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A COLLECTION OF SERMONS

— BY THE —

MOST EMINENT AMERICAN RABBIS.



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ROSH HASHANAH.

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(Of Cincinnati, O.)

צא ועמדת בהר לפני י " "Go out and stand upon the mountain before God." These are the divine words addressed to the Prophet Elijah, when he abode in the cave of Mount Horeb in a state of despair over Israel and his cause. He had seen the fire come down from heaven upon Mount Carmel to demonstrate to all the worshipers of Baal that the One and Eternal God is the Lord and King and Rock of Israel. He had heard the congregated myriads of Israel exclaim in accents of liquid fire: "הוא האלהים", "God is the Lord." But the wicked Queen of Israel, hearing of the discomfiture of the priests and prophets of Baal, and the havoc made of them, sent forth her messengers to slay Elijah. He fled for his life to the wilderness, and there in that cave cried painfully: "קנא קנאתי וי", "I have been very zealous for God, the Lord of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, have thrown down thy altars, have slain thy prophets with the sword; I am left alone by myself, and they seek to take my life." Poor man! poor enthusiast! He was neither the first nor the last victim of mighty enthusiasm. But then God commanded him to go out of his dismal cave, to stand upon the mountain before God.

Brethren, this is Rosh Hashanah, Israel's New Year. God bless you all, you and all who are near and dear to your hearts, this day and every day of your lives, all of which may be sweet and happy. May all of you feel the presence of your God in his holy temple, to fill your hearts with golden hopes and heavenly joys, to forget the combats and sorrows

and tears of life, and behold the pleasantness of God ; so the King of Glory may enter in you and with you into the portals of the new year. This is Israel's New Year, brethren ; and what a mountain is in space that is the New Year in time. It is an elevation, and those who stand on its summit may survey the area below. New Year is an elevation in time, and those who place themselves upon it may look backward and forward, to the right and to the left, to survey the past and cast a glance upon the future. Therefore, in the divine words of Scripture, I call on you : " Go out and stand upon the mountain before God." Come out of the dismal cave of self-delusion, self-conceit and sinfulness ; out also of the vulgar habits of indulgence, self-gratification and self-forgetfulness ; also out of the dismal cave of grief and affliction and fear and apprehension ; and stand high upon the mountain in the clear and transparent atmosphere of truth, light, godliness and holiness ; and stand before God, the Eternal and Omniscient, who looks into the recesses of the heart and beholds the very motive of your volitions ; the All-just and Almighty, who gives to man according to his ways and the fruits of his doings. Come out and stand upon the mountain before your God ; come out and hear the message of the Most High to his servant Elijah.

Elijah came forth from the cave, stood upon the mountain and complained bitterly : " I have been very zealous for God, the Lord of hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant." Stop ! here we must pause. The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, he said ; not all of them, indeed, but many, very many, of them ; not those, perhaps, to whom I speak, but many to whom I speak not, because they studiously and persistently desert every moral influence, and kneel spell-bound before Baal and Astarte, the Baal of a bewildered imagination and the Astarte of wicked and debauching propensities ; not those, perhaps, of this city, but those of many cities and localities, who listen to no admonition, the name of God is never on their lips, they never think and never feel a sublime thought or profound sentiment ;

to whom indulgence, gratification, pleasure wild and inebriating, is life's sole object; or perhaps these and those, here and there and anywhere, as none but the eye of the Omniscient penetrates into the secret dens of corruption, to know exactly who is and who is not of those children of Israel who have forsaken His covenant. One thing, however, is certain also in our days—a large number of Israel's sons, and, alas! also of his daughters, between the confirmation and wedding days, never show by one word or deed of theirs that they stand within God's covenant with Israel. In the most dangerous time of man's life, when youth matures to manhood, the passions are fresh and strong and the understanding insufficiently developed to govern them, those young people are withdrawn from every moral influence of the school and synagogue, science and art, elevating and invigorating literature, the society of men and women of culture, moral and intellectual ambition, or, what is perhaps an equally efficient educator, work, sufficient work to engage body and soul; yes, in many instances they are withdrawn from the moral influences of the virtuous family, the softening and humanizing affections of mother and sister, to live together in clubs or gilded saloons, with magnates of frivolity or champions of lewdness, left to drift unguarded, unheeded, unnoticed upon the wild current of life, to swim or sink, to live or die. Who can close his eyes to the fact that they have forsaken His covenant, many, many, of the sons and daughters of Israel, and kneel spell-bound before Baal and Astarte? Who can doubt it that a grievous sin has been committed on the rising generation, permitted to grow up without a God and the watchful eye of religion? Who will deny the necessity of saving our own sons and daughters from under the destruction of this age of gross materialism, which seeks pleasure, gratification, pomp, ostentation, tinsel and toys more than truth, light, happiness and true manhood; this sensual, scandal-loving and excitement-seeking generation, that has no aim beyond crude selfishness? Therefore, the divine words addressed to the Prophet Elijah are also directed to us, and now "Go out and stand on the mountain before God;" survey the lo-

