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Rosh Hashanah sermon, 1984.

Rosh Hashanah Sermon
Daniel Jeremy Silver
September 26, 1984

The Bible provides few details about the original observance of Rosh Hashanah. The Torah informs us simply that this day was a Shabbaton, "a day of solemn rest," a Mikra Kodesh, "a sacred assembly," and a Yom Teruah, sometimes Zikaron Teruah, phrases which are usually translated as "a day on which the shofar is sounded." We can coax a bit more about the observance of Rosh Hashanah by translating this latter phrase literally: Yom Teruah, 'a day on which the Teruah call is sounded.' The Teruah, which is the first of the four shofar calls in our present service, consists of a single note, repeated several times at short intervals. The Teruah was the toxin, the alarm call, of ancient Israel. When an enemy approached or fire broke out, the Teruah was sounded to mobilize the community.

Why an alarm on Rosh Hashanah? Obviously, our ancestors believed that there was some present danger. Wherein lay that danger? Obviously, it lay in the new year itself. If the danger lay in the new year, what good would it do to sound an alarm? There is nothing humans can do to guarantee that the new year will be an auspicious one.

But God can. We tend to look on ceremony as providing a colorful background for meditation and prayer, and as a means of calling to mind important ideas which ought to occupy our attention. The ancients thought much the same, but also looked on ritual instrumentally. ~~They expected ceremony to effect a desired end.~~ They believed that properly managed ritual had an effect on the actions of the gods or God. A common ritual form involved suggesting, by means of drama, what it was you wanted the god to do for you. If there was drought in the land, the priest would pour a water libation at the foot of the altar, in this way suggesting that the gods open the heavens so the reviving rains might fall. When a community faced danger it sounded an alarm to mobilize its resources against whatever the danger might be. ~~so~~ It was only natural to sound the Teruah in the shrine to God to ^{protect} ~~help~~ the community ^{from} ~~some~~ some imminent danger.

What did they fear about the new year? The new year's newness. As humans we instinctively prefer the known to the unknown. We would rather not sail in uncharted waters. To be human is to have an active, sometimes overactive, imagination, and though we often imagine the good things that could happen, more often than not our imaginations focus on the dangers which presumably lurk in the shadows. I suspect that is why so many of ~~the~~ classic epics present the story of a hero embarked on a dangerous journey during which he ~~will~~ face and overcome a series of dangers, dangers which personify people's fears of the future.

Then, too, the ancients believed that each year had a distinct personality. The past year might not have been the best of times, but at least they had survived. Who knew how bitter a year the new year might be? It was only prudent on Rosh Hashanah to summon God to shield them from the dangers which awaited them.

If an anthropologist were to describe the original observance of Rosh Hashanah, he would label it as an act of sympathetic magic, an attempt through ritual to manipulate God to the advantage of the worshipper. The limitations of this service were early recognized and by post-exilic times Rosh Hashanah had been reshaped from Yom Teruah, 'a day of the alarm,' into Yom ha-din, 'a day of judgement.' You know the image. On the New Year's Day each of us, in turn, is brought before the Heavenly Court. God sits as Judge. A secretary reads from a register which lists our deeds. This completed, God renders a judgement based on our record. The original Rosh Hashanah assumed that the future was entirely up to God; the new Rosh Hashanah was based on the idea that our future well-being depends, at least in part, on our actions and the emphasis on self-examination in ~~our~~ ^{The} service suggests how we can improve our chances. Born in magic, Rosh Hashanah matured into a demanding spiritual and ethical exercise.

To be sure, there is no guarantee that if we are good and disciplined, work hard and are honorable, everything will work out the way we would want it to. The world is not a classroom. There is always the unexpected. The times

have a great deal to do with well-being. But, surely, this is true. When we are irascible or arrogant or petty we trample on and can destroy the feelings which hold firm those intimate relationships which provide serenity and emotional security. And it's equally true that greed or naked ambition or dishonesty gain for us the kind of reputation ~~we will never outgrow~~ and which will ~~forever~~ keep us from gaining the respect of those whose respect is worth having.

