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Yom Kippur sermons, 1986.

YOM KIPPUR SERMON  
Daniel Jeremy Silver  
October 12, 1986

By ancient design, Yom Kippur is a day set aside to be different. We leave outside these walls the cares of business and profession and the concerns of family and home. We spend a number of ~~the~~ goodly hours in the synagogue where we are encouraged to be engaged in meditation, confession and prayer. Even when we leave the synagogue during this holy period we carry something of today's sacred spirit with us. We fast. Conversation is subdued. The television set is kept off. This is a time set aside from worldly cares and worldliness, a time to concentrate on eternal values and fundamental truths.

Yom Kippur, I believe, was designed by our ancestors to give us a taste of the life of the saint and the mystic; to let us walk a few steps along the, for us, unaccustomed way of denial, withdrawal and intense meditation.

Most of us find ourselves a bit awkward handling the Yom Kippur spirit. It's a bit much. Yom Kippur takes us into unfamiliar ground. We were raised to be activists, face our problems, roll up our sleeves and cope. We believe that we ought to do things in a timely fashion. We describe the world of challenge and responsibility as the real word. We are puzzled when someone talks to us of the timeless or suggests that what we call the real world is really a mirage, that we may be deluding ourselves as to what is consequential. We are surprised if we are told that the real life is the contemplative life, that the voices advising us to do our duty and to compete vigorously are not the voices to which we ought to be listening.

We don't quite know how to handle Yom Kippur's intensity or its unworldliness. It is hard one day a year to do what our tradition



asks us to do, to live as a saint might live and to think as a mystic might think. While we feed, the mystic fasts. We are eager to become engaged in life, the saint withdraws. Family and community seem our natural and appropriate habitat. The saint needs to leave family and community behind. We care. He seeks to be carefree. We like to talk. He seeks silence. The only voice he wishes to hear is the inner voice. We seek companionship. He seeks to be alone.

All religious traditions emphasize the fragility of life; remind us of the folly of seeking happiness in things. No one can own anything in the grave. All the traditions encourage communicants to remember that the more we have the more we want, "the eye is never satisfied with seeing." Some go further and teach a doctrine of determined indifference: 'want not, care not, disengage yourself from human relationships, turn your back on all those goals and relationships you think are consequential. Then, and only then, will your soul be at peace.' These religions glorify the way of the mystic and of the saint and hold these men to be paragons, religious heroes whose way ideally should be ours.

Our tradition has never held up the monk or the saint as the religious hero whom we ought to emulate. God made us social beings and intended us to live among. Hillel put the Torah way succinctly: "Separate not yourself from the community." God endowed us with the capacity to care and to love and intended us to be involved and engaged. Yet, the question that Ecclesiastes asked is a valid one: "What profit has man from all his labors wherein he labors under the sun?" This is the saint's question also: what is the value of all that we care so much about, or say we care so much



about? What do we really accomplish with all our frenetic efforts? Are our goals worth the while?

Even if we do not accept the answers the saint gives to these questions, there is much we can learn from him, for he approaches these questions in a special way. Where we try to understand our world, make sense out of our experiences; he tries to turn off his sensory apparatus and make sense of the thoughts which arise within. We try to manage our lives by common sense and reason. He mistrusts common sense and wants to transcend reason. He seeks to listen not to the voice of experience, the voices of the world, but to the voice within, God's voice.

On this Yom Kippur, this day designed to be a different kind of day, I would like for us to spend a little time thinking along with one of the venerable saints of our tradition and discover what we can of what he learned through his meditations, the wisdom which might be ours if we lived Yom Kippur all year round.

Many of you have visited Israel. In all probability you were taken to Sefat, that little mountain top town in the lower Galilee which for a time in the 16th and 17th centuries was the center of a remarkable circle of mystics which included some of the most brilliant scholar-saints of our history. None was more remarkable or more venerated than Solomon ben Isaac Luria who died there in 1572 at the young age of thirty-eight. Luria was better known throughout the Jewish world as the Ari, an acronym for ha-elohi Rabi Yitzhak, the divine Rabbi Isaac, the saintly Rabbi Isaac.

