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Rosh Hashanah sermon, 1962.

ROSH HASHANAH SERMON

1962

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

According to an ancient piety, our troubled world came into being on the first Rosh Hashanah. " --
this is the day on which God created this world." And as befits any birthday, Rosh Hashanah exudes a mood of warm joy and quiet reflection. Yet increasingly I have found myself an outsider to this spirit, a bit reluctant to step across the threshold into the new year. I ask myself, Why so? Am I disturbed by the passage of time or the process of aging? I think not. Does the sudden change which surrounds me, the revolutionary character of our life disturb me? Again I think not. Science and change rather excite me. It is not so much that I fear the future. It is that I fear that there may be no future.

One of the oldest nightmares known to man is that of Armageddon, sudden, cataclysmic end to life. We have an Armageddon, but unlike the ancient dream of the Four Horsemen galloping across the world spreading death and desolation, ours is not science fiction, but science. The plans of destruction are neatly typed. The buttons of destruction are clearly marked. Computers have spun, and they have pinpointed the cities that are to be razed, the millions who are to be cindered, the billions who are to be left starving and homeless. It is all so neatly arranged. And as I a tomorrow which may include inferno -- as we face a tomorrow which may include inferno, I think it is easy to understand why we halt, and hold

back, and are not quite as eager as we once were to taste the delicacies of the future.

And what is our reaction? It is to search out the meaning of history, the drift of history. Are we being channeled toward the precipice, we ask, or is mankind coming into quieter waters where we will be given the leisure, the opportunity to work out our passions and the revolutions of our time? I do not know. No one knows. The more that we search beyond the curtain that veils tomorrow, the more that we search back and review the history of today, the more it seems to us that we are moving towards progress and towards destruction, towards Armageddon and towards peace at one and the same time. There is greater freedom, but equally there is greater belligerency. There are Peace Corps in our world, but for every volunteer ten men are conscripted into some army. We have produced great prosperity, but such is the explosion of our population that there is even greater want than ever before. We manage to muddle through each succeeding crisis, but crisis piles upon crisis, one more exacerbating than the next, one coming closer on the heels of the next than ever before.

We have met the problems as of now. Men are energetic, but we are not quite sure how long we will maintain our control over the confusions and the chaos of the day. And so we face the future, you and I, with mixed anticipation. But if we search out and puzzle out the meaning of our day, one truth shines through, one truth calls out to be listened to, one truth can give, I think, a great measure of hope, and it is this -- that we will sculpt our own destiny, that there is nothing inevitable about the future except the inevitable price we must pay for our follies, the inevitable price that can be ours if we are singleminded and if we are

strong. Neither the heavens nor human nature conspire against us. We determine -- we determine blessing, suffering, life or death, judgment of the new year.

Many an ancient philosophy and biology, my friends, teaches other, Many an ancient biology and philosophy insists that man is a superficially civilized jungle animal and that ultimately, in a moment of crisis, when man is confronted and must be heroic or ignoble, ultimately the primitive passion comes through. Translated into the usual theology, there is a soul stain in man, some concepts of burden of original sin, that hobbles us, that ultimately when we seek to achieve we cannot achieve; our arm is too short; we lack the power.

The longer I am permitted to live the more I am convinced of the untruth, the utter falsity of this view. The badge of the human race, my friends, is not depravity but decency. Goodness and gentleness are the attributes of mankind, and there is no social problem which faces us which, given the skills of our hand and the powers of our minds and the depth of our understanding, is ultimately beyond our solution. Decency is the badge of the human race. Oh, it may be well for our literary people who delight in a mood of self pity, to image man as a ship of fools, sailing backwards from the new challenges to old worlds and old wars and old hates, to people this ship with the despondent and the broken and the dispirited and the distraught of our world. It is good literature but it is not drawn from life. The little man who cowers in his box and he looks out upon us and curses us and says man is to be damned, man is no good -- this little man has walled himself in. He is sick, it is not mankind that is sick. Mankind is a shipload of decent, honorable human beings. All that mankind needs are clear-eyed captains and competent

navigators, and if we have these we, too, will reach most pleasant anchorage.

