



Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Yizkor Service, 1982.

Yom Kippur - Memorial Sermon
Daniel Jeremy Silver
September 27, 1982

According to legend, when the news was brought to Socrates that he had been condemned to death by the thirty tyrants of Athens, he paused in his reading long enough to hear the messenger deliver the court's sentence and, before returning to his book, said no more than this, "Well, nature has condemned them." The hour of birth is our first hour on the way to death. The wise have always recognized that there is no benefit in railing against this fact or in trying to deny it.

"Dust we are and to dust we return." "The days of our years are three score years and ten, or even by reason of strength four score years." We tend to take the familiar truths for granted. We ought not to for they represent a unique feature of our Biblical tradition. Judaism alone among the religions of the ancient world advised man to live easily and comfortably with the fact of his mortality.

Judaism developed in a world, the semitic world of West Asia, which was pre-occupied with the quest for immortality. Its best-known epic, the Gilgamesh legend, describes the adventures of a hero who sets out in search of the elixir of immortal life, but the legend suggests that immortality is not beyond our reach. There is a plant which, when eaten, endows man with immortality. At one time the hero actually holds this miraculous root in his hand, but before he can taste it, a serpent snatches it away.

The Bible never suggests that we can be other than mortal. Instead of focusing our concerns on what cannot be, the Biblical tradition seeks to provide us useful instruction on how to use the time that we have wisely and well. Death is accepted without protest, "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." "Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for You are with me."

How shall we explain an attitude which varied so much from the prevailing one? The answer, I believe, lies in the Bible's special understanding of God. The gods of the pagan world were powerful and arbitrary, not unlike the forces of

nature which they personified. In the pagan world creation was seen as an accidental event rather than a carefully considered decision which reflected the clear purpose of the gods. They were not sure that the gods had any real plan for them and since life was difficult and full of anxiety and it was only natural that man should believe that death was much the same. By contrast, our ancestors spoke of a just and all wise God Who had carefully designed creation. Death and life were part of His design. God protected man in this life and would not abandon him in death. "The Lord will guard you from all evil/the Lord will guard your coming and going from this time forth and forever."

Today we recognize the wisdom of accepting life and death as part of the natural order, God's order. The leaf must fall to make way for the blossoms of Spring. Death is no longer a taboo subject which we discuss with euphemisms. We have learned to be rather open about death. But some of us still act like the child we once were, who closed his eyes and held his breath whenever he passed a cemetery. Each year I come across men and women who will not talk about their deaths with their families, and in so doing condemn those whom they love to unnecessary stress when the practical decisions about funeral and burial need to be made. The first shock of grief is a difficult enough time without that added burden.

More of us have learned to discuss procedures openly, but we have not taken to heart all the implications of death for the conduct of our lives, for the truth about death is that we cannot schedule it. We have no guarantee of another day or another year, and if we procrastinate the acts of love, service and reconciliation which we intend may never be done.

Judaism differed from the other cultures of the Near Eastern world in its calm acceptance of the terms of life and from the cultures of the Greco-Roman world in its understanding of the attitude we should take towards life and death. When the philosopher, Thales, was asked about death he is said to have answered, "There is no difference between life and death." A disciple then asked, "If this is so why do you not commit suicide," and Thales answered, "Because it makes no difference."

In the Greek scheme of things death was to be endured as life had to be endured. Little joy was expected in either. To the Greek the proper attitude was that of a stoic: to conduct yourself with becoming courage, to bear silently the slings and arrows of an outrageous fortune. This rather bleak view was rejected by our tradition. There was a fundamental difference between life and death. The Bible puts it colorfully: better a live dog than a dead lion. We were to "choose life." We were encouraged to be a passionate, not a dispassionate, people. We were to live carefully but intensely. We were to commit ourselves to others in love, to give ourselves over to God's concerns, and to involve ourselves deeply in our talents and work.

The Torah provides instruction on how to live righteously, fully and well, and we appreciate the value of this approach during this memorial moment when we recognize again that not all memories are alike. Those who we remember now are those whose lives were most intimately involved with our own. It is this memory of those who opened themselves to us rather than those who closed themselves off from us which fill our hearts: the love and understanding of a parent; the quiet support and encouragement of a mate; the wisdom and patience of a teacher; the loyal support of a friend.

Judaism differed from the ancient world in its acceptance of death and from the Greek world in its acceptance of life - while we live, let us live, and from other medieval faiths in its insistence that the fact that we die alone does not mean that we must live alone. Medieval Christian painting often pictures the wise man as seated before a table on which a human skull is prominently displayed. No one was to forget that he would have to present himself at the gates of Heaven, and prove there that he qualified for admission. No one would be there to assist him and the qualifications which would be asked about would be those of piety and purity.

Medieval Jews, too, believed in Heaven and that each one would have to

prove his right to be admitted, but the tradition insisted that we would not be tested on the intensity of our private devotions - on whether or not we had separated ourselves from the supposed distractions of everyday life - rather, our test would be had we been a good parent, a contributing citizen, a wise teacher and leader, a loving parent. Had we obeyed God's will to establish justice in the gates, to pursue righteousness, and to create a strengthening environment for our families? We were not to separate ourselves from the community even to gain that ultimate prize - entrance into Paradise.