The Ari was born in Jerusalem. His father was from the Ashkenazic community, his mother was a Sepharadi. At the age of seven or eight he was orphaned and was sent to an uncle in Cairo where he was given the usual Talmudic education, apprenticed to the family



business and married, as was the custom, at the age of fifteen. If there is any non-saintly moral to be drawn from his life it would be this; never hire a saint. A saint's mind is on higher things and the Ari was a disaster in the family business. Fortunately, there were other worlds.

Somehow or other, he came across a copy of the Zohar, a mystical commentary on the Torah which was compiled in Spain in the thirteenth century; but which the Ari and the men of his generation believed to have been written a thousand years earlier by the most famous of the mystics mentioned in the Talmud, Simeon bar Yohai. This book of speculation and theosophy fascinated the Luria. Here he found metaphysics, ideas about the nature of God and the creative process and speculation about the Day of Judgement and the coming of the Messiah. The young man sought out teachers and learned from them as much metaphysics and Kaballah as he could. Then, in his early twenties, it was time for him to seek his own truth. He built a shed on the side of the Nile and lived there alone for several years, spending his days and nights in meditation and mystical speculation. Today we would describe such a program as bizarre. Saints are not familiar fixtures of our world. But we have at least rediscovered the value of the imaginative pathways of the mind. We accept ideas which transcend logic, if we no longer view monastic withdrawal and silence as the ways to unlock the depths of consciousness.

During his vigils, the Ari began to hear voices, the voice of the patriarchs and prophets. Elijah often spoke to him and told him a great deal about the mysteries of the universe. At times



the Ari felt that his spirit actually left his body and mounted to the heavens where he spoke with the great figures of the past who taught him about the messiah, about creation and about the nature of God. Here on earth, the Ari's reputation as a holy man and as a healer grew. It was said that he was able to look a person in the eye, see the root of the sadness in his soul and prescribe the appropriate remedy for that sadness.

Saints live outside of history, so we know little about the details of his life except that when he was thirty-five he settled in Sefat. His disciples later reported that Elijah had told him to go so that he could join that important circle of mystics who lived there and teach them what he had learned. There was some urgency, Elijah said, because the Ari would die young. The Ari died in Sefat three years later, we believe a victim of Black Plague which was then decimating the populations of Europe and Asia.

Mystics are concerned with questions which we may not even recognize as such. When we think about God our first concern tends to be a personal one: what we need of God. Our prayers reveal these thoughts. We pray to God for health. We pray for the well-being of our family. We pray that God will somehow keep this troubled world of ours in one piece so that our children and our grandchildren will have a future. We think of what we need from God and in our more sensitive moments we ponder what God requires of us in return for His many gifts. We think of the responsibilities and duties God imposes upon us.

Another question entirely preoccupied the Ari: What did God need from him? On the surface this question is a strange one, indeed. We think of God as omnipotent and omniscient. We take for granted that God is all-knowing and all-powerful. How can an all-



powerful God need us?

The Ari was convinced God did need him.

Mystics think differently than we do and about different things. We concentrate on what our senses reveal to us. They concentrate on what the senses can not know, the nature of God. We are satisfied to acknowledge that God is and that the nature of God will remain to us a mystery, that we cannot understand what God is really like. The mystic is not so easily satisfied. He wants to pierce the veil which separates the divine from the human, to understand God. His question is Moses': "Show me Thy glory." To accomplish this seemingly impossible task, the mystic focuses on the one moment in time when God opened Himself to the world. He seeks to understand creation. He believes that during creation God raised the veil and opened Himself to the world and that if he could only understand the creative process and reverse it, climb back up the chain of creative acts through which God allowed His spirit to enter the world, he would be able to understand something of God's nature.

In medieval times, mystics of all the great traditions, Muslim, Christian and Jewish, described creation in terms of a theory of emanations. This theory had originated among the Greeks. According to it, at creation God allowed something of His nature, the metaphor usually selected is light, something of the divine light to flow out from Him and spread out into the void. As that light went further and further away from its source in God, it became more and more enmeshed in primal matter and the physical world as we know it emerged.

