

Rosh Hashanah Eve

September 30, 1970 (5731)

In this sermon on the eve of the Jewish New Year in 1970, Beerman reveals the full array of his homiletical talents. He begins by expressing delight at seeing old friends, members of Leo Baeck Temple, who appeared in the sanctuary once or twice a year, as was and is the custom of many American Jews. He then launches into an exposition of one of the most vexing of biblical stories, which is recounted on Rosh Hashanah: the 'Akedah, or binding of Isaac by his father.

The cautionary tale of the story is to warn against submission to irrational or destructive authority. Many in the modern world have replaced absolute faith in God with absolute faith in the State, which calls its citizens to express their loyalty by going to war. Returning to the theme of the Vietnam War, albeit in veiled fashion, Beerman takes stock of the destruction to human life caused by that war—and all war. The present-day challenge—and the opportunity afforded by Rosh Hashanah—is to break free from the modern “condition of servitude” and resist the impulse to barbarism, choosing instead justice and peace.

I come to this night always with a reverence and awe that befit an occasion which has so many mystifying powers. It is difficult to speak in the midst of such an accumulation of moods and expectations, the almost infinite variety of feelings which pulsate in this sanctuary tonight. It is not accidental that we are gripped by a feeling of elation as we return to the synagogue, that source from which our fathers in every age have drawn their will to survive as Jews. We have been drawn to this place by some seductive power whose magic is such that none of us can understand its sway over us.

To see the old faces and the new ones, to experience the vitality of numbers, is to be shaken by the possibility that there is something of value here after all, that

our being here has worth, even a dignity and majesty. We are even more than just a little proud of ourselves, for we are, after all, a rather splendid looking array of people at least by the standards that most of us are still clinging to.

Perhaps nowhere else in the world does it feel so good to be Jewish, at least for those who have emancipated themselves from what they feel to be the rigorous demands of a more observant Judaism. It is easier to be a Jew in Israel, but Jewishness is taken for granted there; it becomes a natural, reflexive part of one's being. It is rarely experienced there the way it is here.

But perhaps it is better not to poke around at these feelings, and simply to revel in them; to be glad to be alive, to be here, to be near those we love in a time of elation—a touch of pride, a reverence, a breath of something called sanctity—all of this is permitted to bore through the castle wall of that rigid routine by which we ordinarily live our lives, do our work, scurry about making all those gestures of living.

Even this building begins to feel the difference; this orphan feels the warmth of care. No longer shivering in neglect, in the cold sounds of silence, it responds to the sounds of life.

How fortunate we are to have in the treasure house of our faith this precious holy day. Surely part of the subtlety of its power lies in its being a time of serious reflection, a time of self-examination and personal judgment. The New Year is certainly a time to be joyful, even to be proud of what we are and what we have accomplished. It is also a time to give some sober consideration to the manner in which we have fashioned our lives and the life of the society of which we are a part.

Our tradition treated Rosh Hashanah not only as a time of judgment and reflection, but also linked it with the date of the creation of the world. The New Year was a creative moment. An entire life could be restructured, transformed, begun anew, if only a man would awaken from the slumber of unexamined living.

All the mechanisms of this day are designed to do just that. Prayer and music are rich in imagery and suggestiveness. Even the crude and anachronistic sounds of the shofar come to shatter our composure, to awaken us, as Maimonides once said, from our slumber, to awaken us to what we really are, to what we really yearn to be. It awakens us to the still, small voice within us, the one that cries out: "Do I have any value? What are human beings for? Am I significant?" It is a voice that calls for an ethic of honesty and courage.

A rabbi who approaches this Rosh Hashanah 5731, and gives thought to what might be the proper subject of his sermon, is presented with an embarrassment of riches. For all mankind these are perilous times, and for the Jewish people in particular it seems so. The traumatic events in the Middle East call out for our consideration. The condition of the Jews of the Soviet Union, the future of the American Jew, and especially the future of our own Temple—(what is to become of us?)—that is certainly worthy of some thought and elucidation.

