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The Vagaries of Life, 1965.

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THE VAGARIES OF LIFE

The Temple
April 4, 1965

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

There are times, good friends, which try even the hearty soul of a rabbi. I went to bed last night, much as you did, in the eager expectation of an intellectual treat this morning. At about one o'clock my phone rang, it was Ambassador Galbraith calling from Omaha, Nebraska. He had been speaking at the University in Lincoln, and he had spent the better part of the afternoon and the evening at the airport in Omaha, which was fog-bound and fogged in. No planes had taken off and none had landed. The last plane had just flown over. He was there and we were here. I suggested to the Ambassador that he might dictate the text of his lecture, but he said that he had intended to speak from notes and that he intended to be with us. As soon as he returns to his desk in Cambridge, we will be in communication and a new date for our lecture will be scheduled.

In the meantime, what does a rabbi do at one-thirty in the morning, staring down at a blank sheet of paper on his desk, knowing that whatever he says tomorrow will be anti-climatic. Well, at one-thirty in the morning you puzzle the strange bafflements of human destiny. You wonder about this mystery which is life. So I decided that I would speak to you this morning on the theme of mystery.

When we consider the history of our people, we come across an interesting fact. We think of the New Year Rosh Hashanah as a fall holiday. But if we go back into the dim reaches of antiquity, we will find that the new year occurred in the spring, on the new moon of the month of Nisan, this month, in fact this week.

Nothing is left, really, of the ritual and the rites of this most ancient of the New Year's Days of our people. Perhaps only this -- the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Numbers will be read in our synagogues much as it was read lo' millenia ago. If you read your Bible as most of us read, hot-rodding your eyes down the page, you may pass over the Nineteenth Chapter of the Fourth Book without noticing it. It seems to be nothing more than another of those heavily stylized and overly detailed accounts of how sacrifices were conducted in ancient Israel. We have no sacrifices, and, frankly, we have little interests in the techniques of the temple sanctuary, but if you read the Bible as our sages read it, with attention and with some concern for the text, you will find that this nineteenth chapter of the Book of Numbers is one of the most intriguing of the whole Bible--for it contains a mystery; a mystery which no one has ever been able to unravel.

In the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Numbers we are told that the priest was to bring a red heifer as a sacrifice to God. This red heifer was to be made into a holocaust, completely charred and cindered, and then the priests were to broom together the char and the ash, carry them outside of the sanctuary compound and outside of the encampment of Israel, and place them in a mound on a clean spot. This sacrifice was to be an act of atonement for Israel. We have here, obviously, some ancient magical purgation. This was a symbolic ritual through which the people became clean. It is in many ways reminiscent of the somewhat later practice of the Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when in the Temple in Jerusalem, two goats were brought for the rites; one was selected as a sacrifice, and the other was brought before the high Priest. He placed his hands upon the shoulder blades of the animal and recited a ritual to this effect: "Upon thee I place my sins,

upon thee I place the sins of my house, upon thee I place the sins of the whole household of Israel." Then this animal, this scapegoat, the Azazel, was driven out of the Sanctuary, out of the gates of Jerusalem, into the wilderness, to death. Presumably it bore with it the guilt for which the people on the Day of Atonement had made their repentance.

These two ancient practices are similar in origin and similar in purpose, but the sacrifice of the red heifer includes a large element of paradox. Though it is a sacrifice that is to cleanse the people, any who touches the sacrifice and those who offer it and who touch the mound of dust made of its ashes, are rendered unclean. How does the unclean, the sacrifice, make clean; and how does the clean, the ash, make unclean? That is the riddle that no one has unravelled.

The rabbis said, that even the wisest of our ancestors, King Solomon, he of the legendary wisdom, could not understand this passage in the Bible; and they added in our Midrash: "How much does our own wisdom fall short of his?"

I find this mysterious chapter of the Bible to be a significant one. I have not, believe me, ever been asked to offer a purgation sacrifice. Thank God, sacrifices went out of Israel two thousand years ago. I have a rather squeemish stomach for this kind of thing. I find the text significant because of its symbolic implications. You and I are members of a rather arrogant generation. We tend to feel that such is the maturity of our knowledge that it will soon lay bare the very skeleton of the universe. Nature's deepest and most prized and carefully preserved secrets will soon be exposed and in our possession. The sacrifice of the red heifer is to the world of the spirit what the law of indeterminacy is to the world of science--a simple statement, that there is a significance--a vastness--a reality far

beyond our comprehension; far beyond our uttermost power to understand. Mystery is part of the very nature of being. There are simple organisms which can neither be weighed nor measured. There are elements in the spiritual life of man which cannot be located or exposed or scalpeled. For each mystery we unravel, another ten mysteries are revealed to us. The world is simply not created according to our categories of thought. The world is created according to a far more fundamental and majestic wisdom. Would you know God? Recognize this element of mystery? Would you know God? Look out into the world about you and see His creative might; His power which cannot be circumscribed by every talent which the human mind possesses. "His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways, and His thoughts, than our thoughts."