The theory of emanation had been well known and generally accepted for centuries in mystical circles. The Ari's new under-



standing, what he learned during his meditations, was that the process of creation had not proceeded without incident. There had been the original emanation of the divine light; and yes, the divine light had streamed forth from God into creation; but then an accident had taken place. Some of the channels through which the divine light was flowing into the world broke under the strain. They could not contain the light's power. Light and pieces of these containing channels were scattered about the cosmos, caught in the far darkness. The Ari was convinced that since creation God is no longer whole. Something of God had been lost and remains stranded out there in the universe.

At first blush, the idea seems like a bizarre fancy. Why should the rabbi on Yom Kippur, of all things, bother me with a story of this kind? There's no logic here. This is pure fantasy and a foolish fantasy at that. Perhaps. But I would suggest to you that this story contains ideas worth contemplating and I am certain that this image of Creation, marred by an accident, was broadly accepted by the Jews of the Ari's generation and of many generations thereafter and that it played a crucial role in sustaining their spirit and making possible their survival.

The Ari's generation was not unlike our own. He, too, lived a generation after a great catastrophe. We know the Holocaust the way he knew the destruction of the thousand-year old Jewish community of Spain. In 1492, to celebrate the capture of the Muslim citadel on the peninsula, the dominance of Christianity in Spain, the Spanish King and Queen, Ferdinand and Isabella, summarily ordered that the Jews of the kingdom be exiled. They were to leave within a three-month period. Six hundred thousand Jews faced a stark choice: to convert or to leave without possessions or any



real hope of resettlement. Several hundred thousand lost their lives in a desperate attempt to find a place of refuge. There are other parallels. Then, as now, there were prisoners of conscience. Some tried to remain in Spain by feigning conversion, but the Marranos found that they had exchanged one hell for another. They had not had to take to the road, but they had been turned over to the cruel mercies of the Inquisition. Many found themselves in torture chambers and, ultimately, being bound to a stake at an auto de fe. Then, as now, from time to time some prisoners of conscience would escape and arrive in Cairo and Sefat with a heart-rendering tale of the psychiatric hospital or the Siberian exile which they had fled.

The Ari's generation, like ours, was burdened with a terrible question: Why had God not intervened? Why did not God save His Jews? Why had He allowed this disaster to take place and why did He allow these tortures to continue?

For us this question had, to a degree, been assuaged by our satisfaction at the creation of the State of Israel. The phoenix has risen from the ashes. All was not lost. God was not unresponsive. No such event lightened the darkness of the Ari's generation. Wherever Jews lived, they endured an exile where they were subject to the whims and extortions of others. No one knew from one day to the next whether they might not be summarily exiled, their property expropriated and their lives forfeit. No one could evade the faith shattering question: Why God did not intervene.

You may remember that after the second World War a number of theologians began to speak of the death of God, by which they meant that God existed. He had created the universe but was indifferent

redemption come to the world. In measure as Jews performed their



to His creation. Having brought the world into being, God simply allowed the world to go on its own way. He had left humans to make the best of it.

The Ari had another answer. God had not intervened because God could not intervene. What did he mean? Remember his description of the accident when part of the light of God had been lost out there in the darkness? As a result, the Ari had learned, God was no longer all He had been and so He was unable to bring about Israel's redemption.

You would think that such a thought would only intensify the hopelessness already felt; but the Ari had learned another of the secrets of creation: the power of the mitzvot. He had heard that the mitzvot, the pieties, devotions and good deeds of the Jews, were not simply what they seemed, everyday human acts, but powerful spiritual events whose virtue did not end with the doing but reached out into the universe where their impact could break open the shells which enclosed the lost pieces of God, free the imprisoned light and allow these energies to be reunited with God, Himself.

The power of the mitzvah, the act of faithful obedience, was incalculable. There was a ripple effect which could reach the farthestmost corners of the cosmos and free God's light to return to its source. The concept seems to us unreal, but a generation of victims who would otherwise have felt themselves to be flotsam tossed about by political forces over which they had no control were taught in this way by the Ari that they and they alone had it in their power to free God to be God. The Ari provided his generation a sense of high purpose and ultimate hope. The people of Israel were not consigned to a hapless existence. Only through Israel could redemption come to the world. In measure as Jews performed their



devotions and observed the pieties, God would become again Himself and once God was again wholly Himself, He would move quickly to redeem the world.

