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"The Face On The Eleven O'clock News"  
Yom Kipper 1989

Tablets discovered by archaeologists in what was the library of an ancient Babylonian King reveal a teaching which has profound economic and religious overtones. The teaching is, "The King is the shadow of the God, the people are the shadow of the king". This brief statement defines the character of the mighty nation from which Abraham later escaped. The King was thought to be some kind of reflection of the Divine. The people, on the other hand, were but a mere shadow of the King and therefore subject to his every will and whim. No wonder that the economy of Babylonia was based on slavery.

Our Bible was developed in the land of Israel when the power of Babylonia was at its height. The Bible contains a revolutionary doctrine the force of which is not fully understood even in modern times. Our Bible teaches that each person, not just the King, is created in the image of the Divine. Our religious teachers have understood this to mean that each person is born with the potential to be loving, just, merciful, and creative. Nothing that the so-called modern human potential movement has to say is more profound or sweeping than the ancient hypothesis revealed to us in the Book of Genesis in our Torah. # 1

There are other religions which dwell upon humankind's sinful nature. These religions emphasize human avarice and cruelty. They even speak of our sexual desires as if they were the product of base instincts. Such religions tend to become salvation religions and teach that humans are destined for hell unless they are miraculously saved by a mysterious rite or sacrifice. Judaism is the religion par excellence which teaches that humans can save themselves as they interact with a God who calls them to be like Him, who challenges them, nay, commands them to imitate Him in His highest nature.

The traditional Jewish wedding ceremony is not merely a legal binding. Its spiritual message is emphasized in that part of the ceremony which is called "the shiva b'rachot, the seven blessings". Too often the Rabbi performing this ceremony and the couple participating in it overlook the powerful instruction to the bride and groom contained in one of the seven blessings. This is the blessing which reminds us that man and woman were

1 TORAH - The first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible in scroll form,  
2 Lemnaeus 19/1

created in the image of the Divine. This single blessing ought to be the hub around which the whole wedding ceremony turns.

When a young couple shares in the marriage ceremony, they are usually too excited to think much of anything. If they think at all, it is the thought associated with the senses, "How beautiful is my mate, or how romantic will be our life together". Or the couple might be thinking, "How much fun we will have together. How nice it is that we have similar hobbies and enjoy the same life style". Or one of the two might be thinking, "How fortunate I am to marry someone who will help me fulfill my career and who will help to provide for me". It is very difficult for a couple in the excitement of the occasion to understand the profundity of the blessing, "Praised are You, Oh Lord, who has created humankind in Your image".

The Jewish wedding ceremony speaks of joy and laughter, of love and togetherness, of inward peace, but it also speaks of human potential, of the remarkable nature of a human being! The Rabbis who created this ceremony wanted to paste a label on both bride and groom which said, "Handle with care! This person is precious"! In modern America, the key question in the popular wedding ceremony is, do you take this man or woman to be your lawful spouse?" This question is not a part of the ancient Jewish ceremony. The Rabbis believed that the key question which the bride or groom ought to express to the other is, "How can I help you to what you are divinely ordained to be"?

Marriage, then, should be a kind of Ahvodah, a kind of service of the Divine, for each of us is linked to the Divine through the seed that is planted within us. The early Hasidim, to be distinguished from the modern Hasidim, played on this very imaginative metaphor. When God created the world, they said, He placed a spark of Himself in everything. We reach God, they taught, by reaching for this spark, this better part in every living thing. Indeed, they said, humans have the great task of trying to redeem these sparks. It is our task to fan these sparks to help them erupt into greater fires and thus to enhance their divine nature. For the divine spark is not static; it is capable of development and growth. This is how the bride and groom should behold one another, and this is how every human being should behold every other human being. So teaches the book of Genesis.

Now let's try to translate these lofty thought<sup>s</sup> to the life we see about us. What do we see every night on the eleven o'clock news? We see a young

man, usually of muscular build, a fine physical specimen. The young man has committed a flagrant act of theft, or may have killed someone. Sometimes the face is white. More frequently the face is a black face. Often I have asked people, what do you think when you see that face on the eleven o'clock news. So often the answer is, "I think, there they go again. Most of them are thieves and murderers!". That is, of course, not the Jewish answer to the question. The Jewish answer is, "When I see that reoccurring face, I think, what a waste—what a waste of human potential. I think what a twisting of the Divine image". The Jewish answer should go something like this: When I see that person in handcuffs, wearing a face shorn of emotion, I think, this is the sign of the failure of our community, for we cannot seem to motivate and educate and direct our youth. Then you have to ask yourself another question. The second question is, what must I do to see that this person pictured on the screen is able to fulfill that destiny which God has ordained for him?" The Jewish person who watches that news program with its repetitive message of violence and despair and who is not moved to do something so that the face will cease to appear on such news programs in the future is guilty of the denial of a major tenet of his faith, i.e. that each human has the divine seed, the noble spark.

