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NORMAN LAMM

Jan. 26, 1951

Sermon, Fri.Eve.

Yithro

Stamford, Conn.

It is a distinct pleasure for me to be privileged to address you, the Jewish community of Stamford, this evening. My heartfelt and sincerest thanks go to your respected spiritual leader, my old friend and fellow student, Rabbi Ehrenkrantz, for having bestowed upon me the honor of speaking from his pulpit.

In the portion of the week which we will read tomorrow, we learn of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Gd delivers to Moses two tablets upon which are ^{inscribed} ~~written~~ the Ten Commandments. Yet this is not the only time that the drama of Matan Torah is acted out upon the wilds of Sinai. For these first tablets are soon destroyed, by Moses himself, in a fit of ^{righteous indignation} ~~anger~~ against his own people whom he finds dancing about a golden calf. It is only after this, when Moses ascends Sinai for the second and last time to receive the Torah, that the tablets he brings down are everlasting. This time the Torah and the Ten Commandments are here to stay. And, lo and behold, וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה בְּקוֹל מֹשֶׁה וְיֹאמַר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְיֹאמַר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְיֹאמַר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה, the skin of Moses' face beamed, a majestic halo radiated about his head. His holy mission accomplished successfully, Moses radiates the soft warm glow of a task well done.

And why is it, we may ask, that the first Matan Torah was an abysmal failure, the tablets were destroyed utterly, and the second Matan Torah was a glorious success, leaving the Ten Commandments as an eternal and timeless gift to all mankind? What was it in the very nature of the procedure of the first Matan Torah which doomed it to failure, and what blessed quality was it which destined the second Tablets to their great role in Eternity?

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The first act of Matan Torah, as we read of it in today's Sidra, turned Mt. Sinai into a universal stage of unparalleled melodrama. "And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a shofar exceedingly loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled". And to this Biblical description, our Rabbis add, that then, as Moses ascended the Mount to receive the Torah, *הַיְיטָא כְּשֶׁנִּתְּנָה תּוֹרָה*, the nightingale did not sing; *וְהַיְיטָא כְּשֶׁנִּתְּנָה תּוֹרָה*, the swallow did not fly; *וְהַיְיטָא כְּשֶׁנִּתְּנָה תּוֹרָה*, the oxen in the field did not bellow; no man dared whisper, the ocean did not even ripple, wheels did not turn, the angels did not sing their songs of glory, *וְהַיְיטָא כְּשֶׁנִּתְּנָה תּוֹרָה*, the entire universe stopped in its tracks, the cosmos became quiet and in frozen silence and breathless expectancy the world awaited the declaration of ANOCHI.

→ * And the answer, my friends, is simple. It is the difference between effort and lack of effort, between action and inaction, between laziness and determination. Let us compare the two acts of Matan Torah, and see how and wherein they differed.

And then, out of this ~~blanket of~~ splendid silence in which Israel, all humanity and Nature itself are united with Moses and the Elders in this great mission, there emanates the loud and clear voice of another shofar; *וירא ישראל את כל אשר עשה אלהים למשה ולבני ישראל באת ה' אל משה ואל בני ישראל מן הים*
 Gd Himself, in all His glory, descends upon the mount, *ויבא אלהים בענן ויבא אל משה ואל בני ישראל מן הים*
 Gd gives to Moses the two tablets of testimony, Moses receives the Ten Commandments much as a mother receiving her babe from the hands of its nurse - so ~~see~~ beautiful, so glorious — so easy. *והנה אלהים נאמן, ומהנה אלהים נאמן, ומהנה אלהים נאמן*
 And the tablets were the work of Gd, and the writing was written by Gd. All Israel had to do was to wait and expect. Gd was working for ~~him~~ *them*.

Yet only a short time later, these same tablets of the Ten Commandments were broken and destroyed in a fit of rage against these same Israelites. These great tablets which were so easily acquired - - were so easily lost. Lost were the tablets, lost was the glory of Israel and lost was the glory of Moses.

The second time that Moses ascended Mount Sinai, it was under radically different conditions. Israel was no longer in its pristine purity. It had suffered the catastrophe of a Golden Calf. "Unity" was now only a word, not a fact. Cheerfulness, expectancy, hope - were things of the past. The melodrama had evaporated. All that was left was hard, cold, prosaic fact. The second time that Moses goes up to Sinai, he is alone. *אמר ה' אל משה, לא יעלה עמך איש, לא יעלה עמך איש, לא יעלה עמך איש*, no man shall go up with thee. With heavy heart and troubled mind he climbs a rocky, stony mountain which is cold and unsympathetic. Moses climbs alone, and he looks about him and he sees no one, not even Gd. The silence is not the silence of a great drama. It is the silence of loneliness.

