evil is not the inevitable fate of man. We reject the notion that man is basically a beast and cannot raise himself up above his own lowest instincts. We cannot believe that he is forever doomed to wallow in the mire of ugliness, shortsightedness, suicide and murder. We believe he has a potential of living but a little lower than the angels and we seek with all the power at our command to evoke from man conduct which is becoming in the sight of the Lord. You have all lived like angels as well as devils. We believe man is capable of the highest conduct and we do not foreordain him to the chains of his own evil nature which shall forever keep him low. We believe he can be free and that as he seeks to soar high, he will bring up the level of the whole human race with him.

Fifth and lastly, we believe that freedom is indispensable as a prerequisite for life upon this earth. We do not render unto Caesar what is Caesar's when we believe Caesar is wrong. At long, long last our Christian brethren have found the courage to repudiate this ancient doctrine. At the great Council of Churches meeting in Evanston this summer they attacked the problem of racial discrimination with great vigor. They finally said that racial discrimination is not only "an unutterable offense against God" but where it is the law of the land (as, for instance, in South Africa) true Christians may properly "feel bound to disobey such law." Jews have always disobeyed the laws of tyranny and injustice and cruelty and evil, even where such disobedience brought them into conflict with the powers of Church and State. Freedom is indispensable and even when government, the highest authority on earth, would seek to abridge it, this is not to be permitted.

And so we return to the root question. Is Jewish existence tragic or is it holy? I say it is holy. It is never holier than on this day when we can understand the grand theme which parades before our eyes through prayer and music. And I say that if this is so, we have no right to keep these values hidden. It is inadequate to suggest that we should be Jews at home but that abroad we should be like all other men. We should be Jews abroad to spread this word, to give this faith, to offer this message to the world which stands now in such paralyzed hypnosis before impending doom.

We believe in God.

We believe in history as progress.

We believe that social justice is the goal of man's efforts.

We believe that man is good not evil.

We believe that rebellion against tyranny is indispensable.

These beliefs have as much explosive power as any atomic engine.

They provide sufficient fuel and power to energize the entire human race.

This Jewish message, this holy, this imperishable message which has sustained our body and soul through centuries of travail, can give to America the faith our president seeks and it can give to all mankind the calm confidence which will enable the world to avoid the path of total calamity. Nation need not lock sword with nation in a blind fury of fear, hatreds, and frustrations, if men's souls are stimulated by the dreams and convictions which have carried us through every ordeal and will surely sustain us to the end of time.

If ultimately in the long run, the impact of the Jewish religion upon mankind is just this and no less, then perhaps our children's children's children will some day not question whether our faith is tragic or holy. They will know it is holy. For they will see that it has brought redemption to the human race.

Amen.

"I am the Lord, thy God! Who? That Asiatic tyrant? No! The day shall come when I shall hold up against these ten commandments the tables of a new law. This is what we are fighting against: The curse of so-called morals. Against the so-called ten commandments, against them we are fighting. Yes -- Hitler knew that if he were to impose upon the world his concept of the super-race ruling the weak, then he must destroy Judaism, and with it its daughter sect Christianity, for only then could he release the fierce and barbaric spirit which Jewish civilizing ethic had attempted to hold in abeyance since Sinai. We should certainly be as aware of our own role as our enemies have always been.

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