

TERRORISM IN MUNICH

1972

(Are The Jews Different?)

A sermon given by Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard, at Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida, Rosh Ha-Shanah eve, 5733, September, 1972, a few days after the massacre of the Israeli Olympic Team by Arab terrorists in Munich.

When I heard on television of the killing of the Israeli Olympic Team, for some reason, I thought of those young collegians who have been saying to me repeatedly of late, "We Jews are just like everybody else". It seems to me there is, at least, one difference between Jews and other people and that is that we have been so often singled out for suffering. It almost seemed as though all the nations of the world assembled their best young men in Munich for the purpose of watching the grand tragedy which involved one group, the Jewish people. Consequently, if I were a young collegian following the new line, "Everybody is alike", I think I would have some second thoughts after what happened in Munich.

To be sure, Hitler killed millions of people other than the Jews in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but he singled out the Jews for systematic destruction. In 1492, "When Columbus sailed the ocean blue", as the textbooks tell us, it was the Jews who were singled out by the Catholic Church in Spain and offered one of two choices, conversion or the guillotine. Apparently, that is why so many Jews financed Columbus' voyage to the new world and why it is suspected (along with other reasons) that he himself was of Jewish ancestry. If you saw "Fiddler on the Roof", you know it tells, among other things, of the persecution of Jewish villagers in Russia. We used to call this kind of persecution a "pogrom". The Russians did not afflict other peoples with these periodic destructive visitations; they concentrated on the Jews because they refused to give up their faith for the majority faith. Similarly, Hitler identified the Jews as the people which most clearly opposed his doctrines and methods. The evidence of history indicates that the Jews were selected for persecution, because they were a stubborn people, "a stiff-necked people", who refused to give up their way of life and their perspective of life, when it would have been to their advantage to do just that. If I were a young collegian, I would not be able to walk away from those who were murdered in Munich or in Auschwitz without feeling that I had betrayed my courageous ancestors who had every right to depend on my loyalty. Surely, such extreme suffering cannot be permitted to be in vain; yet if I, as a Jew, walk away from their suffering, it is reduced to meaninglessness. We Jews owe this awesome suffering some kind of positive response, or the whole world has no meaning!

CONVERTING THE SUFFERING MEANINGFULLY

There are other ways, of course, in which the Jews might be considered a "different" people. For example, no people has such a genius for converting suffering into a meaningful experience. When the Hebrews were in exile in Babylonia in the 6th Century B.C., it was the prophet Isaiah who said to the people. "You are not suffering without reason; the whole world will learn from your experience". It was he who developed the idea of "the suffering servant", the idea that someone must be willing to suffer while striving for justice, so that God's purposes might be accomplished. Isaiah taught that through the heroic experiences of the Jewish people, the other nations (the goyim) were to be "healed" of their diseases. It was Isaiah's message that the world might learn something about man's inhumanity to man, if we Jews would only persevere and continue to live by the ideals of our fathers. Isn't this what the Jews are trying to do in the State of Israel today? It was a non-Jew who said, "If the Jews can make it in Israel, after thousands of years of suffering, maybe there is hope for the rest of us."

When Jews come home from a cemetery, they say, as you know, "L'Chayyim". We take a little "schnapps" (liquor or wine), and we drink a toast "To Life". We do this not because we try to conceal our mourning and sadness. On the contrary, the whole purpose of the "shiva" or mourning period is to encourage the release of emotion. Our Jewish tradition teaches, "It is good to cry", but it also encourages us, in the midst of our sorrow, to say, "L'Chayyim - To Life". Our religion asks us to affirm the goodness of life even in the midst of suffering. We call a cemetery a "Base Chayyim, a House of Life", because we do not believe that those who are dead are completely cut off from those who are their descendants and who carry on in their place.

How did the Jews get the courage to go on after the liquidation of six million of their people by Hitler, if the dead did not lend their strength to the few who escaped? When has the world seen such a conversion of suffering into hope and creativity as one witnesses in the modern State of Israel? When the Jews were forced to leave Spain in arguish in 1492, they went to Italy and to Holland, to England and to France, and built in each of these countries new Jewish communities which were as energetic and as successful as the vanished communities in Spain. Such has been the repeated pattern of our endless search for a spot on this earth where Jews would be welcome.

We have only to look at the holiday of Purim to learn that we Jews have a genius for converting a sad experience into a party. Thousands of years ago, the Persians persecuted the Jews who were in exile there, and so what do we do each year when we tell that story contained in the Book of Esther? We have a party; it's Purim time! We have converted the memory of that persecution into a Mardi Gras. One period of suffering - a thousand years of parties. Our fathers were slaves in Egypt. Do we mourn constantly over that fact? No, we have converted the memory of that slavery into a Seder, and we have sung a thousand times a thousand songs down through the ages, rejoic-

ing over our escape into freedom. In what other church or House of God can you have a parade with flags waving, as we do on Simchat Torah, as we march behind the Torahs? When Jews have a "simcha" a celebration, it is not just a celebration, it is "A Celebration - A Celebration". That is perhaps why a Bar Mitzvah party is not just a little party; the happiness of the occasion is intensified by the element of sadness that is never quite absent from the Jewish memory. That's why a Jewish wedding is not just a wedding. The energy of an ocean of tears is re-cycled into the celebration. Yes, the Jews have a genius for enjoying life, in spite of their suffering. Our Rabbis have never ceased to call attention to the Book of Genesis which informs us that after God created the world, "He saw that it was good", GOOD. Nothing that has happened to us has led to a dilution of this basic attitude of the Jewish people about life; it is, or ought to be, good.

