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Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Rosh Hashonah, 1959.

On Rosh Hashanah we are summoned to confront ourselves and our God. (). "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel". We are admonished to judge our life and our actions during the past year in the clear, searching light of impartial truth. We are asked to see ourselves not as others see us, or as we would like others to see us, but as God, the All-knowing, before whom nothing is hid, sees us.

We are asked to do this, at the close of the old year, not that we might be humbled or abased. Rather, that we might be set straight for the new year. The aim of our religion is to exalt man, to inspire him to reach up and to excel himself, never to discourage or disparage him.

But unless we are frank with ourselves and unless we set ourselves up from time to time for self-appraisement, we shall never advance spiritually and shall never realize the highest potencies of our being. We never really come to

know ourselves truthfully and unfeignedly, and when we no longer rely on pretensions and impressions, we grow strong with the strength of inner truth and conviction, and are then free to act independently and courageously as great human beings.

If need be, we can then redirect our steps, once we realize and acknowledge that we have been traveling on the wrong road. If need be, we can break with our past altogether and start fresh again, once we see it for what it is - a blighted existence, unproductive and unworthy of ourselves. There are then no limits set to our powers of renewal, and man can come very close to heaven.

It is not easy to judge ourselves honestly. Too many things stand in the way. In the first place, there is the force of habit, the deep grooves of the past. What we

have been doing, customarily, seems right and proper in our eyes. Then there is self-esteem, the desire of men to think well of themselves. To acknowledge that we have been wrong seems like indicting ourselves, like implying that we have been far less wise, or honest or forthright than we thought ourselves to be. Man is very near to himself, his own best advocate, and on all occasions he is inclined to act, where he himself is involved, not as prosecutor or judge, but as counsel for the defense. We do not like to disapprove of ourselves. It is easier to judge others than ourselves.

On this day, when we are closing the books of the old year and opening, as it were, a new ledger, we are asked not to judge other men at all or concern ourselves with their opinions and

judgement, or with the standards and reactions of the social group in which we find ourselves. In a very direct and personal way, we are called upon by our religion, by our conscience and by our God, to think of ourselves in relation to ourselves, and to the faith which we profess, to our own immortal souls, to our mission in life and to our destiny on earth. In this solemn penitential season, deep calleth unto deep, and unless that which is deep-most in ourselves responds earnestly and sincerely to the profound challenges of human life, we shall miss completely its meaning and purpose.

One of the difficulties in the way of self-examination is that every man lives on several levels and, as it were, in a series of separate compartments. We are not always the same on all levels

and in all compartments, and when we take stock of ourselves, it is usually in relation to our most favored and creditable location that we direct our attention, where we are at our best estate. We look in upon ourselves only where we are most presentable and least vulnerable, where we know ourselves to be least open to self-criticism. Other areas of our lives we choose to by-pass. But it is these very nebulous and spiritually unfrequented and unaired compartments of our lives which need to be unlocked, if they are to be made clean and fresh, wholesome and unitary. We all have our blind spots; not for things that we can see, but for things which we do not wish to see. The results however, are the same. We are partially blind. But by a determined act of spiritual introspection we can correct this imperfect vision, and where there was darkness, there will be light.

Our religion wants men to be whole-
- single-hearted;- pure-
hearted, that is hearts unroiled and un-
muddled. It wants us to be and the
same on all levels of existence, in all
our manifold relationships with our fellow-
men and with ourselves. Our religion
claims nothing less than the whole domain
of our being. It will not be satisfied
with a part of us. There are some people
who are very loving and devoted to
their families and on that level of
existence they are truly exemplary. But
the same people may be ruthless in their
business life, conscienceless towards
competitors, hard and thoughtless towards
employees and co-workers, indifferent
to the needs of others, and altogether
uninterested in the progress of their
community, or in the larger life of their
country or humanity. Conversely, there
are those who are, or at least appear
to be, paragons of social-mindedness,
affable, courteous and cooperative in
the world outside their homes, but

within the private precincts of their own homes they radiate neither light nor thoughtfulness nor any understanding of what it takes to build a home or to maintain it in dignity and beauty. The same person may be a totally different person in different situations. He is unpredictable, contradictory and therefore undependable. To himself he is a bag-full of pieces which have not been put together in a solid pattern.

