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Rosh Hashonah Sermon, 1951.

SLOUGH OFF THE DEAD HUSKS

A sermon for the New Year, 1951, *The Temple*

There is food for thought in the fact that the Jewish people celebrates its New Year in the autumn of the year and not in the spring. Although the Jewish calendar actually begins in the spring with the month of Nisan, New Year is celebrated in the fall of the year in the month of Tishri.

Clearly Rosh Hashanah does not celebrate the beginning of a new cycle in nature or, for that matter, any seasonal event at all. It celebrates the beginning of what might be called the religious year, the beginning of a 12-month cycle of religious and spiritual existence in the life of man. The holiday, therefore, is dedicated to spiritual reflection and stock-taking. It ushers in a period of ten days, culminating in the Day of Atonement, which is devoted to moral self-examination, to repentance, to regeneration. It calls upon men to make a new start in life.

Normally autumn is a season for somber reflections. Of autumn the poet Shelley sang: "The warm sun is falling, the bleak wind is wailing, the bare boughs are sighing, the pale flowers dying, and the year, on the earth, her death-bed, in a shroud of leaves dead, is lying." In such a melancholy season man is inclined to think meditatively and rather sorrowfully of his past. He is inclined to recall rather than anticipate. It is a time for remembrance rather than for hopes. He is waiting, so to speak, not for the curtain to rise but for the curtain to fall.

It is precisely at such a time when nature is sere and withered, and the mood of man is correspondingly low and depressed that the Jewish people celebrates Rosh Hashanah, its high festival of renewal, whose imperial message is one of challenge, of enterprise and of aspiration. Against a background of approaching winter and death, our holiday summons men to new life goals. It urges men to cast off their old, worn garments of weariness, defeat and frustration, and to put on the new bright raiment of hope. Our Rosh Hashanah speaks of things new - a new hope, a new heart, a new world.

There have always been those who maintained that there is basically nothing new in the world, and those who ^{find} ~~have seen~~ newness and revelation everywhere. There have always been those who ^{see} ~~saw~~ no miracles in life at all and those who ^{see} ~~saw~~ nothing but miracles. ^{The latter are} ~~These men were~~ the poets, the saints and the builders of new worlds. The cynic and the pessimist have always denied that there can be anything new, or that life can renew itself, or that society can rebuild itself after a nobler pattern, or that man can rebuild a new life for himself on a higher plateau of living. "There is nothing new under the sun," we read in the Book of Ecclesiastes, "all things are full of weariness. That which hath been done is that which shall be done. That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be filled."
← On the other hand, there have been men of faith in all ages who have maintained that even as God renews His world every day, so can man fashion a new heaven and a new earth for himself, and that there are no limits to the progress which he can maintain.

There are people who are discouraged or frustrated and who surrender themselves to defeat. They ^{then proceed to} rationalize their surrender in one way or another. It is not worth the effort, ^{anyhow} they say. Life is cheap and meaningless anyhow. Man is caught in a hopeless trap!

There have been and still are religions which declared that man is governed by fate, and that it is, therefore, hopeless or even impious to try to change what has been decreed. Such doctrines of fatalism are found in some of the religions of India, in Islam, in Calvinistic Christianity. It is at the heart of the present-day philosophic vogue of existentialism. It was a widespread tenet of the pagan faiths of antiquity.

"Pray not at all," chants the chorus in Sophocles' "Antigone", "since there is no release for mortals from predestined calamity." Man is caught as is a fly in a spider's web. Zeus himself and all the other Olympian gods are subject to the same blind, relentless force of fate, destiny or necessity.

The Hindus believed in the rule of Karma. What a man did in his former existences determines absolutely and inevitably his fate in his present existence. There is no turning aside. What was done cannot be undone.

All these beliefs, ^{and} philosophies or popular opinions make man subject either to the compulsion of impersonal nature, or to the influence of the stars or planets, or to his own past irrevocable acts or to the unaccountable willfulness of some divinity. Judaism denies and rejects them all. They are all contraverted by the message and the spirit of this holiday of Rosh Hashanah.

