

## A CELEBRATION WITH MY FAMILY

A Rosh Hashanah Sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard  
Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida, 1985 (5746)

L'Shanah Tovah, Happy New Year to each of you. I always feel especially warm and happy on Rosh Hashanah. I still recall one Rosh Hashanah eve many years ago when I was a small boy, and I was walking with a group of young friends to the synagogue. Each of us was dressed in his finest clothes, as if he were going to a great party. Then one of the older children summed it up for all of us when he said, "This is a time when you feel proud to be a Jew".

When we got to the synagogue, we found that everyone else in the neighborhood was there. The baker, the chicken slaughterer, the deli owner, and my father, the tailor. These were humble, unsophisticated people, most of them lower middle class, but this night they were all princes and princesses. We had come to be with God, yes, but also to be with a people prominent in the history of humankind. We had come to be with other Jews.

It did not take me long to realize that night that the meaning of our Rosh Hashanah gathering extended far beyond the walls of our synagogue. Before long, the memory of Jews long dead was being invoked. The Rabbi began to talk about Abraham and Moses, and then about the Prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then he began to talk about his parents and the Jews of Europe, and about Jews in other far away lands in this and previous times. Gradually, that small schul, which actually held about two hundred living bodies, became filled with thousands and millions of Jews, living and dead. That small boy, who was myself, learned that night that to be a Jew is to be a member of a royal family that transcends time and place. That small boy also learned that Rosh Hashanah eve is a time for rubbing elbows with your larger family. It is a time for celebrating one's Jewishness.

The synagogue I attended that night was not as spacious or as elegant as this synagogue. Beth Am is more modern in design but, interestingly enough, it speaks in greater detail about our Jewish ancestors who share this moment with us. Beth Am has twelve windows. Each of these windows has an inscription, visible in the day time, which mediates to us the teachings of a famous Jew. If you would take time to read these windows, you would learn that the words of the Prophet Amos are here, so are the teachings of Isaiah and Jeremiah. What Moses had to say to the Jews of three thousand years ago are inscribed in our Sanctuary. The teaching of the Prophet Zechariah eschewing violence is emblazoned across our Ark. All of these great Jews are with us tonight linking us to ages past and to hearts that continue to beat through ours, for we are not only the living bearers of these Jewish messages, we are the bearers of the genes of our Jewish ancestors. We are their physical as well as their spiritual eternity.

This "Nare Tamid" that you see, this "Eternal Light", has a fascinating story that goes with it. Some of you may remember that I purchased this lamp in a copper shop in the ancient city of Acco in Israel. When I purchased the lamp 25 years ago, it was oxidized and smashed in. When the owner of the store told me that the lamp came from a synagogue in Iraq, I knew I had to have it. The owner could not understand my intense interest, for he had other lamps in better condition from other places. But I knew that Iraq is the modern name for ancient Babylonia, the birthplace of Abraham, and I wanted a memorial to Abraham, the founder of Judaism, in my synagogue. That beat-up lamp only cost us a few dollars. It would take thousands of dollars today to design and to build such a lamp, just as it took thousands of years to build in the memories that shine forth from it. Our Nare Tamid mediates to us the presence of Abraham, and it also speaks to us of the Talmudic Rabbis who lived in Babylonia two thousand years after Abraham. Modern Iraq was once the home of Hillel and Shammai and Rabbi Meir and dozens of other brilliant Talmudic sages, heirs of those Judeans taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar and brought to Babylonia in 586 BCE.

Since our Eternal Light comes to us by way of Israel, it ought to make us think of the heroic effort to reclaim the Holy Land. When we look at the lamp we should think of the modern Israeli pioneers, the "halutzim", who drained the swamps and learned the joy of laboring on the land. Our Eternal Light should stir thoughts of the Haganah, Israel's first fighting force in 2,000 years. It should remind us of heroic leaders like Ben Gurion and Golda Meir, and of Col. Natanyahu, who was killed at the Uganda Airport in the now famous Entebbe raid. All of these gallant souls, our fellow Jews, are with us tonight.

