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Reel
47

Box
15

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812

Is There a Promised Land?, 1965.

IS THERE A PROMISED LAND?

#145

The Temple
April 18, 1965

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Dear Friends:

I am afraid that the most that can be said of life is that it is a rude and uncertain enterprise. And so, it is not surprising that men are forever imagining more stately mansions for their dwelling. To live is to dream. From Plato's philosopher's Republic, to the Utopian islands of Sir Thomas Moore, to our contemporary vision of a more abundant community capsuled in the President's image of the Great Society - the literature of the world, our political thought and our philosophy have been enriched by many a vision splendid.

Is there any basis in fact for these happy hopes or are they sheer fantasy? Do they testify to our ability to fabricate ingenuous illusion, or are they a tribute to the reach and range of our vision? By way of answer, I would place before you this morning the two Utopian visions presented to us in our Bible: that of Paradise and that of the Promised Land.

I would ask you to notice how differently the Bible treats each. In the beginning there was the Garden of Eden - a Utopia. It was a green place of many pleasures. It was a Paradise where every want and need was amply and effortlessly satisfied. And then, the serpent beguiled Eve, and Eve coaxed Adam, and they ate of the forbidden fruit and they were exiled from Paradise. Not only were they banished from their garden, but the verdict was irrevocable. The Bible tells us that God placed an angelic

sentry with a brandished sword at the gate that none might re-enter. The gates of Paradise were locked shut. It is as if the garden had never been. Now, of course, there was no Garden of Eden. The story is constructed out of the language of myth. Yet it is drawn out of man's experience. What is Eden but the dimly remembered, secure delights of childhood? What is Eden but innocence outgrown that can never be recaptured. Eden is all that is implicit in the sigh with which we repeat Mr. Shaw's wellknown phrase, that youth is too good to be wasted on the young.

We are all born into Eden or so it seems, in retrospect. We grow up, inevitably so. As we grow we eat, as did Adam and Eve, of the tree of knowledge. Our eyes are opened. We see death. We notice pain. We note the mysterious mathematics of life - how some die young, that the good are not always rewarded. We are tormented and we exile ourselves from Eden. The older and more experienced we become the less snugly and comfortably life fits. We see the child pulling the wings from the living butterfly and we see the child man tormenting his weaker neighbor.

We cannot stop growth. We cannot prevent being banished from the nursery, and so inevitably we are pushed out into the real world and the gates of Paradise are locked tight. We can never return. Paradise is a place of no return except in the hallucinations of madness. We must live in the world as it is. The nursery world where everyone lives happily ever after is a world based solely on innocence or illusion.

There never was such a life.

What does the Bible mean to teach us by this image of a Paradise locked? Simply this, that there is no fairy godfather and that there is no good witch of the East. All of our Cinderella stories are nothing more than projections

of urgent longings - insubstantial - unreal. Do not depend in your lives on some bolt of lightning out of the blue - on a miracle. Life must be lived within the terms of the possible. We cannot change our skin. We cannot exchange our sex. We cannot change the facts of our birth. We cannot multiply the reach of our talent. We must learn to live with the world as it is. We must learn to live with ourselves as we are.

Now, it is natural to dream. Every man daydreams of a nursery world, yet it is not wise to linger high in a fairytale heaven. If we do each day becomes a prolonged despair. Each experience plunges us deeper into remorse. There are no streets that are paved with gold. Our streets are littered and refuse-laden. In the real world all people are not like our parents - sweet and loving and reasonable. People are quixotic. Each has his own disposition and each has his own ambition. The real world is our world. We ought not spin for ourselves a world of such fine fancy that it destroys our ability to enjoy that which we really have. For there is color and excitement, love and tenderness which can be ours in the here and now. A Rabbi has capsuled this wisdom in this phrase:

the secret of happiness is our ability to accept circumstance. You do not need to be a Nobel laureate to make a contribution to the on-going progress or the race. You do so daily in your business as you conduct yourself with honor. You do so daily in your home, as your love and teaching raise children, straight and sturdy. You do so in your civic undertakings as your time and effort lends strength to the city.

