

FAN THE SPARK

Rosh Hashonah Evening Sermon
Temple Israel September 8, 1972 Omaha, Nebraska

RAEBI SIDNEY H. BROOKS, D. D.

I have long been troubled, dear friends, by the opening prayer we have just read together. Not all of its thoughts. But some. With you I am grateful for the gift of life. All of us desire a future of blessing. And we are surely of single mind admitting our ambivalent feelings of anxiety and hope engendered by a future which portends so much of danger and promise but of which we can know nothing at all. Our fate from this moment on is, really, unpredictable in most respects, awesome in the possibilities that lie ahead.

Only recently did I discover that I am not alone in my difficulty with one phrase of the prayer. "As we thank Thee for the joys of life, so we praise Thee for its sorrows." Especially are these words difficult in view of events at Munich this past week. Is it true that our losses and burdens are, as the prayer further says, "God's discipline that we may learn to understand life's holy purpose"? I wonder!

Upon this matter, each of us will reflect in his own manner. Each of us holds within his own recollections, unique memories and feelings and often tears. There have been serious, tragic losses among us this year. My heart goes out to all who mourn.

Then too we stand here this Rosh Hashonah with a special grief none but we can know. My personal sorrow cannot and should not be extensively expressed tonight. For in the matter of life and death we are very much alone. But together you and I as a congregation mourn the loss of our beloved Cantor Manfred Kuttner. And that is all that need or can be said now. He is gone and we are the poorer. We have lost one of the K'leh Kodesh, one of the holy vessels of God which contained beauty and wisdom and kindness and out of which we were uplifted and inspired as he shared the context of his life with us. But whether Olympics, personal, or congregational loss of loved ones do I -- do we -- praise God for this? Do we join praise to thanksgiving for the anguish we have suffered during the year? Is this a callous, unfeeling -- in fact, impossible prayer? Or is there a deeper acceptable meaning?

Let me try to be helpful by telling you a well known rabbinic illustration. Most of you will surely remember the Biblical story of Joseph. It is one of the great sagas of all literature. The immortal German writer, Thomas Mann, fascinated by the Joseph epic, enlarged it into his magnum opus of four volumes: Joseph and His Brothers and Joseph in Egypt. In any case, I hope you recall that Joseph for reasons, clearer now according to modern psychology, was much envied, indeed hated by his brothers. And so they literally sold him into slavery. Years later when he had grown from Boyhood into manhood, his brothers came to Egypt and by coincidence

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were reunited with him. And the Bible recalls that Joseph then said to his brothers:

"Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither, it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you." (Gen. 45:5)

The obvious point of the comment is that had not Joseph suffered the rejection of his family and the rigors of enslavement, he would not have been in Egypt, and his family would have died of starvation.

But the further implications are more to our instruction tonight. Sometimes even that which seems to us the greatest calamity may be to our good. But be sure you heard me say: "sometimes"

One of the rabbis illustrated with this parable: A king had a precious ring the like of which existed nowhere in the world. One day he was horrified to find an ugly scratch on the smooth surface of the jewel. No one he consulted could find a way to remove the scratch without damaging the beauty of the gem.

Until one day another expert looking at the stone exclaimed: "What a pity that such a fine stone in so lovely a setting should not be perfect." Naturally everyone thought he referred to the scratch. But not so. His thought was quite different. "There is something missing. Such a treasure should bear the coat of arms of its owner. Look here! This scratch is the perfect beginning for the design and from here I will continue until the jewel has the perfect likeness of your personal coat of arms engraved upon it. Only then will the ring become what it really should be!"

"What it really should be". Isn't that what our presence here is all about. Not just these High Holidays but Judaism -- our faith. To help us to become what we should be, to transform adversity, the scratch in the ring of life, and use it to fashion the triumph of improvement. For that we can, we must praise God -- for the opportunity life gives us -- even with the endurance of scratches of pain and loss.