cation, take in the whole situation, and remember that you stand before your God, the Lord of justice, the God of righteousness. To you, young men in Israel, and to you first, those divine words are addressed. Have mercy with your kin, your companions, your brothers. You who are not sold into the perpetual slavery of sensuality; you who are not damned to sit with the cards, the cues or the goblets in your hands in order to be amused, who know and understand that there are higher duties, higher aims, higher pleasures, especially for the conscientious son of Israel; have mercy with your kin, your companions, your brothers; rouse them from that deadening slumber; rouse them in the name of truth and mercy; save them from the poisoning looks of basilisks; rescue them out of the iron grip of the forlorn and sinking victims of wickedness. Come out and stand upon the mountain before God. Save those who in a few years will sorely repent, and, perhaps, will discover it to be too late to amend, to restore the wasted time, energy, manhood, intelligence and human happiness. Hear the divine injunction, listen to the solemn admonition, save your kin, your companions, your brothers.

Standing upon the mountain, brethren, let us look around to discover why this is so. Why is it that while on the one side there is manifested in our days so sublime an enthusiasm for the cause of Israel, there is on the other hand so deadening an indifference to all that is of a religious, moral or even an intellectual character; so that the same people who care not for your religious belief and practice care for nothing else which offers not either gain or pleasure, sensual gratification or amusement? The prophet in the bitterness of his soul, answers this momentous question even before it had been asked. He exclaimed: "They have thrown down thy altars," not the one on Mount Moriah, but many other altars have they thrown down, so Elijah complained.

Here, methinks, the fault lies. The altars of ceremonial religion, the heritage of the Middle Ages, have been thrown down by advancing culture, liberty, intelligence, wealth, contact with the human family, the revolution of opinions which

upheaves all strata of society. Mere observances and performances, however ancient and venerable, would no longer satisfy the heart of man. The ancient forms were broken asunder, and Judaism on this continent had become a weak shadow of the past, an exotic plant without the ability to strike roots in this soil. Honest men, men of inspiration and enthusiasm, raised their voices as did Elijah on Mount Carmel: "How long halt ye between two opinions (hobble on two clefts)? If God is the Lord, follow him; and if Baal, follow him." Let us reform, *i. e.*, let us adopt other forms, better forms, modern forms, æsthetical forms, to rescue the spirit of eternal truth; to give adequate expression to the sublime doctrines and precepts of the divine religion, which is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob. As in all political revolutions, the transition from despotism to freedom is understood by some, and misunderstood by many as a signal to violence, robbery and general lawlessness; as in social philosophy, the idea of independence is grasped and valued by many, and misconstrued by others into communism and libertinism; so the idea of reform in Judaism was understood and duly appreciated by many honest and enthusiastic men and women, even those who built up all these glorious temples of divine worship, schools of religious instruction, asylums for the sick, the needy, the orphan and the widow, associations of charity and societies of benevolence; even those who love and support all those institutions with their treasures and personal attendance, have built up a Union of the American Israel and a College to educate expounders of the Law; even those who have deeply implanted Israel in the American soil, in the hearts of good and intelligent people, in the esteem and respect of our neighbors, who have removed from our heads the prejudices with the superstitions and have rejuvenated with life and energy the declining spirit of despairing children. But it was misunderstood and misconstrued by many into a communism with the lowest class of God-forsaken worshipers of Mammon, and a libertinism common to the scum of society. They have thrown down thy altars and adopted the culte of Mammon, Venus

and Bacchus. They have thrown down thy altars and returned to a loathsome heathenism. "This is nothing, that is nothing, all is nothing," is their crude motto; "let us eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die," is their moral doctrine; knowledge and learning are good for professional men, they say; intelligence and enlightenment are necessary for public writers, orators or comedians; we live, we take life as it is, we are practical men. "And the superiority of man over the beast is naught, for it is all vanity;" it is the Darwinian baboon with two hands and no hair.

