

Yom Kippur Eve—Vocation of a Rabbi

September 17, 1972

In this Kol Nidre sermon, Leonard Beerman reveals important facets of his personality and theology. With an erudition lightly worn, he laid out his vision of religion, as well as the vocation of the rabbi. Beerman was mindful that not all of his congregants applauded his bold political stands and statements; no doubt, they would have preferred a spiritual leader who hewed to the mainstream. But in this sermon, on the day when the largest number of listeners was in attendance, he rejected this aspiration. It was impossible for religion to be disengaged from politics—and by extension, for a rabbi not to be political. It was the rabbi's job to assure the "moral grandeur" of Judaism by insisting that it raise rather than blunt the conscience of Jews.

As a prototype for this role, Beerman turned unsurprisingly to the Hebrew prophets—and more specifically, to Isaiah, whose words are read on Yom Kippur day. Like Beerman himself, Isaiah did not aim to please. He railed against his contemporaries who deluded themselves into thinking that rote performance of external rituals (such as fasting) would lead to repentance. The mandated act, the prophet exclaimed, was "to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke" (Isa. 58:6). Calling out injustice was the prophet's—and the rabbi's—most important mission. In assuming this mantle, Beerman here took aim at the moral numbing that Jews had undergone, losing their sensitivity to the loss of life of others—and particularly to the millions of victims who were injured or killed in the Vietnam War.

Last year about this time I was given a cartoon depicting a bearded man marching with a large placard on which were inscribed the words "Repent now; avoid the Yom Kippur rush."

It was a great idea, but we all know it doesn't work. When it comes to repentance, we do not avoid the crowds, nor are we particularly as individualistic as we normally are. We prefer to take our repentance collectively. And so it has always been for us Jews.

It is the theme of repentance that sets this day apart from all others, and brings us together to observe it in a great show of strength. We Jews have always been small in number. We have never enjoyed political sophistication or power, with perhaps the exception of the Solomonic kingdom, 2,900 years ago. Nor has smallness of numbers, persecution, martyrdom, ancient or modern, transformed us into a morally superior people. We are and always have been incorrigibly human and fallible, prone to greed, sloth, and selfishness, and all the other vices both individually and collectively. But one of the greatest glories of our heritage is that it has not only never denied this, but in recognition of it has made this day of atonement—this Sabbath of Sabbaths, the day of repentance for the whole household of Israel—a day to seek repentance in all aspects of our lives where we negate by word or deed the ideals we claim to cherish. This is an annual reminder of the distance that separates our values and our conduct. It is a celebration of moral failure. It is therefore a call to conscience.

But a call to conscience implies that we have a conscience, that there are standards by which we measure our personal lives and our collective lives as well. We shrink from this responsibility. It implies, with Cassius, that the fault is not in our stars but in ourselves, that we are not the persons we pretend to be or wish to be.

Struggling with such questions is the professional task of the rabbi. Some of you would insist that that is what he is paid to do. Struggling with the question of conscience is the job of the rabbis, and their function on Yom Kippur is to serve as a guide to their congregation, to aid all of you through the process. To do this we try to make the vision contained in Judaism relevant to the world, as we perceive it. We cannot speak for you but only to you. We cannot even speak for *the* Jewish point of view. Out of the discipline of whatever learning and understanding of Judaism is ours as rabbis, we may say that this is *a* Jewish point of view that we bring before you. We try to speak with conviction and honesty. But to do so we must face the challenge of learning as we teach. And when we try to be serious about our task we know that what we say will not only comfort but also disturb. I have no burning desire to disturb you, upset you, but I am convinced that there are enough sedatives and tranquilizers traversing the bloodstreams of the members of this congregation alone, without adding to their number. There are enough clergy around to perform this role. As a model for this, one should go to the East Room of the White House on a Sunday morning, where each week two or three hundred invited guests, especially token priests and pastors . . . All of them solid, respectable, all of them giving their blessing to whatever it is that the President is doing.

Wherever it appears, in the White House, in churches or synagogues, this is not authentic religion. Wherever religion does no more than sedate and tranquilize, it becomes a drug, a snare, a delusion.

Some of you have been complaining that this pulpit and this temple are too political. A religion must be political. A religion divorced from politics is a religion divorced from life and from people. I am not talking here about partisan politics and supporting candidates in elections, which we never did, and shouldn't be doing. No, religion must be political because this world is political, for this world has to do with the decisions we make, the decisions that determine who shall live and who shall die, and how we live and how we die. A religion that does not help us, cajole us to confront the moral issues present in all of this, is another tranquilizer; it is at best a subordinate amusement. "It does not originate, it reacts." As C. Wright Mills once said, "It does not denounce, it adapts. It does not set forth new models of conduct, it imitates. It does not move the heart, it hardens it. It does not stir the conscience, it blunts the conscience."

