

"The Sun is Setting"
The Need to Return - (T'SHUVAH)

A High Holiday Sermon, Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard
Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida, 1972, 5733

Both the Greeks and the Hebrews, the two great peoples of ancient times, artistically developed myths to teach important truths to their citizens. A myth is a story which is generally and universally true, even if it never happened in history. There is a story which comes to us from the Russian writer, Tolstoy, which, I am convinced, is a significant myth for American society in the Twentieth Century. The story concerns a poor peasant who performed a service for his king. In return, the king made a bargain with the peasant. The king promised the peasant all the land he could walk on between sunrise and sunset. There was only one condition to the bargain. The peasant would have to be back at the designated starting point before sunset. Otherwise, all the land he had claimed would be lost.

On the day agreed upon, the peasant, the king, and hundreds of spectators came to the starting point at sunrise. The peasant dashed off like a deer, determined to claim as much land as he could. On and on he ran, and as he ran, he became more and more excited at the knowledge that every time he put his foot down, he became richer. By noon-time, the peasant had encompassed thousands of acres, and he was tiring, but he pressed onward. By three o'clock, he had traveled through ten thousand acres, and he knew in the back of his mind, he had to save enough strength to get back before sunset. Still, he could not bear the thought of not claiming for his very own all the beautiful land he saw about him.

Finally, when the peasant saw the sun in the lower quadrant of the heavens, he reluctantly turned back. With all of his might, he pushed his exhausted body back towards the starting line. His chest heaved and burned. His heart pounded in his throat. He could scarcely raise his legs, which seemed to be weighted down with iron. On and on he dragged himself, until, as the sun set, he stumbled and died, just short of his goal.

This myth can be related to most human societies, but it has a direct application to middle class Americans who, like the peasant, have a real opportunity to move up on the economic scale. Since most Jews are in the American middle class, we might say that the story has a special application for American Jews. There was a time when the Jewish myth was the story of "Bunche Schweig", the all suffering, uncomplaining, impoverished saint who died and went to heaven and was told that he could have anything he wanted, anything-at all. To the amazement and admiration of all the assembled angels, Bunche Schweig answered, "Well, if you really mean it, I would like to have each day a fresh roll with butter." If once, the Jewish hero was the saint who made the most of poverty but who lived with dignity and integrity, that time is certainly gone, for America is like the king who offered the peasant the chance to be unbelievably wealthy, and the Jew, coming from his impoverished European background, is like the peasant who rises to the challenge with such zeal that he destroys himself in the process. I am not one of those who teach that it is good to be poor, but when Jews were the poorest of the poor in Europe, they did not lose their identification as a people of moral character, and they were firmly committed to Judaism. In view of what is happening to many American Jews, it does seem that it is increasingly difficult

to be rich and to be committed to Jewish values. It does seem to be increasingly difficult to be affluent and to be committed to the survival of the Jewish people.

No Longer Discriminating

ii It seems fairly clear that as Jews have become wealthier, they and their children have become increasingly unhappy, more demanding of materialistic possessions, more tolerant of violence, more alcohol- or drug-oriented, less family-oriented and less group-oriented. Short years ago, the thousands of affluent Jewish children, who fled to Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, looked for comfort and meaning in every garret and gutter, but they did not look to Judaism. I trust that we are past the stage of blaming the younger generation entirely for their problems. We have helped to give them their problems, but we, like they, are also victims of the society and times in which we live, for it is a time when leaving home base is a compulsion. It is a time for moving out to know and devour the world. It is a time when people have forgotten the secret of looking backward and inward in order to claim oneself.

Emerson once wrote, "Each man is a collecting principle, gathering more of himself to himself." Alas, this is not true in our society. The Jew has forgotten how to sort and how to choose. Now he says, "Everything is of equal value" and "Anything Goes." For Jews, this great levelling is a catastrophe. It means we have lost our sense of elitehood and noblesse oblige. It means that we have forgotten how to be different. It means that we now longer affirm our special task to serve as a catalyst in man's effort to live nobly.

There was a time when a Jew did something unethical, or when he did something contrary to the teaching that man is created in the image of God, that the entire Jewish community would rise up and say "Me Ture Nicht," A Jew does not do that". Alas, there seems to be no deed, however low, which a Jew does not do here in America. Take, for example, a man named Clifford Irving. Clifford Irving is the novelist who tried to perpetrate the fraud concerning the Howard Hughes biography. Long before he was caught by the police, Irving had made certain that he could not successfully retrace his steps. Like the peasant in Tolstoy's story, Irving could not restrain himself from trying to digest all the pleasures he saw about him in life. He was a lover to many women, each of whom he deceived, and he unscrupulously took money from friends and business acquaintances without accountability. In the indiscriminating enjoyment of life's bounties, in his hedonistic style of living, Irving progressively lost his Jewish soul and made certain his failure to return to the starting point of his Jewishness. Long before the sun sets on his physical life, he is empty of any spiritual identity.