It is true, of course, that every human being is a intricate network, and very much involved. Complete unity and clean simplicity in one's own life, and consistency in outward expression in conduct, are difficult to achieve. For that is perfection, and perfection belongs only to God. Our religion expects of us not to be perfect, but to be perfectly motivated in our aspirations. "Man is wise only", declared the famous poet, Ibn Gabirol, "while in search of wisdom;

when he imagines that he has attained it - he is a fool".

One of the legends of our people has it that Tineius Rufus, Roman governor of Judea, who so ruthlessly suppressed the Bar Kochba revolution and was guilty of many acts of cruelty and persecution against Jews and Judaism, once asked tauntingly the great Rabbi Akiba, the spiritual father of the insurrection: "if your God is so great, why did He not creat man as perfect as He wanted him to be?". Akiba, the sage, the foremost Rabbi, of his day, replied: "For the very reasons that man's whole opportunity in life and the very reason for his existence, is to perfect himself". If we strive for wholeness and integrity, for what we might call organic moral unity, we are sure to win also a large measure of simplicity, coordination and harmony in our lives which will then come to have a clear pattern, a firm texture and a standard quality - pleasing to

ourselves and to our fellowmen.

Naturally, we will never have the same degree of attachment to all our relationships nor make the same response to all the situations which face us, but we will never fall below a certain level. Even the minimum level will be high. We will never be completely detached from our social responsibilities or utterly unresponsive to any legitimate call for help and cooperation.

In unifying our lives, in trying to achieve identity on all levels of existence, we must guard ourselves against the facile assumption that if we are a great success in one or another department of life, everything else does not matter. But everything else does matter greatly! Success in one field does not cover up or atone for moral failure in other fields. A man cannot say: "I am a very successful merchant or industrialist, or a great scientist or inventor, or a world-renowned artist, actor or sportsman, and therefore I can afford to be indifferent to the

moral standards and disciplines and the ethical demands of society. Our religion recognized no such special pleading and no such exempted classes of people. On the contrary, the more successful and outstanding the individual is, the more is demanded of him, for he has been endowed with greater power, and power is a responsibility as great as it is a privilege.

Sometimes a nation begins to preen and pride itself upon its material prosperity - its outstanding success in production, trade and agriculture - its teeming cities, its vast wealth. There are those among its citizens who blandly assume that that is all that matters. Slums don't matter, and juvenile delinquency, and a mounting divorce rate, and loose morals and segregation, and intolerance and inflation, and prolonged strikes and

educational standards which are not geared to the new space age. But they do matter vitally and urgently. If unchecked or uncorrected, they may topple the whole edifice of success upon which citizens rely so much. Confidence based on success rests on shifting sands. When based on character, it rests on solid rock.

We have our national blind spots. We simply will not see them as evils, as symptoms of disease. All the coarseness, violence and brutality of our mass-media entertainments which are daily served up to our people, young and old, all the "Can-can" vulgarity of Hollywood which shock our visitors but which are evidently all right for the natives, all the six obsessions of our modern school of writers and novelists and those who make of them best-sellers - is all this culture, art, the refinements of civilization or corruption, decadence and decline?

We have had an important visitor recently from the Soviet Union. He came, as he said, to try to end the cold war, to reduce armaments, to end the danger of a nuclear warfare, and to improve trade relations with our country. These are all paramount and most commendable objectives. It is good that Mr. Khrushchev came and talked directly to President Eisenhower, who is to return his visit to Russia. It is good that Mr. Khrushchev saw something of our country and our way of life, talked directly to the American people and that our people had the opportunity to observe him at closer range, and to evaluate his statements. The more contact, the better understanding, the greater hope for a more peaceful world order. We all hope that some substantial good will result from these visits,

a lessening of distrust which breeds fear, of misunderstanding which nurtures hate. Perhaps some walls will be levelled and some bridges will be built. Can anything be more welcome or more urgent?

