

THE IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLS-The Statue of Liberty

A High Holiday Sermon at Temple Beth Am, 5747-1986

Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard

The big event of the past year which galvanized all Americans together was the rededication of the Statue of Liberty on July 4th. Hundreds of thousands of people travelled to New York City to witness the spectacle. Millions more were glued to their television sets. As fireworks laced across the New York horizon, America cheered. Finally, after hours of celebrating, the light in the lady's torch was rekindled. The hearts of Americans swelled with pride. Many a face was streaked with tears. What a glorious event it was! How sympathetic Americans of all races and creeds felt towards one another. The rededication of the statue was indeed a happening.

But why was it such a happening? What is there about this lady of metal that makes her so beloved and special to all Americans? She cannot speak, as we understand speech. She cannot touch, as we understand touching; yet she speaks, and she touches us in a most profound way. We must conclude that the Statue of Liberty is so beloved, because she is a perfect example of an effective symbol. She is associated with the flow of refugees to our shores; therefore, she is symbolic of the hope of America. At her base, immigrants shed their old nationalities and their old fears and began a new life in a country dedicated to freedom; therefore she is symbolic at once of change and security. In a way, the Statue of Liberty encompasses all that we believe to be good and right about America; therefore, she is a symbol of our beloved country. The celebration centered around the statue this summer proves one thing indisputably-that America, slick, hard hearted, street-wise, commercialized, as it is, is still capable of mystic reverence in relation to this symbol. The Statue of Liberty is proof of the tremendous importance of external symbols and their power in welding a people together.

Jews do not have a mammoth statue to serve as their symbol. We have not stayed in one place long enough to build monuments of metal and stone. No, our symbols are all portable things that we could carry with us as we were shunted from land to land. Any Jewish list of symbols would not be weighty, but it would be long: Sabbath candlesticks, a kiddush cup, a Menorah, a Purim grogger (noise-maker), a Tallit (prayer-shawl), a Torah, a fragile fruit-filled sukkah, a yahrzeit candle, a mezuzah.

No people is richer in symbols than the Jewish people. To our more observant ancestors, these symbols were the stuff of their life, the core around which their life evolved. On Rosh Hashanah, the symbol was the shofar calling them to God and to repentance. On Yom Kippur the symbol was a prayer and especially the musical rendition of that prayer, Kol Nidre. My earliest memory in the Synagogue of my youth is the solemnity I saw revealed in the faces of the male worshippers during the Kol Nidre prayer. As the prayer was sung by the Cantor, I remember the soft sobbing of the women in the balcony. Few of the worshippers in my Orthodox Synagogue could translate the Aramaic words of the prayer. No matter, the prayer had passed into the mystic realm of symbolism, and its meaning became all the more profound. Into this haunting prayer our ancestors projected all their sorrows and their deepest feelings and hopes.

The deep significance that the Kol Nidre prayer has acquired is proof that what we bring to the symbol is as important as its original meaning. Once a Rabbi met a congregant who was particularly lax in attending religious services. The Rabbi asked him, "Why don't I see you more often at services?". The congregant somewhat disdainfully replied, "To tell you the truth, Rabbi, I don't find God in the synagogue." To which the Rabbi replied, "Tell me, do you bring God with you to the synagogue?" Just as a potential worshipper will not find God in the synagogue unless he brings God with him, so the beholder of a religious symbol will see little in it, unless he brings something to it, unless he is familiar with the use of the symbol, unless he associates with it something meaningful and dynamic.

The marriage ring, for example, is just a symbol, but for many married women the ring lends a security and meaning to their life that goes far beyond the intrinsic value of the ring, be it made of gold or diamonds. With the ring on, many women feel clothed, as with the crown jewels. Without the ring, they feel bare, naked. It is only a ring, but the universe of their life is attached to it.

Some of us have experienced the frustration of having our home robbed. The things we miss most are not necessarily the jewels of greater monetary value. The things we miss the most are the mementoes, the heirlooms, that were handed down to us by parents and grandparents, the objects that have assumed symbolic value because they carry with them a personal message of love and continuity.

Symbols and rituals are part of one another. Often in modern times I have young couples say to me, "Rabbi, we really don't feel the need for a public wedding ceremony. After all, we have been living together for a while, and the ceremony is really for the two of us". Nothing could be further from the reality of the matter. A wedding ceremony is one of the most important of all community rituals, for it is through the wedding ritual that the community renews itself. Two people in love who are concentrating on their own future and who are thinking primarily of themselves can hardly understand this fact. Indeed, most people who share in the wedding ceremony don't completely understand it, but the truth is that the ceremony speaks to everyone. Those involved are not just the couple and their families but everyone who is present.

