

## WHO ARE WE?

A sermon given on Rosh Hashanah, 5783  
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The fifth book of the Torah (D'varim), tells us that when the ancient Hebrews harvested their land, they were to take a basket of the first fruits and bring it to the Temple in Jerusalem. After giving the basket to the priest, the Jewish farmer was to say these words, "A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down to Egypt...and the Egyptians dealt cruelly with us, and afflicted us...and we cried out...and God heard our voice and brought us out of Egypt... and He it is who brought me to this land, so that I might grow these wonderful fruits." At the beginning of the year, each Jew had to recite the history of his people, as if he himself had experienced all of its pain and joy. The recitation was his prayer.

Shortly after the Yom Kippur War in Israel, I attended a conference in the Holy Land for Reform Rabbis. Golda Meir addressed the conference, and when she had completed her talk, I made bold to ask her a question. "Madame Prime Minister," I said, "we American Jews greatly admire what you have accomplished here in Israel, and we want to help you. Tell me, what would you like most for us to say to the members of our congregations?" Mrs. Meir thoughtfully replied, "Tell them not to forget who they are."

Unfortunately, it is all too easy for an American Jew, living in a land of little discrimination and considerable affluence, to forget who he is. Perhaps it would be meaningful if we reviewed our history tonight, just as the ancient Jewish farmer used to do, so that we might remind ourselves who we are.

Our people began its existence about four thousand years ago when a man named Abraham revolted against some of the major assumptions of his society. We say that Abraham is "Ahvinu, our father, our ancestor," because he was the first to make a brit, a covenant, with the living God.

Abraham based his new way of life on two premises. The first premise was that God was the creator of nature but not an object in nature. Before Abraham and long after him, the nations of the world worshipped the sun, the moon, the stars, or even trees, rivers, and animals. By separating out the divine from the objects of nature, Abraham and our people paved the way for modern science. For how could one study the objects of nature scientifically and dispassionately if they were thought to be divine?

The second premise of Abraham was that God was not a blind or capricious power but the source of righteousness and compassion. The school of Abraham based this premise on the life experience of their leader. God would not let Abraham follow the common practice of sacrificing his first born son. God would not destroy the righteous people of Sodom together with the wicked. Indeed, if there were only ten righteous people in the whole city, God wanted to spare it.

Abraham gave us ethically oriented stories. Moses, 600 years later, gave us an entire code of laws. First there were the Ten Commandments, those general rules without which civilization cannot endure. Thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not commit



adultery. But the Ten Commandments were only the beginning of the laws designed for the Biblical society. The Bible is filled with specific laws designed for pragmatic applications. Many of these laws are a part of the American legal system today. For example, the Bible tells us that if a person causes damages to another because of his extreme negligence, he is as responsible for those damages as if he had deliberately caused them. The Bible also tells us that if a person murders another with premeditated intent, he shall be fully liable, but if he kills someone accidentally or in self defense, the killing is to be forgiven.

We have only to read the early history of America to find how much the model government in ancient Israel influenced the early American colonies who used the tripartite division of the government of Moses with an executive, a legislative council, and a judiciary.

In addition to the specific laws in our Bible, there are also the laws that we call apoditic. They call for more extensive action than that required by the basic law. The basic law provides that you shall not steal from your neighbor; the apoditic law says, "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." The basic law says that poor and rich must stand as equals before the judge, but the apoditic law calls for special care for the widow and the orphan. So it is with the blind and the lame, and so it is with the stranger.

No stranger had any rights within any ancient society, but our Bible says, "You shall have one manner of law for the home born, and for the stranger, for you shall love the stranger as yourself." This special regard for the stranger is repeated over and over again in our Bible, for the text reads, "You were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Who are we Jews? We are that people who were strangers in the ancient land of Egypt. We were amongst the slaves who helped build the pyramids and the cities of Raamses and Pithom. We are a people born in slavery and, therefore, forever wedded to the cause of the outcast and the rejected. Some members of the congregation recently wondered why this Rabbi went out of his way to help reelect Leah Simms, a County Judge who was the first black woman ever appointed by the Governor of Florida to a judgeship. Judge Simms was opposed by a Jewish woman of considerably less experience. I campaigned for Judge Simms, I am proud to say, because she was a symbol of the emergence of black people in this country from their state of rejection, and it would have been a great tragedy if local blacks had lost this symbol just a few months after her nomination by the Governor. We Jews are that people who first taught the world that there is a God who cares about the poor and the outcast, and we have to put that teaching to work.