Do you doubt this? What is mankind? You are mankind, you and those you know and you love. The father who gave you vigor. The father who taught you the meaning of honor. The father whose actions and whose ambitions excited yours. He is mankind. The mother whose love taught you the meaning of sacrifice; the mother whose spirit informed you as to the meaning of sympathy; the mother who forever ingrained on your heart the law of kindness. She is mankind, and so is the husband you respect. So is the wife you adore who warms your heart. So is the teacher whose gentleness strengthens your child. So is the doctor whose skill heals your wounds. So is the friend whose presence warms your loneliness. This is mankind. Change the color of the skin. Move up or down in the scale of economic worth. Cross the continent, change the tongue and the speech, it matters not. Go wherever you will in our world, in the poorest of hamlets, in the most modern of cities, and you will find men and women exactly like those you know, with whom you are intimate, exactly like those you love. These are the mass. These are man. These are the creatures created in God's image. Oh, but you say, What of evil? What of the prideful and the powerful and those who flaunt their authority? What of the greedy? What of the lustful? What of the vengeful? What of the violent? How can you dismiss these?

The body, my friends, can be ill, and so can human nature. These men are diseased, their souls are diseased, their nature is diseased. Nature is not coeval with evil itself. Nature, as our prayer book says, "The soul which Thou, O Lord, hast given unto me came pure from Thee. Thou hast created it." Human nature can be disturbed. Human nature can

be thwarted. Human nature can become diseased if its environment is diseased, if the body is a broken vessel. But the essential man, the man we know, the man who has built civilization, the man who has ultimately overcome evil is good, created in God's image. How else would civilization have arisen out of the primal slime? For evil, my friends, has a doubled and tripled power far beyond its own. A few guns can hold a city at bay. If man were not innately good, if the most debased slave in his prisoner's pit did not whisper to his son of the hope of freedom and did not reach down to sustain one whose wounds were even more blistering than his own, if mankind had not within him this urge, this urgency, this innate sense of goodness, he would not have overcome the challenges and obstacles which history has placed, he would not have come to this high pinnacle of civilization. For what is civilization but the extraordinary achievement of ordinary people. And what is extraordinary about civilization is that civilization is at all. That civilization is at all. It ought not to be. There have always been men who sought to impose their will, to keep men under their heel, crushed and broken. Their power has been great, and the power of good, the power of saintliness is often far less great. Mankind has pushed forward. Mankind has overcome. Mankind has overwhelmed. This is what ought to give us a sense of confidence, and this is what ought to give us a sense of urgency, for how often we have heard that ultimate excuse and justification of unmanliness, "You can't change human nature." The argument is one about open housing in our communities; we excuse our participation in the cake of custom which establishes restriction, "Why," we say, "you can't change human nature. Next year, perhaps, in a generation, but not now and not for me." The discussion is one of welfare for the indigent in our community; the need is urgent, and we

excuse our indifference on the grounds that after all we can't rehabilitate these people; social workers have tried, why should we bestir ourselves for them; "You can't change human nature."

And it is true, my friends. You can't change human nature. How grateful we ought to be to God for this, for human nature has won knowledge out of a dumb universe. Human nature has established justice and just laws. Human nature has created religion and morality. Human nature has built art and culture and civilization. If you could change human nature, if you could debase it, if you could render it brute and devilish all our dreams would be at naught. But because you can't, because ultimately man is good and hopes for the good things, we have reason to believe that what we aspire can be achieved, that men can be educated, that the ancient prejudices can be erased. We have reason to hope for the future.

Here, too, I think, comes our answer to the most perplexing problem which confronts any of us. We hope for peace. We dream of peace. But we ask ourselves honestly, what can I contribute? What can I contribute that will quiet the problems of this troubled world? I am no prince. I am no commissar, no president. I do not control the political destinies of mankind. My vote is pitifully meaningless. What can I do? Do you remember the child's poem how for want of a nail in the shoe of a horse, because of the carelessness of a blacksmith, the battle was lost and the fate of Europe was decided? War is not determined ultimately, my friends, in the chancellories of the world, because we bear responsibility for those who are placed in power, who occupy those chancellories, and it is our passion or dispassion, our reason or our emotion, our prejudice or our clear-eyed vision which establishes the

broad limits within which such people may operate and exert their power. Hitler unloosed the panzers on Europe, to be sure, but the medieval prejudices of the German people, the religion of the German people which was of the next world but not of this, the academics of the German people who believed that truth belonged in an ivory tower but not in the marketplace, the mothers of Germany who dreamed of martial glory and honor for their children, the Junkers of Germany who dreamed of the reconsecrated vision of Germany over all, the burghers of the German community who allowed themselves to be coerced, to shout with the mob, who refused to have independent judgment in matters of economics and politics -- these ultimately bear the blame, the responsibility for Hitler, for had it not been for their compromises and their indecision, their weakness and their prejudice Hitler would have remained an unknown psychopath in an Austrian hospital.