The problem of human freedom and of free will was not unknown to the thinkers of Judaism, and they were not unaware of the difficulty in reconciling man's freedom of ^{choice} action with God's omniscience and providence. But the intellectual difficulty which they encountered in their effort to solve this problem - one of the many unsolved problems and contradictions which abound not only in the field of religion but in the field of science as well - did not move them to commit the grave error of denying free will to man altogether. They realized that there were limitations to human freedom, but they also realized that there were vital areas in which man was free - in which man had ^{an} intuition and an experience of freedom. Because the ^{boundaries} ~~boundaries~~ were not clearly defined, man should act as if they did not exist - in- ^{between what was free & what was determined} ~~boundaries~~ ^{did not constrict him,} ~~him,~~ so far as his moral initiative was concerned. As the Jewish philosopher, Bachya, put it, "How much man is free, no one knows, but he should act as if he were free!" In a profound sense, it is our duty ~~to be free~~, to develop freedom within us - just as we develop our mind and reason although they, too, have their limitations. ~~It is very significant that determinism is being abandoned today even by scientists as regards the physical world.~~

Good and evil may befall man by accidents over which he has no control, but there is so much of evil that man himself brings about, and so much of good. It is part of recorded history that man has, by dint of his will and exertion, improved his lot upon earth, elevated his standard of living, increased his physical security and the amenities of his life, diminished want and poverty, and improved health and education -

and there are no visible limits to such improvements. Even though not absolutely free, man has within his limitations been able to accomplish much which he never would have accomplished if he had accepted literally the idea "that that which is crooked cannot be made straight and that which is wanting cannot be filled, and there is nothing new under the sun."

Judaism proclaimed to the world the liberating doctrine of moral freedom, and therefore, also of responsibility. "See, I have set before thee this day life and good and death and evil. . . I call Heaven and earth to witness that I have set before you this day life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life that you may live, you and your seed." *1172057 IN SIC p. 19 p. 78 17002* "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve."

Man is not subject to the influence of the stars and planets, declared our faith, ^{to} external forces which consign him helplessly to the inevitable. He is not an astrological pawn. "Thus saith the Lord. Follow not the way of the heathen and be not dismayed at the signs of the Heavens as the heathens are dismayed at them."

Nor is man forever doomed to the errors and the consequences of his past conduct. He is free to repent and through repentance, to nullify the evil influences of his past over him. One of the noblest and most inspiring contributions which Judaism made to the spiritual development of mankind was the concept of Teshuvah, repentance. Repentance means the opportunity of a new start, the chance to correct what man had made crooked, to fill that which is wanting in one's life. *Repentance is* The central motif of this entire holy season ~~is repentance~~. It is the luminous theme around which these heroic spiritual days revolve. "As I live, saith the Lord God, I do not desire the death of the sinner, but that he should return from his evil ways and live." "For Thou knowest our frame; Thou rememberest that we are dust."

There are few things that are irrevocable in the world. Death is one of them; but as long as there is life, there is always the promise and the possibility of the new. According to the liturgy of this day, even after God has decreed the fate of a

man, even after it is written down on New Year's Day and sealed on Yom Kippur, ~~that~~ man can nevertheless, by repentance, prayer and charity undo the evil decree.

In our tradition God Himself is represented as building worlds and destroying them - experimenting, ~~as it were,~~ ^{with} His own handiwork. God wiped out His first creation because He was not satisfied with it. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth and it repented Him that He had made man and the earth, and God said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth." He sent the flood which practically wiped out the race of man and then the Lord God created his world anew.

Not only is man free and able to renew himself and to make a fresh start, but in this enterprise towards newness and regeneration lie the meaning and significance of his life. Concerning all the things which God created in the first days of the world, the Bible says, "And God saw that it was good." ^(Gen I:31) The creation of life, the firmament and of all the beasts of the earth are characterized as good and very good. But of the creation of man, who was made in the very image of God, it is not said that it was good. Because, say the Rabbis, man was not created perfect but perfect-able. His destiny and the purpose of his life is to perfect himself and his world -- regardless of the struggle, the strain and the sacrifice.

The great American philosopher, William James, wrote:

For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight - as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted.

These then are my last words to You: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. The "scientific" proof that you are right, may not be clear before the day of judgment (or some stage of being which that expression may serve to symbolise) is reached. But the faithful fighters of this hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may turn to the faint-hearted, who have declined to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV greeted the tardy Crillon after a great battle had been gained: "Hang yourself, brave Crillon! We fought at Arques, and you were not there!"

Those who are engaged in creative work - the artist, the craftsman, the builder, the reformer - always experience in their work a sense of newness, a refreshment and exhilaration, regardless how humble their work may be. They seem always to be drinking from the Fountain of Youth, even in their old age. "They bring forth fruit in old age; they flourish and are verdant."

The great revolutionists of history always believed that they were ushering in a new world and that their achievement marked the beginning of a new calendar in the history of mankind. Upon the seal of the ~~new~~ Republic of the United States of America the Founding Fathers placed the inscription, "Novus ordo seclorum" - a new order of the ages. They were convinced that what they had achieved was a new landmark on the road of human progress.

I am afraid that too many of us yield too soon to the habits or the discouragements of our past, the routine of our present, or the sorrow of some irremediable loss. We become frozen into passivity, reconciled, resigned or beaten into resentful capitulation. I am afraid that too many of us accept too readily old slogans, old standards, and old prejudices. We fear and resent and resist what is new.