While it is perfectly understandable that the young couple would want privacy for their marriage ceremony, they misunderstand the ramifications of the ceremony. To couples who come in complaining about the fact that their parents are making too much of the ceremony and the party, I explain, "But you see, it is their affair at least as much as yours. They have been looking forward all the days of your life to this moment. They have a great deal invested in you, and now this ceremony is for them like a victory celebration. It gives them the opportunity to say 'thus far we have done well', and it gives them the chance to think, 'my son or daughter will be cared for in the future'." "For you", I say to the couple, "it is a beginning. For your parents, it is a grand culmination!"

Beyond the horizon of the marriage ceremony lies the prospect of children and the continuation of the family name and fortune. The whole cycle of life comes into play at the marriage ceremony. If the ancient Rabbis had not invented such a beautiful ritual, it would have to be reinvented all over again, because the circumstance cries out for some kind of symbolic procedure to carry us all over the threshold of this feeling-packed moment. As the song, "Sunrise, Sunset" aptly says, the marriage ceremony is "laden with happiness and tears." Past and future are spectators as the ritual unfolds and the symbols of wine, ring, and glass are brought into play.

Baby naming ceremonies may seem to be unnecessary baggage until you have a baby and want to see the child properly and officially accepted into the community. Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremonies may seem to be a bore, until you have raised a child to that point and watch the child proceed through the ceremony. How fortunate we Jews are to have a religion which gives us such magnificent opportunities to express our hopes and gratitude at the critical points of our life.

You have rightly observed that I am moving about from a discussion of symbols to a discussion of ceremonies or rituals. In Judaism, rituals and symbols are intertwined. The Sabbath, as an alternative to the hectic mid-week days of getting and spending, is introduced with certain rituals which inevitably involve the use of symbols, and the use of these symbols take on added dimension depending on our experience with them. Shabbat candles symbolically divide the ordinary week days from the spiritualized day, but when you see your mother standing silently before those candles for five minutes,

her eyes shielded, as she prays to her God, the candles take on a very personal meaning. What they say to you is that Sabbath candles are a way of talking to God. Whenever you light them, you are in a sense relating to your mother who lit them and to her mother, and to her mother.

Most of you remember the famous incident of Entebbe, when Arab terrorists captured a French plane loaded with Israelis and took the plane to Uganda. When TV reporters asked a family in Jerusalem what bothered them most about the absence of the father in Uganda, they answered, "We miss him most on the Shabbat when it is time to sing the Kiddush over the wine. Father always sang the Kiddush", they said. For this family the Kiddush Cup was the precious symbol of family togetherness, but only because the symbol was regularly used, and because it was used lovingly.

We Americans tend to think that we can manage without symbols. The truth is that we are embarrassed by ritual and the use of symbols. When the American Flag is raised and we are encouraged to sing the Star Spangled Banner, most of us would like to crawl into a hole. We turn our minds to everything but to that for which the American Flag stands; but did you observe the faces of our Olympic stars when they had won the gold medal and the American Flag was raised? Few of these Olympic winners were able to beat back the tears, so deep were the feelings stirred by the raising of our flag. Symbols have an importance that we Americans try to deny. Why, do you think? Is it because we are afraid of deep feeling, or is it because we are afraid of being sentimental, afraid to think idealistic thoughts.

For me the Chanukah Menorah is a beautiful and compelling symbol because of what it has meant in the life of my family. In my family we have a tradition at Chanukah of dancing around the Menorah after we have sung the blessings. When I see the Menorah, I see the bright faces of our children when they were young and I think of my grandchildren who have now joined the dancing circle with my wife and myself, along with our grown children. The Menorah may have been intended to remind us of a great battle for religious freedom two thousand years ago, but it has taken on a new dimension for my family, because we have used the Menorah creatively, because we have put our own meaning into it, a meaning of family affection and rejoicing.

Learning to use and to appreciate a symbol is something like learning to appreciate a work of art. The Jewish painter Chagall, for example, fills his paintings not only with Jewish but with universal symbols. Look closely at any of Chagall's paintings and you will see a Menorah, a shofar (or is it a new moon?), a bride and a marriage canopy, a Torah. Then there are the objects of his boyhood village which to him have become universal symbols-the old shack in which he lived, the animals that lived in his front yard (a cow, a horse, a rooster), a mother and child.