Now, we all listen to what Dr. Freud once called the lullabies of heaven, those wonderful ethereal melodies which come to us from a never-never land of many delights, where all the loneliness of this life is somehow forgotten in thunderous applause and where all frustrations of this life

turn into golden success. We all dream - to live is to dream. But, we cannot live in our dreams. Dreaming, we destroy such happiness as can be ours. For our dreams place our ambitions too high. Our dreams cause us to live by a standard which we cannot achieve. Our dreams drain from us the joy in everyday things. You do not have to sit in a seat of power in order to live usefully. You do not need to have amassed wealth or be president of a giant corporation in order to be secure. Yet, if you are nagged by such a fantasy, if it gives you no peace - there is no peace. Enough is never enough. You do not need the beauty of a Venus in order to be loved and to know love. Beauty is an inner grace of a human being at peace with himself. And yet, if you are caught up with some adolescent conjuration of beauty what peace can be yours? What love can be yours? Whatever grace is yours by birth will never be enough. We must learn to live with the world that is ours.

The beginning of wisdom, the beginning of maturity, is to accept the verdict of banishment from Paradise. The beginning of wisdom is a willingness to live, unprotestingly in the world of death and of pain, in the world in which men are less than angels. The beginning of wisdom is a willingness to live in this world without regret, to accept it for what it is and to seek to make it an even better place.

The gates of Paradise are locked. The Greek word "utopia" means "no place." There is no Paradise.

Paradise is locked tight, but the gates of the Promised Land are open. At the beginning of our history God covenanted with Abraham, "Lift up your eyes and look about this place for all the land which thou seest to thee I will give it and to thy seed after thee as an eternal inheritance." The focus of our long history is the desire to be on the land, to possess the

land and to build upon it a promise equal to the blessing. Patriarchs came to the Holy Land and they pastured their flocks there and camped there. They left the land only when they had been driven off by drought or by famine and the need to seek pasture elsewhere; but always they returned. We were forceably restrained from the land by our enslavement in Egypt. We were deprived of the land for many centuries. Then came the Passover and God's deliverance. Then came Moses who led the people back to the very gates of promise. It has often been in our history, as it was under Joshua. Again and again we have pioneered the land. As it was under the Judges and under Kings, again and again we have built high its cities. We have tilled its farms and its vineyards. We have cared for its wealth. There were times when we were driven off the land, but always we kept close the dream, always the land beckoned. As in our own generation the land reached out to us and drew us back. We renewed the land. We rebuilt it.

There are some cynics who say that the phrase "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here" is inscribed over the archway of birth. Through this vision of the Promised Land our Bible argues that life is something more than a barren, difficult enterprise. There are hopes that do come true. There are dreams that can be realized. It may take forty years of wilderness wandering to come to the Promised Land. It may take centuries of human undertaking to build a high civilization, but the land is there, civilization can be built, the promise can be established.

How does our hope for a promised land is a fact of geography. It is within time and place. We dream of Paradise when we dream of immortality, something impossible to man. We dream of the Promised Land when we devote ourselves to the healing sciences and seek within the terms of our mortality to increase man's enjoyment of the years which are by God's decision ours. We dream of Paradise when we dream of a world of saintly people, a world where

everyone is created after our imagined image. We dream of the Promised Land when we dream of building the welfare of the home, when we establish justice within the social life. Paradise is an ethereal place. The Promised Land is this place.