Now, some of us will say, "Clifford Irving was a fool. He was naive." We might think, "It's not that his goals were wrong, It's simply that he tried to bite off too much and didn't know enough to quit while he was ahead." We are all so sure that we know when to quit, when to turn back to the starting point. We are all so confident that when we choose to stop the lying and the cheating and the

licentiousness, we can do so and return home to find it just as it was; but the wise person knows that Irving's story, like Tolstoy's story, is meant for him. With each step that we take away from our cultural and spiritual Jewish identity, it becomes harder to return. With each temporarily satisfying experience in the world of passing delights, we are lured further and further away from our Jewish ethical tradition and from our perspective of the noble human.

"Good-bye Columbus"

Clifford Irving is an example of a man cut off from his roots, a self-styled internationalist with loyalty to no group, to no country, and to no creed. There are many Jews in America, however, who find it difficult to remember from whence they came and to what goals, as Jews, they ought to be committed. They look neither back to Sinai, to our moral treasury, nor forward to the messianic day, to our mission to help shape the world as God would have it. Take, for example, the story of Mr. Greenberg, a man who lives in a city other than our own. Mr. Greenberg recently spent \$35,000 on the wedding of his daughter. I have heard a first hand description of the wedding by the Rabbi who officiated. I was told that in all of the artistic display of the finest in the gourmet culinary art, there was little time and space for the ceremony itself. The Rabbi was advised to come to the wedding at eight P.M. He arrived on time but discovered that this was the time for the reception, not for the ceremony. The ceremony was to come later. Along with the other guests, the Rabbi was ushered upstairs to a large room where he observed the grandest arrangement of foods that he had ever seen. There were foods from all lands in copious quantities, artistically arranged, enough to have fed twice the number of people who were present. In between the partaking of the exotic dishes, the guests were invited to quench their thirst at a multiplicity of bars that were spread throughout the hall. Two hours later, the somewhat intoxicated and over-stuffed guests were directed to the chapel where the wedding itself was to take place. Already an anti-climax, the ceremony was performed like an incidental interlude between two more significant events. Following the ceremony, the party returned to the scene of their previous orgy to choose from amongst three main courses. Each individual's choice of entree was then cooked to order. Dinner was served around 11:30 P.M., but the marathon in digestive consumption was far from over. The Rabbi left shortly after the main course, but he tells me that he heard from others that at 4 A.M. a huge cart of Viennese delicacies was brought in for an early morning snack. He was informed that his display was more elegant than anything that had preceded it.

Now, I have no possible objection that Mr. Greenberg spent \$35,000 at this wedding, provided, of course, that he could afford it, and provided that he gave generously to charity in honor of the occasion. There was, however, no talk that Mr. Greenberg gave a dollar to anyone, and he obviously was not the kind to practice the Jewish virtue of *Matan B'Sayter*, "Giving in secret." Recently, a man who had survived the German concentration camps, and who had become wealthy, gave a wedding in Israel which cost much more than Mr. Greenberg's wedding, but the refugee gave an equal amount to the Combined Jewish Appeal before the wedding. If one can afford it, it is not un-Jewish to spend

one's money on luxuries, but it is un-Jewish to spend much on luxuries, when one is not at least equally generous in supporting charitable institutions.

I say to you that there is a little of Mr. Greenberg in all of us who bathe in the lap of American affluence, and it is possible for us to drown, Jewishly and spiritually speaking, in the ocean of plentitude. When I see evidences of conspicuous waste amongst our fellow Jews, I wonder, first, how much is this family giving to the Temple, to the CJA, to the United Fund, to the starving around the world? And I think of the teaching of the prophet, Micah, who proclaimed to the insensitive rich of his day, "Woe unto you who lie upon your couches of luxury and drink wine in elaborate bowls, and anoint yourself with costly ointments, and dress in ornate clothes and wear costly jewelry but are not grieved for the affliction of the poor!" Never have Jews had more money than they have in America today. Never have we controlled so much power, in this sense, yet never have we been more uncertain as to what to do with our wealth. Since most of our parents, or, at least, our grandparents, were pitifully poor, we haven't yet learned that wealth brings with it new responsibilities, just as greater freedom requires greater discipline. Jews have learned over thousands of years how to adjust to poverty, but our unity and cohesiveness may be dissipated in a few decades, if we don't learn quickly how to adjust to affluence.