A strange idea? Surely. A mystical idea? Certainly. A reasonable idea? Hardly. But where a more realistic assessment of their situation would have been cold comfort and plunged Israel deeper into despair, this vision gave life and hope to many generations.

The Ari called these liberating acts of devotion Tikkun. Tikkun comes from a root which means to repair, to make whole. Tikkun means reparation. To translate the Ari's idea of Tikkun into everyday vocabulary is to find ourselves saying: the fate of the world depends on us. Ultimately, what we do, how we live, the causes we serve, our commitments, the good sense and the wisdom we bring to our problems ultimately determine whether our world will survive or not.

But however bracing that idea is, it somehow does not fully ring true. One of the most sobering aspects of recent history is the fact that despite a succession of successful movements of liberation which have affected all parts of the world, most of the peoples of the world remain unfree. The Tsar was overthrown. The colonials were sent home. In most societies the Brahmins lost their traditional privileges; but, all too often the tyranny of the past was replaced by another tyranny. Again and again, successful revolutionary leaders have sought special privilege and special powers. In so many cases, movements of liberation which were meant to bring opportunity, amplitude and decency to human life have in their success become movements of suppression.



The Ari was not a social thinker or a social activist but a saint. He dealt in visions, not in social analysis; yet, the fate of our times would not have surprised him and he would have offered a suggestion. He taught that while everyone can perform the mitzvot, not everyone who does so gives to his acts the power of Tikkun. For a mitzvah to have the power of Tikkun, it must be undertaken by someone whose spirit was whole and wholesome, who had allowed the spark of the divine within to flame up and become the controlling element within their soul. Those who try to save the world without being themselves whole and wholesome can not achieve their end.

The Ari's vision of creation included a second part. He shared with most of the mystics the belief that all that happened in the heavens was replicated here on earth. There had been an accident during the creation of the cosmos and an accident during the creation of man. When Adam was created, according to the mystics, he carried within his soul the souls of everyone who would ever live. We might imagine Adam as an all-embracing genetic reservoir. Unfortunately, Adam had sinned and things had not gone according to plan. All the souls which his soul had contained in purity had, as a consequence, spilled out into the world and became imprisoned in bodies. Adam's descendents were no longer pure, whole. Like God they needed Tikkun, reparation.

How is a soul made whole? By someone else offering Tikkun. In measure as a person spent time with another, listened patiently, observed carefully, was sensitive, empathetic, compassionate, he became able to understand the sadness in another's soul and was able, somehow, to deal with it. When the Ari spoke of Tikkun in terms of human relationships, he spoke of one on one relationships;



of the parent who loves, encourages, teaches, provides an example to and is always supportive of the child; of the spouse who is responsive, sensitive to, steady in support, understanding of the needs of the other; of the friend who takes time from the business of life to encourage, support, share pain and joy, hear out the needs of the other and be responsive. That is Tikkun. The Ari set little value on those who set out to save the world but do not have time to save a single life or those would-be saviours whose minds are inflamed with noble ideas but whose lives are mean and tawdry.

How do we get to the point where we are able to offer Tikkun, be sensitive enough or wise enough or patient enough to heal another? How does one become what the Hindus would call a Mahatma, a great soul, whose spirit is able to perform redemptive acts?

The Ari offered a final mystical insight: in measure as you give, you receive. In measure as you enlarge another's divinity, the good within you becomes more dominant. By performing Tikkun you unlock your own spiritual potential. It is in the giving of yourself that you free and purify your soul.

The Ari would argue that only those whose souls have been repaired can perform Tikkun, which I translate to mean that only such people ought to be entrusted with the saving of the world. Otherwise, power corrupts and today's liberator becomes tomorrow's dictator.