We wish, we pray, we dream of a certain scope of our skills. We wish, we pray, we dream for a certain place of respect in our community. It is good to dream - if we rein in these dreams within the realm of the possible. We are meant to have a vision splendid toward which we guide and focus our energies. A grand dream ennobles, but too grand a dream enfeebles. Too grand a dream becomes an illness, a mania. It destroys life. It dooms our efforts before we undertake them. We become like Icarus of Greek legend. You remember the man who built himself crude wings of wax in order to fly to the sun. He rose a few miles and then the heat of the atmosphere burned the wax and he plunged headlong into the Aegean Sea. Our dreams need to be constructed of the stuff of life. They need to be within the reach of our talents, and within the facts of our circumstances. We cannot change what we are. We cannot endow ourselves with talents we did not inherit. But we can hone the skills that our ours. We can use the powers which are ours efficiently and these powers are largely sufficient.

To lead a good life, to contribute to our world, to know love, to know responsibility is to live significantly. The Promised Land is fact not fancy. But the Promised Land was theirs. They lived in cities. They built high its palaces. They leveled its roads. They farmed its hillsides. Canaan was theirs but despite their hopes it was not the Promised Land. The finest spirits among our ancestors, the prophets, came among them and said, "You have spoiled your dream. How did you fail to understand that you had not only to own the land, cultivate it and mine its wealth; but to build

upon it a society which was etched in decency and full of justice and of freedom. Canaan is just another land until you make it a holy land - a land which reflects in its institutions and its citizens God's law, a divine way, a goodly life. You have been too busy being busy. You have been too busy mining the wealth of the earth, taking in taxes and tolls, enjoying the profit of your crafts, eating the harvest of your fields. This is not the full promise of this land. This land was given to you for holy purpose; to love the good, to establish justice in the gates, to erradicate the injustice of class and of cast; and what did you do? You became indulgent. Luxury turned some of you into vultures. Indolence made grasshoppers of others of you. Prosperity perverted you. This land became just another place.

The Promised Land is geography set firmly on spiritual foundations. No man comes to his Promised Land directly by setting a material goal and achieving it. For what is success? What success is ours if we have what the world calls success, the tinsel, but in the process we have tarnished our good name, or we have exhausted and broken our health and we have so drawn away from our families that they are alien to us. What is the virtue of the Promised Land if it is not established in freedom? What is the virtue of all of our undertakings if they do not bring goodness into life?

Let me apply these thoughts for a moment to our present vision of the Promised Land. Most of us agree that President Johnson's image of the Great Society is a good image. Indeed, what is this image but a contemporary version of the Biblical vision. And it is a realistic vision. Thank God, our land is sufficiently abundant to provide for all. Thank God, our land is sufficiently abundant to provide for all. Thank God, our machine is sufficiently great to provide the education and the training, the leisure,

the recreation and the decency which is the birthright of every man. Poverty can be irradiated. Illiteracy can be erased. The ancient divisions of class and race can be overcome. The Great Society is a realizable dream. It falls within the category of the Promised Land. But is it enough? What will we have if we erase poverty, if we tear down the slums, if every man has opportunity and every man exploits that opportunity for selfish advantage? Israel was never more prosperous than under such kings as Omri and Ahab, and never more pained. The people turned away from the God of their fathers. Wealth became a mirage which drew them on to be ever greater gluttony and greed. Indolence led to idleness. Leisure led to vice. The greedy vision of Promised Land led to the destruction of the people and exile. When I look about this gracious land of ours I sometimes wonder if we have the human capacity to create a Great Society? We have declared war on poverty. Thank God, war finally is to be used for constructive purpose. Washington has declared war on poverty, but how many among us have already declared themselves conscientious objectors in this war? How many among us want no part of this battle? There are the greedy, and these are many. There are those who say to us, we will not pay the taxes for the welfare of others. Let each man care of himself. Many of our best citizens are among those who oppose each and every tax and each and every welfare program. There are the carefree, those who say, yes, hire a professional army, marshall the social workers and the teachers and let them go where tutoring is needed and bring these people out of their darkness; for me I want no part of it. I will not give a single hour of my time, my previous time, to this undertaking. My business cannot afford it. There are the stunted people - people who enjoy living with their medieval prejudices and who will not welcome a man of another background into their neighborhood or hire a

person of another color into responsibility. There are the careless men.

