

PART I

First Sermon



## Chapel Sermon

October 30, 1948

*This first selection was Leonard Beerman's public debut as a preacher. Each graduating rabbinical student at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the seminary of the Reform movement, was required to deliver a "Chapel Sermon." Beerman began his talk by demonstrating his interpretive abilities, offering an explication of the biblical story of the garden of Eden. On his reading, which is informed by a deep interest in psychology, Adam is trapped between a sense of freedom gained by disobeying God's word and a tremulous fear of standing naked in the shadow of God's judgment. Beerman analogized this condition to modern man, who was caught between the gratification of material possessions and the sobering realization that he could not exert ultimate control over his physical surroundings. Beerman introduced a theme that would reappear throughout his writings in the 1950s: that Communism and the Soviet Union were not the source of evil in American society. In the early years of the Cold War, as Americans, in general, and American Jews, in particular, were in the throes of anti-Communist fervor, the soon-to-be rabbi revealed more than a little courage by challenging this growing tendency in American society. In the next breath, he called out the lack of intellectual discernment of his fellow American Jews, as well as some of the theological presuppositions of neo-orthodox Protestant theologians. Rather than conclude his sermon on a pessimistic note, Beerman ended it by reminding his audience of the enduring moral vocation of the Jewish people, borne of Adam's original sin in the garden of Eden. "Israel," he declared, "is the eternal dissident, the great disobedient child of history."*

There was once a time when children were supposed to be seen and not heard. Thanks to the contributions of modern psychology, however, our ideas have



FIGURE 13. Leonard Beerman (second from left in the second row) at Hebrew Union College graduation (1949).

suffered an alteration and while we do not go so far as to believe that a child who isn't permitted to smash everything he gets his hands on will grow up into an inhibited lunatic determined to smash everything in the world, we have learned that children must have free expression and that we should not expect a child to respond to his parents' commands like a well-gearred machine. With all our erudition, disobedient children still create a problem and, in fact, are quite commonplace. But the classic story of disobedience is not found in any of the modern texts nor in any of the publications of a Spock or Gesell. It is rather to be found in the early chapters of the first book of our Bible.

Far removed as the writers of the story of the Garden of Eden may have been from a Sigmund Freud, they achieved nonetheless an amazing insight into human behavior. Man had been placed by God in this precious garden. He had been given a wife as a help-meet, and they lived together in harmony with each other, with nature, and with God. There was supreme peace for Adam, and, according to one version of the tale, no necessity to work. Man appeared to live an ideal kind of existence as a plaything of his Creator, who, in this very primitive picture of the Deity, came at the cool of the day to play with his children in their beautiful garden. But with all his privileges, man commits the supreme act of rebellion or disobedience.

He eats of the prohibited tree, the one thing denied him, and the overwhelming consequences of his act strike him with the suddenness of the wind that came up to cool him each day.

For Scripture states: "And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves girdles. And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden toward the cool of the day; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden."<sup>1</sup>

Adam understood what had happened. It was more than acting against God's command. He had actually severed the umbilical cord. Up to this moment in time he had been like a newborn child, who, though biologically separated from its mother through the process of birth, remained fundamentally one with her and dependent upon her for its existence for a long period of time. So Adam had been dependent upon his Creator and the Garden of Eden had given him security, a feeling of belonging, and a feeling of being rooted. Like a child he had been fondled by God and cared for. And yet he was not free any more than an infant is free. Yes, there had been no necessity to work. True, God had once flattered him by allowing him to give names to the beasts of the field, but actually there was not even a necessity to think. That tree in the middle of the garden, that tree which he had been forbidden to touch—that was the symbol of his lack of freedom. And with one touch of his hand he had committed—not sin, no, he had not sinned. God would punish him now. God would cast him out of Paradise—but he had not sinned. God would proclaim war between man and woman and man and nature. He, man, would work now, and sweat, which he had never felt, would roll from his face, and thorns and thistles would bar his way—but he had not committed sin—he had committed the first act of freedom. He had become human by becoming an individual, by tearing himself out of infancy, by breaking through his state of harmony with nature. Yes, he was free now but the freedom appeared as a curse, and although he was no longer a child, neither was he a man. He was free from the sweet bondage of paradise but he was not free to realize his individuality or even to govern himself. He had been released to another kind of bondage—the bondage of helplessness. He had lost the meaning of his existence and, being uprooted, could not find it in these new surroundings. He had taken only one bite of reason. Perhaps he had sinned after all. *Ochal mimenu* he ate of it. He should have devoured every bit of it—for now he could not cope with this new station in life—he was alone, naked, and ashamed; he was powerless and afraid.