Even today our tradition continues to think about death in its own way. We face a new problem associated with death - the problem of dying. With our skills and medicine we have played God with what used to be the autumn season of life, and an increasing number are consigned by our achievements to a mattress grave. Some faiths deny that the problem exists. Life must be prolonged at all costs. As long as the heart beats and the lungs breathe, even if it is with the aid of a machine, life must be sustained. Our tradition, as you know, has a long history of avoiding sweeping moral statements and looking at life case by case and issue by issue, and so we must today. Judaism has never accepted the idea that we are born to endure. We are born to care, to be passionate and compassionate, to be involved, to live. When we can no longer care or be passionate or compassionate or care, the time has come for family and friend to consider whether anything of value is accomplished by preserving a non-sentient existence. Reason must help us shape even our most elemental emotions.

This memorial hour is a time of remembrance. Each one of us recalls the special qualities of those who were dear and precious. It is a private moment, a moment which makes us know that they are still with us - a reflective moment when we learn again what it is that life demands of us. Their lives remind us of the standards by which we must live. The memorial hour is a ritual. Our dead are with God. The benefit of this hour accrues to us. Compelling memories have

been brought back to mind, useful lessons are spoken, the long view of faith is again offered to us, and we are reminded that death forces us to measure life - insists that we live well.



892. WORTH MAKES THE MAN

From "Essay on Man"

Honor and shame from no condition rise;
 Act well your part, there all the honor lies.
 Fortune in men has some small difference made,
 One flaunts in rags, one flutters in brocade;
 The cobbler aproned, and the parson gowned;
 The friar hooded, and the monarch crowned.
 "What differ more," you cry, "than crown and cowl!"
 I'll tell you, friend! a wise man and a fool.
 You'll find, if once the monarch acts the monk,
 Or, cobbler-like, the parson will be drunk,
 Worth makes the man, and want of it the fellow;
 The rest is all but leather or prunella.

Alexander Pope, 1688-1744

A MAN FOR A' THAT

st poverty,
 head, and a' that?
 we pass him by,
 or for a' that!
 and a' that,
 obscure, and a' that;
 out the guinea's stamp;
 the gowd¹ for a' that.

hely² fare we dine,
 gray, and a' that;
 ks, and knaves their wine,
 for a' that.
 and a' that,
 l show, and a' that;
 nan, tho' e'er sae poor,
 men for a' that.

⁴ ca'd a lord,
 stares, and a' that;
 orship at his word,
⁵ for a' that:

and a' that,
 star, and a' that,
 independent mind,
 nd laughs at a' that.

a belted knight,
 e, and a' that;
 n's aboon⁶ his might,
 nauna fa'⁷ that!
 and a' that,

Their dignities, and a' that,
 The pith o' sense, and pride o' worth,
 Are higher rank than a' that.

Then let us pray that come it may,
 As come it will for a' that,
 That sense and worth, o'er a' the earth,
 May bear the gree,⁸ and a' that.
 For a' that, and a' that,
 It's coming yet, for a' that,
 That man to man, the world o'er,
 Shall brothers be for a' that.

Robert Burns, 1759-1796

894. MYSELF

I have to live with myself, and so
 I want to be fit for myself to know,
 I want to be able, as days go by,
 Always to look myself straight in the eye;
 I don't want to stand, with the setting sun,
 And hate myself for the things I've done.

I don't want to keep on a closet shelf,
 A lot of secrets about myself,
 And fool myself, as I come and go,
 Into thinking that nobody else will know
 The kind of a man that I really am;
 I don't want to dress up myself in sham.

I want to go out with my head erect,
 I want to deserve all men's respect;
 But here in the struggle for fame and pelf,

comespun; ⁴ fellow; ⁵ fool; ⁶ above; ⁷ must not claim; ⁸ prize.

I want to be able to like myself.
 I don't want to look at myself and know
 That I'm bluster and bluff and empty show.

I never can hide myself from me;
 I see what others may never see;
 I know what others may never know;
 I never can fool myself, and so,
 Whatever happens, I want to be
 Self-respecting and conscience free.

Edgar A. Guest, 1881-

895. THE FOE WITHIN

None but one can harm you,
 None but yourself who are your greatest foe;
 He that respects himself is safe from others:
 He wears a coat of mail that none can pierce.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807-1882

896. TRUE GREATNESS

Were I so tall to reach the pole,
 Or grasp the ocean with my span,

899. POLONIUS' ADVICE

From "Hamlet,"

There,—my blessing with
 And these few precepts in t
 See thou character.—Give t
 Nor any unproportion'd tho
 Be thou familiar, but by no
 The friends thou hast, and
 Grapple them to thy soul w
 But do not dull thy palm w
 Of each new-hatched, unfled
 Of entrance to a quarrel; bu
 Bear't that the opposed may
 Give every man thine ear, b
 Take each man's censure, bu
 Costly thy habit as thy pur
 But not expressed in fancy;
 For the apparel oft proclaim
 Neither a borrower nor a len
 For loan oft loses both itself
 And borrowing dulls the edg
 This above all: to thine own
 And it must follow, as the n
 Thou canst not then be false

William