And what of the world—bristling with violence and instability—our own nation, poisoned and corrupted in its own fertility and growth, its universities at the ready,

a mindless leadership, like so many bullies, flexing their muscles at the young? I can see some of the paths that might lead me into. There are so many matters to concern us here. I shall get to some of these places before the holy days are done, but by way of a circuitous route, by way of a Torah portion we read tomorrow.

Of all the elements that come to shake our composure at the Jewish New Year there is none that causes greater embarrassment than the story of the binding of Isaac, the *'Akedah*, as it is called in Hebrew. We like to think that Jews are the bearers of an enlightened religious tradition, teaching some of the highest ideals ever known to man. How is it possible that our ancestors could have included such a horrible story in the sacred Torah, to be read on Rosh Hashanah yet, when all of us are here to listen? What kind of man is this terrible Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, who would sacrifice his son? What kind of God is this who would demand such a thing? What could be more brutal, more ruthless? Here is the aged Abraham who had for so many years longed for a son and who had this longing fulfilled. Now he is commanded to offer his only son as a sacrifice, so that Abraham's faith, we are told, might be tested in the heroic exercise of it. But hadn't Abraham already proved his loyalty, his devotion, his faith? What kind of a god is it who is so relentlessly demanding of one of his most courageous, most dedicated servants? Oh, the Jewish tradition has a dozen ways of explaining away these difficulties. Sometimes the ancient commentators stress the heroism of Abraham. This was a test of faith but he stood the test. "Here am I," he said. He thus established a standard of character and integrity, which made him the first hero of his people. In every generation Israel would have such heroes—men who would respond, who would sacrifice what was most dear to them.

Or the most familiar interpretation: that the story of the *'Akedah*, the attempted sacrifice of Isaac, is in reality an outcry against the practice of child sacrifice. Now we know that some of the neighboring cultures surrounding the land of Israel did indulge in child sacrifice. Israel rejected this practice. Why God should have chosen this devious method of teaching such a lesson is never told us by the commentators.

The most intriguing explanation of the *'Akedah* was that of the late Professor Edmund Cahn, Professor of Law at Columbia, who attempted a juridical approach to the problem. He began with the question: What is the source of the evidence? Who has testified to the basic facts of the case? Who could be providing the account we have of this story? Only two possible witnesses: Abraham and Isaac. It seems plausible that Isaac rather than Abraham was the source of this story. He outlived his father. Besides everything we know about Abraham contradicts the story of the *'Akedah*. Abraham was a man of superb dignity and valor who never silently would have accepted such a command. He had left his father's house, migrated to a strange land, believing he had a mission to perform. He laughed in his old age when he was told that God was going to provide him with a son from a wife who was almost ninety. We would have laughed too. Abraham was the man

who inaugurated the greatest of all Jewish traditions when he stood outside the wicked city of Sodom and urged God to deal justly and compassionately with its inhabitants. He provided one of the great mountain peaks of Jewish history when he confronted God, demanding, "Shall not the judge of all the earth himself do justly?" How could such a dynamic hero have been the one to tell the story of the binding of Isaac?

What of Isaac, Professor Cahn continued. Could he have been the source? He survived Abraham. He had plenty of time to develop the story. What kind of a man was he? A shadow of a man, tolerably good, and yet had it not been for his father, Abraham, and for his son, Jacob, we might never have heard of Isaac. Isaac lacked insight. He was soft, submissive, ineffectual. It must have been he who would tell such a story.

But how did he come to tell it? Professor Cahn asked. It went very much like this: It was a family dinner in Isaac's old age, like some of our family dinners today. The wild, explosive Esau was quarreling with his brother, the dreamer, Jacob. The boys had become too big for their mother, Rebecca, to control, and she demands that Isaac do something. She nags at her husband and finally with her teeth clenched and her anger grinding within her, she screams at her husband: "For God's sake do something to stop Esau and Jacob." And Isaac does. He looks at his two sons and he knows in his heart that each of them is stronger than he and that neither of them will obey him. And so in a voice, which attempts to simulate the tones of his great father, he tells the *'Akedah* story. He tells it to prove that when he was young his feeling of respect and obedience toward his father, was as absolute as his father's respect and obedience toward God. He tells it to show that his sons must obey without challenging, without the necessity of first being convinced. He tells it because when his father was alive he did not understand him, and now he does not understand his own sons. "Listen to me, as my father listened to God, as I listened to my father. Listen to me."

