

# YOM KIPPUR EVE SERMON 1967

delivered by

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There is very real danger in the observance of Yom Kippur. The enormous attraction of the Day tends to concentrate the latent and sometimes dormant religious feelings with us to such intensity that we express them through a single prayerful experience. It is likely in this setting that even in the tones of the Kol Nidre we experience more of enjoyment than soul searching and in the attendance at a day of ritual and prayer too much of self-righteous satisfaction and not enough of honest self doubt.

The Kol Nidre is an emotionally stirring melody. It is drawn out of the well springs of tears and tragedy and tender associations. But, even so, beauty and emotion are secondary. We are not here to attend a concert or to have pleasant feelings awakened within us. We are come in the spirit of the Psalmist: "Out of the depths I cry unto Thee O Lord."

Still, if you believe that such a mood of repentance and self searching implies debasement of one's character or an abject appeal of lowly man to an unreachable God, then you tragically misunderstand Yom Kippur.

This day is Judaism's most emphatic statement of hope. This day is our declaration to the world that man can redeem himself, that we can confront and change the horrifying evils in the world by changing the error of our own separate ways. Yom Kippur is not a confession of weakness as much as an insistence upon the durability of human goodness.

Once again, as so often in our history, this world-view of ours is contrary to the temper of our times. Today society is filled with moral dropouts from the insincerities and miseries of life. But the goal of Judaism is to overcome evil not to retreat, withdraw and escape. While other philosophies, fads and fantasies counsel deliberate disengagement from the problems of our world, Judaism urges each of us to muster every last quantity of spiritual and intellectual resources to meet our problems.

## I

I want to share with you tonight the implications of three common responses to the moment of moral decision. Though stated as questions, they are, in reality, devastating commentary on our moral and ethical confusion.

The most overwhelming moral decision to be made by young and old alike today is unquestionably the issue of Vietnam. So sensitive has this torturous matter become that many would prefer to avoid the problem altogether. It's easier to let matters drift as they will, despite each moment's death and destruction, without taking a personal stand. Some people just can't comfortably make decisions. One of the insipid excuses for permanently straddling the fence is to discount the moral value of what one thinks and does and to cry "What's the use?"

What's the use? is the cry of despair, of weakness and of moral bankruptcy. In the case of Vietnam it is far more important to be a man than a bird - be it hawk or dove! What's the use? means: I see no reason for defending what I believe or honestly professing the values I cherish because they are not really all that important.

One young man visited me recently for guidance on this subject. After a long discussion of his ethical and moral views he said: "What's the use? What's the use of persisting in my defense of non-violence, of human compassion and moral action when no one pays any attention? What's the use?"

The honest answer is clear. There is no "use", really. Not in immediate terms of converting all others to one's own view or of effecting the accomplishment of the desired goal. But surely there is an inescapable duty to make a moral decision for one's self in all things. And in equal truth each man's decision does in some measure bolster the courage of others.

It is each man's duty to make a choice. In this instance, despite the widest reading of which I am capable (which is more than I can say for many on so vital a problem) it is my personal conviction at this moment that the involvement of our country in Vietnam was ill advised to begin with, worse subsequently and presently a growing disaster both morally and militarily.

But I do NOT think mine is the only ethical stance in any moral issue. So let it be clear that in such matters I never attempt to impose my own view upon others with the full force of absolute Jewish authority. There is no such thing.

But as a rabbi I can and should guide whoever consults me insofar as the ethical teachings of Judaism are concerned and insofar as these teachings can shape the direction of a man's own moral decision. I may give my reasons for my stand on any moral issue - if asked. But I would not and will not press my own view in such way as to volunteer another man's sacrifice either in battle or in jail for support or non-support of the war.

By the same logic it is equally immoral I think for others to attempt to impose their views on me or to attempt to silence me any more than any other man either by threat or imprecation.

If there be one moral lesson thrust upon us with greater force than ever before it is that every man has a duty, a religious responsibility to decide the moral course of his life independent of the actions or thoughts or commands of others. Life holds no guarantee of exemption from sacrifice or pain or martyrdom. And consensus is never a valid excuse for an immoral act.

In this context the hopeless cry "What's the use" becomes all the more tragic when uttered as a surrender by young, well-intentioned, thoughtful people who know perfectly well what their own

moral standards are but find themselves intimidated and silenced by the cynicism and abuse and intolerance of those who make no anguished decision for themselves but merely follow the line that others have determined for them. Thus do laziness and loyalty get confused.

The complex issue of Vietnam is not alone the point. The peril to our immortal souls inherent in the course of action which every one of us pursues in moral choices is a matter appropriate to Yom Kippur.

