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Passover sermon, 1958.

PASSOVER SERMON

The Temple
April 5, 1958

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Since that great day many centuries ago when the Lord, our God brought us out from under the yoke of Pharoah with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand. This is , the time, the day of our liberation, when we changed from an enslaved to a free people. It is the day on which Israel began its historic destiny, for this day marks the welding together of the Jewish people, who previously had been a series of wandering nomadic tribes, but who now shared a common history and a common destiny. There is high drama in the story of the Passover - the drama of a people shackled and enslaved, dreaming of freedom, dreaming of the day when they would awaken not to the shrill whistle of the task-master's call to work but awaken to the bright dawn of the day on which they were masters of their own soul. It is a day on which we remember these dreams and these hopes, and we remember also the single-minded indomitable will of the man Moses, the leader Moses, who brought his people out of Egypt. And we remember the high hopes in which he returned to Egypt bearing God's mission. We remember the early expectancy with which he met the Pharoah and then the frustration into which all^{of} his expectancy was dashed by Pharoah's unwillingness to bend to the will of God. We read also of that day of frustration turned into a day of triumph. We see the exodus of these slaves from Egypt, and we see also the awakening, the sobering realization in which they begin to see, to recognize and to accept the responsibilities, the duties, the obligations of freedom.

Now many great artists, many great poets have been thrilled by the saga of the Passover. They felt that it required visual representation, that it was

drama, and should be played upon the stage and the screen for the benefit of all. I think the rabbis too sensed that. For after all the Seder meal in which we all took part last night is really what we would call today "impromptu theater". We, the family, all assembled, are the actors, the participant audience. The Haggadah is our basic text. It recounts for us the broad outline of the history of the Exodus. It gives us a few famous well beloved speeches and songs which we could all recite with familiarity, and it encourages us to embellish upon, to go beyond the bare outline of the story, to dilate upon the history of this day, to enjoy to the full, empathizing with, sharing the emotions of the enslaved Israel becoming the free Jewish people. Recently we have seen in America two important attempts to visualize the story of the Passover for a broader audience yet. Remember last year we saw on the cinerama screen Mr. Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments" in which in monumental saga he depicted for us the great world-shaking events, the miracles, the wonders by which God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt. This past week many of us in Cleveland have been privileged to see another attempt to grapple with and to portray the emotions and the history of the Passover story. The screen is not so broad, the stage is live. It is the attempt by the noted contemporary playwright Mr. Christopher Fry to search out and display the psychology, the inner emotions of the main protagonists of the Exodus story. He calls his play "The First Born", and it is perhaps a very apt time this week before Passover for it to be staged here in Cleveland. What particularly struck me about the play "The First Born" is a character whom Mr. Fry creates out of whole cloth. Almost all the other actors are familiar to us - Moses, Aaron, Miriam, the Pharaoh, the Egyptian princess who raised Moses when he was brought to her from the Nile - but there is a young man in the play of some twenty-odd years. His name is Shendi. He is said to be the oldest and only son of Miriam. When we first see Shendi, we find him a hot-blooded revolutionary, a young man who is

unwillingly accepting the yoke of the taskmaster and burning with desire for that day on which the dice will be turned and he will no longer have to placidly and without challenge accept the whip of the slave-driver. Indeed our first meeting with Shendi occurs when he is fleeing from one of the slave-drivers whom he has challenged, whom he has insulted, who is seeking to beat the will, beat the challenge, from this Hebrew slave. Now according to Mr. Fry Moses, after he had been raised in the palace of the Pharaoh, had become the most renowned and most successful general of all the Egyptian forces. Time after time Moses had led the Egyptian armies into battle, he had defended the frontiers, he had enlarged the boundaries, and his name had become famous throughout the length and breadth of the land of the Nile as the most renowned of all the warriors of Pharaoh. And this fame of course lasted until that day when Moses, driving his chariot along the banks of the Nile, saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave and in a fit of anger killed that taskmaster and was for this act sent into exile. The scene that Mr. Fry sets for us is a day in the court of the Pharaoh, a day on which Moses, newly commissioned by God to come to Egypt to deliver His people from bondage, is about to be recalled by the Pharaoh, who has need of his military prowess and skill. Moses, then, has two commissions. One is from God, given to him at the burning bush: "Return to Egypt. Set My people free." The other is of the Pharaoh, who wishes to fine Moses, to give him again the mantle of commander-in-chief, so that he could defeat the forces of Libya which were attacking the Egypt of the south. Now this desire on the part of Pharaoh to appoint Moses as his general redounds to the benefit of this young Shendi, because when Moses refuses immediately Pharaoh's commission, single-mindedly determined to carry out God's commission, Pharaoh determines to try and win Moses' favor by doing well by his relatives, and so he appoints the young Shendi a lieutenant, a minor officer in his army, he forgives him for his rebelliousness, and Shendi becomes one of Pharaoh's own troops. And then a strange metamorphosis, a strange change of character takes place in Shendi.