Rebecca sits there silently, stunned. The two sons sulk in their places. Jacob remembers the story and it is he who probably recorded it.

Of course this treatment of the story by Professor Cahn is a somewhat playful one. He knew just as we do that what the story of Abraham and Isaac reveals to us is the life-thwarting element, which can be found in the Jewish tradition, and in every religion man has ever fashioned. In all religions there is a strain which attempts to enslave man, which tries to force man to give up his freedom, his reason, his responsibility, which tries to make man an obedient and dependent child; it is a religion of submission where sin is disobedience, and virtue is the unquestioning acceptance of authority. In tribute or service to such authority a man is willing to perform the most irrational acts of faith, even as Abraham climbed the mountain dutifully to sacrifice his beloved son.

Well, what has all of this to do with us, here on the eve of Rosh Hashanah? You might suppose that I have come to tell this story just to show what horrible

elements there are in our tradition, as though there were some need to overcome the overly sentimental, highly romantic notion that Jews have of their past. I could simply be here to say that what makes us important as a people is precisely that we are so very human, that even our sacred literature preserves for us those aspects of our past that show us and our heroes at their best and at their worst.

But that is not why I rehearse the *'Akedah* here tonight in anticipation of tomorrow morning's Torah reading. What makes the Torah rich and enduring is not that it tells us interesting or even disturbing stories about Moses and Abraham and the prophets, and all the others. No, it is telling us something about man in his encounter with life; it is telling about the human experience; it is talking about us. In every generation of human history men have received a call to sacrifice their sons. In every generation, like so many Abrahams, men have responded to that call. Dutifully, in obedience to tribe, to clan, to king and country, to nation, to defend the fatherland, to rescue the Holy Grail from the infidels, to uproot the heretics, to defend our honor, our liberty, our credibility—in every generation the fathers have sent forth their Isaacs to be slain upon the altar of war.

As for us, we no longer believe in a commanding God. We find it difficult to understand an Abraham whose faith in God had such enormous power over him. But we merely substituted for God another power as great as God himself. Our god is no longer the God above gods Abraham served. Our god is our unswerving subservience to the nation and the way of life that has been created here, and in service to the State, the nation, its system of production, its law and order, its way of life, we and all of the fathers before us have been willing to destroy the life of our children.

Let it be remembered that the Torah does not permit Isaac to be killed. A voice speaks to Abraham on the mountain, calls out to him, "Abraham, Abraham, lay not thy hand upon the lad." And Isaac is spared.

One of the late Hasidic rabbis, Menachem Mendel, said that this story teaches us that only God has the right to command us to destroy another man, and that even if the smallest angel comes forth to counter such an order, we must obey the angel.

But ours is a history of the fathers who would not listen to that voice calling upon them not to slay their sons. We insist upon the way of death.

One of the great British poets of World War I, Wilfred Owen, shortly before he was killed in France in November 1910, wrote this poem, which he called "The Parable of the Old Men and the Young."

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,

But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
 Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
 And builded parapets and trenches there,
 And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
 When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
 Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
 Neither do anything to him. Behold,
 A ram, caught in the thicket by its horns;
 Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
 But the old man would not do so, but slew his son,—
 And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Is that not precisely what the fathers have done to their sons? How long will we continue to play the role in this brutal tragedy?

How do we kill the young? Not only by our dedication to the system of international violence, but primarily by way of perpetuating a way of life that ignores so many essentially human needs, a way of life that is single-minded in its dedication to organization and technical achievement, whose actions are not guided by what will make men healthier and happier. Behind the façade of freedom we think we have, we are enslaved, rigidly obedient to a society that mindlessly preempts human energies, exhausts human resources for non-human ends. It is a society, to use Hans Morgenthau's words, that grows monstrously for the sake of growth, that ravages natural and scenic resources, and where the work people do and the goods and services produced are not really judged by human needs.