The new is not always the true, but neither is the old. Scientific text-books are out-dated and discarded ~~almost~~ every few years. What was universally accepted a decade ago has been found, upon further research and experimentation, to be false or only partially true, and science has been quick to abandon or correct. At this very moment science is going through a most revolutionary reorientation, and the most time-honored of its basic tenets and conceptions are being discarded. An altogether new set of principles concerning the nature of the universe, of time and space, and the origin of matter, energy, life and consciousness is being propounded. The truly scientific mind is humble and is eager for new ideas which can help to explain more accurately the nature, the origin, or the relation of the things and forces in nature.

This is not the case when it comes to the social life of men, their personal lives, their economic arrangements or to international relations. Here they cling tenaciously to old arrangements, to old ways and out-dated philosophies. They resent the prophet of new ideas. They seek to discredit or destroy the spokesman of unpopular new doctrines. Men denounce him as the disturber, the enemy. "The man of the spirit is mad."

It is for continuous newness in these realms of human life that our religion pleads. Our faith urges us to make new covenants continuously with a better, juster, kindlier and freer life, and not to be content with the past. For while there was much good in the past, there was also much evil in it. Our faith urges us not to be content with the present, for while there is much good in the present, there is also much evil in it.

Our present age is tired and afraid. There are no ^{grand} great liberating ideals sweeping over our world today. On the one hand there is a fearful dictatorship which has been clamped down upon a large section of mankind. This dictatorship is certainly not new. It is a dark and savage tyranny, a throw-back to ancient forms of bondage and to the most ruthless voodoo disciplines of primitive society. It is the dead hand of the past, but it is a deadlier hand today because it is mailed in science and technology. On the other hand, human freedom and democracy have lost their revolutionary fires, their crusading zeal. They are on the defensive. They are building a Maginot line around themselves, as a defense against an aggressive Communism. They are joining hands and seeking allies among their sworn and unreconciled enemies. They are not trying to build a world-wide fraternity of freedom-loving peoples, united by common needs and aspirations. They are attempting to cement with gold a military alliance of frightened governments. Democracy is no longer the mighty faith which in the golden prime of its youth shook the foundations of the world, toppled kingdoms and empires and broke the chains of enslaved peoples everywhere. ^{The democracies} They seem to have become old institutions which are fighting for survival, neglected shrines at which the fires of dedication and sacrifice are burning low unto extinction.

All this is sad to contemplate. For in essence democracy and freedom represent the ~~very~~ newness and freshness of social life, the eternal springtime of humanity. Unfortunately, we have become so accustomed to them that they have lost their spell over us. Somewhere I read the phrase, "the film of familiarity", which tragically screens today the great ideals and institutions of liberty, self-government and the inalienable rights of man, which in the past kindled the spirit of generations with high exaltation, with ardor and devotion.

We must begin to see them again with new eyes. Herein lies our salvation. There are times when our liberties are threatened by foreign foes, but most often they are undermined from within, by ourselves, because we lose our faith in them or because of fear, or panic, or impatience, or the disastrous lure of expediency.

Democracy will not be saved for mankind by destroying Communism - nor will we stop tyranny abroad by stifling freedom at home. Mankind will ultimately destroy Communism by living and practicing courageously ~~the~~ ^{the} mandates of political, social and economic democracy. ~~It is not in Korea where the issue of freedom versus dictatorship will be settled, but in every town, village and city of our beloved country, and in the conduct and way of life of every individual citizen here and in every other democracy on earth. The global strategy of democracy begins at home. Our expeditionary forces will do nothing to save it, if it collapses at the base.~~

We must renew our faith and our dedication to our own ideals and set about rectifying all that we know to be wrong. We should slough off all the dead husks. We should dare to experiment with new forms of economic and social life while employing all the time the tried methods of democracy. Democracy is a permanent, peaceful revolution! It anticipates unrest by timely change and adjustment. Ours is not yet the perfect society. There is still ^{red} much of poverty, exploitation, bigotry, crime, vice, and group and class hatred in our midst to justify any complacency on our part. Read the record of broken homes, of juvenile delinquency, of gambling, of police and official bribery and corruption, and of influence peddling. The road

is still long, but it is an open and a promising road. "The real slavery of Israel in Egypt was that they had learned to endure it." The danger lies in our acceptance as inevitable, what is inadequate in ourselves, in our country or in society.

The message of Rosh Hashanah comes to us with the full surge and thunder of a mighty challenge.

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till I have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

But not only in England, which was the poet Blake's country, but in our own country and throughout the world.