Some of you already have this developed sensitivity, but you wonder what can be done to solve such a difficult problem. There are, of course, many facets to the solution. There have been federal programs in the Black ghettos, and in other similarly deprived communities, but their success has not been outstanding. Always the measures taken have been palliative or cosmetic. The root causes of poverty and apathy have not been attacked in a serious way. If the limited programs did not achieve immediate success, the people needing the help were blamed for the failure of the programs. It is time for America to realize that you can't train a people to be passive slaves for the 150 years and then expect all of the psychological aspects of slavery to be eliminated suddenly and on demand. Further, the problems of our deprived citizens have become enmeshed with the problems of urban crowding. You can't solve the problems of one without solving the problems of the other. The beginning of the solution is to recognize that the problems are monumental and require the kinds of planning and expenditures that are associated with the preparation for war. If the programs for education, social and job training, job placement, and housing are not massive enough, or if one program (i.e. housing) is projected without the support of the others, we can anticipate the kind of failures we have had in the past in other piece-meal attempts.

But beyond the massive Federal and State planning that is needed there is always something you and I can do on the personal level. We can help individual Blacks to move a step up on the ladder. We can teach one Black child to read. We can give one Black man a job. We can make allowances for ingrained weaknesses and persevere in our efforts to help, for the Blacks have already demonstrated in abundance that they have the intelligence and the capacity to rise above the ghetto lethargy.

Think for a moment of Leontyne Price, one of the greatest opera stars of our generation. Leontyne Price was just another poor Black girl in Meridian, Mississippi, until a white woman recognized her potential and provided her with a music scholarship. How many Leontyne Prices ~~are there waiting to be recognized or waiting to be recognized or waiting for a sympathetic hand?~~ are there waiting to be recognized or waiting for a sympathetic hand?

I know that some of you want to shout out, "But, Rabbi, shouldn't the Blacks help themselves, and what about Jesse Jackson and Arafat? Should we Jews help the people who are friends of our enemies?" I could take several hours addressing these questions. I would begin by saying that while Jackson is not as sympathetic to Israel as we would like, he is not an enemy of the Jewish people, and even if he were, the rank and file of the Blacks are not committed to Jackson's personal foreign policy. Since we can't take the time now for these aspects of the matter, let us at least make the main point for this place and time. The main point is that the ultimate test of our own worthwhileness is what we do for those who are in the greatest need!

## SERVING GOD

The New Testament, as we know, takes up many ancient Jewish themes. These themes are not less Jewish because they are found in the New Testament also, so let me use an example from the New Testament to support our point. When Jesus wants to teach his followers to help the poor and the outcast, he says, "Inasmuch as you do it unto one of the least of these, you do it unto me". This is a sublime teaching. I do not, of course, believe that Jesus is divine, but I recognize the theme that I find in the so called older Testament and in our Talmud. The theme is that he who serves those who are the neediest, serves God.

There is a story in our tradition brought to the attention of the Temple Board by Rabbi Kendall which speak of a famous Rabbi who invited a beggar to his home and asked his wife to serve a dinner fit for a King. After dinner, the Rabbi himself took the dishes the beggar had used, went to the kitchen and washed them himself, praying all the while. Later, when one of the Rabbi's disciples who was present asked the Rabbi why he, such a renowned teacher, went to the trouble to handling and washing the beggar's dishes, the Rabbi answered, "It is said that the High Priest in the Holy Temple is charged with the duty of handling and washing the dishes that are used in the Divine Service. "Handling the dishes of a hungry beggar", said the Rabbi, "is equal to the task of the High Priest in the Holy Temple"! What does the story teach? He who serves those who are brought low is as if he had served God.

Speaking to the people of ancient Israel on this very holiday of Yom Kipper, The Prophet Isaiah said in the name of God, "Is this not the meaning of the fast that I have chosen, that you feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and that you release those who are falsely imprisoned...is this not a fast acceptable to Me?' saith the Lord".

"Feed the hungry---clothe the naked---release those falsely imprisoned...". Now let us not make the mistake of thinking that there is only one kind of imprisonment. Let us not make the mistake of thinking that the only need people are those without financial means, We are all deprived in one way or another, and all of us are in need of loving help from others. Most of us are suffering from emotional malnutrition. You could not be a Jew, you could not have experienced two thousand years of wandering and persecution, you could not have experienced the holocaust, without suffering from emotional shock. We all need to be helped in one way or another, especially we Jews.

Yom Kipper is the time for us to turn towards one another in mercy and forgiveness with the understanding that all of us, regardless of our station, need desperately to know that we are loved. Let me tell you about a story in which I participated some two decades ago. A man, who has since moved out of Miami, called me to say that his father had just died and he wanted to come to see me. I invited him to come to my office whenever he was able to do so. As soon as the man came through my office doorway, he burst into tears, and his whole body shook with the force of his sobbing. I have never seen a man cry that way. When the tears subsided somewhat,

I said, "I suppose you loved your father a great deal". The man answered, "Rabbi, I am not crying because my father and I had such a close relationship. On the contrary, I am crying because my father never expressed his love for me, not even indirectly; and now that he is dead, I know that I will never have a father to love me". Unfortunately, the man's problem was compounded by the fact that he had a wife who seemed equally incapable of showing love for him. So here was a person situated very well financially who was indeed an emotional "beggar", searching hungrily for someone to show him affection and understanding.

