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Rosh Hashanah sermon, 1986.

ROSH HASHANAH SERMON

Daniel Jeremy Silver

October 3, 1986

As many of you may know, I've spent the last month of September in England and I must confess that even the notorious English weather is preferable to ours. I arrived in England the first week of the month and that Sabbath happened to be the unfortunate day when terrorists threw grenades into a synagogue in Istanbul and one was struck not only by the tragedy, by the callousness and viciousness of the act, but as is so often the case in moments such as this there's an added cruel irony to it all because the twenty-one men who were murdered, martyred, were worshipping in a synagogue which is called N'vai Shalom, an oasis of peace.

England, London particularly, like so many of the capitals of Europe, is anxious, troubled by terrorism. In London there is the hidden fear of the provisional Irish Republican Army always present, and there is the reality of tens of thousands of Arabs in the capital whose ways seem mysterious and sometimes murderous to the English population. And, of course, during September there were those ten terrible days in Paris when a group of Syrian or Lebantine terrorists tried to free one of their members from a French prison and set off a series of explosions in a super market, a major department store, a police license bureau and, as a rabbi, I could not help but notice the difference in the way these two different episodes were handled. The murder in Istanbul made the front pages. There were pictures, there was a story. There was speculation about who had thrown the grenades and why, what their particular cause or supposed cause may have been, and then the story was finished. There were the customary ceremonial murmurs of regret that we should live in such a world, but attack on synagogues, Jews, Israelis, is, to a certain degree in Europe, expected, taken for granted.

But when the attack was an indiscriminate one against French citizens, then there was a major uproar. Not only were there the screaming headlines, the terrible pictures, long newsreel coverage, but there were demands for a major conference of foreign ministers of members of all the European economic community, France mobilized 20,000 of her troops to seal the borders. She demanded visas of all citizens of countries outside the European community. And there was a frenzy of activity because now the terror was directed not by Arab against Arab or Arab against Israeli and Jew but against Europeans. Now, suddenly, the sense of terror had come home.

There's a certain, again, irony to it all. France, of course, over a number of years has had a very silent but very real agreement with a number of these groups, Libya, Syria, the PLO and others, that they would not monitor too carefully the coming and going of their agents or what was brought in diplomatic pouches provided, provided there were no attacks against French men on French soil. And you may recall that it's not so many years ago that the arch-terrorist, *Munir al-Badawi*, fell into the hands of the French government and was released by them as part of this arrangement which was to protect France though it, of course, exposed others to terror. September terror began to be felt across Europe and, of course, the Jews of Europe have always had a sense of unease, who know they might be selected as targets. Last week a Syrian doctor was sentenced in Old Bailey in London, in one of the courts, for 25 years in jail because he had received from a uniformed attendant on the Libyan National Airlines through an intermediary grenades which he obviously was going to use for terrorist attacks. And when Scotland Yard had investigated his apartment, his flat, they discovered there several lists of major British Jewish personages and

of the addresses of major British Jewish institutions.

After all, it's only three years ago that the liberal synagogue in pernik in Paris on a Sabbath morning had a bomb explode in the entrance way. And yet, I confess there was a bit of surprise in my heart and a good bit of sadness when in conversation with one of my English rabbi friends, he mused out loud, wondering how many of his congregants might not show up for services this year out a sense of fear, caution. Now, obviously, it's not a matter of cosmic consequence if a few English Jews do not come to Rosh Hashanah services. God is infinitely understanding, that's the whole message of this high holiday season. But, at the same time, it's saddening to think how much of our lives is increasingly circumscribed, how much of our being is diminished by our fears, real or imaginary, of the world of which we are a part. And I've been thinking not only of English Jewry and of their fears but of our own, how many of us find every excuse not to go downtown at night even though we might be interested in going to the theater, how many of us think twice even about walking around the block after dark, how many changed their travel plans once they saw a dark headline about a skyjacking of one kind or another.