The position of man today is somewhat akin to his ancient progenitor. Modern man, by virtue of eating of the tree of knowledge, has built a material world, which surpasses the most fantastic utopias. He has harnessed physical energies, which would enable the human race to secure the material conditions necessary for a dignified and productive existence—and now in the moment of his greatest greatness, at a time when he seems to have gained his freedom from all the tyrannies of

nature—he, like Adam, feels his freedom to be a curse. In the process of advancement he discovers that he had produced a world so vast, and so complicated, as to be wholly unmanageable. He had not eaten enough of the tree of knowledge for he sees a world in chaos and cannot produce the light to interrupt it. His power over nature has reached his greatest proportions and yet he feels powerless in his individual life and in society. All of his accomplishments sit blushing in his face and a sense of futility overcomes him. He is powerless and afraid and would wish to hide himself if he could amongst the trees of his universe. And thus he poses our problem, our challenge, and our goal: to find a sense of purpose, a sense of human dignity in the changed and different world in which we live.

The reality of our own feelings of insecurity is a factor that many of us, for good reasons, prefer to ignore. But there are moments, perhaps when we lean upon the sills of evening, when the cool drafts of truth chill our minds. Quite fortuitously we become aware that we live in a strange, impersonal world. We need only recall the events of the period still fresh in our thoughts to discover that these events were strangely removed from their causes and wrapped in remote confusion. 365 days of the year we have consumed the news printed and broadcasted of drug affiliations, ax-murderers, police beatings, lynching, stonings, riots, revolutions, tortures, and sodomies—and they are as meaningless to us as the great disorders of nature, the hurricanes and earthquakes over which we have no control. Even the thoughts we have are as impersonal and mechanical as the world we live in. The art we enjoy is a mechanical vocabulary of electrically animated images without touch or smell, or electrically vibrated words only recently endowed with faces and bodies. We have watched wars precipitated without the motion or the knowledge or the consent of the millions of people who will be caught up in them, and today we see the nations heading for a battle arena from which not even the strongest may emerge alive. There seems no place to make a stand, nothing for us as individuals to do about it. A nerveless sense of fatality occupies our subconscious and we feel that this is our destiny and destiny is being imposed upon us. It is true we are richer and stronger as a nation than we have ever been. Our national income is far above the figure economists once dismissed as fantastic, and our military strength is supported, for the moment at least, by a monopoly on the most formidable weapons ever devised by man. But strangely enough, these facts do not bring us much comfort for they are coupled in America with a peculiar demand for conformity and national discipline. We are supposed to believe, at the risk of disloyalty, that if there were no Russia and if there were no Communists, all the problems with which we and the world are troubled would vanish—and this thought is supposed to possess the validity of a geometric axiom. A tiny nibble at the tree of knowledge reminds us that before Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and the Soviet Union there were wars and depression and insecurity and fear, and we might even be led to conclude, at the risk of being un-American, that the problems we face are much more deeply rooted than we are supposed to believe and that the fault is not only in the Russians but also in ourselves. The antagonism against Communism here and against Capitalism

abroad is not really an affirmation of a faith in either one of them; it is nothing more than the expression of our mutual fears and frustrations, which stand like double-tongued adders barring the path to peace.