The needy people are all around us. They are as visible, (if we are capable of seeing them), as the young man on the eleven o'clock news. The smartest girl in your class may possibly be putting a desperate energy into her books because she thinks that her parents will not love her unless she is number one. The neediest person may be the most ambitious, the most aggressive person, who unscrupulously fights his way up the corporate ladder to be President, because the person thinks he must have power to be appreciated. The most beautiful girl might become a prostitute in search of the male approval she did not get from her father. The most handsome eligible bachelor may never get married because he fears that everything he does ends up in failure. The truth is that most of us are naked in our vulnerability, and we are in serious need of being clothed with respect and appreciation. We have to remind one another that we are each of us created with the same divine spark. As the Hasidim of old phrased it, "The most serious sin is to forget that you are the beloved son or daughter of the Divine King".

We hear a great deal today about child abuse. The child psychologists tell us that many children are beaten excessively, are sexually abused, and are emotionally castigated. How differently we might treat our children if we could remember when they spill the milk for the tenth time or when they deliberately lie to us, that they are reflections of the Divine with a fragile spark which can burst magnificently into flame or be ignominiously smothered. In this day of frequent divorce, children are all too often the biggest sufferers. In their bitterness and unhappiness, separated parents tend to take advantage of their children and use them as weapons against their former spouse. Mother tells the child what a devil the father is. Father tells the child what a shrew the mother is. The child decides that if his parents are so terrible, he must be a monster himself, so he begins to act like a monster, or alternatively, he retreats into his room and becomes anti-

social. How can a child believe that he is created in the Divine Image, if he is taught by his parents that he was created by two cruel and insensitive people? How can a child believe she is loved, if one parent pulls one arm out of the socket while the other parent is wrenching the other arm?

In our Bible there is spelled out a revolutionary doctrine about concern for defenseless children, for widows, for the poor, for all of those who were least protected by economic and societal law. God is presented uniquely in our Bible as the defender and protector of the weak and rejected. For example, Isaac has two wives, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, so God gave Leah the first child. It is not by accident that down through Jewish history Jews have gravitated towards those professions which protect the interests of the poor, the sick and the aged. It is no accident that the first state laws in America restricting abuses in child labor were the result of the man known as "The people's attorney", Louis Brandeis, later Supreme Court Justice Brandeis. Jews pioneered in many countries in the field of Medicine and Psychology, and we have established hospitals in the smallest of communities. The Social Work field has a high proportion of caring Jews. When the Director of the local Lutheran Home For the Aged needed a model for the home, he told me he had to go to the Jews who had pioneered in the area of providing for the aged. All of this derives from our Jewish belief that each human is created in the image of the Divine.

### The Poet's Scream

The Bible has its own special poetic style, best experienced in the original Hebrew. It is most interesting that the greatest Prophets were also the greatest poets. There is an American poet who has captured our Bible's message and put it beautifully into his own words. Edwin Markham wrote this poem in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was not unusual for children and aged people to work from dawn to dusk on the farms, eeking out a few pennies for bread. After viewing the famous painting by Millet entitled, "The Man With The Hoe", Mr. Markham wrote these words:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans  
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,  
The emptiness of ages in his face,  
And on his back the burden of the world,  
Who made him dead to rapture and despair,  
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,  
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox...?"

The poet might have spoken in the same way in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the factory laborer who was reduced to the mechanical operations of a robot. So might Markham have spoken if he went home tonight with us and watched the eleven o'clock news and saw that face, that seemingly uncaring and unfeeling face, "a thing that grieves not and that never hopes" ... a symbol of the rejected of our time.

The religious person, the ideal Jew, has something of the soul of a poet of a Prophet. He sees what is real in the world and he compares it with what might be, with what ought to be. He sees the vapid smile of the prostitute and he thinks of the true happiness that this young lady might be experiencing in a more exalted role. The religious person sees the perpetually angry and continually frightened child, and he wonders how he might make the child feel safe and happy.

The religious person, the ideal Jew, of who the prophet Isaiah spoke, observes the human tragedy and is impelled to scream out with the poet:

Oh Masters, Lord and Rulers in all lands,  
Is this the handiwork you give to God,  
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quenched?  
How will you ever straighten up this shape;  
Touch it again with immortality, (how will you ever)  
Give back the upward looking and the light;  
Rebuild in it the music and the dream..."

So the poet releases his heart-felt pain. He dares to ask the questions the religious Jew must ask. After these daring questions must come the active attempt to restore the rejected of our society to their rightful place as children of God. But the action will not come unless first you sense the awesome dimension of the tragedy, unless you have a profound belief in what ought to be, in what must be, because God will it so!