

SERMON DELIVERED TO THE CONGREGATION OF TEMPLE ISRAEL

by Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks, Friday Evening, September 25, 1964

"COULD BILLY GRAHAM UNDERSTAND SUCCOS?"

Since Billy Graham came to Omaha it is impossible to escape discussion of his impact on the religious life of our community. Though his basic message is not directed to us, what he says and the way he says it must interest us. He is a rare personality. He is a notable preacher. He is surely an influence for good wherever he goes.

It was coincidental that Dr. Graham came to Omaha during our High Holidays. And one could not help wondering what he would have said had he been given the opportunity to comment on the religious message of the Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur.

I have an idea that, of course discounting the crucial "decision for Christ", which Billy Graham expects of his followers, that he would have understood with sympathy and with appreciation the theme of our High Holidays. Fundamentalist Christianity is well familiar with the theological ideas of sin and atonement, though the Christian method of dealing with these matters differs radically from that of Judaism.

But the idea that man sins and must make his peace with God and the idea that we can spiritually renew ourselves would, I suspect, be common ground upon which Billy Graham and we could stand.

And now immediately after our High Holidays comes the colorful and complicated festival of Succos. And I do not think Billy Graham could understand, in depth the much broader religious implications of this festival of ours. It is too typically Jewish in history, in theology and in ritual and in purpose.

The origin of Succos, despite the several Biblical references, are confused and multiple. Historically, they say, the frail succa is a reminder of the protective providence of God spread over his people in their wanderings. The lulav and esrog, beautiful and fragrant symbols of the earth's harvest were interpreted by the

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The origin of Succos, despite the several Biblical references, are confused and multiple. Historically, they say, the first succos is a reminder of the protective providence of God spread over his people in their wanderings. The laws and exegesis, beautiful and fragment symbols of the earth's harvest were interpreted by the

abbis to suggest more than seasonal meaning. They recalled the varied characters and virtues of the patriarchs each with his own particular personality directed to the service of mankind and God.

And to all of this must be added the separate but immediately continuing holiday of Simchas Torah which concludes the Succos season when our people through centuries rejoiced and proudly carried the sacred scrolls through the synagogue and gave thanks to God for the gift of the Torah and the occasion of its completed and renewed yearly reading.

Taken together, all these ideas reflect two basic Jewish ideas: God in human history and the revelation of God's word to be found in the continuing study of Torah.

It would be hard for Billy Graham to understand these themes. And parenthetically I must sadly add that in our day it may be equally difficult for modern Jews grown away from the Succos theme and the idea of Talmud Torah (the perpetual study of God's law) to understand them.

Salvation for Billy Graham is an act of faith. Salvation for the Jew is a life of faithfulness expressed in every act of life. The goal of religion for Billy Graham is primarily reward in the world to come. The goal of religion for the Jew is primarily the reward that comes from creating a better world in which to live here and now. The duty expected by Billy Graham is belief. The duty expected of the Jew is the observance of the ethical mitzvos (divine obligations to do good), the life of deed.

Billy Graham's fundamentalist Christian position would distrust the material and place prime emphasis on the spiritual. The Jew finds the spiritual and the material interdependent and both exalted in the life of man depending only upon how we use the things of earth and dedicate them to spiritual ends. The sensual joys of life: nature and human nature are suspect in Billy Graham's view. And he is right when he cautions us to be careful lest we be led astray by our passions and emotions.

But the Jew finds the joys of living, the sensual beauties and joys of the world, the wonder of growth, the miracle of family life, the laughter and joy of comradeship, the intellectual thrill of wisdom

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all blessings of God given us here and now for our enjoyment and proper use. I think Billy Graham would have trouble understanding Succos.

This is not to say either view is totally right or wrong. I believe the world needs both. But we Jews believe that our emphasis is healthier, more rational, more conducive to a life of continuing social and personal improvement.

There was a time when, apart from the High Holidays, Succos was the most important of all the other festive seasons. It was called simply "The Festival."

Perhaps this is because the themes of Succos were so totally earthbound, so practical, so much in the use of earth's natural yield and the pursuit of learning the testing of our professions of faith.

Let us, then, never underestimate our material or intellectual opportunities nor be unmindful of the sustenance that comes to us enriching body and mind from the yield of nature and human nature.

Let us use our blessings well. And let us find happiness in the proper use of whatever we have to improve ourselves and our society and in that goal find the goal of salvation for all mankind.

Amen.

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There was a time when, apart from the High Holidays, Success was the most important of all the other festive seasons. It was called simply "The Festival."

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Amen.