Our way of life, the one that has made all of us its captive, the one into which we try to indoctrinate our children with all of the mechanisms employed by our society, does not permit any value to interfere with efficiency, organization, growth, progress—not beauty, not community, not even the supreme value of life itself, and the signs of death—the decay of cities, the destruction of the natural environment, racial conflict, poverty, are not the result of accidental misfortunes, or even poor judgment; they are the result of the way in which the social and economic policies of this society operate.

The militarization of American life, the war in Indochina, the orgy of wasteful production and distribution are all a part of a gigantic hoax that we are trying to perpetuate on our children. It is a huge joke that we are free. We are killing one another. We are killing our own capacity to be human. And a voice is calling out to us, the young, the blacks, the students, the violence itself, as ugly and brutal as it all is, is that not a cry for help—a voice calling upon us to put an end to the way of death and to affirm the way of life? Will we listen to that voice the way Abraham did and not slay our children upon the altar of a way of life which commands our total subservience? Do we still have the capacity to be free in our judgment of what is truly human in the life that has been given to us?

The task and the possibility of the human being is to move out of this condition of servitude to live at least as many moments as possible in freedom, in honesty, in responsibility.

That is what we must demand of one another, that is what the voice is calling us, begging us to do if we are to survive in this inhuman death-driven era in which we have been fated to live.

The Rosh Hashanah calls us to be free; the Rosh Hashanah calls us to be free from all the old enslavements; it calls us to the continuing possibility of our own transformation. This day a new world can come into being. A new person can come into being.

Once Socrates was describing the ideal society to his friend Glaucon. And Glaucon countered saying: "Socrates, I do not believe that there is such a City of God anywhere on earth." And Socrates answered, "Whether such a city exists in heaven or ever will exist on earth, the wise man will live after the manner of that city, having nothing to do with any other, and in so looking upon it, will set his own house in order."

Whether the City of God will ever exist in heaven or even here on earth the wise Jew is called upon to try to live after the manner of that ideal City and to begin by setting himself, his own household in order, that is what the New Year asks of us, and because we are asked, it must mean that we are capable of doing it.

COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR
JONATHAN D. GREENBERG

Rabbi Leo Baeck called Judaism "the religion of moral optimism." The Hebrew prophets were "optimists" in their relentless expression of "scorn for the present, derision for the status quo"—and their fierce insistence that a broken world can be redeemed. Jewish prophets, ancient and contemporary, are "the great believers who hold fast to the future and lead step by step toward it. They are the consolers of the people, the humans within humanity [*die Menschen der Menschheit*]."

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 1970. Leo Baeck Temple, Los Angeles. I'm thirteen years old. Reading this text, years later, I hear Rabbi Beerman's voice. *What does it mean to be a Jew? A human being?* Leonard's voice revealed the path I traveled to answer these questions in my own life.

By "Leonard's voice" I mean the gentle, resonant *sound* of his voice, its human intimacy, and the feelings it conveyed: kindness, sadness and compassion, urgency, anger and power. I mean Leonard's voice as a writer, the elegance of his prose, the diversity and depth of his literary imagination. The way he opened our eyes and minds, moving us from complacency to disquiet.

Leonard's voice erased barriers between Hebraism and Hellenism. Between holy texts and secular poetry. Between peoples and nations. Even at Israel's triumph in

the 1967 Six-Day War, Rabbi Beerman insisted that the heart-rending grief of Arab and Jewish mothers is the same.

In this Rosh Hashanah sermon, biblical struggles unfold in the present. The terrible shadow of the *'Akedah* falls on us. We are Abraham, a gleaming knife in our hand, above Isaac, bound at the altar. Leonard called us to protest. Against the slaughter of innocents in Indochina; the threat of nuclear annihilation; the gross inequality of American society. He called us to recognize that all children, of all races and faiths, are our sons and daughters—and to act accordingly.

Like Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah—and Martin Luther King Jr.—Leonard called us to be socially *maladjusted*; to reject the unconscionable violence of national and global systems; to affirm the dignity, value, and life of every human being throughout the world.

Rabbi Beerman was a consoler of the people, a human within humanity. Fearlessly expressing scorn for the present, derision for the status quo, he showed us the path of peace, justice, and redemption.