The Ari left little by way of literature. We have no books by him, only a few mystical hymns glorifying the Sabbath. A saint's power can not be separated from his person and the power of the vision which he offers. Visions do not stand up to critical analysis, but shall we discount the Ari's healing vision because it came to



him from parts of the mind we rarely use, in a way which is unfamiliar to us? The Ari believed that the idea of Tikkun had been revealed to him by a heavenly voice. Most of us would not trust such voices. Perhaps we should be a bit less dogmatic in our realism. The Ari's message was a redemptive one and it suggests important truths. We need not accept literally the Ari's description of the twin accidents which occurred at creation, but we would do well to contemplate his message this Yom Kippur. God needs us and we need to become more godly. Redemption begins in helping another.

I find it surprising that so many spend so much time and energy trying to pierce the veil which separates the next world from this world and yet spend so little time or energy trying to pierce that veil that separates them from those with whom they live side by side.

This Yom Kippur let us think of Tikkun in the sense in which the Ari used the term: as our obligation to spend time with, to be sensitive to, to help, to heal, to listen, to encourage, to love, to save. In saving another perhaps we will save ourselves and our world.



















Over time unintentional Deaths - 40k children in  
Tobacco - Tobacco use from infancy to the 5th grade - strongly  
and an over - inhalant, if correct, unpleasant and control one  
for children

That land - he needs to increase his small capital  
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possibility of freedom - for freedom is the most valuable  
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## MEMORIAL SERMON

The Book of Leviticus contains a brief and puzzling story which focuses on Aaron's eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu. Little is told in the Bible about these two sons except that they had served with their father at the altar during the early years of the wilderness trek; indeed, all we know about them is contained in this strange story which is quickly told. One day while serving in the shrine they brought to the altar what the Bible calls "an alien fire." They are immediately struck down - killed. That's the whole of it. No explanation is given.

Modern interpreters readily admit that they do not understand why this incident was deemed of sufficient importance to be enshrined in the Torah. Some speculate that we have here a coded reference to an early attempt to change the pattern of the rites which the authorities found unacceptable. Medieval rabbinic commentators offered sermonic explanations. They saw this incident as a warning to the priests to carry out their duties with due respect for the holiness of their task; a rule which should also apply to those who conduct worship in the synagogue. Most of us, I am afraid, are simply taken aback by the image of summary punishment and pass on quickly to more satisfying matters.

For me the virtue of this story derives largely from the brief phrase with which it concludes, two words only *וַיִּשְׁתָּקֵף אֶרֶץ* "and Aaron was silent." These words take me from thoughts about the man-  
agement of a long abandoned cult into a world I recognize - a world where children sometimes die and parents grieve. Aaron, after all, was not just another figure, the high priest responsible



for the operation of the shrine, he was their father - the two young men were his eldest sons, and no death is more cruel than that of a child. have to suffer." Well intended words, but to those to whom

To know Biblical language is to know that this phrase, Aaron was silent, does not suggest that he shed no tears or that he did not speak of his love or that he carried on stoically as if nothing had happened. When the Bible speaks of silence in the context of grief, the meaning is specific - silence means that those who grieve do not burst out with bitter complaint against God or challenge God to justify a particular death. We do not know how Aaron expressed his grief, whether he cried aloud or silently. The Bible assumes tears and mourning. Our tradition knows that it is natural and necessary to grieve for those we love, to tell others how their lives and ours were intertwined, to seek comfort against the numbing cold which comes over us as we recognize that what has been can never be again; but Judaism also teaches that there is neither comfort nor benefit in making bitter and embittering complaint about the justice of it all. Aaron's sons died in a shocking, puzzling manner. Aaron must have asked why - want God to explain Himself. Why those so young? Why his sons? We recognize the question. Life is not predictable and, therefore, when death intrudes, as it inevitably must, the timing often seems unfair. But for all that, there is nothing to be gained by complaint. There are no satisfactory explanations. "God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts, that as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts." I translate this passage from Deuteronomy to

We are here because we have loved and lost. For most of us



mean that when it comes to the mathematics of life, God is silent.

Yet, how often have you heard someone say, "At least she didn't have to suffer." Well intended words, but to those to whom the loss is immediate, the thought can only be modestly consoling, if that.