~~Our~~ Rosh Hashanah ^{developed} a new shape, but being human ^{our fathers did it} ~~haven't~~ completely set aside all attempts to influence God. If you happen to go home tonight and pick up the Talmud for a bit of casual reading, you might discover in a section known as Horayot a recommendation that we eat pumpkin seeds and dates during Rosh Hashanah. Why should we eat pumpkin seeds and dates? Because these fruits grow in great profusion and are a sign of prosperity. If you read the text carefully, you will ~~then~~ notice that this advice seems to be followed by a pregnant pause, as if students were silently reproving their master, 'You're talking superstition.' The master senses their reproof but holds his ground: "There are those who say that it doesn't hurt to give some credit to omens." Tonight at our table we sliced an apple and dipped the ^{pieces} ~~apple~~ in honey. Why? ~~That~~ the year might be a sweet year and a good year for us. Of course, none of us believes that God is suggestible, but it didn't do anyone any harm to dip the apples in honey. If God's not suggestible, at least the apples were delicious.

Over time, ^{the} observance of Rosh Hashanah has changed and the Jew who observes Rosh Hashanah has changed. At different times in our lives we bring different moods to the holiday. Sometimes we're exalted; the world seems to be opening up to us. Sometimes we're burdened by a thousand worries. We're surrounded by illness, age, pressing problems which seem to have no solution. From year to year our mood changes, but it's also true ^{that} ~~that~~ over the ages the collective spirit of the Jew ~~approaching the holiday~~ has changed in significant ways and since what we bring is what we take away, Rosh Hashanah's impact has changed and changed again.

In the early 19th century the German philosopher, Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, put forward the thesis that in every age there is a ~~specific~~ ^{distinct} cultural environment which shapes people's responses to the elemental questions: how they organize their communities; in what they have faith and what they declare to be right and proper. Hegel was arguing against thinkers who insisted that human nature is a constant and that all people react similarly to stress or challenge. To be sure, there is an elemental human endowment, but Hegel was certainly right in insisting that people respond to the opportunities and pressures of their time in ways which clearly reflect the conditioning of their culture. Culture determines what we believe to be right and what we believe to be wrong; what we believe to be appropriate and what seems to us inappropriate; what we declare good and what sinful. ^{Jews have} ~~our people's~~ approach ^{to} Rosh Hashanah ~~has been~~ conditioned by one or ~~another of~~ three successive cultures.

The first and original attitude, and the longest lived, began in Biblical times and exists even today wherever rabbinic Judaism still holds sway. This attitude can be characterized by a phrase from the psalms which was included in our service this evening: "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." Our Fathers did not believe that the coming year would be much different ^{from} ~~than~~ the year that had just ended. They lived on the margin of subsistence and their communities survived on a fragile sufferance. Their lives were brief. Their passage through life was bruising. They had no reason to believe that the new year would be fundamentally different from the one before. They taught their children: "Be not too eager about tomorrow, for you do not know what the day may bring."

Without hope, the spirit shrivels. A hopeless people loses its natural energy and does not long survive. Something must have given our fathers reason to stay steady, accept the blows of life and continue to struggle to build societies where decency reigned. If they had ^{few expectations for} ~~little faith in~~ the next year, they had an unshakable faith in the End of Days. There would come a time when God

would redeem the world, when the forces of evil would be undone, ~~when~~ Israel would be released from exile ~~and sovereignty in its own land~~ and ~~when~~ peace would reign on earth. "And it shall come to pass." When? "In the end of days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains. . . (Then) they shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, nations shall not make war against nation, nor shall they learn war any more." They were sustained by their faith in God the Redeemer.

About ^{Two hundred} ~~200~~ years ago, as numbers of Jews began to leave the ghetto and the shtetl, a different sense of the future began to take over in the Jewish soul. Next year would be different. ^{Now} The Jew began to sense change and possibility. His life was markedly different, usually better; and, as it happened, he entered Europe at a time when Europe, itself, was experiencing an upsurge of optimism. The first substantial effects of the Industrial Revolution were beginning to be felt. ^{Men were} ~~Machines~~ creating machines which could harness the powers of nature. For the first time there was reason to believe that mankind could be freed from the burden of back-breaking, mind-dulling work, ~~and that people would be able to enjoy some leisure and to develop their various interests and capacities.~~ Life had been brief, but medicine began to master the skills which prolong life. Those who were privileged did not have to fight as hard to maintain a graceful standard of living and people began to believe that everyone would soon enjoy the benefits and concomitant freedoms of the brave new world. Tomorrow was bright. The day after tomorrow would be brighter.

The early Jews had said: "in the end of time, God will." The new Jew began to say: "in our time, we will." The old Jews had spoken of man as a partner with God in the work of creation. The new Jew began to think of man as the senior partner in that arrangement. Through the work of our hands and through the ability of our minds, through our science and our research, we will create a new world. The familiar messianic hope was dismissed as a form of self-delusion.

They understood that people need hope, but now the old illusion could safely be set aside. It was an exaltant time, a happy time, and a remarkably short-lived time.