It is we Jews who first brought the notion of human potential into the world. The Babylonian sacred literature states, "The king is created in the image of God; the people are created in the image of the king." And so it was that the Babylonian king had textual support for his enslavement of his subjects. Not so in ancient Israel, for our tradition is that all human beings are created "Bidmut Elohim," in the image of the divine. We understand this to mean that all humans are created with the potential to grow towards ideal love and



justice, and therefore we have the responsibility to create that kind of family and that kind of government which will encourage the flowering of this potential. Of all the many contributions Jews have given to the world, none is more profound than this - the concept that humans are capable of infinite growth and development.

Our people was 600 years old when Moses was our leader. We were a thousand years old when the Prophets came upon the scene. The Prophets were those courageous advocates of the people who challenged kings, priests, and the military to live up to the requirements of the Mosaic Law. Known in their time as revolutionaries, the Prophets were really conservatives who were critical of the prevailing regime that sought to be above the law. Often a Prophet was imprisoned and sometimes killed, but never was he/she silent. From the Prophets we get those highly idealized and poetic proclamations that still tantalize the world today and prod us on toward that more perfect world which they envisioned.

It was the Prophet Isaiah who said in the name of God, "Behold the time comes when nations shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war anymore." It was the Prophet Zechariah who proclaimed, in the name of God, "Not by military power nor by violence but by My spirit," saith the Lord!" And it was the Prophet Micah who said, "What does the Lord require of you but that you do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." A Jew is not a Jew in the profound sense until he understands his responsibility as the heirs of the Prophets.

When Golda Meir said, "Tell them not to forget who they are," she meant that we American Jews have to know where we came from and how we got to be where we are. She meant that we must identify with biblical history and with our more modern history.

It was a thousand years from Abraham to the Prophets. A thousand years after the Prophets, the Romans, impatient with the repeated Judean revolts against them, drove us out of Judea and forbade us to enter Jerusalem. But before the Romans came upon the scene, we had served as the vassals of Babylonia, Persia and Greece. In this series of confrontations with other cultures, we developed a miraculous survival technique. We absorbed the best aspects of the cultures of our conquerors, but we maintained our religious and ethical life with scrupulous loyalty. The Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible, for example, reeks with Greek pessimism, but it is just a drop in the ocean of Biblical optimism. Again, Philo became a master of Greek philosophy, but he employed it to support the deeper meaning of Judaism.

When the Romans forced us out of Jerusalem about 135 C.E. (A.D.), we had long existing major Jewish centers in Babylonia (modern Iraq) and in Egypt. In Babylonia our people prepared the voluminous Talmud which is second only to the Bible as a source of wisdom; and it is said that at one time there were a million Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt, one of the great cultural centers of the Greek world.

With the Roman expulsion, however, the greater exile of the Jewish people began. Now some of us went into Asia Minor, others to the Mediterranean islands, others across northwest Africa, and finally, beginning with the eighth century of the common era, we found a land that really welcomed us, Spain. Jews settled in large numbers in Spain at almost the same time that the Arabs swept out of the Arabian Desert and conquered most of the lands of the Middle East.



In Spain, Jews mastered first Arabic and then Spanish. For 700 years of what is called the Golden Age of Spain, it was not unusual to find Jews holding the highest office in Spain. Jews served as Minister of Foreign Affairs, as Minister of Finance, or as Royal Physician. In Spain, we became great poets and philosophers in a land that made us feel at home.

Maimonides, who lived in the 12th Century, demonstrates all in himself some of the accomplishments of the Jews of this period. He was a renowned physician, an outstanding Talmudic scholar, and a brilliant Aristotelian philosopher. St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Catholic theologian, studied Maimonides closely and learned Aristotelian philosophy in this way. Thus, in an indirect way, a Jew, Maimonides, mediated Greek philosophy to medieval Catholics.

In many ways Jews were the cultural brokers in the Europe of this period. Rashi, for example, the famous Jewish Bible commentator in the 11th Century, is still today a primary source for the knowledge of early French language. In 1492, we are told, Columbus sailed the ocean blue, and in 1492, as a consequence of gradual developments in Spain, many Jews were forced to leave. Around 1490, Torquemada became the head of the Catholic Church in Spain and began a campaign to force absolute obedience to the Church. Jews were amongst the chief victims of his Inquisition. Jews, like other non-Catholics, had to choose between death, emigration, or conversion. Many of our people fled to Holland or to Italy. Some accepted conversion outwardly but remained secret Jews, or Marranoes.

The history of the next 500 years is better known to you. It is the period of flagrant anti-Semitism. Our people were accepted for a while in a particular country, but then, as we became rooted and successful, we were the subject of vicious attacks which we call pogroms. Many books have been written on the subject of anti-Semitism, and the authorities generally agree that the base cause was the Christian doctrine, so popular in this period, that anyone who does not believe in the divinity of Jesus is consigned to Hell. Once our people were equated with the Devil, it became possible to do everything to them.