The curtain may be falling upon a dying world. It may be rising upon a brighter and better world. What our God-given Holy Day is trying to tell us is that we alone can determine whether it shall rise or fall, even as we alone must devise the plot, write the words, and act the parts. The whole drama of social life is of our own composition.

It all depends upon our wisdom, our courage, our faith.

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SLOUGH OFF THE DEAD HUSKS

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Sermon, The Temple, Rosh Hashanah 1951

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There have always been those who maintain that there is nothing basically new in the world, and those who find newness and revelation everywhere. There have always been those who see no miracles in life at all, and those who see nothing but miracles. The latter are the poets, the saints and the builders of new worlds. The cynic and the pessimist have denied that there can be anything new or that life can renew itself, or that society can rebuild itself after a nobler pattern, or that man can rebuild a new life for himself on a higher plateau of living. "There is nothing new under the sun...all things are full of weariness. That which hath been done is that which shall be done. That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be filled". On the other hand, there have been men of faith in all ages who have maintained that even as God renews His world every day, so can man fashion a new heaven and a new earth for himself, and that there are no limits to the progress which he can ^{achieve} maintain.

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The Hindus believed in the rule of Karma. What a man did in his former existence determines absolutely and inevitably his fate in his present existence. There is no turning aside. What was done cannot be undone.

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Good and evil may befall man by accidents over which he has no control, but there is so much of evil that man himself brings about, and so much of good. It is part of recorded history that man has, by dint of his will and exertion, improved his lot upon earth, elevated his ^A standard of living, increased his physical security and the amenities of life, diminished want and poverty, and improved health and education.

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בחרו לכם היום את מי תעבדו

"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve."

Man is not subject to the influences of the stars and planets, declared our faith, or to external forces which consign him helplessly to the inevitable. He is not an astrological pawn. "Thus saith the Lord: Follow not the way of the heathen and be not dismayed at the signs of the heavens as the heathens are dismayed at them."

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extract

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Those who are engaged in creative work — the artist, the craftsman, the builder, the reformer — ^{always} experience in their work a sense of newness, a refreshment and exhilaration, regardless ^{of} how humble their work may be. They seem always to be drinking from the Fountain of Youth, ~~even in their old age~~. "They bring forth fruit in old age; they flourish and are verdant."

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All this is sad to contemplate. For in essence democracy and freedom represent the ~~very~~ newness and freshness of social life, the eternal springtime of humanity. Unfortunately, we have become so accustomed to them that they have lost their spell over us. Somewhere I read the phrase, "the film of familiarity", which tragically screens today the great ideals and institutions of liberty, self-government, and the inalienable rights of man, which in the past kindled the spirit of generations with high exaltation, with ardor and devotion.

We must begin to see them again with new eyes. Herein lies our salvation. There are times when our liberties are threatened by foreign foes, but most often they are undermined from within, by ourselves, because we lose our faith in them or because of fear, or panic, or impatience, or the disastrous lure of expediency.

Democracy will not be saved for mankind by destroying Communism ¹/_M nor will we stop tyranny abroad by stifling freedom at home. Mankind will ultimately destroy Communism by living and practicing courageously the exacting mandates of political, social, and economic democracy. It is not in Korea where the issue of freedom versus dictatorship will be settled, but in every town, village, and city of our beloved country, and in the conduct and way of life of every individual citizen here and in every other democracy on earth. The global strategy of democracy begins at home. Our expeditionary forces will do nothing to save it, if it collapses at the base.

We must renew our faith and our dedication to our own ideals and set about rectifying all that we know to be wrong. We should slough off all the dead husks. We should dare to experiment with new forms of economic and social life while employing all the time the tried methods of democracy. Democracy is a permanent, peaceful revolution! It anticipates unrest by timely change and adjustment. Ours is not yet the perfect society. There is still ^{too} much ~~of~~ poverty, exploitation, bigotry, crime, vice, and group and class ^{hatred} in our midst to justify any complacency, ~~our part~~. Read the record of broken homes, of juvenile delinquency, of gambling, of police and official bribery and corruption, and of influence-peddling. The road

is still long, but it is an open and a promising road. "The real slavery of ^SIsrael in Egypt was that they had learned to endure it." The danger lies in our acceptance ^{ing} as inevitable, ^gwhat is inadequate in ourselves, in our country or in society.

Blake's
mighty challenge.
The message of Rosh Hashanah comes to us with the full surge and thunder of ^{William}

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till I have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

But not only in England, which was ~~the poet~~ Blake's country, but in our own country and throughout the world.

The curtain may be falling upon a dying world. It may be rising upon a brighter and better world. What our God-given Holy Day is trying to tell us is that we alone can determine whether it shall rise or fall, even as we alone must devise the plot, write the words, and act the parts. The whole drama of social life is of our own composition.

It all depends upon our wisdom, our courage, our faith.

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