And then Moses' wavering hand grasps a rock, a cold hard rock, and he thinks to himself, "Is this my destiny? Is this the destiny of my people?" And as he thus contemplates the bitter turn of events, he hears a voice, if but a whisper. It is the voice of Gd! And his lips smile, for he is now alone - with Gd! And the message of Gd then breaks through in all its Divine strength -

"Hew for thyself two tablets of stone". No, Moses, this time the Torah shall not be an effortless gift. *אין סוף*, hew it out, hammer it out with your own power and energy. With your own bare hands mold out of this cold hard rock the *אין סוף*, the Eternal Message of Israel to all generations. *אין סוף*, the same message as on the first Tablets, but these will be perpetuated, because you will have done it yourself, with the creative power which flows from the deep well of your own personality. Alone, hard, cold, work - these shall make for success in your holy mission.

And Moses did just this. Alone, he hewed the hard, cold rock until he molded the two Tablets. Upon them he hammered out the Ten Commandments. His own efforts and energies had created the greatest message mankind ever received. These tablets lasted forever. They were never broken.

And when Moses descended from Mount Sinai, his mission successfully completed, he did not even realize that *אין סוף*, the skin of his face beamed, a halo had developed about his head, he was all light. It was well deserved.

My dear friends, this lesson holds true for us in ^all of our endeavors. All of Jewish history ~~is~~ ^{res}echoes with the vibrant overtones of the ^{ג' פסח} theme. Think of the Jew exiled from his home for over two thousand years, picture his wanderings from country to country during ~~this~~ ^{the} lost night, this Jew for whom the world is divided in two: those nations which expel the Jew and those which will not receive him. Solitary, alone, always alone, always against the stream rather than with it. The Jew has so often found himself on the rocks, his fate so cold and hard and brutal. Exiled by the legions of Rome, trodden upon by those who swear by the beard of a prophet, forcibly converted and ~~or~~ burnt at the stake by pious inquisitors who preached good-will and brotherhood, butchered by the cannibals of ~~the~~ Germany and strangled by the silken plots of England, the Jew of the Exile has never been able to receive the Torah and the Divine blessing by sitting back ~~back~~ and relaxing. If the Jew of the long and bitter exile was able, despite political persecutions and cultural assassinations and threatened assimilation, to live that noble and idealistic Jewish life which he did lead, it is because he did not rely upon the Matan Torah of this week's sidra, ^{ו' ח' ,} but rather he lived and experienced the second Matan Torah, that of ^{(ע' ח' ,} that difficult but rewarding command of ^{ג' פסח} . And it is this Jew whose life was characterized by the motto of ^{ג' פסח} , who has survived the vicissitudes of the long exile-night and who today has returned to his home.

But bother to examine the fate of the other Jew, the Jew whose goal and ideal was not the Matan Torah of $\gamma\delta\delta\omega$, but the other Matan Torah, the one described in this week's sidra, the Matan Torah of ease and comfort and drama and effortlessness. Look at the ~~Jew~~ German Jew of the 1910's and 1920's and 1930's, he who embraced Reform because he liked its beauty, its drama, its so-called dignity. He was satisfied by the Reform "Torah" because it put so few demands upon him; it promised him the liberal's paradise if he would just attend services and admire the show staged for him. An easy Judaism, a Judaism of comfort. Yet this Jew has disappeared from the face of the earth; he had begun to make his exit even before Hitler. The Golden Calf ^{around} ~~about~~ which he danced was assimilation and inter-marriage; his children were half-Jews and his grand-children $\frac{1}{4}$ - Jews, and had they ~~too~~ not ~~unfortunately~~ been swallowed by the open jaws of the Nazi death machine, their descendants would have dwindled, by geometric progression, into infinitesimal-Jews. A Jew who has not learnt and lived his $\gamma\delta\delta\omega$ cannot hope to survive. Instead of the halo of light, his lot must be the dark shadows of eternal obscurity.

This past week, I had the privilege of meeting a man whom I think is the embodiment, the very realization of the second Matan Torah, the archetype of the $\gamma\delta\delta\omega$ Jew. I ^{wish} ~~should~~ all of you would have been there with me to meet and greet him. If you would meet him on the street I am sure that you would not bother to give him a second look. His appearance is rather ordinary - a short man, old looking, thick glasses and a quite short white beard, dressed in dark suit and coat.

