

ON THE DEATH OF PRESIDENT KENNEDY

(Delivered 7½ hours after his death, Friday, November 22nd,
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Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard

Short hours ago, the President of the United States was slain by an assassin, even as thousands crowded the streets of Dallas to pay him tribute. He was killed with a high-powered long-distance rifle aimed by an, as yet, unknown person. The first news reports were greeted by American citizens with a mixture of shock and incredulity. How is it possible to accept in a moment the sudden violent death of one possessed of so much vitality. Some people I know reacted as if their own father had died. Some acted as if nothing had happened. How could they possibly accept so fantastic a report?

Later, as reports began to come in that the President was not killed, but merely wounded, we began to hope. Surely, the man who had survived the battles of wartime would win in his battle with a bullet. Such optimism was not encouraged for long. Before two o'clock, we knew the harsh reality. By this time, we had the opportunity to accomodate ourselves to this awesome possibility. Now, we were able to accept the fact that he was dead. Now, he was really dead, because we were able to admit it to ourselves.

The murder of the President of the United States is an insult to and an attack on all Americans. My 8 year old son came home and said, "I'd like to stab the guy who killed him." The secret service men who were so near were filled with despair and self-incrimination. How could they have permitted it to happen? Shouldn't we outlaw firearms? How could we have abused this man who fought hard for many things that were worthwhile and decent?"

Gradually, some of us realized that we had been participants in a fairy tale. The fairy tale was about a young prince, handsome and good, who was married to a beautiful princess named Jacqueline, who was cultured and kind. The prince and princess had a lovely young girl named Carolyn who was beloved of kings and queens, and there was a son named John Jr. who captured more hearts than his father and mother. How we loved to hear about these people and to think that nothing could happen to such a wonderful family. But in a short while, the princess lost a new-born child, and the prince lay dead. The fairy tale was over. Even handsome princes and beautiful princesses face the daily dangers of life, and the line between happiness and sorrow is a thin one. Those who laugh today may cry tomorrow, just as those who cry today can reap happiness on the morrow. Yes, even for the high born, there is no escape from the alternations and lashings of life.

For some of us, the news of John Kennedy's unnecessary death brought a feeling near to panic. "What will happen to us now?", we asked. "Our leader is gone, and, surely, there is no one else who can lead as well." Others of us, who still remember the death of Franklin Roosevelt in the midst of terrible war, were reassured by the fact that just as America lived through that crisis, so it will live through this one. The great question before us is not really, "How can we go on, but in what manner shall we conduct ourselves in the future?"

Listening to the radio reports on this inconceivable crime, I heard one announcer say, "Why was Kennedy killed? Perhaps we'll never know!" I am afraid I have some strong feeling already as to why he was killed.

In a recent issue of the "Miami News", Editor Bill Baggs spoke of a rising swell of hatred being organized against the President. His opponents were calling him a "nigger-lover", and the sponsor of "creeping socialism", which is the next thing to Communism. Only today, I received a local political newspaper entitled "Today's World", which charges Kennedy with socialistic inclinations and which suggests that anyone who supports federal intervention to guarantee civil rights for negroes is following the communist party-line. This handsome looking newspaper suggests that other communist-like tactics are United Nations efforts for peaceful co-existence and the outlawing of nuclear weapons. The paper claims to be an organ for those inclined towards political conservatism. It quite obviously is nothing of the kind. It is a hate sheet, pure and simple. If this material is being widely circulated in Miami, a semi-enlightened city, you can imagine what is being circulated in Jackson, Mississippi, in Shreveport, Louisiana, and in Dallas, Texas.

People in the deep South have been the most deeply opposed to Kennedy. In the South, he has been bitterly attacked by racists, by religious fanatics, and by political reactionaries. After all, it is in the Kennedy regime that the developing Negro revolution for equal rights has gotten its greatest impetus. It is in the Kennedy regime that the Supreme Court has outlawed Bible reading in the public schools. And it is in the Kennedy regime that a treaty was made with the Soviet Union outlawing the testing of Atomic bombs in the atmosphere. This kind of movement towards equality and peace is frustrating and maddening to the step-on-em and stamp-em-out boys, many of whom are raised in the deep South. I ought to know, for I am a Southerner.

When I was in the army in Mississippi in the Dixie or Southern Division, I heard this kind of question put to an enlisted man who had come home from furlough in Alabama, "How are you, Mac", asked his colleague, "How was the leave? How many niggers did you kill?" Whereupon Mac would tell the story of how he had driven his car through the negro section of town at dark and just missed knocking down some swarthy figure which moved out of the way at the wrong time. We underestimate the hatred and anger of some Southerners whose whole plan of life calls for the subjugation of the Negro, so that the poor white can have some reason to think that he is worthwhile. In the twisted mind of the hate-monger, there is little difference between the nigger and the nigger-lover. The image of President Kennedy had become joined, in the eyes of the prejudiced Southerner, to the Negro drive for freedom. And so, Meger Evers, head of the NAACP in Mississippi and President Kennedy, the liberal Democrat from Massachusetts, were each shot, without warning, with the same kind of long-distance rifle. This could be mere coincidence. It may not be. We know one thing. Both men were killed by cowards with hate-filled hearts.