Every once-in-a-while, someone will research the religious views of scientists. They are interested to know if those who live at the frontiers of human knowledge have lost their faith or gained faith. The sum and substance of these surveys has been that the scientist is much as you or I. Some have faith. Some are men of little faith or none. Some find themselves familiar within the walls of a sanctuary and at home, and others must walk alone to carve their own philosophy.

Men, after all, whatever be their interests or professions are men.. Each of us has his own quotient of sensitivity and spiritual talent. Those who touch the living reality come back to us always, whether they give a deistic answer, for they speak of majesty, of the miracles, of the size and depth of reality; of its significance, of its vastness, of its restlessness, of that which is ever-elusive to human understanding.

"Oh, Lord, how shall I find Thee?
High and hidden is Thy place. Where
shall I not find Thee, Whose Glory
fills all space. "The Heavens declare
the Glory of God, and the earth revealeth
His handiwork."

Mystery leads to awe. Awe leads to the Creator God. Mystery leads to a second teaching. Mystery leads us to an understanding of God's Law; this Law -- the Commandments, the tradition. You and I are not only members of a rather arrogant generation, but we delight to think of ourselves as competent, as decision makers. When a judgment needs to be made, we like to believe that we lay the skeleton of the problem bare before us and bring to mind all its possibilities and ramifications. When all is neatly laid out, we will make a rational decision. But if we are honest with ourselves, we can throw light only on a fragment of the problem. There are always imponderables, the unknown, that which eludes the human grasp. We stumble. We intuit. We hope. These are the real terms in which we make the fundamental human decisions.

When we were young, we used to believe that we knew in what the good consisted. The good was that which our parents had taught us. As adolescents we knew that the good was that which our friends and peer group agreed on, but as we became adult we were no longer so certain. We heard of Socrates, and we recognized that the human mind could punch holes in every argument which defines virtue. No definition was logically sound. We began to read Nietzsche who told us that the good was that which served the use of the man of strength and of iron will - whatever the consequence to the poor and the ordinary and the simple. We read Huxley, who told us that the good was simply that which improved the eugenic quality of the race. We read Karl Marx, who defined the good simply as that which brought about

the emergence of the proletariat, again without thought to its consequence in the life of other individuals. We read John Dewey, who told us that the good was that which permitted the integration of a human being into a society. We read and we found many of these views contradictory and most of them confusing and we recognized that the simplest moral decisions of life are themselves confusing. Moral decisions are at best tentative. We cannot be sure. Remember the shock that first day when you walked into a great university library and saw the range upon range of volumes representing the accumulated wisdom of the human race. You stood in mute humility, and you recognized that were you to spend the rest of your life reading, you could not even climb the foothills of this intellectual mountain. For every book that you completed a hundred would have been added to the catalogue. Man is capable, surely. Man can enlighten, truly; but beyond the perimeter of that which we can know, there is always a vastness which is unknown, uncertain, confusing. We must make our decisions always within the framework of mystery. How then do we make them? In terms of the proven and the useful. I cannot logically prove to you that to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God is the definition of the virtuous way. I cannot prove it. But I can show you historically that those who have done justly, and loved mercy and walked humbly have added to the sum total of human happiness, and have given us that which we choose to call civilization; and that those who have walked arrogantly and aside have ruptured the fabric of the family, strained the web of relations within the community and added to the sum total of human anguish and human misery. What better proof can we have? These are the ever usevul verities, and in a world of mystery, these are the solid foundations on which we can build our lives.