We are here at this memorial service because we have loved and lost. When we recall those first hours of our grief, we remember the host of questions which flooded our minds. Why so young? Why so suddenly? Why so tardily after so much pain? Why couldn't have I gone first? Why such a gentle soul who never did anyone harm? Why? Why? We want to understand - understanding would give us a sense of control, but the timing of death is outside our control. Love can assuage grief; kindness and empathy can encourage and heal; but words cannot explain - because we do not understand.

The only response we can make to the question, 'why' is to ask another: 'why not?' When we are in a philosophic mood we recognize that death is a necessary part of life, that we must die to make room for our children and our grandchildren. Unfortunately, in the valley of the shadows, when a loved one has died, death ceases to be an abstract concept. It is not easy to be rational and be satisfied with this detached approach. When we grieve our question is no longer 'why death' but 'why this death.' Our dead always are taken too soon. Their death almost always seems unfair. But there it is, and we have no alternative but to be thankful for all that we shared and for the companionship that continues in a love which is stronger than death and in those memories which span the gulf of the grave.

We are here because we have loved and lost. For most of us



the days of raging against destiny are behind us. At first, few of us exhibited Aaron's strength, but, ultimately, we learned what he knew, that life is a fragile thread, easily cut; that there are no guarantees. But we have also learned that life is an opportunity, that we can weave the thread of life into a fabric of some beauty as did our dead. The wise accept life as an opportunity despite all its uncertainties. They know they will die and that those near and dear to them will die, that they will be hurt. They know they will not escape tears, but they are not afraid to open themselves to intimacy. They know there is a way to avoid the pain of grief: never open yourself to friendship or love, but what kind of life would that be? It is the joys of intimate friendship, the sharing of life, which gives life its grace.

This memorial service was constructed carefully over the generations and reflects the wisdom of our people in that it contains not a word of explanation and many words of encouragement. Its message is simple: our dead are not alone - they are with God. We are not utterly bereft - our dead are still with us. We still hear their voices, feel their presence in our lives, are motivated by their example.

I thought of Aaron the other week when a young person for whom the Holocaust had just become a reality challenged me on my faith. She didn't know about Nadab and Abihu, but she knew about the six million, and she would not be silent. How could I carry on as a rabbi in a world where innocents are murdered, where there is no justice? Why did I not cry out against God?

I asked how spending my energies complaining to God would help? Would it bring back the six million? I made the point that



the Holocaust was man's work, not God's. I suggested that it was wiser to accept life for what it is and to make the most of what we have, rather than spend our energies in futile protest. I am not sure that she was prepared to hear my answer. Youth must cry out against the cruelty of a world they never made, so different from the security in which they spent their early years, but I am convinced that the way of wisdom and of healing lies in transcending grief, in finding and pursuing work worthy of us, in continuing to live by the standards they set for us.

To challenge God's justice, to keep asking why, is not only pointless, answers will forever escape us, but ultimately, childish. It is a way of saying, I can escape the human condition. I want to play at life by my rules. Better to be silent and simply carry on, love those who are orphaned, befriend those who are lonely, encourage those who are despondent, share life's responsibilities with those who seek to do good, bind close the ties of family and memory.

The original Yizkor service included a practice which we have abandoned. During this service mourners would pledge a sum to charity in memory of the dead. The prayer read:

May God remember                      the soul of  
Who has passed to his eternal home, in  
whose behalf, I give in alms  
May her soul be bound up in the bonds of  
life eternal.

In grief we use symbolic rites to "prcve" our feelings - charity is one way - but only one. The message of this service is that we show our love and respect by an ongoing concern for their work, by keeping close the ties of family, and by accepting the viccisitudes



of life as graciously and silently as they did.

The Talmud tells of the son of a sage who deeply mourned a father's untimely death. Each day he would go to the cemetery and prostrate himself on the grave. One day his father's spirit spoke to him. "Do you think you honor my memory in this way? Do not weep for me. Live for me. Show your love by obedience to God's laws, by devotion to our faith and by service to others. That is the memorial I desire."

That is the memorial we would desire - the only memorial our dead ask of us.

October 13, 1986