This hot-blooded revolutionary, this man who cried out against the tyranny and the oppression of the Pharaoh and of his taskmasters, becomes more Egyptian than the Egyptians. He is given rule over some of the very Hebrew slaves among whom he toiled building the treasure cities of Pitom and Ramses. Does he show mercy? Does his experience as a slave make him more kindly disposed to these Hebrews? Does he work to ameliorate and to better their condition? Unfortunately not. He is as hard and oppressive and tyrannical a master, a slave-driver, as any native-born Egyptian. He was restive only as long as his own fate was concerned, only as long as he was suffering along with the rest. But once his future was assured, once he had escaped from behind and beneath the whip, he no longer was concerned with the wellbeing nor the welfare nor the future of his Hebrew fathers and brothers.

Now I said that Mr. Fry drew this character himself - he created it. Shendi is not to be found in the Bible, he is not to be found even in later Jewish literature. But those of us who read carefully our Haggadah at the table last night will recognize Shendi. Remember the section about the four sons, the four types of human beings who ask the leader of the Seder to tell the story of the Passover? In the Bible God commands in four different ways to relate, to tell, the history of the Exodus. And the rabbis, unwilling to let any word of the Bible seem superfluous, said that each of the minor variations which occur in the Biblical text teach us a lesson - a lesson in psychology, a lesson in pedagogy. Each man, they said, should be answered according to his interests, according to his intellect, and according to his understanding. Thus the simple son should be given just the boldest, baldest outlines of the story. His mind is incapable of grasping the nuances, the subtleties involved. Now the wise son, the son of superior intelligence, he should not be retold year after year only the bald facts, but each year you should introduce him to further levels of the story, further interesting interpretations of the text. While the son who is unable to ask should be stimulated and motivated to have interest in the Bible

story. And they point to yet a fourth type of human being. This human being is not judged by the capacity of his mind but by the quality of his character. He is the , the wicked one. And more interesting perhaps than the answer which the rabbis tell us we should give to the wicked son is the description, the means of identification, with which they present us so that we can single out such a man. For who is the wicked man? Who is the Shendi? He, the rabbis said, is . He is the person who always separates his future, his success, his wellbeing from the wellbeing of his family, of his neighborhood, of his community, of his country. The wicked person is the person whose thoughts are concerned only with himself. He does not care the least for your wellbeing, for your health, for your safety, for your happiness. As long as your needs coincide with his he is with you, but once he has achieved his goal and his aim he either uses you and discards you, or he simply has no further use and concern with you. The wicked man is the Shendi of Christopher Fry's play. The man who, once he has won safety for himself, shows not even an ounce of sympathy for those who suffered even as he has suffered. And I would suggest to you on this Passover morning that there is a great deal of insight, of Jewish insight, into life expressed and revealed to us by the character of Shendi, revealed to us by this important midrash from our Haggadah. Because it is a maxim of Jewish ethic that each of us lives in a tangled skein and web of personal relationships, and none of us can seek personal success by cutting off ourselves from these relationships, by paying no attention to them. We have responsibilities to our families, to our parents, to our brothers and sisters. We have responsibilities to our friends, to the neighbors in our community. We have responsibilities to our fellow citizens in America. We have responsibilities to our fellow Jews the world over. We have responsibilities to all our fellow men wherever they may exist and whatever they may be doing. And no philosophy, no theology, whatever its law and labor, Neitsche and existentialist, transcendental - no philosophy of rugged individualism which

tells us to forget these responsibilities, not to be limited by them, to seek only that which seems important to us - no such individualistic philosophy is accepted by Judaism. We have no patience with it. We are concerned always with the wellbeing of every man, ^{of} with every person with whom we are related and with whom we come into contact.

The eminent English divine and poet John Donne said many centuries ago a phrase which expresses perhaps as well as any other this Jewish idea. "No man", he wrote, "is an island unto himself." No man can live simply selfishly, self-centeredly, without concern, without a thought, for those among whom he walks and he lives. The only person in this world who has a right to be wholly self-centered is the nursing, the baby, and as we grow old, as we grow up, education teaches us to think more and more of the other person. Now each of us, when we were young, remembers the battles we had with our parents when we wanted to be out playing or watching the television or gossiping on the telephone rather than be doing the many chores in the household which alone make household living pleasurable for all. The wilful child continues to struggle away, to revolt against these small chores and regulations of family living. The foolish parent gives in to the wilful child. And as we grow up we begin to see how much we owe of duty, of time, of attention, of charity, of support, of counsel, of helpfulness, to all those with whom we daily come into contact. This obligation can not be escaped. And when we do not accept these obligations, when we single-mindedly set out to enjoy the luxuries of life, when we indulge ourselves without any thought to the pleasures of others, when we benefit from the richness and the peace and the prosperity of this land without giving one iota of ourselves in work and in social service in return, then we are the Shendi of the Christopher Fry play and the ^{of} the Haggadah. Then we are being wickedness. For wickedness is utter self-centeredness. When you are self-centered you are violating the law and the will of God.