Prudence, obviously, is a virtue, it has a certain value, and the Temple, like all Jewish institutions in our country has taken over these last years a number of security precautions that we would not have thought necessary up to now. We are heirs, after all, of a tradition which included the book of Proverbs in the Bible with its realistic prudential wisdom - a father telling his son, be sharp witted and look carefully where you're going. Our tradition has no use for daredeviltry, the taking of risks for the thrill of the risk itself. It believes daredeviltry is properly

named for it's an interest of the darker forces of life and not of God. And the first of the school teachers of our tradition of whom we know, a man named Joshua ben Sirah, who was principal of a school in Jerusalem some 2200 years ago, told his excitable charges not to be caught up by the attraction of danger because you can die from that kind of interest. So what I'm going to say tonight is not to suggest that there is not sometimes good reason to be cautious but, rather, it's to suggest that if we are serious about our hopes for the new year, if we want the new year to be a good year, a full year, a year of expansive living in which our lives and our souls and our spirits are enlarged and not diminished, our lives have some amplitude and they're not stunted, then we're going to have to find the courage to press on, not to pull back, the courage to live in a troubled, roiling, sometimes violent world and not to allow that world to force us to hunker down and to cower behind elaborate electronic devices and all manner of locks and protection.

It's interesting, that the first commandment given by God in our Bible to the first Jew, Abraham, the man who was the prototype of all of us, was a simple command - leave, get out, leave your father's house, leave your homeland, leave the security of the past, leave the apron strings, go out and seek your future, go where your talents, your needs will lead you.

Unfortunately, I have a feeling in our day and age, for a variety of reasons, safety, security, have become for some ultimate ends and when safety and security become the ultimate judgements by which we make our decisions, when we keep saying to ourselves, better safe than sorry, we keep finding reasons not to, not to go out, not to expose ourselves, not to make the attempt, not to try

to fulfill our talents, not to face the tests of life, not to open ourselves in love to another, love is entangling, and more and more as we pull back, we deny to ourselves the opportunity which a new year can offer.

What did we say to each other as we met tonight? L'shana tova, may the new year be a good year. And at our dinner tonight we took an apple and we sliced it and we dipped the slices in the honey and we shared these slices with each other in a symbolic act, hoping that the new year would be a l'shana tova o mituka, a good and sweet year for all who sat at the table who shared our meal with us. And our liturgy tonight is filled with the same hope... our father, our king, grant unto us a year of happiness, renew for us the goodness of the year.

Now, our tradition is an interesting one. Unlike many, our tradition does not say, cast your burden upon God and He will take care of you, give up your troubles to God, let Him know what they are and all will come out well. Pray for the new year and somehow your prayers will come true.

Our tradition, on the contrary, says to us, God gave you talent sufficient to the task, God gave us freedom to succeed or to fail, God willingly withdrew part of His omnipotence, His power, and, to a certain degree, left life in our power. We don't set the circumstances of our life, but we determine the quality of our life and, certainly, life is meant to be led, not to be fled. God gave us this freedom. God gave us strength sufficient to the challenge and that, too, is written deep, etched into our Rosh Hashanah theme. The Bible calls Rosh Hashanah a yom hadin, a day of judgement, and long, long since our fathers created one of the

first mythic socio dramas when they asked us to imagine an actual heavenly court, God the judge, each of us somehow in the dark, the court attendant reading out a ledger, the lists of our achievements and our failings, our good deeds and of our sins, a judgement being reckoned. On what is the judgement based? Presumably, on whether we have used the past year well enough to deserve from God the gift of another year. The quality of life is; to a large degree, within our own control.

Now, when we spoke tonight and prayed tonight of l'shana tovah, of a good year, I suppose there was first a fugitive thought, an innocent thought that we'd like the new year to be an endless succession of bright, sunlit days without any shadow, but we know, because we're adults and we're experienced, that that's not the way life is. In every life there are trials and temptations and there are challenges and there are difficulties and there are responsibilities of all kinds which must be met. There are always the storm clouds and also the shadows. What were we really asking for tonight when we asked God for l'shana tovah? Here, again, the answer to these questions, the theme, is etched deeply into the Rosh Hashanah liturgy.

Eighteen hundred years ago or so the rabbis chose as the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah the 22nd chapter of the Book of Genesis, the famous , the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham, as a test of faith, is told by God to take his son, his beloved son, his heir, to take him three day's journey to Mt. Moriah and offer him there as a sacrifice. But I think there were two reasons why our fathers chose this reading for Rosh Hashanah. The first has to do with the fact that Rosh Hashanah is a day of beginning, it begins the new year, it's the beginning again, the

renewal of our faith. And this chapter, the akedah, plays the same role in our Jewish tradition as the crucifixion plays in the Christian tradition. A great sacrifice is demanded of the progenitor of the faith, Abraham or Jesus, a sacrifice beyond what anyone can imagine, and because that progenitor, the father of the faith, is willing to make the sacrifice God develops a special relationship with His community. It is that sacrifice which establishes the bond, the chosenness of the community. It is the initial act in the relationship between God and Israel and at the beginning of a new year our rabbis wanted to signify the renewal of that tie, that very special relationship.