No one contradicts what we have suffered. No one denies the horrors of war which still debase and shame the name of our country, and of humanity. No one turns from the tensions and evils of our society. These are the scratches on what otherwise could be the smooth loveliness of our world.

But now, again, we have a beginning. What shall we do? Leave it as it is? Let us hope not.

Inexplicably to me, the majority of our people still attend services of worship during the so-designated High Holidays.

But what God are we talking to? Who's listening? And I would ask you -- each of you -- to ponder for yourselves as indeed do I: What meaning have our prayers? To whom are we speaking? And, even

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more importantly, what would likely happen that is different if we were not here in prayer tonight and what is likely to happen inasmuch as we are? Shall the scratches be beginning or end?

These are enormously difficult questions and cannot, except by the most shallow and thoughtless, be easily dismissed. Questions of the nature of prayer and God have puzzled and intrigued our people from of old. Immediately I would deserve to be discredited even to hint that I have an absolute or final reply. There is none.

Nor do you have the right to expect from your rabbi, much as I would wish it possible, to teach you all of the wisdom of Judaism as it impinges upon our lives in these few moments once a year.

But I can tell you what I think -- what at this moment in time I honestly believe. Your agreement or your disagreement with me may help you.

It is not a simplistic statement but one of the most profound and complex of all theological matters, to be reminded of the basic principle of our Judaism. All we can say and all I will say with conviction to the end of my days, dear friends, is "Shema Yisroel, Adonai Elehenu Adonai echad." God is; God is One; God is universal; God is unseen; God is ethically demanding; God is the root of being. Philosophic details another time. But that is the meaning in part, at least, of the Shema. It is what the Shema does not say that is important to my message to you tonight.

Is God personal or impersonal? I do not know. The Shema does not say precisely. I have my interpretation. Yours may be different. You are still a Jew. Does God hear my prayer? The Shema doesn't say. I do not know. I have my belief. Yours may be different but you are still a Jew. Does God interfere in the natural order of the cosmos? The Shema does not say. I don't know. I have my thoughts in this regard. Yours may be different but you are still a Jew. Are our blessings the reward of the good life and our trials punishments for the evil we have done. I don't know. But I have my strong conviction and yours may be different but you are still a Jew.

What I desperately want to convey to you tonight is that if, in the course of these holidays or at other times when you read our prayers you have your misgivings and you seem to find represented a God concept you cannot accept, do not be misled. For there are a multitude of alternatives within Judaism. I admit that I have struggled to find a way to speak to you tonight without being unnecessarily personal or academic. But I must in order to be honest and, I hope, in order to be helpful.

Let me make an unequivocal statement first: There is much in our prayer book, indeed in our Bible and in our Rabbinic literature which I cannot in good conscience accept and in the context of which I cannot live. There are ideas of God that I do not believe and in response to which I cannot live.

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Now an equivocal statement: My Judaism, my faith is not the same as it was when I was a child, or a teenager, or a young adult, or a rabbinic student. Indeed my faith is not the same as it was last year and, perhaps, even yesterday!

I am a Reform Jew -- a liberal in religion -- and I cherish the dynamics of Judaism, its infinite variety of theologies and philosophies because I am not forced to absolutism. I welcome above all the quest, the searching, the yearning, the striving even the resulting doubts to make man and the world better. That which fits my striving and my yearning is my faith.

I fervently and sincerely hope that I do not shake the faith of any one of you because my convictions differ from yours. Nor would I deliberately disturb any of you if I confess that not only are my convictions tentative but I hope and pray they always will be.

I affirm with all my heart that I believe the major purpose of Judaism is not to save our souls for a life to come but to save ourselves and our world here and now. I find it impossible to praise God for any kind of pointless, needless, suffering or death. I reject such as punishments inflicted by God.

But I would hope that you, with me, can find it possible to rise from our grief and say "Yisgadal v'yiskaddish": that is, to praise the name of the living God and go on living the better for our experiences.