It does seem that the Jewish people is different from other people, if only in that we have been called on to show a courage unparalleled by any other people. Perhaps the story that best exemplifies the Jewish people is to be found in the Bible. When our fathers had fled Egypt and stood on the edge of the so-called "Red" Sea and saw the chariots of the Egyptians approaching them, they understandably trembled in fear and complained to Moses. Moses, in turn, complained to God, and God said to Moses, "Why criest thou unto Me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward!" And, the text tells us, they went forward - into the sea! Perhaps God caused the sea to part for them, but, then again, perhaps their audacity compelled the sea to retreat in astonishment and admiration. We must conclude that while we Jews have suffered more than other peoples, we are different, also, because we have a genius for converting suffering into celebration and into victory.

SOURCE OF THE WORLD'S GOALS

There is at least, another way in which the Jews are different, and that is in the kind of contribution we have made to the world. How can one say the Jews are not different from other people, when being in number less than one half of one percent of the population of the world, we have given 12 percent of the Nobel Prize winners? How can one say that the Jews are not different, when it is we, and not others, who gave the world its Ten Commandments? Who gave the world the teaching, "Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself"? Who gave the world the goal inscribed on the Isaiah wall of the United Nations, "Men shall beat their swords into plowshares...and learn war no more"? It is by no accident that the teaching on the Statue of Liberty was written by a Jewess. There, in the center of New York Harbor the United States proclaims, through the Statue, to all the world, "Give me your tired and your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Give these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door." Great American words written by a great American Jewess (Emma Lazarus), in the spirit of Israel, born out of the experiences of the suffering Jewish immigrants of the 1890s. What people, but the Jews, gave the United States of America the slogan that is on its Liberty Bell? "Proclaim Liberty Unto the Land and To All the Inhabitants Thereof", reads the inscription on the Bell. It comes from our Bible and from our historic experience in liberating the slaves. The goals of America and the goals of the United Nations are taken from the Jewish

people, and that alone makes us something of a unique people.

We are unique, also, because ours is a religion which is unfolding and developing and not closed. It is we who have given the world the Messianic idea of a future time when men shall live in peace and justice. Especially in Reform Judaism, we have taught that no one man will save us, but we are all together the Messiah. We teach that there is a little bit of the Messiah in each human being, not only among the Jews, but among the Christians, the Mohammedans and the atheists, among the North Viet-Nameese and the South Viet-Nameese, and among the Soviets and the Japanese. Because there is a little bit of the Messiah in all of us, the Messiah will "Come" only when we have put all of these pieces together to create the Messianic Age. What people but the Jews has given such a dynamic concept to the world, such a noble task for all men to burden, to accept and to work for?

"PRISONERS OF HOPE"

It is part of the Jewish paradox that while we have been singled out for suffering, we have not, in one significant way, suffered as much as some peoples. It is true that we suffered through Auschwitz, but not all Jews were killed there, and there have been peoples which have been completely wiped out in one experience. Jews have suffered for so long, because we have lived for so long. Arameans do not suffer anymore. The Moabites do not suffer anymore. The Edomites are not suffering. These contemporary nations of the Biblical Hebrews are non-existent. It is only the people that survives which suffers, because to live is to be exposed to the possibility of suffering. The Jews have been victorious over Time, and that is why we have been called "The Eternal People".

It was, after all, not the Jews who gave the world a weighted sense of tragedy. It was the Greeks who developed the myths involving man's helplessness and hopelessness. Ours is a tone of optimism. We might call this tone the spirit of "Af-al-pi-chayn," which means, "in spite of everything." Af-al-pi-chayn, in spite of everything, we Jews will not say that history has no meaning. In spite of everything, we will not say that human life has no purpose. In spite of everything, we will not say there is no God. In spite of everything, we will not say that man is evil, that he can never hope to succeed, and that he can never build the good society on earth. On the contrary, we affirm the opposite of all of these negatives. As one Hebrew writer has said, "We are 'asiray tikvah'", we are "prisoners of hope". That makes us different from other people. As one poetess has said, "Only those incredulous of despair beat upwards to God's throne." Only those who don't give up, no matter what, celebrate the ultimate victories.

I would like to conclude with a statement which is scrawled, we are told, in the basement of a home in Germany, where a refugee from Hitler spent endless months, hoping that by the end of the war he might be saved. We do not know who that Jewish person was, but we do have his legacy. It was scrawled on the basement wall, and it goes something like this, "I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in God, even when He does not seem to answer." The Jews are different from other people.