They have torn down thy altars. They would not go into the old synagogue, and do not show their faces in the new temple, which is too civilized a place for those used to dens and hovels. They did not pray in Hebrew and do not pray in English, because they can not pray unless Providence smites them with misery. They could not listen to the old melodies of the old-fashioned precentor, and have no ear for the sacred music of our choirs; it does not afford them the right kind of excitement. They did not read the Bible or any other religious book, and do not read any book now unless, perhaps, it contains a sufficient amount of scandal or crime. They worship not on Sabbath and propose now to deceive God and man also on Sunday. There is no God in their hearts, therefore none in their houses and families, none in their children, none to sustain a moral character. They boast of what they do not and believe not, although they would not care for telling what they do and believe. Next *Yom Kippur* you will hear again how many have taken illicit dinners here and there; but they would not tell you what else they have done on that occasion, nor will they tell you of anything good, generous, noble, humane or wise they may have done instead. You will hear of those who do their daily business to-day and do it on *Yom Kippur*; but nobody will tell that on that account they are better, more respectable, honorable or more trustworthy than you are.

I do not exaggerate, you know I do not. There are quite a number of people who have become libertines in this respect and appear to believe they could be good, moral men, who

deserve honest men's respect without any religion. They also appear to believe they could raise children to be good and happy men and women without the moral influence of religious instruction. They think a man might be rich and fat and do a lucrative business without any religion; therefore, they have torn down thy altars, and also, alas! the altars of their children, the altars of a rising generation. The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and so the teeth of the sons are blunted. The fathers imagine they could do without it, and so the sons do without it. One wicked man leads many astray; one Satan consumes many victims; one debased ring-leader leads many to hell. So reform was abused, so the altars were torn down; so good morals, intelligence itself was defied, so they have deserted thy covenant, the children of Israel. They had outgrown the forms of the Middle Ages and had not grown high enough to understand the lofty principle of a purely spiritual religion. They escaped the fear of hell without learning the fear of the Lord, therefore, they scorn with infidels and laugh with the frivolous; but they have not learned to think and reason with earnest men. They have forgotten everything and learned nothing. They have thrown off the burden of the Sabbath, the yoke of divine worship, the restraints of the law without submission to the dictates of reason, the imperative decrees of ethics, the demands of humanity, self-control and self-perfectionment.

For the sake of my brothers and my friends, let me speak peace, I beseech you, men and brethren in Israel; for the sake of those who sink, go under, and drag others down into the whirlpool of self-destruction, let me cry out, heal, rebuild the altar of God, which is overthrown. You, the better men and better women in Israel, who stand to-day upon the mountain before your God and Father; you who do not bend your knees before Baal, who love truth and righteousness, God and humanity, you must do something to reclaim the fallen and the falling. You must make up your mind to give honor to God by the strict observance of his laws, honor to Israel by adherence to his precepts, and honor to human

nature by going before others with good examples and inspiring deeds. "That they may hear and may see and deal presumptuously no more," you must set the example by a stricter observance of the Sabbath; you must honor your sacred cause by attending to it personally in all public meetings of the congregation, in divine worship or any other occasion; you must be strict at your homes as well as in public that the words of God be made known to the young and the old by all means at your command. To be brief, you men and women in Israel must be Israelites of the nineteenth century, as you can be Israelites no longer of any previous date, and set the example to others that there is a God in Israel who is our Judge, our Law-giver, our King and our Savior forever.

"And thy prophets have they slain with the sword," Elijah complains furthermore, as if he intended to say all hopes of reformation and restoration appear to be lost; they have deserted the covenant, have destroyed the altars, the doctrine and the deed are perverted, and the only men who could bring about a change for the better, the prophets, have been slain with the sword. Might we not utter the same cry of despair? **אין עוד נביא**, "We have no more prophets?" but that is not yet the worst, that Psalmist continues, **ואין אנחנו יודע**, **ער מה**, "And none of us knows to what, whereto all this will lead." The prophets are gone and ignorance has increased. Those who are appointed to replace the prophets are "Your prophets," who reveal unto thee messages of falsehood and seduction. Anybody almost appears in our days to be deemed competent to replace Moses and the Prophets, their precepts and the eternal truths of history. Any young man of a common school education in our days, any bankrupt man who has failed in his ordinary profession or trade, any common man who perchance has read a book and was lucky enough to become wealthy, any common howler or public crier, nay, renegades, apostates, abject impostors, political demagogues, eccentric croakers, anybody almost has become a substitute for the prophet, to tear down and uproot, to scoff at all things sacred and laugh at the teach-

ings of reason, to begin history anew and close our eyes to the holiest treasures of man in all history of the past; and a blind multitude, pleasure-loving and amusement-seeking, worships this idol or that fetich, is bribed and corrupted by a laugh or pleased by scandal. May we not exclaim, "And Thy prophets have they slain with the sword?"

