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Ninetieth Anniversary Sermon, 1940.

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NINETIETH ANNIVERSARY SERMON

WRHS

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple



On
Sunday morning, May 26, 1940

Heavenly Father! A thousand years in Thy sight are as yesterday which is past. Yet to us, whose days are few and whose power is limited, every completed year is of moment and worthy of observance. May we then so count our days as to apply our hearts unto wisdom.

We thank Thee that this Thy holy congregation has passed another milestone in its existence. We know that its survival would not have been possible, hadst Thou not looked with favor upon our work. This is indeed a day which Thou hast made. Therefore, we rejoice and pour out our hearts in gladness. In unison we exclaim: "Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; His mercy endureth forever!"

We thank Thee, that because Thy spirit dwells here, this house has become a gateway to heaven. We thank Thee for the solace and strength our prayers here have brought us; for the devotion to lofty purpose and the loyalty to ennobling ideals with which we have been imbued. We thank Thee for the divine truths which have been here proclaimed; for the religious spirit which has been here deepened; and for the human service which has been here inspired. We thank Thee for the mutual sympathy and cooperation which have been here stimulated.

Mayest Thou ever watch over this, Thy house, and the people who gather within its walls. May all who enter here, realize how awe-inspiring is this place, that it is none other than the house of God. Vouchsafe Thy blessing to every man, woman and child of this congregation. Fill with the spirit of wisdom and understanding those who are entrusted with the guidance of this congregation. Bless those who do service at Thine altar, so that by their prayers and teachings hearts may be hallowed and souls inspired. In Thine unbounded grace bless our city, our state and our country. May justice and peace reign within our borders. Hasten the dawn of the day when "Violence shall no more be heard in our land, wasting or destruction within our borders, but when every city shall call its walls Salvation and its gates Praise." Do Thou establish, O Lord, the work of our hands; yea, the work of our hands, establish thou you. Amen.

My dear Friends:

No one can really evaluate the work of our religious institutions and our congregations. There is no way of registering the extent of its influence because after all they deal in imponderables. It is possible, of course, when you take stock of the achievements of a congregation and point to its physical size, the number of its membership, and the number of children who have received instruction in its school, or have been confirmed, the beautiful structure and its equipment - essentially these do not tell the story of the influence of a religious institution. For the prime commissioned service which a religious institution must perform is, after all is said and done, of men and women, the men and women who compose their fellowship and the extent of that service within its recesses, and the inner spiritual lives of men and women cannot be factually determined.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that for ninety years men and women have entered the gates of Tifereth Israel with thanksgiving, and into its courts giving thanks unto God, and praise his name - that fact alone is of supreme significance and is supreme evidence that Tifereth Israel satisfied some vital needs of these men and women during these last nine decades, responded to some real spiritual necessity. No institution can last ninety years - indeed no institution like ours could last forty times ninety years - for that is the life-span of the synagogue of which this congregation is, after all, only a star in the vast constellation covering the whole earth. No institution can last that long unless men and women ardently wish that it should last, and are ready to make critical sacrifices to insure its survival.

The forty-seven men who ninety years ago assembled and organized our congregation did so through no outer prompting. They did so because they felt somehow that life was incomplete, and in a real sense felt spiritually

insecure without a congregation. And those who came after them during the last nine decades maintained institutions and enlarged its activities did so for the self-same reason - they felt their lives needed complete spiritual security, - even if many of them were not fully aware of the motives behind their affiliation.

And you, too, dear friends, who stand this day before the Lord your God, who are the latest sons and daughters of Tifereth Israel, you, too, must sense the same need - not all of you and not all in the same measure - but nevertheless you sense the same need. Some of you are fully aware of that need, and others only vaguely, some only in rare moments when private lives are fearfully shaken.

Every generation of men feels itself less religious than the preceding one. It is part of the proud sophistication of each new generation to regard itself superior to such an old institution as religion. People feel secure in other fields - in material prosperities, scientific, artistic achievements, security in military prowess and feel that they can dispense with the whole mystic, at times incompatible heritage called God and His moral law. But there is hardly a generation, my friends, which is not brought, sooner or later to the brink of disaster by such spiritual obtuseness or spiritual blindness, and when it is, that generation desperately, instinctively, with fear in its heart, turns to religion.

