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Rosh Hashanah sermon, 1988.

ROSH HASHANAH SERMON
DANIEL JEREMY SILVER
SEPTEMBER 11, 1988

To the ancient Greeks the word "mimetic" described literature or rhetoric which attempted to reproduce life as it is. Today we would label mimetic literature as realistic literature and mimetic art as representational art. The English words "mimic" and "mime" come from the same root.

One of the most significant books of literary criticism of our century is MIMESIS by the European scholar, Eric Auerbach. He attempts to detail the history of the realistic tradition in western literature.

Auerbach makes the point that the earliest examples of realistic literature are to be found in Homer and in the Bible. Auerbach was struck not only by the seminal importance of these classic works but by the fact that they approached the task of shaping life into literature from radically dissimilar points of view.

The eye of Homer lingers long and lovingly on things: on a rich tapestry or a well-wrought piece of armor or a fine male torso. His ear is tuned to melody and to the beat of the dance. His hand reaches out to touch a fine piece of cloth or to balance a finely honed weapon.

He delights in the world of things and in the world of sensation. When we read Homer it is as if we were attending a theater where the stage is elaborately dressed, costumes are extravagant, the lighting is full, so that every action, every movement by the actors, can be clearly seen. Everything is fully articulated. Nothing is left for the imagination.

By contrast the Biblical eye passes quickly over the world of things. The Biblical eye is drawn to the shadows rather than to the surface of things. Biblical literature seeks meaning rather than sensation. It's as if we were attending a theater where the stage is bare except perhaps for a single rickety chair or step ladder. There is no back drop - no elaborate costuming. Action is only dimly outlined and the imagination is allowed to do the rest.



Auerbach establishes this comparison by contrasting book 29 of the Odyssey which describes Odysseus' much delayed homecoming from the Trojan war with chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis, the Akedah, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac which, not incidentally, is the Torah portion for Rosh Hashanah. Homer lovingly describes Odysseus's palace in Ithaca.

He describes the disguise which the wanderer adopted that he might not be recognized and the design of the tapestry which Penelope wove each day and unraveled each night to delay the importuning suitors whom she has promised to choose among once the tapestry is finished. Odysseus's old nurse is fully described as is the scar by which she recognizes Odysseus.

By contrast, Genesis 22 is bare of detail. In Homer, Odysseus, Penelope, the nurse and the suitors are described in every particular. In Genesis, Abraham and Isaac are named and we are left there. We are not told if they are tall or short, ruddy or fair-complected. The scene is not set. We are simply told that God commanded Abraham to take his only son Isaac, to offer him as a sacrifice and that the two of them set out on a 3-day journey through an unvisualized countryside. Is it hilly? Is it forested? We know only, "and they went." Homer employs a thousand verses to tell his story. The Biblical author tells his in 19.

The Homeric approach centers on the world that presents itself to the senses. The Biblical style centers on what lies behind the surface of our world. It seeks out purpose and meaning and explanation.

These two classic works reflect the two distinct national moods. The Greek world delighted in the sight of a well-proportioned human being. The Greeks, particularly those of the upper class, rejoiced in possessions, in athletics, drill and the dance, in well-designed homes, in well-laid out gardens, beautiful vases, sculpture and painting. The Greeks were the first people in history to write intelligently about the concept of aesthetics.

Why is a particular song melodious?
Why is a particular piece of art
beautiful? The world of appearances,
the world of the senses, satisfied
them deep down and, to a large degree,
preoccupied their minds.

By contrast the Biblical style is
spare and lean. We're not provided
word pictures of the great heroes
of the Bible. The Bible places little
emphasis on human form or on the
shape of possessions. "Grace is
deceitful and beauty is vain."

In the Biblical perspective, preoccupation with the material, with appearances, with physical forms, with possessions, blinds men to wisdom. The world of appearances is a beguiling but misleading place. If we want to find the meaning of life we must look beyond the surface of things. We want to hear the still small voice, not the sounds of the world.

Rosh Hashanah is called Yom_Hadin, the day of judgment. The myth has it that on this day each of us stands before the seat of judgment while God passes our deeds in review. Were they good or evil, generous or selfish? The Rosh Hashanah liturgy suggests that while this heavenly assize proceeds, we must make a judgment on ourselves. Are we satisfied with the life which we have led? What plans can we make, what disciplines must we undertake, to permit us to live with greater grace?

Tonight, as we review our particular chronicle, I think we recognize that most of us lived during the year with a Homeric attitude. We were dazzled by things, by possessions, and preoccupied by the means of acquiring them.

Because of this, last October 19 was a Yom Hadin for many who were shaken to their boot straps by the drop that day of 500 points in the Dow average. It was a rude reminder of the fragility of possessions and of the danger of hitching our life to material possessions. They are so easily wiped out.

Living in prosperous times, we have come to take prosperity for granted and have adopted the attitude that happiness lies in things. Today, the wise among us must question whether the Homeric perspective is adequate, whether we ought not put less emphasis on things, cash balances, and evanescent luxuries, and take more delight in sensitivity and find happiness in meaningful relationships and in well-crafted work.

Over several centuries, particularly over the last decades, our machines, industry, and technology have poured out an avalanche of things. Our prosperity was the result of the Industrial Revolution, an open frontier, scientific discoveries, and technological advances. We learned to use fully the natural resources of the world. Many began to live the way only the Caesars of old could afford. Luxuries became familiar parts of our lives and we, like children, came to take them as our due. We couldn't imagine life without them.

Few escaped being dazzled by the great Homeric world out there, by the taste of our wines, by the fashion of our dress, by the decorations of our homes, by the style of our cars, by the taste of our food, by our sports and vacations. We let go of the habits of thought which for centuries had protected men from wanting too much in a world which could not provide more. The puritan principle, "travel light and work hard" was set aside.