It is ultimately we, by our abidance of principle, by our acceptance of civic virtue, by our passion for civic improvement, by our impatience with ancient prejudices, by our determination to improve the economic lot of all, by our belief and practice of principle, by our intolerance of evil, by our unwillingness to participate in the chorus of emotion which the hidden persuaders again and again unloose across our land -- it is we, by being ourselves, by maintaining independence of judgment, control of the facts, by abiding a law of service to our community, by accepting the responsibilities of goodness and morality -- it is we who will determine whether there be war or peace, whether there be justice or injustice abroad in our world.

Rosh Hashanah, dear friends, would be a pointless holiday if man was ultimately not responsible for the fate of his life and his society.

And Rosh Hashanah points up, clearly and unmistakably, the extent of our responsibility. What is the legend of Rosh Hashanah? God is in His heaven. He sits on the throne of judgment, before Him an open ledger, in His hand a quill. He writes each name of man on one page or the other -- for life or for suffering, for blessing or for death. And what determines God's judgment? Before Him there is a scale. Into the one pan is poured our good deeds and our accomplishments, into the other our failings and our weaknesses. As the measure of the scale, so the measure of our destiny. So the ancient legend. And what is the symbol behind this legend? It is clear to all. We determine, ultimately, if we live or if we die. We determine the folly or the truth, the honor or the dishonor which will be abroad in our world.

God, the ancient legend says, created many a world before He was satisfied enough with one to allow man to be born into it. There is power sufficient, resource sufficient, plenty and abundance in our world if man organize his energies and develops intelligently his resources. And what of man himself? Are there any bars within man, any instincts so primeval, so devilish that ultimately we will be caught short, that we will thwart our own best intentions? No. Man is created in the image of God. God does not have eyes, hands, feet, a mouth to speak. God is the symbol of goodness. God is the symbol of mercy and of generosity, of honor and of truth. This is sealed within us. We can discipline these virtues, bring them out, refine them, develop them if we have the will and if we are determined.

Rosh Hashanah, my friends, speaks with an urgency the imperative of action. Prophecy, the prophecy of our Bible speaks in the same vein. Why? The prophet Zachariah spoke of Israel as being the "

-- the prisoners of hope," and the phrase is apt. We read of hope this morning. "It shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and every man shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make him afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts shall have spoken." This is our hope. It is embedded in our Bible. It is embedded in our hearts. It is embedded in the life instincts of man. We are shackled to this hope, shackled to it because of our sure knowledge that it will not be established in and of itself. We cannot sit back and wait and say God will take care of it for us. The responsibility is ours, now. Not someone else's but our own, not tomorrow but today. "Cease to do evil. Establish justice. Proclaim freedom." These are the imperatives of Rosh Hashanah. These are the imperatives, the bases of Judaism, these are the basis of our hope.

We read this morning, as we have read every Rosh Hashanah these past many generations, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. It is a strange story indeed, and with it I close. God commands Abraham, His first disciple, to take his son, his only son, Isaac, and to offer him up on Mount Moriah as a sacrifice to God. Now, many have complained about the cruelty of this command. Many have wondered why such a story be in our Bible, and if it were history we would well wonder at it. But it is not, of course. It is legend, a legend which contains within it a great universal truth. Abraham is symbol of mankind. God demands of each of us great sacrifice, the sacrifice of our whole lives, for what could be more precious to us than a son? What is more precious to us than our honor? What is more precious to us than the lives of our children? He demands this sacrifice of us. And what is the conclusion of this story?

A ram appears caught in the thicket near the place of sacrifice -- a surrogate, a gift, a miracle from God -- in place of the boy. The ancients knew that in the end weeping would dissipate itself and there would be the dawning of joy. But they could not imagine that this joy would come about except through God's miraculous intervention. We need God's help, but we, my friends, are a generation which, were we to rewrite this story, could rewrite it in humanistic terms. We have made poverty obsolete. We have made want obsolete. We are about to make unnecessary pain and illness obsolete. We have it in our power to make ignorance obsolete. Would it not be the most tragic end of all if, after tens of thousands of generations of growth and hope, of sacrifice, man, on the verge of utopia of utopias, man on the verge of the day for which he has for millenia dreamed, man would suffer such a failure of nerve that he could not persevere, walk the last steps, open the door and enter into a world of justice and liberty, honor, and religion, and peace.

