

THE THREE ASPECTS OF REVERENCE -
RITUALISM, MYSTICISM AND ETHICS

Sermon by Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard
for Rosh Hashanah Evening, 5737-1976

The holiday of Rosh Hashanah is not just another holy day to the Jewish people. It has an aspect of reverence or awe which is not matched by other holy days. Reverence is a mood which modern people are not trained to experience or even to understand. To the extent that we do not understand what reverence is, we will find it difficult to share what is most profound about Rosh Hashanah. Reverence combines three different kinds of religious expression. Let us call them ritualism, mysticism, and ethics. All three of these aspects of reverence are ways in which we might reach out to the divine and have a religious experience.

In religions more primitive than Judaism, a ritual is nothing but mere magic. The function of the ritual in early Egyptian or Babylonian religion was to compel the god to do what the person performing the ritual wanted. A simple example of this practice is the fairy tale of the genie or divine spirit imprisoned in a bottle. The person who knew the magical words was really the master of the spirit in the bottle. Since ritual, in ancient times, was thought to have such compelling power as to force the god to do what the person wanted, the priests kept these secrets to themselves. In ancient times, nobody knew the ritual but the priest. Since he alone could get the right kind of answer from the god, the priest became, to all intents and purposes, the god himself. A ritual is just magic when its sole purpose is to get a result from an outside source. One such remnant in our Bible is the ritual of the red heifer or young cow, a fascinating procedure, which we do not have time to describe this evening.

Rituals like that of the red heifer fill the religious texts of the great nations which existed in biblical times, but one has to look long and hard to find a remnant of this kind of magic in our bible. The reason is that our fathers had a different concept of ritual. For them, the function of ritual was not to make God do something, but to make men do something. For our ancestors, the purpose of ritual was to change the character of those who participated in it and to make better people of them. Accordingly, we gave a new name to our kind of ritual. We called it "mitzvah". Mitzvah is as opposed to magic as love is opposed to fear and hate.

As Judaism developed over the centuries, the rabbis tried to weed out all references to magic in Jewish observance. They weren't always successful, because sometimes the power of popular folklore is greater than the power of learned teachers. Some of our Jewish grandmothers in Europe believed that if you hung a m'zuzah or an amulet over a baby's crib, the child would not get sick. Some otherwise learned Jews in Europe, and still today in a few sections of the United States, would take a chicken at Yom Kippur time, wind it around their head and recite certain words, hoping by the recitation of this formula to transfer their sins to the chicken, who was then slaughtered and given to charity. This kind of magic sometimes crept into the ritualistic observance of our people, but by and large, our official version of Judaism remains amazingly clear of magic when compared to other religions.

Let us look briefly now at some of the higher rituals or mitzvot that our tradition suggests for our use on Rosh Hashanah. We are asked to light the candles in our home, as the holiday approaches. The purpose of this ritual, like the Sabbath ceremony, is to help experience a change of pace, a change from the rush of our daily lives to the peaceful and exalted atmosphere of the holiday. The candles have a double symbolism, for their light is joyful, while the candle is the spiritual symbol par excellence, giving light even while it is itself consumed. So the candle is a symbol of meaningful sacrifice. We are asked to say the Kiddush, the ritual over the wine, to remind us that so long as God, the power that makes for freedom is with us, we need never despair, no matter how dark times may be. So, the wine is the symbol of hope. The purpose of saying the blessing over the bread is to enable us to feel grateful that we have enough to eat and to inspire us to help others who are less fortunate than ourselves. Especially when most of us are members of middle class families, it becomes all

the more important to be reminded that all we have is but lent to us, and it is the height of philistinism or barbarism to amass wealth without a dedicated sharing with those in need. The blessing over the bread is designed to contribute to this mood of humility.