"Israel is the heart of all the nations," in the words of Yehudah Halevi, the heart that suffers whenever any part of the body is ill. For the Jew, the words "suffering," "fear," "insecurity," are weak symbols of the terrible frustration which have become a part of us and our brethren. It seemed for a time that our collective agony was more than we could bear. The enormity of the crime against our people is but an element of this feeling and if the Christians really believe that the body of Jesus is wounded each time a man wounds his fellow, his body must indeed look something like the picture of Dorian Gray. These are not new things with us—there is a crimson cord of blood that knits our history and makes it whole. Whatever comfort we derive from the victory of our people in Palestine and the fulfillment of their dreams, we cannot ignore the simple fact that a dream doesn't come true of itself—it takes work and much effort and still more pain. If the Jews of the new Israel have shown us that it is not nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune but rather by opposing them to end them, their success only gives us pause to meditate on our own weaknesses. We are great as a defensive team. We can amass millions to help others fight battles and even live in decency, and we should not detract from this virtue of ours. But what positive virtue can we show world Jewry? Have we, even we, progressive Jews, produced an American Judaism dynamic and sustaining? Have we yet been able to attain that goal for which we strive—the harmonious blending of the best of the old with the best of the new? A casual visit to the Jewish State will only confirm us in our doubts as to the glories of Judaism and Jewish life in America. In our efforts to assume the coloration of the society in which we live, haven't we produced a generation that has lost that sense of intellectual discrimination that made the Jew a civilized being whether in Imperial Rome, the Church, or the Mosque dominated society? We remember that Philo the Jew lived in Alexandria but he was not a *ger*, a stranger in the land. He borrowed generously from the culture of his time and simultaneously maintained his identity with Jewish tradition, and the same may be said for Maimonides and Mendelssohn at a later date. Our own failings are quite obvious and the huge controversies that rage in contemporary Jewish thought give subtle confirmation to them.

There is a good reason to be apprehensive, but we need not drown ourselves in the current of our times. It never was, and neither is it today, wise or desirable to borrow everything from the environment, and so we need not succumb to our feelings of weakness. It is true, the time is short and the work may be great, but we are not free to desist from it. The whole burden of the community, we are taught, rests upon us. Wherever there be wrongs, we must intervene, we must raise our voice in protest. There are apostles of degradation among us; among them the neo-orthodox Protestant thinkers and their secular comrades, the men of the "New Look" that is not new. They come to us with the face of innocence and call us brothers and friends. See, they say, man is naked and ashamed and powerless—and we

agree. See, they say, quoting the words of a New England Primer, in Adam's fall we sinned all. Man is evil; the world is set against him in eternal conflict; man must bow in submission. And then we understand that they are our enemies, as old as Time, that they are not our brothers and our friends, and we protest. True, we may be powerless, but our lives are not so cheap, nor our existence so meaningless, that we will tutor ourselves to this submission; there are none of us so base or cruel that we shall not protest. Adam's was the first act of freedom, and we are here, every one of us, to make that freedom real, to restore man to dignity. We will eat more and more and more at the tree of knowledge of ourselves, our society and our universe until this is fact.

"Israel is the heart of all the nations." Israel is the conscience, the raw, exposed nerve. All emotion passes through it. Israel is the eternal wanderer and sufferer, like man himself, fighting against thistles and thorns, shadows and abstractions. Israel is the eternal dissident, the great disobedient child of history. Israel is the servant of God, made like all men in His image, and nothing can deter him in his effort. The peoples will yet understand and will yet come to say:

This day we shall not be afraid, but we must be silent, for the house of Israel is at prayer. And its prayer is not for itself alone, but for all the children of men. We shall be silent, so that God may hear it. AMEN

#### COMMENTARY BY RABBI SAMUEL KARFF

As an admirer of Leonard Beerman, I relished his "Chapel Sermon." He reveals himself as a first-rate intelligence, a passionate moralist, and an elegant stylist.

Characteristically, he interprets Adam's disobedience not as a sin but as a claim to his humanity. However, with freedom come overwhelming challenges and the threat of meaninglessness. Even as a young man, Beerman embraces his lifelong view that the people Israel's role—and a major source of life's meaning—is to combat injustice and affirm the dignity of all.

Even as he celebrates Israel's recent rebirth and the rejection of Jewish powerlessness in a post-Holocaust world, Beerman anticipates challenges ahead and would be among the Jewish state's loving critics when he felt the absence of a good-faith pursuit of a two-state solution.

His sermon, delivered in the early years of the Cold War, attributes its causes not only to the Soviets but to our own nation. Some of his judgments in this sermon could stand revision in later years, including his dismissiveness toward the "realism" of the neo-orthodox theologians. I think of Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the more illustrious among them, whose realism was consistent with a robust social conscience. Rabbi Beerman might also have revised his blanket depreciation of the attainments of the American Jewish community vis-à-vis Judaism in the State of Israel.

Above all, even this early sermon reveals signs that he was destined to be one of America's great rabbis.