

ROSH HASHONAH EVE SERMON 1967

delivered by

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As always I would welcome you once again to our place of worship. But more than is usual I feel the heavy weight of speaking in meaningful terms on this eve of a New Year. Because tonight is so very different than any in our lifetime. Tonight is different than a Rosh Hashonah has been for unnumbered years in the past and is likely to be for generations yet to come. What momentous events and changes in Jewish life have taken place within only the last few months!

I am sure that as you entered the sanctuary tonight, you noticed the refurbishing of our Temple, the stained glass windows, the newly fashioned Menorah and Ner Tamid. We can only pray that these will always be for us the symbols of our historic past and our never-ending adoration of the living God.

But how trivial these are in the light of recent events! For even as these artistic adornments were being forged by the hand of the artist to uplift and beautify, our People were brought to the anvil of testing, thrust into the fires of implacable fury and beaten upon with the hammers of death and intended annihilation. The symbols of our faith, the Menorah and the Ner Tamid however fashioned are historically stirring. The Torah is central to our lives. But tonight, thanks be to God, I look with a new understanding upon you, the Congregation, as the enduring symbol of Judaism. For you are the real Israel. You are the embodiment of our Faith, its past and future. You are the goal of our efforts to teach Torah. And nothing is of any value or meaning without you. For you are the latter glory of all our history and in what you think, in how you behave, in what you truly believe rests the destiny of our people, and, I believe, one of the greatest hopes of all mankind. Judaism has no validity, no power, no message without Jews completely dedicated to it. So I speak my greeting and prayer for you the words of the Psalmist: "The Lord has been mindful of us. He will bless the House of Israel. The Lord increase you more and more you and your children."

Indeed, how blessed we are! How likely at one moment it seemed that we would be met tonight not in festive mood, but literally in mourning for two million more of our people, our family, if you will, in Israel. To be sure there are homes tonight whose Rosh Hashonah is darkened by the empty place, the shattered hopes, the obliterated lives of young and old who perished in another of the senseless slaughters of man by man so that honor and security might be maintained for others.

But the People lives. And the world knows now that Jews too can wage war, that they will not ever again be the passive targets of murderers and that to be a Jew does not mean a second class right to life and peace.

But what really is the meaning of the "Six Days War"? Was it simply a military victory? Was it redemption? Was it a miracle? What is its meaning for us, beyond the security of the State of Israel? For such meaning it surely must have.

While the world, for the most part, applauds, for us exaltation in the salvation of the State of Israel must turn upon the despair and never to be explained or comprehended loss of our perished six million. For us, behind the thoughts of Jerusalem are other names, names which cannot and should not be forgotten: Theresenstadt, Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Warsaw and Berlin and Frankfurt and every place in Europe where the foot of a Jew touched the earth. Power triumphed there too. Power killed and maimed. Power also failed there. For the People of Israel lives even though to say Kaddish on the graves of our kinfolk.

So was it only military might which saved the State of Israel? Or was there something else we too ought to understand about ourselves and our relationship to each other and the world as a People?

The question is vital to our gathering here tonight. It is vital to even the most rudimentary attempt to give some semblance of meaning to the observance of Rosh Hashonah.

Let me tell you a true experience of mine shortly after the Six Days War. It is amusing but it can also be instructive.

Only days after the cease-fire I sped to an appointment where I was to speak. I was barely on time and I slid up to the front door directly in front of a No Parking sign. As I crawled from the car I confronted an enormous policeman who asked me to park my car properly. I told him who I was and why I was there, at which point he put his arm around my shoulder and with the embrace of a bear said: "Rabbi, after what your boys did over in Israel, you can park any place you want!"

Now I appreciated his sentiments and his accommodation. But I differ with his logic.

Firstly, whatever our fellow Jews may have accomplished in Israel gives us no privileges beyond that of other men to which we are not by right entitled and to which we were equally entitled before the Six Days War.

Secondly, and for my message unequivocally to you tonight: As Jews I do not think we should want to win our rights to life and peace by the violent means of war. War in Germany, war in Vietnam, or war in Israel, war anywhere is an obscenity. Regardless of the pride we take in the valor of those who fought for

the preservation of Israel, we Jews do not take pride in war. For us killing is a necessity pressed upon us by a brutal and callous world. If there be any lesson in which Judaism is clear it is that the greatest value is life, that life is sacred, that except in defense of one's own life, we may not kill and then only in sorrow.

Let there be no misunderstanding. No course of action lay open to the State of Israel except that which was taken. As a matter of fact, had our people in Europe during the late thirties and forties been able to resist with armed force who knows how many might have been saved. And there are those in this sanctuary now whose parents and loved ones could be sitting beside them on this holy night.