The function of using these rituals at Rosh Hashanah time is to deepen the spiritual aspect of the holiday. Their function is to bind us closer together as family members, as members of the Jewish community, and as part of mankind. They also help to bind us to God, the spirit of love and caring. The family that is too rationalistic to permit itself to perform these rituals thereby detaches itself from some of the festive mood and places itself in the role of spectator rather than participant. Nothing too profound ever happens to a mere spectator. Ritual has an important part in contributing to the mood of Rosh Hashanah.

The Mystical

A second aspect of the holiday mood of reverence is the mystical. The mystic relationship to God has more to do with feeling than with the mind. The Bible tells us that Moses first saw God in the form of a bush that burned but was not consumed, that is, he saw God as a never ending fire, giving heat and light but never being diminished. This was a very real experience to Moses. He felt the presence of God personally and immediately. The Bible also tells us that Elijah, hiding in a cave from his enemies, tried to understand what God was, and decided that God was not to be found in violent episodes of nature, as the pagans thought. God was not to be found in the turbulent fire, in the earthquake, or in the cruel storm. Rather, said Elijah, God was to be found in "the still, small voice" that spoke from within. Some people have thought that Elijah was referring to the conscience, but since Elijah was quite a mystic, we may assume that he did not mean just the conscience. Perhaps he meant the conscience as directly tied to the living God, as one hears a voice, other than one's own, speaking from a telephone. We assume that, to Elijah, the conscience was not just a memory bank of acquired values, but a two-way receiver and sender, with which he could really communicate with God.

The mystic, like Elijah, tries to reach down into his better self with the hope of contacting God on the other side of this better self. He hears things that not everyone hears, because he is listening for a different kind of thing than we are accustomed to listen for. The mystic is like the poet who walks through the fields in the perfect quiet of the countryside and cries out, "Listen, the mighty being is awake and does make a sound like thunder everlastingly!" The sensitive poet hears the sound of God constantly. You and I may not be quite attuned to such hearing. Our receiver is not on the required frequency.

Not only does the mystic hear things someone else may not hear, he sees things not everyone sees. One mystical poet taught us to see heaven in a grain of sand, to see the traces of mankind in a single footprint, to see all human beings in a single face. The Hasidic Jewish mystic achieves such happiness in his mystical state that he is impelled to dance to express his happiness. He does not dance alone, however, for that is not what his joy tells him to do. He must dance with others, and he must sing out his joy in the songs of his people. Our Rosh Hashanah prayer book contains some of this mystic sensitivity. Our prayer book reads, "M'lo chol ha-ah-retz k-vodo, The whole world is full of God's glory."

One of our grand Hasidic stories makes this point graphically. On a certain morning, a Hasidic Rabbi, who was always the first one at services, was late. His disciples waited for him, but when he was over an hour late, they began the service without him. Long after the service was over, the rabbi appeared. His worried students asked, "Master, where were you? We were afraid you were ill." The master apologized for his unusual absence. He explained, "I awoke unusually early this morning, so I decided to take the long way to the synagogue. First, I walked through the forest, and I thought to myself, 'How great is God that He created trees able to sink their roots deep into the earth and yet able to reach upward towards the sky.' Then, I passed through the meadow, and I saw hundreds

of flowers growing there, each with a different shade of color and a different shape, and I said to myself, 'How great is God that He could create such delicate and glorious things.' Then, I passed by the pond and I saw the fish swimming beneath the surface, and I thought, 'How great is God that He could create living things that can exist without air.' Then, I saw the birds flying around and singing their wonderful songs, and I cried out, 'How great is God that He could create such small and fragile creatures that can fly into the heavens.'" "And", concluded the rabbi, "between one thing and another, I must apologize for missing the worship service."

The clever rabbi meant to teach his students that since God is everywhere, one need not meet him only in the synagogue. One prays in a forest differently than one prays in the synagogue, but there is a place for both kinds of prayer in the life of the person who is truly religious. In the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, there is a place for the expression of this kind of joy in God's creativity, and through the prayers, we come closer to the spirit that permeates the universe.