But the second reason that I think our rabbis chose this portion for Rosh Hashanah has to do not so much with theology as with the human condition, with you and with me and with the nature of life. How does this story begin? With four weighty, simple words: And the Lord tested Abraham. All life is a test. Every day we are tried, we are put to the test. Some of the tests are very dramatic. We dare to undertake a new task, a profession, a business, some responsibility or do we pull back? Some tests are domestic, personal, but all life is a test. We cannot expect the new year to be a year without challenge, without trial, without difficulty, without challenges to be overcome. In what, then, will happiness in the new year consist? In meeting the tests, in overcoming the challenges, in pushing ahead and not in pulling back.

I don't know why our world seems to be so concerned with security and with safety. We want everything without a risk - financial investments, to our commitments in love and marriage, almost everything in our life we would like to be guaranteed that

the thing will work out, but there are no guarantees.

Now, there are some sociologists who say that this particular concern with security and safety which seems to be prevalent in our community and our country develops from the fact that so many of the traditional securities of our life have disappeared, that if you want to launch yourself into life you need a strong platform from which to begin, and that platform which was once in place for most, family, a solid marriage, a community, a series of known relationships, all these have become attenuated, they're no longer secure as they once were. Or to use an image, if a tree is to grow to its full height its roots need to be able to go down into solid soil and the solid soil is not there any more for many of us, but that's simply a fact. It's too bad, it's regrettable, but the challenges are still there. The problems still need to be faced. We have to be willing to reach out, to explore, to expand, to lead lives worthy of us. And there are some who argue that the search, the urge for urgency of security and safety has to do with the fact we feel overwhelmed in a world of five billion people, half of whom are ill-clad, ill-fed, illiterate, in a world where two hundred nations are competing with one another with the most horrible weapons mankind has ever produced. In such a world it seems almost futile to try to make for a better life for humankind. For many, I suppose, the symbol of the last year was the accident at Chernobyl, not the accident itself but that radioactive cloud went up into the heavens which threatened communities, millions of people, and what could they do? They were powerless except to pray, to hope that the winds might move the cloud off toward somebody else rather than let it stay on top of their own home, their own community. But again, without denying the magnitude of the problems which face us, what's

the alternative? In a world where everybody tries to play safe, to pull back, not to be involved, such a world is the most dangerous world of all because that world is given over to violence, to terror. When you leave the city you give the city over to the violent, to the street people. when you leave the political arena, you leave that world over to the ambitious, the greedy, the people who may not care. And so we really have no alternative despite all the problems which we face but to press on, to find the courage, the conviction, the heart to live a brave life.

You know, it's interesting that when Moses began to think of passing on the mantel of leadership to his heir, Joshua, he had only two words to say to him: be strong and be of good courage. What do you say to someone who comes to you, rabbi, I had talent, my teachers told me I had talent. I had ideas, I wanted to be a writer, I went to school and I fell in love and I wanted to get married and I was afraid I might not be able to afford marriage if I would write. My wife told me to try but it didn't seem right. I told myself that I would get a job and that I would write in the evenings and I did get a job and I've had it for the last forty years, but often the work was tiring, often I had to work at night. Then we had children and I came home and there was no freedom, no time to sit down and to write. I told myself that when I would retire, then I would write. And I retired last year and you know what happened? I sat down at my desk and I looked at the blank piece of paper and I have no ideas, I have nothing that I could set down of any worth that I could write.

The saddest thoughts of all begin, it might have been if only - if only I had spoken of my love and not been frightened of responsibility - if only I had voiced an apology and not created an

unbridgeable distance between myself and my family - if only I had the courage to try, to experiment, to see if my ideas would work, but I pulled back, I wanted security - if only.

I often think of Abraham facing the test. How bitter those days must have been, what heartache must have been his, those three long days as he walks with Isaac toward Mt. Moriah where the sacrifice is to take place. God, of course, may know that the sacrifice will not take place, the boy will not die, but Abraham does not know that, which is the Bible's way of saying that when we try we can get hurt, that courage demands something of us, it has a cost, that nothing that's worth achieving can be achieved without being bruised, that there is no relationship which does not have its tension, its heartache. That, too, is part of wisdom, to recognize the cost of these trials. God does not promise us a future of happiness without alloy. What we are offered is work worth the doing, high purpose, that deep sense of satisfaction that comes from knowing that what you did was worth the doing, that's happiness, ultimately.