While Chagall may use symbols more obviously than many other artists, all artists know that what they put on canvas is just a symbol of what they were thinking consciously or unconsciously. Artists rely upon their viewers to interpret these symbols, to fill in the arcs that are only partially drawn, to project those themes which are only partially suggested. In a sense, the viewer has to finish painting the picture. All art, in a way, is the transmission of ideas and emotions by the use of symbols. Religious symbols likewise require us to make an extension of their meaning. What we make of them depends upon our knowledge of them, our experience with them, our imagination, and our sensitivity. It has been aptly said that some people see more between sunsets than others see in a lifetime. Thus it is that some of us see nothing in a particular symbol and some of us are moved to tears.

As we all know, Chagall frequently throws in a clown into his pictures, even in the most

serious of his pictures. Judaism also does not hesitate to draw in, as it were, a suggestion of humor or fun. One of my favorite Jewish symbols is the Purim grogger or noise maker. On the Purim holiday we read the story of Esther from the Bible and we actually encourage the children to make noise in the sanctuary itself, whenever the name of the arch villain Haman is mentioned. Some of you might ask, but Haman has been dead for thousands of years. What possible meaning can the failure of his evil plan have to modern Jews? To this we must answer, Haman himself is only a symbol, a symbol of all of those in many ages who have plotted against the Jews, (and still we are alive today). Haman is Torquemada, the leader of the Spanish inquisition who gave the Jews of Spain in 1490 the alternative of death or conversion. Haman is the Russian cossack whose horse trampled Jewish peasants in a hundred Russian villages. Haman is Hitler and every anti-semitic who rears his head today. Turn the grogger round and round, the good guy will triumph in the end! If we Jews can't actually subdue our enemies with greater force, let us at least symbolically drown them out with noise. The sound of the grogger is the sound of victory for the "tempest tossed" people of boundless patience and courage. "Hava n'risha, rash, rash, rash!"

Then, of course, there is the greatest Jewish symbol of all, the Torah. When the young Israeli soldiers who had manned the Suez Canal base were captured by the Egyptians in the first surprise attack of the Yom Kippur War, the soldiers went into captivity carrying their Torah. We saw the incident on TV. Somehow, as I saw that Torah being carried to a prison camp in Egypt, I knew those soldiers would be all right. They had something to cling to, a symbol that contained the courageous story of the effort of their people to survive meaningfully.

At the Saturday morning service here at Beth Am, we walk around with the Torah, inviting people to touch it and to kiss it. In some Reform Congregations this traditional practice has been dropped. I think it is one of Judaism's most significant customs, because to hear somebody else read the Torah is one thing; to touch it with one's own hand is quite another; to kiss it is still another. The Torah is a symbol which is intended to be read. It is a rational symbol, but it also has its emotional extension. The Jewish people would not have survived if the Torah were just a rational symbol. When the synagogues of Germany were burned down by the Nazis, many Jews risked their lives to go into the burning synagogues to save the Torahs, which were considered to have a life and a soul of their own. Does it not mean something extra to you to know that one of the Torahs in our Ark today comes from one of these incinerated synagogues? Of course, it does.

Whenever we finish reading the Torah at a Beth Am service, I take the Torah, I stand in front of the Ark, and I say this little speech: "V'zote Ha-Torah, and this is the Torah, which Moses first gave to the children of Israel and which through them has come down to all humankind. This is the oldest written document in continuous use in the history of all humankind, and yet it is the first document to teach, 'Thou shall love the stranger as thyself'". Now I do not believe that the words of the Torah are divine. I do not believe that God dictated the words one by one to Moses, as the Orthodox believe; but I can tell you that in spite of the fact that I have said that speech a thousand times, when I hold the Torah and say those words, I tremble to this very day. Such is the power of this living symbol. Those who know the most about the Torah are those who are the most moved by it. You see, it is not only the symbol that determines its effect. It is what we bring to the symbol also. The net effect depends on the interaction between the symbol and the person.

This is the year in which sophisticated Americans discovered that they could be deeply moved by a symbol, the Statue of Liberty. Surely, we Americans were spiritually enriched by that celebration. Such enrichment awaits all of those who ponder the deeper meaning of Jewish symbols and celebrate the sacred events associated with them.

Jewish symbols, like all objects of art, speak to us in terms of our own ability to hear what they have to say, but let us not forget to speak to the symbols. Let us be wise enough to use the symbols creatively and to add still another dimension to their eternal meaning.