So wherein lies our pride? Is it because a policeman has respect for me as a Jew because now I have, as a Jew, become as adept at brutality as the others in our world have been for thousands of years? Do we, the People of Faith, find a new self respect because now we can kill like others? Is this a source of pride? Certainly our people are as brave, as dedicated to their land, as intelligent, as physically tough as others. Perhaps the world needed a demonstration of these facts. But I should hope we did not need a war fought and won by Jews to prove them to ourselves.

Look more thoughtfully. When the hostilities were over and the borders of Israel were secure, what happened? Who ever before saw Generals sending thousands of prisoners back to their homes? As quickly as possible, soldiers went back to their shops and their farms and their villages. And what was the high point of victory? Not a parade, not a victory celebration, not a display of military power but a pilgrimage unorganized and spontaneous to an ancient pile of stones, the Western Wall of the ancient Temple. Think of that! Think of men and women and children, soldiers and civilians, government officials and laborers, religious and irreligious and anti-religious alike drawn as to a magnet to the pathetically beaten, abused and defiled remaining wall of the Temple! How like unto our People that Wall! In physical power "nothing". In spirit "everything". We are still a people of Faith. And the symbol of victory is the wall of a Temple. In that should be our pride.

We deplore a world of violence and inhumanity that will not let some men live unless they too become equally violent and inhumane.

If there be sources of pride in our heritage, let us think of our prophets and sages, our teachers and psalmists and poets and writers and dreamers who have since our beginnings heard the voice imploring man: "See I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil.....therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy children."

We Jews still represent the highest aspirations and goals of the teeming family of man. We are not part of the insanity of conquest and conflict. The war is not over neither in Jerusalem, nor in other corners of the world nor for ourselves. Not until we hear the voice of the Shofar, the message of Rosh Hashonah calling us and all men not only to resist threats to our lives, but to resist with even greater force and self discipline the corruption of our souls.

Our goal is to make life "holy" not to make it rich or powerful. Judaism is not the observance of Rosh Hashonah or Yom Kippur but the observance of decency and honor in every moment of life. Judaism is not the establishment of the synagogue as an institution, it is the building of the institution of society reflecting the spiritual values we teach in the synagogue not the techniques of a military school.

The real weapons forged by our brothers in Israel for the salvation of their land are clear. They were intelligence, a magnificent willingness to sacrifice and an indomitable faith that they stood on the side of honor and of peace.

We too are in peril -- a different kind of peril. For our borders, the borders of the Jewish home and community, the Jewish mentality and spirit are under assault by the forces which would seek to make us think as others, behave as others, believe as others, and surrender the one possession of Jewish life through all our history that has preserved us: our religion.

Let us not be misled. For all's the wonder that we are here at all what with the weapons of destruction at men's command, the reliance on power to solve our problems, the callous disregard for human suffering and death so widespread today.

Sadly, as Israel stood alone in its hour of peril, I confess that I believe ultimately and in truth, we the People of Israel still stand alone in our particular covenant with God, in our particular relationship with Him that impells us to do His will among men.

Here, then, with the synagogue, within the teachings of our faith will the defenses of the way of life and peace be drawn.

This is a New Year, but more: a new chance to rebuild the waste places of our lives, to fortify the walls that make secure the House of Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, to do what we can, not to wage war or to be beguiled by the fruits of strength but to establish justice, equality, fidelity and mercy in the gates of the world. Ours is the inescapable role to make peace among men and to serve our God through honesty and truth.

Search the story of our People as you will and you will discover that our religious mission has been our salvation all through our history. That is why we are here. That is how we will endure.

It was given to our brothers in Israel to defend those principles with their blood and their lives. Can we not resolve to defend those same principles with our trust, our passionate belief, our refusal to sell our birthright of honor for a mess of alien pottage.

There are no words tonight to speak the joy of the People of Israel everywhere. But our God asks not words but deeds. There is no place for pride nor vain glory even now among us. For the battle goes on, the battle against tyranny and hunger, poverty and oppression, violence and irrational hatreds every place upon the earth.

If this Rosh Hashonah and the period of self-searching which now begins is to be taken seriously, then each of us will find our pride in a personal commitment to fulfillment of the age-old vision of the prophet: "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea." May the new year be the new effort in your personal life, in your homes, your labors, your thoughts and deeds to bring that day closer for us all.

Listen to this fragment of a letter from Jerusalem written June 26, so typical of the mood of the true Jew even in military victory:

"Our soldiers and our population did not number 2½ million because walking along side of us and everyone's subconscious were Hitler's 6 million martyred. And what good fortune that we have a Jewish community in the States and throughout the world. Without you we could not have exercised the influence nor borne the tremendous economic burdens. It was a united force, Israel and the Jewish People! We stood as one covenanted people and repeated our historic Naaseh v'nishma." (We will do; we will hearken).

In that covenant is the only way we shall be worthy to share the pride of what others of our People have done.

"The Lord has been mindful of us. He will bless the house of Israel. The Lord increase you more and more, you and your children."

Amen.