We've all been thinking a great deal, I think, these last few weeks about that small group of Russian citizens who some ten years ago began to meet in Moscow as a watch committee as to how the Soviets were living, or not living, up to the Helsinki Human Rights Treaty. There were thirty or so of these men and women. Their task was, we would say, impossible. Twenty-seven of them have served time in psychiatric hospitals and prisons, years of exile in Siberia and Sakharov is still in exile, Orloff may be coming out as part of the most recent trade, but any of us who listened to and watched Sharansky once he had been freed, recognize that despite the pain, despite the years in jail, in exile, despite the

separation from his family, that man's life was worth the living. There was a deep joy in him. He had tied up his life with something worth the doing, pain, hurt, but he had faced the trial and he had grown. He had become something other than he had once been, something larger, braver if you will. Not all of us will face trials which will potentially make the headlines and make history, but all of us, every day, must choose whether to go out or to stay at home, whether to press forward or pull back, whether we have the courage of our convictions and will act on them or they're mere words, whether security and safety are the gauges by which we measure our decisions or whether we're willing to take the world for what it is - a roiling, troubled, dangerous place and yet, walk out into it and do what needs to be done because we need to do it.

The voice of those who seek security, I'm in love, he loves me, he wants for us to be married but I'm not sure, we're very good together, we're very happy together, but what if we should grow apart, what if there should be children, how can we be sure? I may want to go one way, he might want to go another, always finding the reasons not to, not to commit, not to become involved, not to tie up with, the voice of courage. I don't know if it can work out but I do know I care and you care and I do know we're responsible people and we will find a way and we will work at it and we will sacrifice to make our marriage work. Which voice will be your voice, is your voice?

A new year begins, opportunity. None of us will be granted, I am sure, a year of quiet, a year without troubles, a year without trials and temptations, tests. Some, perhaps many, will try to find

security, safety. And some, for a time, may find the leisure and the luxury and the security, but they will also find that their lives have been circumscribed, to a very large degree diminished. The circle of their friends is narrow because they don't want to expose themselves to other people. They have fewer and fewer experiences because they might endanger themselves in going beyond the circle that's familiar to them. The days begin to weigh. The mind begins to rust. Life begins to be numbing rather than exciting.

There's another way, Abraham's way, the Jewish way, a way which is willing to accept life as it is in its own terms, to recognize that life is an adventure, that the joy's in the living, the joy is in the doing, the joy is in the sharing, the joy is in the loving, the joy is in the meeting the challenge, the joy is in exploring yourself and exposing yourself and expanding your mind and expanding your interests. That's the kind of new year I hope you're praying for today, to be a good year, difficult year but a satisfying year. Those who fear, someone once said, that they will suffer are already suffering from their fears. Those who suffer from causes they know to be just, facing responsibilities that they know they must undertake, fulfilling their talents, loving, caring, supporting their family, those sufferings are easily borne because we know they are necessary, that we are doing what we need to do, that we are living as God would have us live, we are living as God would have us live, the kind God who will grace each of us with another year.

1986 Announcements

Rosh Hashanah Evening - October 3, 1986

MAIN TEMPLE

Rosh Hashanah MORNING services will continue at 9:30 tomorrow morning.

A Children's Service will be held in the Main Temple only at 2:15⁴ tomorrow. Parents are requested to sit with their children. A pre-school experience for children ages four through six will be held in the Social Hall of The Temple at the same time. Parents are requested to bring pre-schoolers to the Social Hall and to leave them with our staff. After the Children's Service in the Main Temple they may pick up their pre-schoolers in the Social Hall.

THOSE WHO WISH THE NAMES OF THOSE IN THEIR FAMILIES WHO DIED DURING THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS mentioned during the Memorial Service on Yom Kippur are requested to submit the names to The Temple office before Wednesday, October 8.



The Temple is pleased that Miriam Tadmor, Assistant Director and Senior Curator of the Israel Museum, will be our First Friday speaker this Friday at the Branch at 8:15.

Dr. Tadmor is responsible for the magnificent exhibition, "Treasures From the Holy Land" which is currently on exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dr. Tadmor will show slides of the major pieces in the exhibit, discuss its approach, and prepare all those who hope to see it for their visit.

The Temple Endowment Fund will hold a seminar on the 1986 Tax Reform Act and You on Wednesday, October 8 at 8 P.M. at The Temple Branch. All are welcome. Please reserve your place by calling The Temple office.

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Lunch with Rosh

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