

PART IV

Social Justice

The Kindest Use a Knife

October 16, 1953

Beerman's sermon was delivered in the heart of the "red scare" in the 1950s when the United States Senate, under Joseph McCarthy, and the House of Representatives, under Harold Velde, alleged widespread Communist penetration of the government and cultural institutions of the United States. With blunt force, the young rabbi issued a searing indictment of "the pygmies of national shame" who falsely accused individuals of Communism without a trace of evidence of due process. In particular, he took grave offense at the fact that two heroes of his, both of whom were Reform rabbis, had been swept up without merit in the allegations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC): Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the most prominent and influential of midcentury Reform rabbis, and Rabbi Judah L. Magnes, the founding chancellor of the Hebrew University whom Beerman regarded as a uniquely courageous and prophetic voice in Palestine.

Beerman here perhaps angered those at Leo Baeck Temple who may have shared in the anti-Communist fear. But the stakes were too high for him to remain silent—nothing less than the "tragic deterioration of democratic values" in our country. It was a characteristic but bold act for the untenured rabbi, who was intent on living up to the prophetic ideals of Wise and Magnes, among others.

A day by itself can have no meaning. It is but a word which describes the rotation of our earth on its axis, while it makes its elliptical passage around the sun. A day comes and goes, whether it be bright or bleak, dismal or sunny. A day by itself has no purpose unless man puts purpose into it. It may mean one thing to the scientist, another to the artist or poet, something quite different to the military commander, to the aviator, or to the miner who works under the ground. But it is always people

who give it cause and purpose, and whatever significance is in it is that which people seek to place there.

The Jewish people have sought to find in the day which began this evening at the setting of the sun, in the Sabbath, all the cherished values of life which have been passed on to them in the Torah, in the teaching of their most dedicated teachers and prophets. This day we call holy, sacred to Israel, and to the seeking of life's purpose by the children of Israel in each generation.

We have had our share of transgression and iniquities. We have never claimed a monopoly on human virtue among us. But we have proclaimed our choice of virtue and goodness as our mission among the nations. Since the days of the prophets, we have borne the message that our God desires neither sacrifice nor burnt offering, but the doing of justice, the showing of mercy, and the pursuit of righteousness. Not all Jews have lived in accordance with the ideals of our heritage. We have had our share of fools, knaves, and traitors. Yet in every generation there have sprung from the loins of Jacob men of courage and women of valor, who have championed every good cause among men, and who have fought and suffered, as Heine said, on every battlefield of human thought.

It seems as if the prophets of ancient Israel never died, for their spirit was resurrected not once, but a thousand times in the annals of the Jewish people. Generation following generation, the conscience of mankind was quickened and enriched by an Isaiah and then a Jesus, by a Maimonides, a Mendelssohn, and a Herzl, indirectly by a Freud and an Einstein and by a never-ending procession of men, whom all the world holds in deep respect and grateful reverence.

In our generation, not by any means the least of these, but a man whose name all of you know, and . . . whose voice many here may remember, was a Rabbi who seemed especially reminiscent of the prophets of old—Stephen S. Wise. For all the world, Rabbi Wise spoke in the accents of a Jeremiah, with the passion of an Amos, and the eloquence of Micah: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice to love mercy and to walk humbly before thy God." While he worked and lived Stephen Wise made many enemies—the proud and the arrogant, men who placed the value of property and possession above human needs and brotherly concern. His critics were among his own people too, who called him actor, or a charlatan. The criticism of some was surely justified, but generally it betrayed the poverty of their own insights and their own corruption of spirit; it did not in any way diminish the stature of Wise. When the cause was just, he stood his ground like a lion, and roared his defiance of those who sought to ensnare him by either threats or promises.

In a day when labor struggled for recognition, this modern prophet joined them in their aspiration. At a time when freedom of the pulpit was a rare commodity among prosperous churches and synagogues, he turned his back upon the most prominent Jewish congregation in the land that he might speak without compromise and in accordance with the dictates of his conscience. In the struggle for the

establishment of Israel as a free republic, his opponents taunted him by testing his patriotism. Fearlessly he answered them and said: "I have been an American for 150 years, but I have been a Jew for 3,000." While many of his fellow countrymen, and his coreligionists as well, would not recognize the danger of fascism, he roared his opposition and prophesied its future, storming even the citadels of the mighty. Always he labored for the end of man's exploitation over man, for the establishment of a more just and equitable social order than the one he knew. When the war ended he continued to work for mutual understanding, respect, and friendship between his own beloved America and the Soviet Union. However repugnant Communism was to him as an anti-religious philosophy; however much he disapproved of the theory and practices of Soviet Russia, he knew that another world war would not correct the evils there but would certainly bring new evils here. Moreover he understood the warning of the atomic scientists. And so he worked for peace. For many years before the war he endorsed the principles of Franklin D. Roosevelt because he believed that in spirit, they were most nearly in accord with the principles and precepts of Judaism. And then at the eventide of his life when he spoke in Cincinnati while I was attending the Hebrew Union College, as I remember him—he reiterated the task that was before us all, the rebuilding of the waste places and the necessity for establishing an enduring peace among men. This ever was Israel's mission, and now it took on greater significance than ever before. Editing the "Congress Weekly" which he founded, he warned in his editorials that fascism had not died with Hitler. He was not blind or indifferent to the challenge of Russia but he urged patience and understanding that men might explore all the avenues of peace as both a practical and moral necessity. He died on the 19th of April, 1949, and since that day, as it was said of Moses, there has not risen another like him.