" -- this is the day on which God created this world." In creating life He gave us blessing. In creating life He gave us challenge. On this birthday of the world's creation let us proudly accept that challenge.

Concerning to an ancient path, then travelled through our country being
 on the first N. H. Co. a hundredly ought, R. H. reports, a number of persons for and
 quiet reflection, I think, ^{unfortunately}, I find myself holding both from them
 I speak -- I cannot reflect that for the more than to be in. But myself, why
 so? Do I disagree with the passage of time? I have not, but I am not
 subject to the danger of being of help; I agree I do not believe so. I agree
 and I have said me. I do not see to increase, I find that I do
regret no longer.

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and now represented more even. I
do a single cut (50 bushes of one strain - I am uncertain of my
bait now and - and it is this - man would rather hit than feed.

meditation has been more human meditation than ever before - we
could do human meditation without books, now and Sure again. These
are our most important lessons except that we need not worry about them.

[illegible]

~~Their labours contain~~.
It has been a common idea of writers upon the subject of the
American Revolution, that the people were so much
of the people as to make it impossible for them to do more than
to support the government.

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spiritual & their - The real text from the originals in the middle
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is being more deeply, and loyally of the human mind. Coastal guardians
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modern settlements of self-governing people founded on a basis of peace -
existing boundaries from now on to be a preference of old ones,
and old lands to new change - well known by their own people
themselves may be - it is nonetheless and less to help. modern and new
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which need only constant improvement and change of our own people
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[illegible]

allowed men from a nation. It is our mission to make modernizing
other little men building a new, better world, which would
understand "Peace and Clean Good" - quite similar to good and
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I am far more impressed with the prevalence of goodness than with
the power of evil. ^{In life and in every} ~~By the way~~ I ^{advantage}. One can hardly over-
speak of ordinary people. Yet despite the advantage of the market place and
modern technology - all these circumstances - to freedom - what a world?
but the oppressors of multi billions of suffering human beings + animals?



huddling in a box, cursing acidly at the world without, "People are no damn good," but let us remember that this little man has walled himself off from life. He is sick. We do not necessarily merit his stricture.

We celebrate this night our Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah would be a pointless spiritual exercise if human nature ^{WERE} ~~was~~ depraved. Why remind us of obligation if we cannot abide responsibility? The drama of Rosh Hashanah underscores that we shape our own destinies. High in the heavens, God sits before an open book, pen in hand, ready to inscribe our lives for blessing or for death, for life or for suffering. On what does He base this judgment? He ^{BALANCES} ~~watches~~ a scale into which our deeds are poured; to the right our goodness, into the left pan our weakness. As the measure of the scale, so is the measure of our fate. So the ancient legend. Rosh Hashanah reflects Judaism's insistence that man is a free agent who has the power and the ability to build great cities or burst megaton bombs. Judaism, my friends, rests on the twin doctrines of human ability and human opportunity. God, an ancient Midrash has it, created many worlds and destroyed each until our world was created, a world with which He was satisfied. Life is not a hopeless striving after the winds but the purposed and deliberate creation of God. God did not place man upon earth as we let loose monkeys in a cage to laugh sardonically at their antics and to enjoy their frenetic energies. The earth is man's to exploit and to organize. Our hands are sufficiently skillful and our minds sufficiently alert. The purpose of life is not death but a better life for all. "And it shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains, that every man may sit under his vine and under his fig tree and none need be afraid." The certainty of

human potential, the image that man is created with a spark of divinity within, runs like a golden thread through the pages of our Bible. It is encouraging to read the Bible's promise, to be told that brothers will yet together in amity. It is encouraging but it is also ~~compelling~~ ^{compelling}. The prophet ~~Zachariah~~ ^{Zachariah} described Israel as the prisoners of hope. Hope compels. As long as we continue to believe that peace is achievable we cannot be satisfied ~~in our lives~~ ^{to achieve} with the philosophy of live and let live. As long as we believe that tensions can be lowered, truculence muted, and tempers controlled we cannot retire from civic responsibility or be deaf to any summons ~~which seeks~~ to promote the general welfare and pacify the current tumult. Until death shatters this hope men of good will, the universal Israel, ~~will~~ ^{can} not be silent. "Then said I, Lord how long." Thus the prophet Isaiah, pleading with God to release him from his mission. And God answered, "Not until cities be laid waste without an inhabitant and houses without men and the land become utterly waste." Nowhere in the Bible does God release the anxious or the timid or the tired from their obligations. Jacob, seeking reconciliation with his brother, tosses on his couch, anxious lest vengeance overtake him. Does God soothe his frayed ~~nerve~~ ^{person's} with a tranquillizer? Not at all. He sends down a messenger to further test his resolve. The congregation complains to Moses about the ~~rigors~~ ^{ROGANS} of the wilderness. Does God smile kindly and provide them some ready rationalization for their timidity? He brushes their complaints aside, "Command the congregation ~~that~~ they move forward." Jeremiah ~~can~~ foresee the indignities which will be his as a prophet of God. He pleads to be excused. There is no excuse. "I have put My words in your mouth. Go thou and prophesy." There are always a hundred reasons why this is not the hour to