Mystery then can lead us to God and to the good. Finally, mystery leads us to an understanding of our vocation as a people. Why are we Jews? Because we were born Jews. Why should we remain Jews? Because we have a certain pride in family and tradition. But what use has the world of a Jewish element? We are, after all, a small minority of some twenty-odd millions in the world numbering in the several billions. In the scale of power and in the scale of population, we hardly count. What use has the world of Jews? Again, I cannot give you a logical, fully rational answer, but then Jewish history, and indeed all human history, does not fit neatly into the categories of reason. There is always the unexplained. History cannot quite explain why a given people presents civilization its particular gift. How is it that these wandering Arameans who were our ancestors gave to the world the vision of the one God and the one Law, and the one brotherhood of humanity? Were they better biologists than their contemporaries? Hardly. The science of that day seemed to prove that there were visible and far-reaching differences between the races. You could see differences in the coloring of the skin, in the growth of the hair, in the stature of the tribespeople. As men classified the tribes systematically, they exposed the differences between races and the differences between classes. The free man was cultivated, a gentleman; the slave was rabble, a conniver, and his children were as offish as he had been. So the greatest of the biologists and scientists of antiquity, Aristotle, knew that the barbarian was a lesser breed without the law. He looked at slaves as human tools, less than other mortals. Yet 800 years before, the Hebrew prophets had proclaimed: "Have we not all one Father--Hath not one God created us all?" Were our fathers, then, better analytic philosophers, ethicists, and moralists? Hardly. We did not produce a mind as keen and as analytically

sophisticated as Plato's and yet Moses, almost a millencom earlier, had argued that there must be only one law for the home born and for the stranger. Plato insisted on a law of large freedom for the philosopher-king, and a restrictive law for the slave and the plebeian. Were we better theologians? The most academic and erudite theologians of the ancient times were the priests of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the priests of Marduk and of Amon-Re. They were learned. They knew the inherited wisdom of the race, yet they were never able to break through the complicated polytheism of their world to a vision of the unity of the world and of the oneness of God.

How shall we explain then the unique gifts to civilization of our people? Many have offered explanations. Some have argued that our contribution to civilization can be understood in terms of our "wilderness living". The wilderness, the desert, is limitless and so is the vision of the unlimited God. We were a nomadic people, we went from place to place and we came to know that all people are essentially similar. There is a rude simple justice in the desert. One law for all people. Yet, how shall we explain that our people alone among the ten-thousand Bedouin tribes of antiquity broke through polytheism, broke through the slave-free standards of the ancient world and came to the vision which is inscribed in our Bible?

There is mystery in history. There is mystery to the usefulness of the Jew in history, and to the Christian in history, and to the Greek in history, and to the usefulness of the Roman in history, and to the usefulness of the American in history. This mystery cannot be parsed down. What then is our usefulness today? How is it that a ghettoized people, denied participation in the Renaissance and in the early days of Industrial Revolution; for long denied admittance to the universities of the world, how is it that this people gave to the Twentieth Century three of its most

formative and important thinkers: Dr. Freud, Karl Marx, and Dr. Einstein? What of our role today? Have we not something to teach the world about the way to live in densely populated urban societies - the concept of welfare care and of the welfare state? Have we not something to teach the world of the virtue of learning and the value of education? Have we not something to teach the world about the reasonableness of hope? Israel was cindered. Israel was gassed. Israel was decimated and Israel was reborn. In a world which is as violent and as confused as our own, do we not stand to men of good will the world over as the living proof that if you will it, there is a way. The words are Herzl's! That decency can triumph over greed. Peace can triumph over violence. Justice can triumph over cruelty. Man can yet have his vision of a peaceful, ordered, open and free society. How will we succeed? Again we humbly accept the mystery.

It is good, then, to think of mystery. To think of it even in the wee hours of the morning. Why did our ancestors read this chapter full of mystery at the beginning of a new year? Well, a new year is mystery. A new year confronts us with uncertainty. We are filled with fear and a vague trembling. We are much happier with the familiar and where we are, we do not like to dare, to brave or to adventure. Were they reminding us that there is nothing to fear in the mystery which is life. The New Year is as full of promise as the old year, perhaps even more. Unwritten days are fresh and clean. Mystery can be a great teacher. Mystery can lead us to a clearer appreciation of the elemental moral law of the Ten Commandments--the Torah, the law of dignity and of community and of freedom. Mystery can lead us to a sense of our own historical mission, as a religious people, as a community dedicated to the service of God.

most
2nd ancient Israel the calendar was quite different than ours. ^{The} ~~August~~
New Year began not in the fall month R.H. but on N.S. 4th month of
Nisan - The month. ~~1000~~ is known on ~~left~~ of the ancient pictures -
some are certain - that of Reading the 14th of the month of Nisan on the
synagogue - at the beginning of the month.