On the Seder, we eat matzoh, the unleavened bread. The matzoh is called in

our Haggadah the Bread of Affliction. It is not tasty. It is not cake. It is not rich. It is simply the bread of poverty, the best that these Hebrew slaves could do for themselves, lacking much in their enslavement, the food for sustenance. And as we eat, during this Passover week, our matzoh, our Bread of Affliction, let us remember those who are in need of our help. Not only the poor, the infirm, the orphan, the widow, all these to whom we owe the charity of our wealth, but also all who need the love of our friendship, the helpfulness of our time, the compassion of our person, all those who so easily would find life enriched if we would only take the time to be with them, to listen to them, to counsel with them, to live with them and to enjoy them but not to use them. Let us on this Passover season cast out the seed of selfishness, the seed of a Shendi that is in each of us, and let us each as best we can strive to live a life as full of helpfulness to others as we can possibly make it.

Amen.



1) ~~Passover~~ ^{celebrate} the most marvelous event in the long and tangled story of Jewish history. On the night of an Exodus we are reminded "We were slaves and Pharaoh in Egypt and would strike us as he did, but we are here and Pharaoh is dead and there were a long hard and an unrelenting and a bitter struggle 1450-1200 B.C. - the time of our liberation - the great deliverance from Pharaoh's slave-driving ~~into~~ ^{from} the hands of the cruel people can be said to ~~mark~~ ^{be} the beginning of the Jewish people's existence. For it was the deliverance that marked the birth of the Jewish people and of the Jewish nation - the Jewish people's existence today - people who are a people and a nation - come now to Jerusalem to observe the Passover and the Exodus.

2) The Exodus story is one of high drama. It is internal human. An enslaved and oppressed people trying to be free. A leader struggling against all odds to achieve that end. There and there Deluged. Frustration and finally the triumph ~~difficult~~ of attaining that freedom which had been so long won. Every man, every woman, every nation within her struggled against an oppressor who has no mercy. That is the story of the Passover story.

[illegible]

many have ~~forgot~~^{remembered} to transfer the Pugh's of the Exodus along for the
kinds of study. We have an excellent guide notes. Just look
you up. Call B. A. Mudd produced his monumental work - the 10 C's

which described in round figures for millions of men all the evils & grandeur of Bonaparte's domination. This year - on a much more limited scale - he noted contemporary phenomena. Mr. Charles Fry drew again from the Bible and account for the story line of his play The Friend Ben which many of us were privileged to see on the Egyptian stage of our own city last year.

Mr. Fry's concern is with the ^{in Egypt} ~~protection~~ of the principal protectorial of the Egyptian stage. Of particular interest is the portrayal of the young boy Shendi. There is a person is mentioned in the Bible and account. Mr. Fry introduced him to us as a young lad of some 20 summer - the only one of his kind known to us here. At the beginning of the play he is just one of the thousands of the laborers assigned to the building of the Suez Canal under the French and Russians. As conditions ~~Shendi~~ Shendi is not a native and not a Frenchman. Enforced to work with his hands and his head. We can understand his ~~life~~ ^{life} as he pleases the ruling of several thousand laborers he has apparently turned into a slave.

As to Fry, Mr. Fry had once again Egypt's most successful general. Before he had taken the Egyptian market he had been alone to suffer a defeat; he had been alone to the heart of the French. Ruined as an individual he passed - his military prowess had added to his prestige. Indeed, at the very moment that most men returned to Egypt to live and work with - the French - he killed by next Bonaparte's sword - was preparing to recall him from Egypt to lead again Egypt's might; concerned only with local mission, Mr. Fry refused French's commission. This refusal provoked a storm of abuse for the neglected Shendi. The French ~~instead~~ ^{instead} is seeing both in general - pardon the youthful misadventures & then his general's pardon as ~~disadvantage~~ ^{disadvantage} benefit in his own hand.

Shendi's work is the work. Fry suggests that the end now must be to identify himself completely with the Egyptian. But one laborer alone - he would then be already so if he had never shared our fate. Therefore Shendi's concern is for himself alone. He is not a native, he is not a Frenchman; he is not a Frenchman for the time of his failure. Indeed, when he is not a Frenchman of Egypt or Egypt. He is alone Egypt and he is alone the fate of Egypt's first laborer on the night under his is first ~~disadvantage~~ ^{disadvantage} pleasure the work of a slave alone the ~~disadvantage~~ ^{disadvantage} of a young Egyptian found.

5) as i suppose that on persons and boundary effusion - perhaps it
will sound as if the words are still new to you.

① to present - attention - love - support

② to community - participation - ~~enlightened~~ - ~~self~~

③ to ourselves - sense of purpose - attitude to communal work -
fundation

~~the~~

Persons ^{'11'17,19,20} 1913 - Education from self - with new world of

service



WRHS

