

Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Yom Kippur sermon, 1983.

synagogues as part of the Yom Kippur ritual. This custom, which is already mentioned in the <u>Talmud</u>, developed because <u>Jonah</u> contains a dramatic and graphic description of the power of repentance. The prophet is sent by God to bring an oracle of condemnation against Nineveh, the respectedly, the emperor and the citizens of his capital take the message to heart. They repent, and the fatal decree is rescinded.

This story suggests, and it's only a story, that we have a measure of control over our lives. We can make choices about how we wish to live and act effectively on them. Nineveh did what was right and necessary and the city's future suddenly brightened. The Torah reading which is assigned for the morning service returns to this theme. It is taken from Moses' valedictory speech as presented in the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses reviews the basic terms of the covenant, the Commandments, and then speaking in God's name lays this charge on Israel: "See, I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse, choose life, that you may live."

"Choose life." We are capable of choosing between the noble and the ignoble, between self-discipline and careless living, between generosity and greed; the choice is ours to make and the choices we make go a long way toward determining our future.

This long day of fasting, confession and atonement, would be a pointless exercise if our fate were predestined. Yom Kippur rests on the conviction that if we fail, the fault lies not in the stars, in our Karma, or in some pursuing Fate; but in ourselves. We can choose the high road or the low road, and the road we take determines much of what happens to us during our lives.

I affirm this great Yom Kippur theme; but I acknowledge that it is capable of being misunderstood. Many seem to think of <u>Teshuvah</u> as a relatively swift and easy process. It is not. <u>Teshuvah</u> is a long and demanding task. The theme of <u>Teshuvah</u> is not the simplistic notion that we can easily change our lives if only we will admit our faults and promise to live up to our resolutions. Much more is required.

In many ways <u>Jonah</u> misleads us as regards <u>Teshuvah</u>. I find the conclusion of Jonah quite incredible. Nineveh was the Paris or Washington of the day, the capital of a great empire. The noble families of Nineveh possessed great power, and certainly were prone to all the corruption that power brings. Many possessed great wealth, Assyria had taken booty from many nations, and these certainly knew all the corruption that wealth can bring to the spirit. It's hard to believe that this community of calculating and military-minded people would suddenly experience a spiritual conversion, renounce the wickedness of their ways, and accept the way of righteousness. Yet, that's what the story of Jonah says.

I find it interesting that the opening of the story of Jonah is not like its conclusion. We first meet Jonah, the prophet, sitting comfortably at home. The word of God comes to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh. Jonah does not want to go. He wants to exercise his right as a human being to determine his own fate. So instead of going east to Nineveh, he goes west to Jaffa where he hires passage on a ship bound for the Spanish coast. But Gcd will not be gainsayed. God sends a great storm and the ship nearly capsizes. Jonah is driven back to shore and forced to go on a mission which he did not want to undertake.

This scene suggests that there are circumstances when we do not, in fact, control our lives. Jonah is not master of his destiny. Many readers are not surprised to find a story of this type in the Bible. What else would you expect in the literature of a people who spoke of an all-powerful God? "Who is there among those who live on earth who can stay God's hand or say to Him: what doest Thou?" God gives us life, and in time takes life from us. God raises up those who are cast down, and casts down those who are overly proud and arrogant. But we should note that this theme is not restricted to the pieties of a theistic faith. The thesis that our lives are controlled by powers we do not control was deeply embedded in the shared wisdom of the ancient world. The poet Horace wrote: "Fate calmly determines the fate of the high and the low." The Greek myths portray the gods as weaving the thread of life and cutting that thread when it suits their fancy. The Gilgamesh epic, the best known legend of Mesopotamia, explains the great flocd by reporting that the gods had been disturbed in their mountain retreat by the noisiness of the human race, and that they decided to remove this annoyance by destroying mankind. The power of Greek tragedy lay in its description of a hero's titanic struggle to escape his fate and the audience's knowledge that he could not be successful.

These legends, myths and theologies make the point that we do not control the circumstances of our lives. We did not will ourselves to be born at a particular time, in a particular place, and into a particular family. We did not specify our physical and psychological endowment; those talents and potentialities which have determined, to a large degree, the course of our lives. More than most of

us care to admit, the circumstances of our lives are set for us.

Ancient wisdom had no patience with those exhuberant folk who peddle gospels of guaranteed success. You know the litany: "Where there's a will, there's always a way." "If you want something badly enough and will work hard enough, you'll attain your goal." Nonsense! Such assurances not only have no basis in fact, but are dangerous. A child born with less than adequate intelligence cannot hope to become a nuclear physicist. Someone whose physique is not robust cannot expect to become a professional athlete. A child born into an illiterate, impoverished family, let's say in sub-Sahara Africa, cannot expect to live a life of ease and prosperity. Many have been emotionally broken because they were encouraged to reach for attainments beyond their reach.