"But Rabbi", you might say, "is there nothing here to remind us of the six million?" "How could you leave them out?" "They must be remembered also". Of course, we have not left them out. They are here through our Torah Scrolls cradled in our Ark. Two of our four Torah Scrolls, which we rotate in our Ark, are refugee scrolls saved from the fire of Nazi destruction. Somehow these scrolls were smuggled through the Nazi lines, in spite of great danger to those who saved them. When we behold these Torahs and read from them, study them, as we will tomorrow mornig, the six million are present with us. They live again as we resurrect the life contained in the written words.

When we read these holocaust Torahs, we hear, of course, the words of Moses, as he teaches, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", but we hear also the words of Anne Frank, the teenager who died later in a Nazi concentration camp. We hear the words from Anne Frank's diary, "In spite of it all, I feel that human beings are good at heart and that good will triumph in the end".

The Rabbis who compiled the Bible tell us that all Jews stood at Mt. Sinai when Moses obtained the Ten Commandments. The living Jews of that time were of course present, but our tradition says, that the Jews who had died in the wilderness en route to the promised land, were also somehow present at Mt. Sinai, and, along with those souls of Jews yet to be born in the future. We stood there also, and we entered into the covenant with God. You and I also said "Nah-ah-seh V'nishmah", "We will harken to the law and we will observe it".

So all Jews stand here tonight, as we renew our covenant with God, on this Rosh Hashanah. One of the symbols of their presence is our Yahrzeit Board naming the dear departed of our immediate families. Their names are here, and their spirit is here. They live in us and through us.

Our parents names are on those boards, and before we left our homes tonight we lit the same Rosh Hashanah candles that they used to light. We will say the same Kol Nidre prayer on Yom Kippur that they used to say. We still subscribe to the teaching of the Prophet Amos as they did, that Amos who taught, "Let justice roll down as the mighty waters and righteousness like an unfailing stream".

There are so many voices speaking in this Sanctuary tonight, if we are able to hear them, so many hearts beating and yearning, if we are capable of sensing their presence. They are all part of our Jewish family, that which God called an "Ahm s'gulah, a treasured family."

It is important, dear members of my family that you understand the special inheritance that is ours. It is important that you understand how miraculous it is that we have survived four thousand years of indescribable wanderings, trials, and batterings.

This is the night for celebrating, both the survival of the Jewish people and the special meaning of being a Jew.

It is also a night for moving closer to the Jewish people. Rabbi Hillel, whose words are enshrined on the window nearest to my right taught, "If I am for myself alone, what am I?" But he also taught, "If I am not for myself, who is for me?" That person who sits next to you, on your left and on your right, is a living remnant of a people which has endured a great deal. In a real sense, he or she is a part of you. Arthur Koestler has said that if there were a germ which was more exposed to the environment than any other germ, that germ could be called the Jewish germ. Jews are like all other human beings, only more so. Life has seared our souls and left its scars on our ability to enjoy life, even on our ability to enjoy our family.

You might have seen that TV ad concerning child abuse which is being shown frequently on the air these days. A young woman is especially harried, and her baby is crying in the crib. The woman is weary from her labor at the office, she has come home to cook dinner for her family; the phone is ringing, and the baby is screaming for attention. Angry and torn apart, the woman hangs up the phone and runs for the baby to take out her frustrations on the child. The message of the film is, "Stop! Don't touch that child until you have regained your composure." All of us suffer as this woman does from the excruciating demands of our highly competitive society. Many of us come home already exhausted and unable to cope with the most ordinary demands of our households. All of our tolerance, understanding, and patience has been spent in our daily rounds, and we have little left for those who are dearest to us.

Let us determine tonight to reach out to that Jew who is nearest to us. He is battle weary and needs support. She is battered and needs encouragement. Let our New Year celebration be marked with a special dose of compassion and forgiveness.

This earth is teeming with human beings and indeed is threatened with over-population, but there are not many Jews in this world. We Jews are much less than one half of one percent of the world's people and our numbers are in decline. You might say that we are part of an endangered species. Each Jew, is therefore doubly precious.

It is time for us to move closer together, for we have shared a long road together, and ours is still a unique destiny.