A generation which has gone to seed in the search of new thrills and excitement - which seeks only indulgence, leisure, an opportunity to live off the fatness of the land, which will not return to the land which has given them so much, a single repayment of their strength and wisdom. I see all these people now - now before the battle has been won, even before it has been joined, and I ask myself if we have the moral stuff to create decency within the Great Society. "Woe unto them who are at ease in Zion." What the prophet Amos told ancient Israel I repeat this morning. Amos warned that they were in the Promised Land, but that the promise could slip easily from their grasp. "Lamentation will yet be heard in the streets of Jerusalem" unless you learn to hate the evil, unless you learn to love the good, unless you learn to establish justice in your gates, unless you are prepared to undertake the responsibilities of community and dignity and show yourselves willing to share and to sacrifice.

Paradise, there is no paradise. The Promised Land - we are almost there. It is just around the corner - a land flowing with milk and honey, a land whose cities reach to the heavens, a land whose institutions are more generous and more gracious than hertofore conceived by man. Ancient Utopian writing did not begin to approximate today's reality. Have we the stuff here to live in and on the Promised Land? Can we found it securely? Can we reject its excess? I pray we may.

Life is a struggle and an eternal interplay. It is not surprising,
therefore, that men are forever imagining more ideal conditions
for their existence. To live is to dream. From Plato's Phaedrus
Republic to Thomas More's Utopia - to the ideal of
utopian of a more perfect world imagined up in the human mind
image of the ideal world - the world of the ideal world has
rejoiced in many a man in the past.

Is there a basis ^{in fact} for these happy dreams - or are they phantasy?
Are they in any way connected to human life itself or are they only dreams of the human mind?

By way of answer I should mention to you that
many of the utopian dreams which are based on the idea of the ideal world
I should like to have you remember the difficulty to reach
the ideal world.

In the history of the human mind as reflected in the history of Eden -
a repeated dream of the ideal world - a fantasy in the mind
all of man's needs are completely and effortlessly satisfied. The
temptation regarded the ideal world as the ideal world, and as
all of the forbidden fruit and they were exiled from Eden,
not only were they banished, but their sentences were
unreversible. The gate of Eden was shut tight and as
firm as any gate could be made and was fastened at the
gate, man was never again able to enter Paradise, if he was
if Eden had never been.

Now - to be sure - there was no Eden - it is all
a dream - yet one which lives in the human mind from life.

Queen's can beat the published and should be ~~the~~
adv of apples & pears

Dream - but ^{REIN} ~~you~~ you have within the limits of
the possible. E. & I of our lives we provide promised land -
the ~~average~~ ^{we} need to find for our skills; the security ~~will~~
pay for our family; the ~~same~~ ^{we} need in our community -
The higher we reach & the greater our ^{POTENTIAL} ~~ambition~~ -
our ~~land~~ ^{TO ENGAGE IN UNREAL FANCY} ~~can reach~~ ^{human}, not to ~~renewing~~ the ~~ideal~~
ambition of childhood and strength and chance of battle and my
is to draw our strength before it begins to grow permanently
young and unpredictable life - I can find a purpose ~~in~~
becoming an illusion - and discovering what's stayed
and what's gone away from me and what's left to me
but for the one crisis away from me and what's left to me
long before we know what's left to me and what's left to me

The Promised Land is a place - just not far away -
yet it is more than a place - more than a concept,
ambition, a material ambition. It is ambition and fantasy
which builds the land - and begins to build the land where
and where we live - the first spirit among us and where we
the project - come away from me and what's left to me
deliberately your promise. The Promised Land is not just
another vision - ambition and fantasy - ambition and fantasy -
another standing away - ambition and fantasy and fantasy and fantasy

Remember? Do not expect it. You are wanted and of the
number

The President said - "I would like to see you all" - so as much as
you young - if you have but the same &
the same to be held as to be held as to
entire