The happy time ended for us at Auschwitz when we recognized that if man be God, God is a devil God. It ended for us at Hiroshima when we recognized that the science for which we had such high expectations could be the agent of our destruction. Our grandfathers had looked on science as a saviour, we began to think of science as the Sorcerers' Apprentice, as much a curse as a blessing. Our fathers looked at tomorrow as a bright, new day. For us tomorrow is the day after, the nightmare image of a lifeless world.

Our situation is paradoxical. In many ways science made good on its promise. Even those of us who have the least are comfortable to a degree other generations would find hard to credit. More people live at a level of decency today than the entire population of the world a century ago. But we live under nuclear threat. We live under the shadow of cancerous pollution. We fear our own numbers. We live longer and take longer to die.

How have we responded to our situation? Some have become desperate. Some of the more sensitive among us are transfixed by the idea that there may only be a few years for mankind to change course before the world blows itself to bits. Doomsday is near. By 1990 or the year 2000 someone will press the button or the bomb will go off because of a mechanical malfunction of its computer control system. Their advice is born of fear and desperation. The nation-state must be scrapped by 1990. All armaments must be eliminated by 1990. Those in power must be replaced by more sensitive leaders. Tomorrow may be too late. Unfortunately, their advice, however well-intentioned, is futile advice. The human being is a creature of habit. Society cannot be unwrapped and put together in radically new ways overnight. We are two centuries into the Industrial Revolution and the world is still

full of peoples fighting to stay with the familiar rather than to adapt.

The problem with apocalyptic thought is that it asks the impossible, and the impossible is just that. Desperate plans are bound to fail and failure only compounds the level of frustration. Desperate people are prone to actions which are not only self-defeating but which can trigger the very disaster they fear. Look about our world. Look at the many heroes of liberation who freed their country from colonialism and then sought to restructure its social order. They planned and cajoled; they organized, but most of their people held on to old ways. Others disagreed with their plans. Little happened as they hoped. Frustrated and determined, these powerful men were not to be gainsaid and so turned to force to realize their dream. The politics of impatience led to the politics of tyranny. I sometimes have a nightmare in which some of those who are most desperate about the elimination of nuclear weapons attempt nuclear blackmail to achieve the goal. Some have become desperate. Others find themselves sunk into a pervasive fatigue.

Some weeks ago I spoke to a group about the elections that were taking place in Israel. During the question and answer period which followed the talk, one man got up. he was strong and tanned. "There seems to be no end to it. The old problems don't disappear. New problems appear all the time. The Arabs and their hate. The occupation of the Lebanon. The settlements in the West Bank. Runaway inflation. An impossible balance of trade. Bitter religious divisions. When will it end?" He ended by saying, "I'm tired!" Now, this man lives in Cleveland. Neither he nor his sons must muster periodically to defend the security of Israel. He enjoys an American standard of living. He does not face the economic stringencies of Israel. But he's tired.

ments about our attitudes, but judged by our actions many of us might as well be

As we spoke before these holidays, I heard some of you say, "I'm just not in the mood for the holiday." I think you were saying: 'I'm too tired to think about the future, about all those problems.' Many of us are exhibiting symptoms of psychic fatigue. We turn off the news. When someone begins to talk seriously about the problems of the day, we divert the conversation to a lighter subject. We read the light and trivial rather than the serious. We no longer volunteer. Why? There seem to be no solutions. Many of our problems are so incredibly complex that we have difficulty wrapping our minds around them. It's easier to think of other things. We know that we ought to be doing something to improve the economies of the poor countries, but if we give them money to establish industries, these industries inevitably will draw heavily on the world's limited resources, pollute the environment, and compete with our interests. To be successful, they must outproduce and undersell our factories. If and when they do, our gift increases our economic problems. There are no neat solutions to most of our problems, only tradeoffs.

Europe began to suffer psychic fatigue after the first World War, that most tragic and pointless bloodletting of the century. Overwhelmed by a sense of futility, reason had not been able to prevent war, many of Europe's best and brightest opted out of politics. They would answer anyone who tried to interest them in some civic undertaking: 'I'm not political.' They were determined to work at their profession, to teach their classes, to write their books, to do what they did best, without being involved in the thankless business of politics. And because many of the best and brightest in Germany were not political, the worst in Germany were able to come into power.