A religion that blunts the conscience is deficient because it is rooted in selfishness. It is cowardly because it is afraid to define and expose what is morally atrocious. It is sterile because its passion is artificial. And further, those who want a Jewish religion which blunts the conscience would rob Judaism of what I believe is its moral grandeur, its heroic dignity, its power to exalt and condemn.

In light of these convictions what could a rabbi say to his congregation on the eve of the Day of Atonement? He might say that because of the serious expectations and demands of Yom Kippur, to confront our conscience, to seek repentance, to acknowledge our moral failure, the observance of Yom Kippur by this congregation is an appalling absurdity. From God's point of view it is an attempt to blackmail with a show of morality. The whole performance is intolerably pretentious. The smugness, the self-righteousness, the dogmatic refusal to admit your complicity in evil, the prayers, the fasting add up to sheer nothingness.

Lest you think I am being arrogant or blasphemous, what I have just said was a fairly accurate paraphrase of the words of the prophet Isaiah, which we will be hearing tomorrow morning. After a scathing denunciation of the day and its rituals Isaiah demanded freedom for all, and an end to poverty; he called for a radical change of both a social and personal nature. I can assure you that he displeased more than eighty percent of those who heard him, and had very few friends at the end of his sermon. That his words were preserved at all is a tribute to the passion for justice and truth that may weaken but never totally disappear from the Jewish people. Isaiah was himself something of an aristocrat, urbane, sophisticated, well-bred. He spoke in an era when there was a priesthood, a temple cult, animal sacrifices, and a nobility of considerable wealth, power, and privilege. He wasn't tactful; he didn't entertain. He stormed, warned, threatened, and promised hope only at the price of radical change. Hundreds of years later his book was included with

that collection of books we call the Jewish Bible; and centuries after that the rabbis took out of his writings this passage and ordained that it be read on Yom Kippur. Surely it is a tribute to the Jewish people that on the holiest of days this denunciation of the rituals of the day can be read, is read from year to year. I stand in awe, in reverence, in gratitude before such a heritage of truth.

But rabbis are not prophets, nor are they sons of prophets. Even the suggestion of an analogy of roles is infected with arrogance. Yet surely something of that spirit lives in all of us who have inherited it, it lives on whenever we insist that we will not settle for what is, but only for what can be. Whenever we resist the forces that blunt the conscience we keep alive something of the glory of that Jewish spirit. Whenever we insist that religion cannot be divorced from life and from people, we breathe life into the Jewish spirit. Whenever we seek repentance we acknowledge a yearning to be finer, nobler and thus give more life to that spirit. In Judaism, Leo Baeck once taught us, the highest possible standard is imposed upon us. "The ethical command with its ceaseless Thou shalt, stands before us and demands our life. Our ethical consciousness is a consciousness of an unending task. If we can feel a reverence toward this task, then we can feel a reverence toward ourselves."

So we are challenged not to blunt the conscience, but to awaken it, not to pretensions of virtue, but to the acknowledgement of moral failure.

The rabbi who ventures to lead his congregation up this path is aware that he is engaged in a dangerous mission. For the rabbi is the bearer of a dark secret. He knows he is the servant of a religion which was not fashioned in a comfortable suburb, a religion which rarely developed any passion for the dilemmas of the privileged and the affluent. The calf worshippers of old who stood at the foot of Sinai sincerely believed that they were worshipping the God of Israel. A rabbi who serves a congregation as fashionable and respectable as this one, feels more like an Aaron, the brother of Moses, who took the gold, fashioned the calf, and gave the people what they wanted. The rabbi who serves the enlightened and privileged knows he is the bearer of a religion whose God pants after the disinherited, the underprivileged, the lonely, the abandoned, the forgotten, the pursued. Its God is the God of the hunted, not of the hunter, of the defeated, not of the victor.

It is a religion not of pious sentimentality, a faith, Heine once said, "not of muscular boys like the beautiful Greeks, but of men, powerful, indomitable men, who fought and suffered [not on the battlefield of war], but on the battlefield of human thought." It was a religion whose most cogent and undisguised invectives were directed against those Jews who might imitate the boorish refinement of the gentile, their manner, their foods, their dress, their affectations, their games. Do you remember the riotous caricature of that in *Portnoy*, when Philip Roth wrote: "Let *them* (if you know who I mean) gorge themselves on anything and everything that moves, no matter how odious and abject the animal, no matter how grotesque or *schmutzig* or dumb the creature in question happens to be . . . all they know, these imbecilic eaters of the execrable, is to swagger, to insult, to sneer, and sooner or

later to hit. Oh, they also know how to go out into the woods with a gun, these geniuses, and kill innocent deer, deer who themselves nosh quietly on berries and grasses, and then go on their way, bothering no one . . . there isn't enough to eat in this world; they have to eat up the *deer* as well. They will eat *anything* anything they can get their big goy hands on! And the terrifying corollary, *they will do anything as well.*"