No longer. We must share our earth with 5 and a half billion other citizens - and share it far more equitably than heretofore. Even in our well-off corner of the globe, a single pay check can no longer provide the so-called "good life" for most families. For the first time in history, this earth must be protected from its inhabitants. Conservation is absolutely necessary and costly. Population control is elemental and costly. Civil rights and public welfare are essential and costly.

The age of great abundance which we have all tasted was an anomaly which will not come again. There are simply too many people. When I was born, there were a billion and a half earthlings. Today, only 60 years later, there are five and a half billion.

There cannot be a peaceful world when 3 out of 4 go to bed each night with insufficient food in their bellies. Some say, our science will discover new, miraculous ways to produce more. "We don't need to change our ways. We will not have to give up anything. The others will have more without our having less." Perhaps. There will be miracles. We had a Green Revolution.

The world today produces 50 percent more food than it had two decades ago. But the sad truth is that at the end of these two decades, more people suffered from malnutrition than when the decade opened. There are simply that many more people.

I am convinced that only those who can shift from the childish delight in the world of things - Homer's view - to the search for lasting values - the Biblical view - will be able to maintain sanity in the world of less, which I am convinced lies ahead.

Look at our country, once the richest country in the world, now the world's largest debtor nation. We are heirs of a rich and fertile land and of a vast deficit which will for generations burden our children's lives.

When I say there's going to be less, I don't mean that we're going to be poor. Poverty is relative. Those of us who are still dazzled by the Homeric view are going to do all we can to try for more. Some will succeed - few. Most will weary of the effort.

There are husbands who so identify their self-esteem with an ability to provide abundantly for their families that they lose them through overworking--by having no time to be a companion.

There are parents so determined to give their children more than they ever had, who become so frustrated by this impossible task, that they darken their relationships with their children and end up without any relationship at all. It runs against the grain for many of us to lower our material standard. "The eye is never satisfied with seeing."

We can still live graciously. There will be enough and more, if we take the Biblical approach toward happiness, which is that it lies in doing what each sees needs to be done.

Our lives need not be lives of whimpering self-pity simply because we can't any longer have what we once enjoyed. We can look at the world with a Biblical perspective, ask "can we be happy with less?" The answer is 'yes.'

The Biblical attitude says be satisfied that you are useful, be satisfied that when we take stock each year, we can say, "I have lived with more grace than I lived the previous year."

Biblical life was not one of monastic denial nor was asceticism raised to a virtue. Biblical man said simply, objects are fragile. Don't depend on them. Happiness is not tied up with wealth which can be quickly lost. Happiness is the ability to be satisfied with the life that you're living. "Happy is the man who rejoices in his lot." If we are doing what gives us satisfaction, we can be satisfied with little quite as easily as with much. The underpaid teacher may lead a much happier life than the Wall Street tycoon.

When the Bible speaks of joy and happiness it rarely ties these feelings to physical pleasures or possessions. It speaks of the joys which are ours because of the duties that we perform, because of the good deeds in which we are involved, because we give of ourselves to others in love, because we give ourselves to worthy causes. By doing something that's worth doing, we establish our own worth. There are so many ways to be happy which are independent of possessions, but we must rediscover them.

When your children say to you they want to act, paint, be a teacher or a social worker, are you tempted to say: Don't -- it does not pay well, how will you be able to afford all that we have -- don't say it. Take the Biblical view. Happiness comes from what we do. It's a terrible burden to sacrifice the work you enjoy for work that has no joy.

Homer's view put things in the foreground. Over the last century, men have again placed things in the foreground. We were able to satisfy rapidly rising expectations. We believed our children would live better than we did and their children than they.

This was an incredibly unrealistic vision. It was a vision which neglected the testimony of history. This prosperous century has been the scene for the most destructive wars mankind has ever-known, a world-wide depression, staggering violence. We'd seen the incredible ugliness of Hitler and Stalin, and close to home, violence in our streets. Today, we can no longer deny the world. We lock our homes at night. An economy which involves 5 percent of the world population and consumes 35 percent of the world's wealth will no longer be tolerated. We share a small planet and there has to be enough for all.

The real world is not a world of endless vistas, of life always getting better.

The real world is a world in which an old man like Abraham, a man full of years and full of good deeds, a man who throughout a long life had discharged nobly the responsibilities of a clan chief, a man who should have been allowed a quiet retirement, suddenly found his age disturbed by cruel duty. "Take your son, your only son Isaac, and sacrifice him." Give up your peace, give up all those things which were to be the solace of your age, and Abraham did so without complaint.

Like Abraham, we have traveled
Ours is a violent world. Our
technology has increased our ability to
deal destruction. Ours is a world of
danger, a world in which many of us
find ourselves like Abraham, suddenly
thrust out of the cocoon, out of a job,
out of a life of ease--the summer is
over.

Yet, there can be happiness if
our lives are tied to noble ideals, to
love, to family, to community, to the
search for decency and peace. Our
times need not lead to a winter of
discontent.
world where those who have courage, who
are obedient to God's will, exist. They
will be content come what may.

Like Abraham, we have traveled light and do not expect that a life of leisure and abundance is ours by divine right. There is happiness enough for a happy life. Perhaps, like Abraham, we will see that, suddenly, there is the ram thrust into the thicket by God, caught by his horns--father and son walked up the mountain together and came back down together to a happy old age.

Somewhere, behind the world of things, behind the world of possessions, lies a world in which God lives and acts, a world where those who have courage, who are obedient to God's will, exist. They will be content come what may.

God fulfills His promise. The
horn is sounded. Deliverance comes.