Now in this year of 1953, in the month of September a committee of the Congress of the United States recalled the name of this man who personified for all the world the Rabbi and the modern Jew at his best [and] noblest. But the recollection of the name of Stephen Wise was not in a spirit of appreciation for the greatness and goodness of his character or for his many contributions to the welfare of our nation. The name of Rabbi Wise was conjured up for desecration by the House Committee on Un-American Activities under the chairmanship of Congressman Velde. The committee accepted and released the testimony of one of our new national heroes, the ex-communist, to the effect that Rabbi Stephen S. Wise was among those who "carried out the instructions of the Communist Party or collaborated with it."

The same monstrous accusation was brought against Rabbi Judah Magnes, now of blessed memory, who was formerly rabbi of Temple Emanuel of New York and for a quarter century thereafter President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a saint-like creature whose brilliance and humility made him a model and an inspiration for thousands of young men, not the least of whom is Nelson Glueck, now president of the Hebrew Union College. I would not pass over the other courageous

and liberal men of the Protestant clergy who were also slandered. But I think that our attention should be drawn not to them, but to their defamers, for it is they who are providing us with a crucial and critical test at this time in our history.

We should ask ourselves, it seems to me, the motive, the plan, and the purpose of Mr. Velde and his Committee. These questions are relevant because, after all, Mr. Velde is an American—not the agent of a foreign power, but like his many friends and allies in and out of Congress, a native American, the elected representative of the people of Illinois, sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Surely we, who are also his countrymen, must be puzzled and disturbed as we witness the desecration of two of our greatest religious leaders, men whose names most Jews have come to revere.

Yet for those of us who have paid attention to past events, who have heeded the storm warnings which have been threatening our liberties in recent years, this “shocking betrayal of elementary public responsibility and decency,” as Dr. Maurice Eisendrath, the President of the UAHC [Union of American Hebrew Congregations] and spokesman for Reform Judaism, called it, was not a complete surprise. Nor is it, we predict with incautious certainty, the last revelation of its kind to emanate from the supposed guardians of our welfare. Indeed as time continues, unless the American people protest with more vigor than they have in the past, we may anticipate that while distracting our attention toward the menace in the East, the demagogues and the opportunists will pick our pockets of many liberties which we Americans of all religions and race have struggled and bled for in the past.

During recent years, the infamous destruction of democratic rights which is known to all the world by the name “McCarthyism” has lived by what it fed on—the ruined lives and reputations of numerous fellow citizens who have never been charged with a crime, tried by a jury, or found guilty of anything worse than invoking the First and Fifth Amendments of the Constitution. The victims of the contemporary reign of terror are more numerous than men realize; some have gone to jail on charges of contempt, some have been silent, but it is impossible to measure accurately the magnitude of the fear and intimidation of others. No wonder that Justice Douglas referred to the black silence of fear among us. But it remained for the world’s outstanding scientist, professor Albert Einstein, a victim of Nazism, a refugee from its barbarism to sound the clearest warning of all. “If the intellectuals,” he wrote, “cooperate with these committees, they will well deserve the slavery that is intended for them.” A short sentence but a pungent one, by a wise and good man. In England, a Nobel Prize winner, Lord Bertrand Russell, spoke in a similar way. Lesser men than Einstein for such a challenge may well have been branded, fired from their positions, and condemned to economic hardships. The McCarthyites of course do not burn men, only books; they do not kill men, only reputations.

They remind me of the old adage about the man whose dog displeased him. “I will not destroy thee, Rover,” he said, “for that is contrary to my principles /

but I will give thee a bad name." Whereupon he turned the dog out of this house and into the street crying, "Mad dog, mad dog." And so the neighbors came out alarmed and killed the poor animal instead.

To destroy a human reputation is as heinous a crime as actual murder. Whatever disease prompts a man to slay his fellow man in a moment of passion can be no worse than that of calculated character assassination—and this crime is one in which all of us as a community are guilty. For McCarthyism and everything related to it cannot operate in a vacuum. It can succeed only when the climate of public opinion is propitious, only when other men are willing to follow the leader and accept his protestations of patriotism at face value. Oftentimes too, people do know better, like many among us, but will resort to the totalitarian argument of the Communists and the Fascists, that the end justifies the means, and thus assuage the consciousness of their own guilt.