"Your prophets" who tell you privately you need keep no Sabbath, you need not worship your God, if you are yourselves artists, scientists, philosophers, free thinkers or something like it; "Your prophets" who are always ready to please you in your houses or even to laugh with you or for you over things sacred, over persons of earnest conviction; but when they come before the public they always appear in the sacred cloak of godliness and with a false face of holiness; these, "Your prophets," are the dead men slain by the levity and hypocrisy of this age of masquerades and burlesques. Do not accuse them, although they are damnable, as long as you must accuse yourselves of the cause thereof. If you do believe in God and truth, why do you run after priests of atheism and darkness? If you believe in moral principles, why do you prefer printed scandal or spoken indecency to the products of reason and words of purity? Why do you desert genius and run after comedians? If you believe in Judaism, and think the Sabbath must remain as ordained in the Decalogue, why do you not keep it? Why do you not distinguish the day in this or that manner to demonstrate to your families and your neighbors that, yielding to necessity, you sell out principles for dollars and cents? Let me stop here or else I might go too far. These are a few of the questions which I ask, not of you assembled in this temple, which I address to this age of levity and hypocrisy, this generation of masquerades and burlesques. We might, I think, say the same thing to-day, as did Elijah on Horeb, who exclaimed: "They have forsaken thy covenant, the children of Israel; they have overthrown thy altars and slain thy prophets with the sword."

And yet, however just that prophet's complaint appears to be, it did not appear entirely so to the Almighty. God

admonished that zealous man to know and understand that he was not in fire, storm or earthquake, that he was revealed in soft and benign whispers. God admonished him that the world will not die out when Elijah dies, and charged him to anoint another king and prophet. God's promises must be fulfilled, however wicked this or that generation may be. God's word is eternal, but generations come and go. The *Midrash* adds to this: "Whoever depreciates Israel, let him beware lest he be depreciated himself. Isaiah said, 'And I dwell among a nation of impure lips;' and he was told with a burning coal to purify his lips. Moses said, 'Hear, ye rebellious ones,' and he was told, 'Thou shalt not bring this congregation into the land of promise.' Elijah said, 'The children of Israel have forgotten thy covenant,' and he was answered, 'Go and anoint Elisha ben Shaphat a prophet in thy place.'"

Well do we understand all this, and history repeats it very frequently. Whatever individuals, whatever a class of individuals may do or say; of Israel, as a community of all ages and generations the Holy One has said, "Verily, they are my people, children who lie not." Israel always was and is now faithful to his God. The minority must not be taken into consideration to condemn the majority. One man, one class of men, yea, one generation, may fail and fall, yet "The word of our God will last forever." The holy religion of Israel is beyond human power; it can not be injured. Well do we know how the large majority of this congregation, in fact of all our congregations, are faithful to God and Israel. But he is my God whom I humbly worship; they are all my own people, my own flesh and blood, whom I love; this law of God is my law, before which I meekly bend my head. Therefore, I mourn, I weep for those who fail and fall and disappear in the current of popular vices, and cry, with the bereaved mourners, "Horrid deep, give back my children!" Therefore, I mourn with mourners and weep with the wretched; with Mother Rachel in Ramah do I cry: "Woe over our children who run to self-destruction!" Therefore, I call from the recesses of my heart, to you, men and brethren,

fathers and mothers, sons and daughters in Israel, on this holy day of memorial ; I cry, go out, come forth and stand on the mountain before God. Neglect not my children, my kin, my brothers, the dear ones of my soul. You must do something to save, to rescue them. Resolve resolutions, devise means in your minds, on the mountain before the Lord. And with such resolves let us open the portal of the future and enter with the King of Glory, who will bless, protect and guide you all. May the year open with the light of truth, the sunshine of prosperity and happiness to all. God grant you life, peace and happiness. God grant you contentment, satisfaction and joy. May God protect your health, increase your wealth, enlarge your sphere of usefulness, pervade your souls with heavenly light. Amen.