How does the teacher, the rabbi, or any knowledgeable Jew take this tradition and with it its literature of loneliness and pain, and the excruciating joy that is born out of being in the company of the insulted, the injured, and the defeated—how does one take all of this to guide his privileged congregation on the path that leads to the acknowledgement of moral failure, the awakening of conscience? How does the rabbi lead them through the well-manicured wilderness of their own lives, the lack of care, the lack of sensitivity to wives, husbands, children? How shall he lead them through the many valleys of neglect, a fellow Jew crying out for help in the Soviet Union, in Israel, in America itself? How shall he lead them through the enormous neighborhoods of poverty, racial injustice, urban decay—a neighborhood that grows and festers with each passing day? How shall he lead them past a million charred and mangled bodies of Vietnamese men, women, and children, twelve million more wounded or homeless, all victims of the soldiers and airmen and the bombs, and the bullets, and the napalm you and the rabbi have paid for? At this very moment, as we meet, even on this Sabbath of Sabbaths, our money kills . . . (the air grows colder on this path, very cold).

Men who kill, we have come to learn—Jews who kill, Arabs who kill, Americans and Vietnamese who kill, Germans who killed, all of them—we have come to learn, undergo a psychic numbing. No great psychological work, Dr. Robert Lifton says, is needed in order to avoid feeling the suffering of one's victim. Technologically distanced from those they kill, our young American pilots are preoccupied only with efficiency and performance. But this psychic numbing affects all of us. We have been brought to the point of exhaustion, an exhaustion of sensibility—it is boring and tiring to think about the war, more tiring than to wage it. The pilots who deliver the bombs on the Vietnamese at Quang Tri or Hanoi are as undisturbed as the postmen who deliver letters to our homes. The air war is a powerful but nonetheless boring symbol of the numbed violence that dominates our time.

How shall the rabbi lead his congregation through this freezing climate when numbing has set in, where Jewish hearts respond only to the terror that brings Jewish death? Are there still Jewish hearts that can beat with compassion for everything that lives, that can be passionately concerned for the defense of human life—Arab and Jew, American and Vietnamese—that can feel the terrible sorrow of being a part of the great fellowship of anguish? Who without condoning murder, or being passive before it, can still comprehend that we are all victims and executioners, those who kill, those who are killed, those who pay for the killing, and those who do it?

We all need to pray for forgiveness for one another, and nothing I know expresses that prayer better than these words of Daniel Berrigan:

We pray the God of peace
 And of unity
 And of decency for all men,
 For the victims
 And the executioners,
 For those who stand in court as judged
 And as judging,
 For those who endure our jails,
 And our stockades
 And our trenches
 And our army depots
 And our ships,
 Hastening on the works of destruction.
 Let us pray for all those
 Who lie under bombs,
 And for those who dispatch them,
 And for those who make them;
 Let us pray for the innocent,
 For the villagers,
 And for the soldiers,
 And for those who go to kill
 And are killed
 Without ever knowing the alternatives
 That have awakened in us.
 Let us pray for those
 Who are powerful
 And for those who are powerless;

The path that leads to repentance is the path of yearning for the beautification of all existence. The path that leads to repentance is a winding way, overgrown with the thorns and thistles of hatred and suspicion, and it leads through a wilderness of doubt and despair. Only those whose faith in human decency is unlimited by fences of national, racial, ethnic, or religious differences, only they may dare to tread this path. But the reward will be equal to the effort, for the path leads to the very summit of our hopes. And when we have at last climbed to the top and by our own effort ascended the highest peak, then God will show us his vision of the future, for only then will we deserve to see it. On that day mankind will be cleansed from its sins and will sing a hymn of victory for the human spirit.

COMMENTARY BY RABBI SHARON BROUS

“The prophet’s word,” Heschel wrote, “is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from Heaven . . .” What happens when a chasm grows between the rabbi and his congregation? When he lies awake at night, tormented by the blast from Heaven, the call of injustice from the street, but they would rather not be bothered? Who among us is willing to lead a flock out of the comfort of carefully manicured and rarified lives into the anguish? Who is willing to trouble the waters? Heschel learned from Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Isaiah that the prophet’s duty is to speak truth, *whether the people hear or refuse to hear*. But rather than take this call to heart, we read prophetic excoriations Shabbat morning in lilted tones, troubled only when the reader takes too long or stumbles over the musical notes. We, the descendants of prophets, have forgotten our calling. We have become convinced that our primary job is to not lose our job.

Leonard Beerman never forgot. He knew and lived that call of the prophet, long before it was fashionable. He did it because he knew that we needed it—not only his congregation, not only the Jewish people, but all who take religion seriously. “Wherever religion does no more than sedate and tranquilize,” he wrote, “it becomes a drug, a snare, a delusion.” His insistence that we fight not to blunt the conscience, but *to awaken it* rings out nearly half a century later. If only we would listen.