With such a tragic deterioration of democratic values as our country has witnessed during recent years, the current assault against the liberal clergy must be viewed only as a part of a larger program. For what possible motive could Mr. Velde have had in accepting and releasing the perjured testimony that desecrated the dead and injured the reputation of the living? The only answer that I can find to this question is the inescapable conclusion that native communism, by itself, never was nor is it now the real target. The word *communism* is used by men to include an ever broadening circle of people. These may be radicals, pacifists, or New Dealers, or people of critical minds, or finally anyone and everyone who will oppose the methods and the principle of some of our Congressional committees. We have always had our demagogues; we have always had cynical and ambitious politicians, and we have them now, and their ultimate aim is to achieve complete conformity, which will tolerate no criticism. They have already sown the seeds of perplexity and hatred and fear. The same perplexity, hatred, and fear which have formed the Communist herds and the Fascist gangs in the United States; and conformity of opinion and belief, the first demands of the mob everywhere, has been secured by methods which differ only in degree from the methods of Moscow and Berlin. When loyalty is put before freedom, and when loyalty is made to mean loyalty not to the right to be free, but to the demands of the majority, with economic and social destruction as the penalty for dissent, the drums of Moscow and Berlin are near enough to hear. When loyalty to the particular economic, social, political and military and diplomatic views of the inquisitors is put before loyalty to the rights of each individual to think and speak as he chooses, then we are marching into the frozen world of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia where everything coheres and conforms and the life of the individual mind and soul is of no more significance than the life of a single drop of frozen water in an ice floe. And since religion at its best and noblest is subversive to this tyranny, which masks itself as patriotism, it is logical and necessary that it be attacked too. Truly the demagogues have attempted to make our nation sick, for they are carriers of a

virus more deadly even than the one they claim to cure. For these men and their servile collaborators are not the doctors of national healing, they are the disease. Today, because these men are in responsible positions, we are a sick people, but understanding and correction can make us well.

Put in the scale of balance on the one hand the memory of Stephen Wise and Judah Magnes, the principles of Franklin Roosevelt, and the wisdom of Albert Einstein, and weigh these giants of the earth with the pygmies of national shame—and choose between them. I lack the wisdom, the maturity, and the eloquence of a Rabbi Wise or a Rabbi Magnes, but I would rather stand with reverence in the shadow of these men than share the sunlight in which corrupt men now bask themselves.

As all men do, I hold opinions. My opinions may be right or they may be wrong. They may not always coincide with the majority. But because they are mine and because they are as honest as I can make them, I have the obligation to speak them. I have done so in the past and I hope to do so in the future. I speak now out of my belief in the vitality of the American people and out of my concern for the loss of personal freedom, my own, my colleagues' in the ministry of all faiths, teachers, writers, doctors, lawyers, and all of us whatever it may be. It is not that I believe that there has been a decline in our devotion to the ideas of freedom. Those who now attack our personal freedom are themselves obliged, as Archibald MacLeish has said, to use the vocabulary of freedom to justify their activities. It is not our belief in freedom that has changed, but our *Faith* in freedom has—our faith that freedom will really work, that it can, itself, by its own means, survive the attacks of gigantic enemies. For the faith in freedom rests necessarily upon faith in man, and faith in man is the heart and the substance of Judaism. And it is this concern which has prompted everything I have said here this evening.

I said at the beginning that a day by itself can have no meaning. But people can put meaning into a day, an hour, even a moment. In an instant a man can open his eyes, and look and see what was always there, but what he had never seen before. Let us then look at all that is past—at ourselves, our country, and the world in which we live. Let us look deep enough and hard enough, for then whatever blindness is in us will be vanished, and we will see better and farther than ever before. In so doing, we will give meaning and purpose and significance not to this day alone, but to days and days to come.

COMMENTARY BY RABBI JOHN L. ROSEVE

The prophets stood alone in the political world because their speaking moral truth compelled and repelled. This was so with Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman, whose moral eloquence drew many to him yet forced him to stand apart and frequently to suffer the pain of condemnation and aloneness.

The biblical prophets at first resisted God's call, but when they succumbed and did God's bidding from within the moral weight of the divine command, they were exposed, vulnerable, hunted, and often forced to flee from the king's wrath.

In our living-room armchairs and behind our computer screens it is so easy, without consequence, to excoriate, chastise, and speak truth to power—but in the real world, there are risks to be borne in speaking out, and there is suffering that accompanies such speech. Moral leaders must be prepared to be ostracized even if history ultimately retrieves them and lifts them up as our moral standard-bearers.

Such were the times of the McCarthy hearings in which Leonard wrote "The Kindest Use a Knife." There, Leonard defended Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, whose good name "was conjured up for desecration by the House Committee of Un-American Activities," which alleged that Rabbi Wise "carried out the instructions of the Communist Party or collaborated with it."

Leonard wrote of Congressman Velde, the chairman of the HUAC:

"Truly the demagogues have attempted to make our nation sick, for they are carriers of a virus more deadly even than the one they claim to cure. For these men and their servile collaborators are not the doctors of national healing, they are the disease. Today because these men are in responsible positions, we are a sick people, but understanding and correction can make us well."

Leonard understood that otherwise good people can succumb easily to hate and fear. They can remain silent, acquiesce, and betray their friends and people to their everlasting shame. Fear is indeed a loathsome motivator and an ultimate corrupter of the good.

Leonard's piece is an inspiration still, and it is as eloquent a moral clarion as any that has appeared in recent Jewish history.