I listened yesterday, as many of you undoubtedly did, to the two political chiefs of the two greatest empires on earth who are fighting for their nations with their backs to the wall, fighting for what seems at the moment to be a tragic and losing fight - empires which cover the earth, strong with the undefeated strength of the centuries, whose statesmen somehow in recent years have forgotten God and His moral law, who have accordingly led their

nations from one disaster to another. I heard these political chiefs speak. One prayed for a miracle. The other invoked the name of God, and the help of God and spoke in terms of the Scriptures and used words, phrases and hopes and prayers borrowed from the sacred text of our Bible.

While we are celebrating here today the Ninetieth Anniversary of Tifereth Israel, the whole British Empire is devoting this day to penance and prayer. Why? Many conceits, my friends, fall away/^{when one} faces death and worse than death. When one finds oneself in the depths, one calls not upon art, science, not upon anything man has created - from the depths one calls upon God.

This is not an auspicious day to celebrate our Ninetieth anniversary. The mood of celebration is far from our hearts in this dark and desperate hour. But in another sense, this is a peculiarly fitting day, appropriate day in which a religious institution should commemorate the anniversary of its founding. On this day, when the whole western civilization seems to be hovering on the brink of an abyss, it is particularly appropriate for religion to proclaim again the immortal character of religion, and its sole power to save the world.

Science is today at Canossa. The very triumph of the Blitzkrieg is frightful condemnation of man's amazing scientific achievement. All the brain children of science have been prostituted to the gods of Moloch and Mars. The most modern and swiftest machinery in planes and tanks and motor-cars are being used to destroy civilization. The most highly perfected techniques of man, of engineering coordination, the most cunning devices, the shrewdest devices of the human mind are being exploited today to destroy man and all his cherished hopes of freedom and a decent way of life. I have heard men say: "I wish to God that airplanes had never been invented, that radios had never been invented. I wish to God that all things in use on the

battlefield today had never been invented." Why do men say this? Because they are frightened by this Frankenstein of scientific achievement which they had hoped would give them comfort, ease. And now, to their utter consternation, it is by way of destroying all that the Church holds dear by way of annihilating. The fault, of course, is not that of science. The fault is with the uses to which men put science. The fault is with the exclusive reliance placed upon it, the failure of men to intensify religious reverences, spiritual discipline, moral sanctities to match the terrific increase in power which science has placed in the hands of men.

Science without religion is a menace. Democracy without religion is a failure. Art without religion is corruption. Society without religion is a bloody battlefield. Thus saith the Lord: "Seek me and live!"

My good friends, we shall need a strong religious faith - we and our children - in the days to come, in the years ahead, regardless of the outcome of the war. If the Allies win, it will be only after a long and devastating war in which much will be destroyed - and not only physical objects and material wealth. The entire political and economic structure will be shaken to its very foundation by this war. If after the Allies win, mankind is to emerge from the ruins of the war and set about reconstructing society after the noble pattern of peace and justice, many tasks will be placed upon the shoulders of men and women. Mankind will be called not only to exercise the greatest patience and wisdom, but also the highest morality and the highest idealism lest the errors of the past be repeated again.

And one dreads to contemplate what the imposition of the Nazi will and the Nazi weapons and the Nazi creed upon the world would mean if the Allies lose. That, too, must be faced. And the hearts and minds of men must be prepared for it. All empires break up sooner or later. It may well be

that the sun which never set on the British Empire will finally set upon a conquered and invaded England. And that may hold true for the French Empire as well. A new era will then dawn for mankind, a new group of nations, a new way of life for men, less free and more regimented, a new complex of ideas will come to reign in the world. How long that will last, how stormy its career will be, no one can say. But if that is to happen, if such a world is to come to pass, certainly men and women will require, and especially we of the Household of Israel will require strong faith to survive, strong faith to preserve their ~~and~~ dignity and confidence and hope.