number 14 is perhaps the most mysterious. It is the number of the
of the month. But when we contemporary eyes see it on the 14th
page of the Bible, it appears to be little more than another name for the
description of one of the highly stylized sacrifices that are further spread
and in the same days. The number 14 is known &
deliberately and by good reason intending & purifying. The
purpose of the sacrifice is purification - to be a purification for sin.
The priests must take a red heifer - make a
holocaust and yet - but in the ritual - and then take the
ash of the sacrifice to a place outside the camp - build there a
mound - & its very presence shall act to purify as a purification
for sin. So far we seem to have no more than the ritual of
atonement - not unlike the Levitic and more familiar picture
of the Y.K. by which a sin is atoned - but a goat - and symbolically
the place of the sin of the people on the goat - but it was
driven out of the camp - bearing the sin out of the city - It
on the day of atonement - of all your sins - and you
be clean

But the more ancient pictures have a bull in purification
It is a description of a purification - yet again with the

to accept - deny the responsibility - on such grounds we
nearly best is rendered useless - Have been the modern
German the people, & have been to have made modern German
which used it?

We do not know

No one seems to have known, The middle system
the machine that every system - he of the modern -
the modern system to assist for another - would not appear
and a very precise of surprise, seen can one - by
added - "But, see all of his members",

Personally, I find modern 14 years with unhappy It's in
the field - no, I'm not sure that it is a success - and
I'm not sure I could follow the modern system - it
is not unfulfilling in spiritual and sympathetic; There is a
reality in our remembrance and then in fact about our
world which we will never forget, We are of an urgent
age. Perhaps, having been informed at such a young age
may have come to feel that soon all the modern will have
been ruined. The success of the Red League is the world of the
spirit - but the principles of modernism is to reject the old
fact about the world & life which are deeply rooted in the past. The
universe is unrelentingly truth, more powerful, more significant
than all the old myths - It is made a way to the modern

attest beyond our comprehension - by a man who had seen and
been 'wound' to judgment.

Would you know what? About the myth, the myth.

Would you know what? Because that was as much based

on myth - & thought based on myth. For 'Kend' says in his own

way & looks straight on my thought - just as he sees the

higher than the world - as he sees the higher than your myth

the thought on your thought.

But now you are convinced - but not yet convinced - you have

an understanding, but you are not yet convinced, much as we

from time to time as to understand what is repeated on and on

which are changes like the myth of us - some perhaps

understand nothing at all WRHS as to understand what is repeated on and on

which are changes like the myth of us - some perhaps

understand nothing at all WRHS as to understand what is repeated on and on

of myth of life - but not yet convinced as a man - convinced as a man

We will never say the myth of us convinced - as a man

now we know - as now we know the myth - as a man

as the myth of us convinced as a man as a man

When you are convinced as a man as a man

as the myth of us convinced as a man as a man

of myth of life - but not yet convinced as a man as a man

as the myth of us convinced as a man as a man

as the myth of us convinced as a man as a man

as discussed - We like to assume that we've got all the facts
 together - however the situation - is actually more a series of
actions - But as the result is 1, Take my decision you see!
 Why are we disappointed on the report to the press P.D.
 we really intend all the necessary facts? P.D. we must outline
along - we will deal of intentional things, we can make you
 more sure that nothing should be good - disputed on
points caught in the good - But we have only to remember
 the old members of the committee to know that disputed points can
be made on any subject of the good 1 the subject. on the subject
disputed points defined to good as well defined
is useful to the study included many defined the good a lot
included points as included the subject, disputed points
defined in the subject defined the subject defined the subject,
from disputed points defined the subject defined the subject defined the subject,
to integrate the subject defined the subject, which is it? can we
prove it?



There is some attempt to be done - but much good - 2
 still have forget the study of nothing at the subject defined
of being defined at College for the subject, then can be included
under the subject defined the subject defined the subject, 1
could not make a list against the subject defined the subject - 3
as good as 2 but can be included - a large number can
have been added to the subject - We can not open

plants degraded 600 meters 7000000 miles but on surface
the solid & solid for solid - solid 1000000
before solid degraded one solid for solid & solid have been

With my little children - The photo of Clara - her
modest little way to beauty and most amiable motherly
face - yet of such pure and loyal love for others -

A proper analysis indicates we never fully see ourselves as
we really are - but just glimpse at ourselves - ^{N of us} ~~some~~

[illegible]

a glutted medical people to look ~~the~~ ^a second night
not known to renewed & the Doctor to the President -

What would a Friend on an Island be a Good Man

be used as needed? what was ~~the~~ ~~purpose~~ ~~of~~

Could one model? The one can Red scheme — but ~~the~~

have been targeted on this and about 400 people

4. function of compound microscope - see how small things are

The value of the work done in this case is very high

and now to receive a letter

to replace it a more appropriate

to our people & our worship all

Answer