"The Book of Life"

One of the mystical suggestions in the Rosh Hashanah service is that on these holy days, God decides which names he will write in "The Book of Life" for the coming year. The more profound meaning of this image lies not in the idea that God decides which names will appear, but that you and I decide. The mystical Jew teaches that God writes what we truly want him to write. When Moses spoke to the assembled Jewish people at the foot of Mt. Sinai and presented them with the moral commandments, he said, "You have the choice. Choose the commandments and choose life, choose the kind of life which is rewarding and just and abundant." "But," said Moses, "You can also choose not to follow the commandments, and in so doing you will choose death, not physical death, so much as spiritual death." #

We are not speaking of physical life and death when we talk about the image of the Book of Life on this holy day. We are talking about spiritual life and death, for this, indeed, is a matter of choice. The person who resolves on Rosh Hashanah to try with all his being to live as if he were created "in the Image of God" chooses spiritual life and not death. The person who resolves to use his body and his mind, all of his strength, for moral purposes chooses spiritual life and not death. And God notes our choice, says our mystical tradition, and records it to our merit.

The Ethical

We have said that the Rosh Hashanah mood incorporates three approaches to establishing a mood of reverence. We have discussed the function of ritual and mysticism. The third key element is the ethical. I do not have to remind you that Judaism is that religion which is supremely oriented towards the ethical, and Reform Judaism is that branch of Judaism which points out that all of the ritual and the mysticism mean nothing if they do not lead us towards nobler deeds. Of course, this viewpoint is not original with us. We stole it from the Hebrew prophets, and that is why Reform Judaism is sometimes called Prophetic Judaism.

The prophets lived in a time, approximately 850 B.C.E. to 500 B.C.E., when the Hebrew priests had lost their original zeal and had lost the deeper meaning behind the rituals. The prophets were not anti-ritual, but they were against the performing of rituals without a clear understanding of their basic purpose. The prophet Micah reminded the priests, who were the religious establishment, that God was most concerned not with the pomp and circumstance of the temple itself, but with justice and mercy. Of course, Micah was not simply talking about following the golden rule. For him, as for all great Jewish teachers, the golden rule had to be spelled out in specific details, such as those associated with the legislation outlined in our Torah. The prophets, generally acknowledged as the greatest group of religious geniuses in human history, were not hoping for millions of separated individuals trying to do good as their heart told them to do good. They were trying to fashion a great society of learned individuals dedicated to a common set of rules and prepared to follow them, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.

Some of our Reform Jews like to think of the prophets merely as ethical philosophers. This simply is not true. For the prophets, the ethical structure of the universe was rooted in a God who was himself the essence of ethics. For the prophets, an ethical system was not possible without God, and it was their love for Him which enabled them to endure persecution while laboring for the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Nor were the prophets simply rationalists. There was something of the mystic in them. For just as the prophet Elijah heard the voice of God speaking softly within himself, so Jeremiah complained that whenever he decided no longer to challenge the greedy king and nobles, there developed "a fire in his bones" which eventually exploded in an attack against those in power who did not use their power for the sake of the people.

The ethical message of the prophets is woven throughout our holiday service. There is a reading from Micah himself just before tomorrow's Torah portion. What is the implication of the Shofar service but that we will renew our attempts to act with kindness and understanding in our daily lives? The messages from the Torah and the Haftarah are simple lessons in ethics. Clearly, the ethical is one of the main themes of Rosh Hashanah. But, by now, you may have concluded yourself that none of the Rosh Hashanah themes, the ethical, the ritualistic, and the mystical stands by itself. Surely the three of them are part of each other. The Shofar service suggests that we are somehow mystically in the presence of God even while we review our ethical responsibilities. The home rituals lead us to ethical deeds beyond the horizons of our family. Perhaps, as we review the intricacies of the Rosh Hashanah observance, we will conclude that this is indeed a unique religion, worthy of our complete loyalty and solemn and joyful devotion.

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