It is said of Abraham Lincoln that he did not choose to become the advocate of the anti-slavery movement, but he had no choice. The time had come for an end to slavery in America. It has been said of Kennedy that he did not choose to become the political sponsor of Negro civil rights in America, but he had only the choice of working with the Negroes or opposing them. He chose, to his credit, to work with them. In so doing, he may have chosen for himself the same fate that came to Abraham Lincoln.

Let no one think that the crime could not have occurred in the North. The North, too, has its share of frustrated and hate-hoarding souls. I have only recently returned from Chicago where it was my privilege to speak to several enlightened cab-drivers of that progressive city. Byron Cherkas, our Vice-President, was with me in a cab when we chanced to say something about the Negroes. Uninvited, the cab-driver took up the subject and informed us that the Negroes were asking for too much. He went on to say that in his opinion, the only way to halt the Negroes was war. "We have to kill about half of them, he said, in order to make them come to their senses." This was a Northern white man, educated to believe that the Negro could increase his rights only at the expense of the poor white man. My friends, the death of the President of the United States is not an isolated incident. We live in a time when an old way of life is dying and a new way of life is a-borning. We live in a time of revolution. We thought we were conducting that revolution for the rights of all men, bloodlessly, but we were not entirely right.

If the death of the President is warning enough to us that the road back to the jungle is ever so short, then his death will not have been in vain. If his death can incite us to that kind of political and social action which will tear power away from the haters, then his death will save many of us from like danger.

The road back to the jungle is all too brief. Germans stood at this kind of cross-road in the early days of Adolph Hitler. First, people were shot in the back with long-range rifles. Then, when the public did not arise in its fury, the rifles became pistols at close range; and, finally, the people dared not organize opposition. I am not suggesting to you that a particular man similar to Adolph Hitler is standing in the wings waiting to ride to glory in America. I am saying that there are a thousand Adolph Hitlers in America who feed on lies and prejudice and hatred, who would not hesitate to resort to violence to accomplish their ends. If one of them, and, if such a group is not behind this assassination of the President, then my story is still true symbolically, because these forces do exist in America! The growing areas of understanding among religionists and the increasing cooperation among nations is a threat to the survival of the fundamentalists among the racists, the religionists, and the nationalists. The fundamentalists are clearly becoming more desperate as the leaders of our nation, whether Republican or Democrat, move together on broad humanitarian issues.

What will happen in America now that our President has been so cruelly taken from us? Two things can happen. On the one hand, the forces of hate can seize upon an inertia that will come upon a stunned Washington to defeat civil rights legislation and to move to power in their local communities, or, secondly, the country will experience such revulsion against what has taken place that we will move forward with even greater speed towards the general objectives which Kennedy has outlined for us. It is interesting that a Southerner, Lyndon Johnson, is now the President. He is not to be confused with the Southerners who have refused to recognize the backwardness of their region. Johnson belongs to that breed of Texas politicians who, like Sam Rayburn, have worked cooperatively alongside liberal Presidents like Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy. It may well be that the coming of a Southerner to the White House will forestall the continued development of racist and extremist political groups in the South. Alabama's Governor Wallace had been able to paint Kennedy as a communistic Northerner who was trying to undermine the ancient southern way of life. Johnson, who is beloved by many Southerners, may be just the man to lead the South out of its dilemma. He may be just the man we need to unify the country when it has been showing signs of intense factionalism. It is impossible to foretell the future, but we have every right to hope.

At the very least, this moment has to be a moment of rededication for each of us. A militant humanitarian leader has been snuffed out. We have to make certain that his death does not diminish the forces working towards the ends we have associated with him. I am not one of those who believes that even the greatest leader is irreplaceable. The answer to the question, "What will happen now?", lies with us. We live in a country where individual voters grouped together can see to it that their leaders follow the policy they desire. If we are for peace with honor, our new President will work to that end, if we support him. If we are for support of the long-suffering minorities, our new President will work in that direction, if we put him on notice. If we are for foreign aid to the underprivileged nations, then our leaders will work to that end, if we bring appropriate pressure to bear.

The vibrant memory of our young and dynamic President, with his cultured and attractive wife and his precious little children, will not soon vanish from our midst. We are entitled to our share of tears and to our share of anger for what has happened. The one thing we cannot afford, however, is inertia. The basic humanitarian objectives of the Kennedy regime are significant to all men of good-will. Whether we are Republicans or Democrats, Northerners or Southerners, we will all want to say to President Johnson what God said to Joshua after the death of Moses. We will want to say, "Chazak V'Amatz, -- Be strong and of good courage, for we the people of America intend to be both strong and courageous to the end that what has happened today may never happen again!"