During most of these 500 years after 1492, we had to live in ghettos, in small cramped quarters beyond which we were not permitted to venture. We could not practice the ordinary trades like carpentry or free masonry, because we were denied admission to the guilds or unions. We could not own land, because we were not considered to be citizens. We were tolerated in a given society only as a special ward of the ruling power which would use us for its own purpose. Jews were admitted to a country because we provided a special taxing base, or because we had developed a special expertise in trade or finance. Jews developed this expertise as a way of survival. Jews who could not own land began selling kitchen ware from door to door and became capitalists. Because Jews had a common language, and because we could find hospitality amongst other Jews wherever we went, we soon developed a network which served admirably for international trade. Since we often had to pick up our belongings quickly and leave a country, we began to acquire possessions that were both light and valuable so that we could travel with them. In time, Jews became dominant in the selling of diamonds and other jewelry.



Jews who were not permitted to learn a trade often became entertainers. Jews like Victor Borge, Danny Kaye, and Henry Winkler (the Fonz) have their predecessors in those Jews who earned their bread by entertaining at the village inn or in the court of nobles. Jewish violin virtuosos like Yitzchak Perlman and Yehudi Menuhin and Isaac Stern go back to those Jewish fiddlers who earned a few copeks playing at provincial fairs or at weddings.

In spite of the fragile condition of Jewish life in the Europe of this period, we managed to excel in certain areas. The greatest philosopher of the 17th Century was Baruch Spinoza of Holland. Perhaps the greatest German poet of the 19th Century was Heinrich Heine. Still, in order for him to be accepted by his peers, Heine had to convert officially to Christianity, from which protected position he then proceeded to extoll the virtues of Judaism.

As Jewish students began to be admitted to the universities in the 19th Century, the Jewish flair for learning asserted itself. Jews flocked to medicine and to scientific research and in some big cities, like Vienna, Jews came to dominate these fields. In pre-Hitler Vienna, two-thirds of the city's 3,500 doctors were Jews, and it was from Vienna that Freud made his immeasurable contribution to the study of the human mind.

The advent of Hitler was merely the absurd conclusion of 500 years of Jewish persecution. Hitler merely systematized on a large scale what others had done sporadically before him. Father Flannery, the Catholic Priest who has written a detailed study of this period, writes, "During the centuries before Hitler, as many Jews were killed in anti-Semitic outbursts as were killed in a few years by Hitler." #

Still, our people did not despair. We believed in the essential value of our religion, and we studied it, observed it, lived it. That we did not despair is living proof of the value of Judaism and its life-affirming qualities.

And so the heritage comes down to you and me who are here this night. You and I are but the living edge of all the Jews who came before us. We are the children and grandchildren of those Jews fortunate enough to leave Eastern Europe and to leave Germany before Hitler reached them. My father and his family came to America fleeing the Russian Czar and extreme poverty in the early 1900s. They came over in the dank hole of a ship that took forever to sail from England to America. My father's feet were frozen on that ship, and for weeks he could hardly walk. His father bought a horse and wagon and sold vegetables here in America. My mother's father was a M'lamad; he taught Hebrew lessons to unwilling American Jewish boys. I am sure your family has a similar history.

While some fled Eastern Europe in the early part of this century, others had to flee before Hitler's onslaught. The unlucky ones wound up in concentration camps or were heaped in graves and shot. Only recently it has been revealed that in Byerlo Russia the Germans did not shoot the infants who were buried with their parents. They were not worthy of a bullet, so they were permitted to suffocate.



Who are the Israelis? They are the lucky ones who managed to escape Hitler and the lucky ones who fled the Arab countries when the reprisals began during the Arab-Israeli wars. If my grandparents had not had the courage to flee the Czar, my parents would have had to choose between death and Israel. If my grandparents had not come to America. I would either be an Israeli or dead. The choices available to Jews in the last 500 years have not been many, and those Jews who survive are clearly members of one mishpacha, members of one tightly knit group that managed to survive, almost miraculously, the numerous death traps that have surrounded us.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are asked to confess our identity as we stand before God. Who are we who make ready to pray? We are the children of Abraham and Moses, the descendents of the Prophets. We are the children of Maimonides and Spinoza, the heirs of Freud and Einstein. We are the ghetto survivors, the branding iron pulled out of the fires of the concentration camps. We are the children of Hebrew speaking, Arabic speaking, Greek speaking, Spanish speaking, German speaking, Yiddish speaking, Russian speaking, Polish speaking Jews. We are the heirs of those condemned to Hell, who speak of the necessity to work for the ideal world.

Oh Lord, this is our rehearsal of our history. We know better now who we are. Now we are ready to pray.