I do not know nor particularly care whether a personal God hears my prayer in a human manner or not. But I care mightily, and I would hope most of you could join me in this: that our prayers are heard by the God within us and that we are personally related to the Ground of Being.

It has been written: "Pray as if everything depended upon God. Then act as if everything depended upon you."

I am only poetically interested in the names we ascribe to God: be it Father, King, Source of Life, or even the word "God" itself which I find far more troublesome than the word "Adonai". But I am mightily interested in the unity of God and Man and all human action which is implied by those appellations whatever they be.

I believe with all my heart that much of my life and yours is in the hands of "God" whatever you may mean by that term. But I believe with equal conviction that not all of our lives rests in the hands of God; much is held in our own hands as well. For me the divinity of God is little more than the divinity of man -- if we live as "Shutafim B'elohim" -- partners of God. This is what I think the prayer means when we speak of "God's discipline, helping us to learn to understand life's holy purpose". I rejoice

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in Judaism's exaltation of man's responsibility and infinite possibilities.

It has to do with that scratch on the gem; the imperfections making life less than it could be.

Some of you recoil when you hear the litany of the evils in our world. So do I. Life is good. Life is beautiful. Life is full of opportunity and pleasure and glory.

But to ignore its ugliness is to be a fool. Life is too often also painful and hurtful and cruel and we live, I believe in an age which tests not only the sanity but the very nature of man himself.

Last winter some of you may have heard my beloved teacher, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, when he said that he was "an optimist against his better judgment." That's the Jewish view. "Lamrot ha-kol", "despite everything", we remain optimists that we can exchange war for peace, poverty for plenty, cruelty for compassion, our own selfish interests for the overriding needs of others, national stubborn pride for the primary value of the life of a man, woman or child anywhere.

Institutions alone, I am convinced, will not do it. Money alone will not do it. Rabbis alone and other elected and selected leaders by proxy cannot do it. Only the human will, only your individual intention. Prayers remind us of our better selves. So God is listening if we are. Life will be better if we begin to work on the scratch rather than to lament the imperfection in the smoothness of life.

All of us have drifted from what we ought to be. Another year has brought a few more scratches. But I hope, now, opportunities as well. Many of us have trials yet to face. May we face them with dignity and strength. How?

Again a rabbinic guide: Once, said a rabbi, a city man came to a primitive village where he saw a crowd standing at a crude forge attempting to fan the small fire into a fierce flame by blowing upon it with all the force of their lungs.

"You could spare yourselves all this effort", he said to them, "if you simply had a pair of bellows." When they told him they had never even heard of a bellows, he made them a pair which he gave to them as a gift.

Weeks later he came to the village again and the people met him with scorn. "Your bellows are worthless. We press them with all our might but we never get a fire." Inspecting the bellows, the man found nothing wrong. Puzzled he asked: "Show me how you work them. But first of all, where are your glowing coals?" "You mean we need glowing coals too?", the simple folks asked. "Of course

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you need them", he answered. "The bellows alone will give you no fire. All the bellows can produce is a useless current of air. But where there is no spark to begin with even the best of bellows cannot produce a flame."

Is there a spark left within you? If so, fan that spark that it glows anew. Is there a spark, however weak, of need for God, of bond with the People of Israel, just a spark of desire to enrich life with blessing, then nourish it, fan that spark. For, unhappily, neither my sermons nor those of any of my colleagues can coax to flame the hearts of men in which there is no spark to begin with. All we can say is only useless air.

But with the spark, even the last glowing embers of love for God and man, there is hope, there is then possible the brilliant flame of a better year, a better life, a better world. Then you will know that God does indeed listen.

Both the end and the beginning of the matter is this: Fan the spark!

May that spark within you, however small, however weak, be it the tiniest glow, rise to brilliant flame lighting our way to the beauty, the certainty, the life of glory and peace for which we so fervently pray.

Fan, now, the spark!

Amen