Jeremiah warned us centuries ago against mistaking good fortune for achievement: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the strong man glory in his strength; let not the rich man glory in his wealth." We are not self-made. We are to a large degree what the accident of our birth and the political and economic realities of our time allow us to be. If our lives have been fortunate we ought not be self-proud. If we have not been as fortunate as some, there is neither grace nor benefit in wasting our energies complaining against our circumstances. It does us no good. We can't choose a new body or exchange our bundle of talents for another more to our liking. We can't suddenly decide that we don't like living in the 20th century and select the 25th or the 15th. Such choices are not given us. Wisdom consists in accepting the situation God has designated for us. Character consists in using the circumstances of our lives as fully, capably and honorably as we can.

This ancient wisdom, shared by Greek and Jew, does not directly challenge the theme of Yom Kippur. We are not told on Yom Kippur that by repentance we can

change the controlling circumstances of our lives. Yom Kippur does not promise that repentance is the way to riches or happiness. Yom Kippur does not describe teshuvah as a way to heal our bodies or recapture our youth. Yom Kippur says simply: 'You can make those choices which control the quality of your life.

In recent years some fundamental questions about <u>teshuvah</u> have been raised on the basis of our increased knowledge of the human psyche. Some years ago, during a discussion of Yom Kippur, a psychologist friend put it to me this way: "You and I have experienced a number of Yom Kippurs; and you know as well as I do that we are still troubled by these same habits and attitudes that bothered us in years past. Next year's Yom Kippur is already scheduled and you and I will be wrestling then with most of these same familiar concerns. Our attitudes and habits are deeply enmeshed in our personality and they are very difficult to uproot and reshape."

My friend made some important points, but he had not said that <u>Teshuvah</u>, the reshaping of our spirit, is impossible. He did not insist that we are prisoners of our genes and our past. Unfortunately, many of the whiners and complainers among us have twisted the psychological and sociological research of our time to provide themselves with a litany of ready and always available excuses for their inadequacies and failings. They paint themselves as shackled to their personalities. They never say: 'I didn't try hard enough,' or 'I gave in too readily.' It's never their fault. It's always, 'I had a terrible childhood;' 'I didn't have the opportunity others had.' Someone else, home, family, parents, community, environment, is always to blame.

A young man came to my office. His marriage was on the rocks and he delivered himself of a long litary of complaints against his wife. When he had exhausted her sins, he admitted that he was not totally without faults, though his faults were minor. I also noticed that whenever he finally managed to say, 'This was my fault,' he'd quickly add, 'but you know I had a terrible childhood.' Finally, I said to him, 'But you're no longer a child. Did you never try to grow up?' It simply isn't true that childhood experiences imprison us for life. Just because we were raised in the overly protective environment of modern suburbia doesn't mean that we haven't the strength or ability to be an adult in the real world. We can grow and we can grow up. Ultimately, we have to take responsibility for our lives, and God has given us sufficient wisdom and will for that task.

Of course, we are born with a particular emotional endowment and we are deeply conditioned by our environment and culture. Everything that happens to us affects us and that every experience leaves a residue. But it is not true that we cannot take ourselves in hand and raise the quality of our lives. It's not easy. You can't change attitudes or the habits of a lifetime overnight. We're talking about an arduous and unceasing task which will require every ounce of strength, wisdom and wit we possess, but it can be done.

Teshuvah can begin on a day such as this; but it must not end here.

Teshavah begins in contrition, but requires continuing commitment and steady discipline. There are daily temptations. When we are tired we let down our guard. Any struggle to lift up our lives requires perseverance, but it can be done. We know we can. One time or another each of us has taken himself in hand and found the strength to do what we recognized needed to be done. We've stayed with some of our resolutions, but we've also broken a hundred others, some almost as soon as they were made. Some of these were beyond our power, but most were not. We simply

lacked the will to keep at it. In most of us the will is our most underdeveloped capacity.

How shall we begin? There's an old folk saying that a small hole in the hull of a ship can cause a great liner to sink. A single match can ignite a good bon-Yom Kippur can help us take the first small, but absolutely essential, first Teshuvah begins with a tear, a single tear of contrition. Yom Kippur enstep. courages us to shed that tear. Here we are, in a great sanctuary whose every line reminds us of all that our tradition represents - strength, standards, Torah, the right, duty, faith. Here we are before the altar on which many of us were confirmed and where our children and grandchildren have been confirmed; and few of us can escape today the memories of those innocent childhood moments when we planned to achieve so much, to give so much, to change our world for the better. Today we participate in a service which highlights the themes of confession, atonement and repentance. If we have any sensitivity, a tear of contrition wells up in our soul, a tear for what might have been. We cry for all those compromises we made, the appetites we indulged, the ugly words we spoke; for all that we should have done but did not do.