✓ If the men and women ninety years ago needed a synagogue so will your sons and daughters need it and far more - far more, my friends. In the new world which we are facing, whether the Allies win or lose, America will remain, in the case of an allied victory, perhaps the one sovereign democracy in the world. In the case of an allied defeat, the one surviving democracy in the world, the last outpost of freedom, liberty. And we shall then have to fight to preserve it, not only from our enemies without, but from our enemies within - the subversive forces which are taking heart from the victory of the Nazis. And democracy will require a fighting spirit and a fighting faith to preserve itself. And it can only get it, friends, from ✓ profound religious conviction, religious convictions touching the work of men, the sanctity of the individual, the inviolability of human personality, tolerance, justice, good will, peace. Those are basically religious mandates, and democracy must draw its inspiration from these or it will not be able to fight for its survival in the world.

✓ We Jews have a particular stake in human liberty and in democracy. Wherever these were held in contempt, we, a minority people, suffered discrimination and persecution. Whenever these ideals were held aloft,

we, along with others, prospered. We have a particular stake in the free institutions of America because America has come closest, with all its shortcomings, to the visions and meaning of Judaism. We shall want to do our utmost in the days and years to come to defend the free institutions of America, fight for its principles. We must equip our rising generation with a passion for liberty and we can do it only if we give to our sons and daughters the spiritual heritage of their people, a profound religious conviction, a profound religious consecration. They must fight for liberty in the name of God and only in God's name can the fight live. It is not necessary, my friends, to fill our minds with thoughts of doom. The war is not yet over. The forces of freedom have not yet been defeated. And always remember that God is our refuge and our strength, our help in time of trouble. Therefore will we not fear, though the earth do change and though the mountain be moved into the heart of the seas."

✓ In commemorating the Ninetieth anniversary of Tifereth Israel, we are thinking, of course, of the past. We are grateful for the men and women who lived, labored here, who are part of this fellowship and who because they are no longer with us in the land of the living, we paid this morning a precious tribute of loving memory. They shine as the brightness of the firmament in the hearts made richer by their heritage. They are forever enshrined in the advancing life of Tifereth Israel. We think this morning, too, of the people of this great congregation, hundreds and hundreds of men and women, and we are grateful for their loyalty and devotion and support and consistent help in fulfillment the work of this congregation.

We are happy to know this morning that we have with us two men who presided as president of the affairs of this institution - Mr. A. Lewenthal who was president of the congregation some twenty-five years ago and Mr. ~~Bern~~ Benjamin Lowenstein under whose splendid leadership and administration this

House of God was built. We are happy to have with us this morning, the present lay-leader of the congregation, Mr. Eugene E. Wolf, who for the last thirteen years led this congregation from strength to strength and brought it to generosity of mind and heart.

While thinking of the past, we are thinking also of the present and we are particularly prayerful of the future. People dream of the past only when it has lost the present, and clings to the present when it is afraid of the future. We are not afraid of the future. When the children of Israel stood facing the Red Sea, the waters of the Red Sea in front of them and pursuing Egyptians behind them, they felt themselves trapped and didn't know where to turn, word of the Lord came to Moses: Go unto the people and say unto them, 'Move ye forward!' We shall go forward. The waters of the Red Sea are in front of us and beyond is the wilderness and beyond the wilderness is the Promised Land. That challenge has been the faith which has sustained us through the ages, never failed us. That is the faith which should emanate in this dark hour. The Lord is with me. I shall not fear.

And so, standing ^{here} / this morning, in the sight of God, I utter the prayer which I know is in your hearts and in the hearts of all our people, and in the hearts of all children of light: God grant that when we met again for an anniversary celebration, perhaps a decade hence, that we shall be privileged, God grant, to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Tifereth Israel - those of us who will be here and those who will not be here but in other parts of the earth - will celebrate it in a happier and sweeter and lovelier day, a day of peace, justice and kindness. Amen.