In one regard the voluble Mr. Khrushchev was guilty of the same success-complex to which I have alluded. He came here flushed with the Soviet triumph of a rocket to the moon. This was the second triumph following the earlier Sputnik. He bragged about it from the moment he arrived, as if this explained everything and insured the success of his mission. His dominant theme was Success. The Soviet Union was catching up with the United States, was surpassing the United States - would soon, in peaceful competition, of course, force capitalism off the stage of history.

But this glitter of success, and the conclusions drawn from it by Mr. Khrushchev, did not quite bewitch or persuade the American people. Success in this one field did not quite explain or justify, in their eyes, the brutal police state in the Soviet Union, the suppression of basic human freedoms, the censorship of all foreign news, the prohibition of all religious instruction - did not quite explain the blood-bath in Hungary or communist conspiracies elsewhere in the world. The communists never accepted the great material achievements of capitalism in the past as an argument for capitalism in all its manifestations. Neither can the capitalist world accept the more recent achievements of communism as an argument for the whole of communism, in theory and practice. Scientific or material success is no index of spiritual truth and goodness. They are desirable, of course, but they are not the true measure of all things.

In spiritual matters, and in matters which affect humanity, you must argue not from material strength and power, but from contrite and humble acknowledge- of inadequacy. "We have sinned! We have transgressed! We have done perversely!" We must do better! Let us help one another to do better. To outstrip and outdistance one another is not important, but to cooperate with each other so as to set both of our houses in order and by so doing, benefit not mine, nor thine, but us and all people and all mankind - that is all-important - that is total and organic success.

That is why the note of confession, contrition and repentance is so often heard in the prayers of this day. For that is the only way by which to approach anything really new and significant in the life of men and nations. To make a new beginning one must be very humble and very prayerful. Pride comes before a fall - never before a

rise. In the long run, it is the very humble who truly seek the Lord, who inherit both heaven and earth. If this holiday, so ancient, so sacred, can help us to examine our lives, to ruffle the calm assumptions of ours and to disturb the comfortable shape of our world so that we may become one with ourselves and with mankind, then it will be a blessed day indeed - a _____, a day of great stirrings,  when, with the blasts of the Shofar, we shall hear a challenging call to a new life, an undeniable summons to new horizons.

Abba Hillel Silver

September 1959

To Independent +
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ON THE OCCASION OF OUR RELIGIOUS NEW YEAR, I SEND MY GREETINGS
AND ALL MY GOOD WISHES TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF CLEVELAND AND TO MY FELLOW-
JEWS EVERYWHERE.

MAY IT BE A YEAR OF WELL-BEING, PEACE AND PROSPERITY FOR OUR BELOVED
COUNTRY AND FOR ALL MANKIND.

MAY GOD BLESS THE LABORS OF ALL MEN WHO ARE WORKING FOR THE
BUILDING OF THE GOOD SOCIETY, FOR THE INCREASE OF JUSTICE AND BROTHERHOOD
IN THE WORLD, AND FOR THE LESSENING OF INTERNATIONAL STRIFE AND TENSION.

MAY THE COMING YEAR BRING THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD MORE CLOSELY
TOGETHER IN COOPERATION AND MUTUAL HELPFULNESS, THEREBY BANISHING FEAR AND
SUSPICION FROM THE HEARTS OF MEN.

MAY WE OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF ISRAEL RE-DEDICATE OURSELVES DURING THE
COMING YEAR TO OUR GLORIOUS FAITH AND HERITAGE AND TO THE STRENGTHENING OF
ALL OF OUR INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING AND WORSHIP WHICH GUIDE MEN TO A BETTER
AND NOBLER WAY OF LIFE.

MAY THE STATE OF ISRAEL BE BLESSED WITH CONTINUED PEACE, GROWTH AND
DEVELOPMENT.

ABBA HILLEL SILVER

9/10/59