So "What's the use?" Use indeed! What kind of use? In our prayers we ask tonight: "Grant honor, O Lord, to them that revere Thee". "Honor", not reward, not safety, not riches or victory or power. But "honor". All values in life do not have "use" in the material sense. A beautiful symphony, a work of art, a moment of love have no use. They have value. What's the use of a single man's decision? Just the use of justice and decency and peace among us.

## II

If the first response to moral decision excites our sense of the tragic, there is another question which stirs our most profound sense of pity. Over and again when loyalty to one's faith, constancy in trust, faithfulness in love or honesty in business are mentioned we hear the retort: "Who cares?"

"Who cares?" Indeed our tradition has the answer in a God who cares. But not many are prepared for such theology today. Even more disheartening is the realization that there are so many who really believe that no one cares what we do.

This summer I had the exhilarating experience of addressing 4 thousand Boy Scouts. My job was to describe for them a Scout's Duty to Others.

I was not satisfied then, nor am I now with simply listing our duties of love, and fidelity, compassion Justice and equality toward others or even being content to pray for these virtues. The point now is: "Who cares?"

I told those youngsters that even in the face of the scepticism and derision of many when they acted morally, made honorable choices and opted for the way of goodness, those who really loved them cared very much: their teachers, their parents, their true friends, their God.

The reminder is necessary because if God has become an abstraction to us, man himself is well on the way to joining his God as a vague abstraction in these days of representing the grandeur of the human personality by numbers and codes. Man today easily loses his face. And in losing his face he loses his soul.

In our prayerbook tonight we will ask: "Inspire with courage

those who wait for Thee." It takes courage to act in the interests of those whom we have never seen. It takes courage to so understand Judaism that it leads us away from the safe bourgeois pattern of American social and economic standards and points a prophetic path toward the most hopeless and helpless in the world. "Who cares?" Men and women and children everywhere care very much what we do with our wealth, our power and certainly with our hearts.

Let no one delude you we do not live in an age of violent revolution and rebellion. The voice of the discontented shouts in the streets and campuses, in the ghettos and poverty plagued hovels of this, our land. If there be a short supply of anything in our country it is not bread or money, it is not clothes or appliances, it is not automobiles or refrigerators. The short supply is a permeating concern for others, whether in Haight-Ashbury, or Detroit or Omaha's Near North Side or in the rice paddies of South East Asia. That is the message. "Who cares?" Everyone cares. Our world cares. Our God cares. Yom Kippur should remind us that we should care.

### III

In much the same vein is the response common in defense of a new kind of morals or lack of them that is called by various names. Some would dignify this libertarian approach to life by calling it the New Morality. Others talk about "Situation Ethics" which in one sense is perfectly acceptable but in most applications of it and interpretations of it makes each man a law unto himself with his own pleasure and his own comfort the single goal of his action.

Those who espouse the New Morality counter appeals for more stable human relationships with the hackneyed clincher: "What's the difference?"

The trouble is that the "difference" is often difficult to demonstrate. At least at the moment. The sneak attack on the fidelity of the family, the clandestine relationships of young people who think they are in love, the experimental nature of the most intimate sexual unions that look upon the marriage vows with disdain, the escapes from the realities of life via a host of mind-warping agents all together speak of a world in which "ayn din, v' ayn dayon", "There is no Judge and there is no judgment." So: "What's the difference?"

Perhaps for the moment there is no difference. But I think the difference, ultimately, is quite clear. That difference is not found in the punishment meted out by a punitive God in another world. At least, not in my honest conception of the God of Israel. The difference is in this world and this life, here and now.

The difference will be between homes that crumble amid the wreckage of dislocated children with broken-hearted parents and

families which are the cradles of healthy lives and soundly reliable human beings. The difference will be between young people who cannot find their direction and those who, turning their faces outward to the world, will chart new courses to good for themselves and their contemporaries. The difference will be between love that is crippling because there is no substance to it and love which excites to accomplishment and growth and maturity. The difference will be between hallucinations that are synthetic and unrelated to reality and the kind of dreams that will enrich our lives because they are the patterns of tomorrow's creations. The difference will be between a world in which war will forever blight human life and a world in which men will learn to live with each other in secure and comfortable relationships.

In the course of this day we will read over and again "Hate the evil, love the good and establish justice into the affairs of men." That's the difference, even as we pray: "Fulfill the hope of all who trust in Thy Name."

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If you are in any ways affected by the guilt we all share in the suffering, the unwarranted death, the emotional turmoil that churns in so many places, then take seriously the essence of this Holy Day and ponder the validity of our faith in the power of goodness and mercy and justice.

If you say "What's the use? Who cares? What's the difference?" let this day remind you that your personal decision for a life of righteousness and fidelity and compassion will spell the use of your faith, the encouragement of millions who care and the difference between death and life.

"Grant honor O Lord to them that revere Thee, inspire with courage those who wait for Thee and fulfill the hope of all who trust in Thy name."

Amen.