meet our problems and to face up to the injustices of life, but not a one of these is acceptable. God is not patient with us in these matters, and we cannot be patient with ourselves. What is prophecy? The grandest message of our people but a statement of urgency, the imperative of action. "Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed. Establish freedom. Proclaim liberty." Not tomorrow, but today. ^{Not some one else's idea - but our own} Not when better times and better education will ^{IF WE DO NOT SUCCEED AT LEAST WE WILL HAVE PRECIPITATED ENERGETIC PLANNING} presumably have improved our chances of success, but here and now. We are the prisoners of hope, shackled to a way of life which demands more of us than living. We are to be eyes to the blind, defenders of the oppressed, among those who shatter the fetters which bind and dispell the ignorance which prevails. ~~We are the prisoners of hope.~~

Two thousand years ago our forefathers arranged that the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac ~~should~~ be read each New Year's day. Here is a strange, if compelling, legend. God commanded Abraham to take his son -- his only son, Isaac -- and offer him on Mount Moriah as proof of his loyalty and devotion. Some have been troubled by the cruelty of this demand, but this is not history but a legend. ^{-A MORALITY PLAY} God asks of Abraham but what He ^{DEMANDS} asks of each of us, that we prove by deed, by sacrifice if need be, the loyalty we proclaim. The servant of God never enjoys the security of routine. His is a life of test, of commitment and of action. In the Biblical story the supreme sacrifice of Isaac is not finally demanded. A miracle occurs. A ram ~~appears whose horns~~ ^{is} are caught in a nearby thicket, and it ~~is a fitting~~ ^{becomes} surrogate for the boy. The ancients ~~maintained~~ their hope. They could see no practical way to overcome the endemic poverty and want which surrounded them and seemed to frustrate every reordering of the society. Were we to rewrite this legend, we would have no need to posit ^{YET THEY MAINTAINED THEIR HOPE}

such a miracle. A noted scientist wrote recently, "Human want has now become as immoral as slavery, for the reason that want is technologically obsolete." Science has already created for us the surrogate sacrifice, the miracle, ~~the~~ opportunity. For an age which has within its power to alleviate all poverty, to order society equitably, to educate each up to his ability -- for such an age to fail, for the men of such an age to suffer a failure of nerve would be the supreme and ^{most} unnecessary tragedy of all.

~~But~~ ^{And} you say, "I agree. I believe in the potential of man. I believe that we are not fated. But what can I do? I am not president or commissar. I do not shape the destinies of man. I'm a prisoner of hope-- this I agree. But I am shackled and powerless." How wrong you are. Judaism was not forged by emperors or princes, but by slaves and herdsmen and dressers of sycamore trees. Civilization is the product of ^{MULTI-BILLIONS OF} ~~multi-billions of~~ unsung kindnesses. It is the silent pain of a farmer in his field. It is the quiet learning of the teacher in his class. It is the principled loyalty of a defender of ^{The falsely charged} ~~his~~ people. It is the cry of hope on the lips of the enslaved. It is the love which binds man to woman and creates child. It is the ^{ATTRACTION} ~~affection~~ which binds the artist to beauty. It is the ^{LONESOME} reason that draws from nature its wisdom. Civilization is the achievement of the extraordinary qualities of ordinary people. None of us is powerless. Do you remember Tennyson's poem how for the want of a nail in the shoe of a horse the battle was lost and the fate of Europe decided. Men go to war when a nation's economy is not healthy, when its fields produce scarcity, when its citizens are so poorly educated that they can be swayed by a demagogue, when a nation's outlook is so darkened by prejudice that

I began by speaking of the doubts that crossed my mind w.r. to the
R.H. in the service money along, I felt myself reassured as to the
impulse needed. As I have heard out one such as I suppose as
the assembled in common sense & common sense - I know that
right will yet be victorious - but it will take time - that the
will be a heavy burden for those who have - for all of man.