Our mystics insisted that a tear can melt the seal on any gate. They taught that we live within a high wall and a locked gate. These are our defenses, our rationalizations, our ready explanations. "Everybody does it." "I have responsibilities. What else could I do?" "It's a dog eat dog world." "Nobody cares anyway." A tear of contrition, they said, can melt the lock on the gate behind which we hide, and if we allow the gate of our defenses to swing open and expose our unprotected soul to Yom Kippur's message, we will have taken the

first step in raising the quality of our lives. Normally, we shield ourself, our inner self, against the cruelties and the buffetings of the harsh world. That's the reason for the wall. Tonight we don't need the wall. There are no dangers here, only God. Tonight we are alone with God, alone with our thoughts. We can allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to want a better life.

Teshuvah begins when we shed that tear of contrition, open that gate and expose our soul to our hopes and God's standards. Teshuvah begins when we allow ourselves to feel the pangs of conscience we usually repress and to reaffirm standards of conduct we normally compromise. Teshuvah begins when we wonder whether success, fame, wealth, social status, the goals we normally pursue, are as important as we have allowed them to become. Teshuvah begins when we ask ourselves whether we have become self-indulgent or shut off from others. Did we serve to serve or to gain approval? Teshuvah begins when we recognize the person we can still become.

The Yom Kippur tear is only a beginning. When Neilah is over we will step back into the familiar world and all the familiar pressures and temptations will be there. Here is a case where our fathers were better off than we are. When they shed the tear of remorse and decided to reshape their lives; when they said, 'I want to live in a more compassionate, more sensitive and more honorable way,' they returned to a world which supported and encouraged Teshuvah. The old Jewish communities confirmed the values of this place and this day. Their literature dealt with Torah. The pattern of their daily life revolved around the synagogue. The extended family was a source of strength. To use the modern jargon, our fathers had a readymade support group.

We don't. Come Neilah, when we walk out of these doors, we will enter a world where many voices decry or scoff at the standards which this place sanctifies. Some say: 'Live it up, it doesn't matter what you do, so enjoy yourself.' 'Don't be a fool, think of number one, you're all that really counts.' Others say: 'Who cares.' Our environment is not a consistently supportive one. Many of us lack the institutional supports which our fathers had. Many of our homes are lonely places where we are left too much alone and little of importance is said. The home, once so strong, so full of instruction, so firm in its values, has been weakened. The patterns of friendship have been frayed by the mobility of our society and by a prevailing feeling that a friend's character is not our business. Many equate companionship with friendship and feel that they cannot talk with their friends about private matters, certainly not reprove them, so there, too, there is emptiness - a lack of support. The synagogue is here, but few Jews turn to the synagogue, and fewer know how to use it effectively. The synagogue confirms righteous and sensitive living, but few return week after week to reassure themselves that teshuvah is worth the effort. When we leave here we re-enter a world full of struggle and bitterness, full of temptation and confusion, a world in which the institutions which support character have been weakened.

If you want to know why some of our children turn to the cults the answer is here. They're seeking community. They need confirmation of basic values. They seek a world that is consistent, coherent, moral, a caring community. We paid a high price for the privilege of walking our own way and doing our own thing; per-

haps too high a price.

We need to be encouraged when we falter; to be criticized when we rationalize; to be listened to when we need to talk. Whenever we're in pain, whenever something troubles us, whenever we're having difficulty finding our way, we need the support of others who are as vulnerable and as much in pain as we are. Every day that we live people are at us, and every day our appetites say to us, 'give in,' and our weakness says to us, 'You can't make it, turn back.' We need support.

Where can we find the support that we need to persevere in the way of teshjvah?

I'm afraid that we're going to have to strengthen existing institutions of the even as we turn to them. Too many homes today are simply places to feed and clothe the children and put them to bed. We will the our homes into he will be need to homes where adults and children meet and learn to share and honestly talk over their confusions and their attitudes, a place of love, a place of correction, a place of character and a place of standards. We need families that are open, openly critical and loving with one another. In turning our lives around we would be wise to turn again to the synagogue for no other institution provides us a regular opportunity to stand before God, draw on His creative strength, and remind ourself of all the Torah represents - rectitude, honor, justice, compassion.

Our rabbis and teachers did not need Dr. Freud to describe to them the difficulties inherent in raising up the quality of our lives. Nearly eight centuries
before Freud, Maimonides wrote: "It is beyond belief, human nature being what it
is, that we can suddenly change the habits of a lifetime." Our sages knew a great
deal about habit and addiction, but they had sturdy consciences, strengthened by
instruction in Torah and reinforced by the coherent culture of their community
and their homes.

We can't really do it alone. That's the bottom line! We like to believe that we're self-sufficient. Most of us handle competently a whole range of responsibilities; but, Lout to you, that when it comes to the non-practical, the

non-financial, the non-professional sides of our lives, when it comes to character, to moral habits and to the sublimation of appetite and passion, we can't make it alone. The pressures are too unremitting. At times everyone needs help and encouragement.

Alone we shed the tear of contrition. Alone we must muster the will, wit and the wisdom to go the way of <u>Teshuvah</u>; but along the way we need support, reinforcement, and beyond reinforcement we need a faith, a hope, the certainty that God cares and will help.



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