On this side of the Atlantic we are not given to such public pronouncements about our attitudes, but judged by our actions many of us might as well be

saying, 'I'm not political.' What we do say is: 'I do my thing;' 'I work hard at my profession;' 'I care for my family' and who say 'I'm too busy' when we are asked to help. We've developed a perfect rationalization. 'There are 4 billion earthlings. I am only one. What difference can I make?' We forget the one truth no one should ever forget: the decision to do nothing is also a political decision. If you are inactive, someone else will be active, and that someone may not have your values.

Some of us are desperate. Some of us are lethargic. All of us face a crisis of faith. Our fathers destroyed for us the hope that in the End of Days God would make the world right. The Holocaust destroyed their substitute hope that science would make all things right. We lack confidence in the future. We need hope, but in what can we hope?

In an age where hopes are not widely shared, I obviously can't draw upon some shared wisdom. What I can do tonight is to speak to you personally of the sources of my hopes. As you know, I am not confident that we will avoid disaster. No one can guarantee a happy ending, but I am convinced that it is possible to lead an active, effective and responsible life, to have the energy hope releases, even in this most anxious of times.

I find my encouragement right here, tonight, in a service such as this, in a congregation such as this. Why are you here? Some of you came because of family. Some of you came because of tradition. Some of you came out of a sense of fellowship with our people, some out of a sense of guilt. But I suspect that deep down each and everyone of us is here because we have felt the tug of a spirit deep within reaching out to touch the sacred. Something within us keeps insisting that there is more to life than getting and demanding and achieving. This holy day service, this sanctuary, these teachings, symbolize to us the sacred and the sacred is compelling. We are here because our spirit seeks the presence of the holy. We may not be able to put what we feel into words. We may be more than a little confused about what we really believe about God, but deep down we

recognize that we share mankind's silent but powerful thrust to create civilization. We've come here because we want to grow, to be encouraged, to be reminded, and this observance somehow encourages us in that effort. No one knows quite how. It's a matter of feeling and faith which goes beyond words - the spirit within reaches out to touch the spirit of the day. They meet. We are encouraged.

There is something within each of us which cries out for a better world, a better life, something which compels us to do what we can toward that end. Some call it humanity. Some call it the divinity within. It matters not what we call it. What matters is that we are here because we are not satisfied with life as it is. We are uncomfortable in our comfort. We want something better for ourselves and for our world. Being here reminds us that others share our feelings. They are elementarily human - almost everyone shares such hopes and needs, and most are trying to respond - that willingness is the source of much of my hope.

We are here today and so are all the congregations that have been here before us. Our service is a compilation of the wisdom of generations. With us here are centuries of courage, concern and hope. We sense the generations and the challenges they faced. We sense their courage and it commands ours. They persevered and so can we. They were not all saints, but they tried and they did not completely fail. This moment represents the truth that civilization can triumph over the chaos of the times.

When the rabbis were asked: 'where is God?' they answered, 'God is wherever you let Him in.' Let God in. Let this service speak to you. And, I would add, let God out. Let your feelings find a satisfying expression. Admit to yourself that you do care. Accept and rejoice in those elemental feelings which are your human inheritance.

Why do we have problems letting God out? In part because we're afraid that if we listened to the still small voice people might call us romantic idealists - do-gooders. Yet, isn't doing good precisely what we ought to be about?

Honesty compels us to say that there is no guarantee, none whatsoever, that the bombs will not fall or that ~~if the bombs are dismantled that~~ the population explosion will not be as deadly as a nuclear war. But honesty also compels us to say: we are not doomed. The worst is not inevitable, provided - we allow the hope within to express itself - do what we can and more for others - love openly and care deeply - offer ourselves in service - live for values which transcend personal gain.

The rabbis said that when we come to the heavenly gates the guardian angel will not ask us, 'were you Moses,' but 'were you Daniel Silver,' 'were you yourself.' 'Did you do what was in your power to do?' We're not asked to be the liberator of our people. That's given to few. We're not asked to bring down a new Torah. We're asked to do what we do best, provided what we do is for the common good: to teach, to heal, to raise children, to encourage them, to love them so that they will become thoughtful and caring adults. In measure as we love and as we care and as we share and as we work with the institutions of support in our community, in measure as we offer ourselves to the common good, we represent the hope of our world.

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Our deepest sympathy to all who are in the same position as
children are in Dallas 1968, the wonderful memories of the
our attitude, character, the quality of the
support, but the time has to be made up.

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wonder what you're looking for - and the answer is that we have
seen a number of very different attitudes and people
different from him very much - and it is not a good thing - that
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~~Many more to see and look at - 3 pages 3000~~
~~Not to be given to the world - 3 pages 3000~~

~~Not to be given to the world - 3 pages 3000~~
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