The Need to Turn Back Forcefully

Now, most of us do not do things that contradict our prophetic background because we are deliberately mean or uncharitable. Most of us are not rebels; we are drifters. We float with the tide. It is fashionable today to give big parties, so we do it. This is part of the new life style, or we might say, part of the new ritual. It is not fashionable today to work for the new Beth Am Teen-Age Building, so we don't want to be pioneers or to break with the pattern. It is the fad to go to London for the summer, so we go to London. It is not the fad to work for Sisterhood, or for the National Council of Jewish Women, or for the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, or for Reform Judaism, or for Haddasah, so we don't. We follow the new ritual of lighting the Bar Mitzvah cake with pious scrutiny, but we don't light Friday night candles as an act of identifying with our people. We are drifters most of us, and the drift is progressively away from the Jewish perspective of life as a sacred trust, and we may not be able to get back before sundown.

Recently, a young man, about 24 years old, came to see me and said, "Rabbi, I want to get back. I have been through it all", he said, "The drug culture, the sex culture, and the mystic culture, and, now, I'm turning back". This was a wise young man, so he knew that if he were to turn back successfully, he had to turn back with all his heart and soul. If he was going to make it at all, he had to turn back forcefully. So he said to me, "Rabbi, I am going to Israel to

live and to study Torah." He went to Israel, enrolled at an Orthodox Yeshivah, and studied Torah in the most traditional manner. After six months of this, he has left the Yeshivah, convinced that he wants to be a committed Jew. He has found peace and he is staying in Israel. Now, I am not recommending that all of us go to Israel to study in an Orthodox Yeshivah, but I want you to recognize the healthy-mindedness of this young man's decision. He understood that he had to make a severe departure from his day-to-day living, if he were to be successful in stopping his drifting. You also have to make some kind of severe departure from your present style of living, if you are to survive as a Jew.

Whatever you think of this young man's action, you must agree with his decision that one cannot be a Jew without a profound knowledge of what it means to be Jewish. We have learned as the result of our conversion classes that after we have given the prospective converts merely a survey knowledge of Judaism, they are already much more informed than their partner born into the faith. The average American Jew cannot re-establish his identity with his faith by reading one book about Judaism. He must read many books. He must become as determined about his study as he is about improving his golf or tennis game or about making that next business deal. The average American Jew, caught up, as he is, in the mire of materialism, cannot begin the process of "T'Shuvah" or "Return" by giving a little to charity. What is needed is a violent turn-about. He must give a great deal to charity, for only in the forceful (if painful) thrust towards the goal will he be able to reverse his momentum.

We have prepared for you a list of suggested books which will help you return to the path of study. That list will be published in the "Commentator" in the near future. To help you in your return to Judaism, we are planning an unusual Adult Education Program on Tuesday evenings beginning in October and, of course, our Friday night and Saturday morning Services all involve teaching and learning as a matter of course. Your involvement in these things - in your self-study program or in the Temple programming or both will be a measure of your desire to be a Jew. You will be the best witness for your own desire; but your children will be watching also.

In a way, we stand today in a position similar to that of Moses who ran away from Egypt while his brothers continued to suffer there. The Bible records that one day, while enjoying the tranquil life of the shepherd, Moses saw a strange sight. He saw a bush burning, but, marvelously, the bush was not consumed. Then, he seemed to hear a voice saying, "Moses, you can't stay here living the protected life while your brothers suffer. Go back to Egypt and do what you have to do to help them." We all know that Moses made that return, even though he was threatened with death. We know that it was he who helped establish those Jewish institutions which have survived to this day, although they are now threatened by indifference and lack of support.

As Moses heard the voice of God calling him, so each of us who has sensitive ears can hear that same voice proclaiming, "Go back to serve your brothers." To be sure, our brothers need our help in Israel, in Russia, and here in our own community, but we must understand that the voice proclaims another thing to us, just as it did to Moses. The voice also proclaims, "Return to yourself, for if you do not return to your better self, you will surely die."

The recently deceased chief Rabbi of Israel, Abraham Kook, once wrote, "...Should he (the Jew) abandon his search (for fulfillment from Jewish sources) and wander about seeking water from wells which are not really his, then, though he draw water as much as the ocean, and take from streams in every part of the earth, yet will he not find peace, for like a bird who has wandered from his nest, so is the man who wanders from his place."

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The place of the Jew is where compassion dwells - not where self-indulgence dwells. The nest of the Jew is where mercy dwells, not where there is a passion for luxurious living. Eyes grown fat with envy soon grow dim, and ears grown fat with small talk soon grow deaf, and the heart grown fat by satiating its physical desires, soon pumps no more. Before you lose altogether the ability to see and hear and feel, turn back, because the sun is setting.

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