And yet, my friends, I am sure that if you knew his story beforehand, your eyes would be opened, and if you looked closely enough, you would perceive that (וינה קרן לור כני), you would see the halo about his head. For this man, who has come last week from Israel to visit American Jewry, has lived 75 years of an ^{continuous} ~~endless~~ and heroic ^{גם סוף} struggle to perpetuate what is best and noblest in Jewish life. Rabbi Judah L. Maimon, Israeli Minister of Religion and the oldest member of the Israeli cabinet, is the honorable visitor of whom I speak. Here is a man whose life ^{has been} ~~is~~ a series of great struggles and great achievements. He is one of the most prolific writers in Israel today. A great scholar, he has ~~almost~~ always epitomized the ^{spirit} of determination in his many pioneer-ideas. Many a time was Rabbi Maimon, or Rabbi Fishman as he was then known, alone, one man crusading against that giant phantom, public opinion. Yet his opinions, as expressed in his many monumental works, were always clear, forthright and fearless. Unpopularity, loneliness and herculean effort and work never deterred this patriarch from his aims. On the contrary, when a task required ^{גם סוף}, he went to it with so much more gusto and relish.

Not only was he a pioneer in taking up the cudgels of ^{גם סוף} in scholarship, but in politics as well. Rabbi Maimon, as unimpressive and undramatic looking as he is, was one of the founding fathers of modern political Zionism. He was ~~66~~ the guiding light of religious Zionism. He stood almost completely alone when, in the early years of Zionism when the movement was extremely unpopular among East European Jews, he campaigned from Vilno to Warsaw and from Bessarabia through Hungary for this burning ideal of ^{113 מריל}, the Return to Zion.

And even after his battle was won, and he had formed the Mizrachi, the organization dedicated to religious Zionism, ~~he~~ refused to rest. The words *לחם* were inscribed in blazing letters on the tablets of this man's spirit, so that even his many critics and enemies bowed thier heads in respect for him. And several few years ago when the proud people of Israel, who themselves were not lacking in the spirit of *לחם*, undertook the great War of Independence against the oppressors, Rabbi Maimon was in the thick of the battle with his heart and his soul, and at the age of 73 years, Rabbi Maimon was ajudged by the British as a dangerous revolutionary, *on a sat morning* and ~~he~~ was locked up in the dungeons of Latrun. [Rabbi Maimon is none the worse for the experience, and even today he is embarking upon another difficult campaign - the reconstruction of the Sanhedrin - which will require the best of him and his experience if it is to succeed.]

Let us American Jews think deeply of this man and his life, for he brings us the message of *לחם*. The halo about him, the halo of success and ever-youthful vigor, testify to his and his people's loyalty to that motto. In every phase of private or community life, that which is acquired too easily is lost easily. And, conversely, that which is acquired by hard, diligent and conscientious work is awarded with the crowning glory of success and a halo of light which reflects that feeling of satisfaction with a task well done.

My dear friends of Stamford, let us too take heed of this sharp contrast between the Matan Torah of the portion of this Shabbos and that of 2860 . From what I hear, not only from your Rabbi but from others as well, I understand that the Jewish community of this city has been partially successful in its attempts at instituting a good Jewish educational system for its youth. I say "partially successful" advisedly. Because, although I realize that your Jewish schools are far better than those of many cities of similar size and population, nevertheless no human endeavor is always completely successful. There is ever room for criticism and encouragement.

You have attained a measure of success in a Talmud Torah of which you may be proud. Yet I am sure that there are some Jewish parents in Stamford who have so far failed to take advantage of the golden opportunities offered to them by your Talmud Torah. Would it not perhaps be proper for you to talk to these parents and tell them of the importance of a Jewish education, rather than wait comfortably till they discover this fact by themselves? And even if every Jewish child were enrolled in your school, let us not forget that this is only a good beginning, it is only the first firm step in the direction of the conquest of broader and grander horizons - a complete and thorough-going genuine Jewish education in an all-day school. 2860, make this your goal and your all-consuming ambition - and do it yourselves, with your own effort and energy; do not expect miracles to emanate from the sanctuary of the principal's office or the rabbi's study.

But, no, my friends, *קצת יש לה*, this is not the proper way.* You must all, each and every one of you, with the picks and shovels of your own determination stubbornly dig and hammer and hew the tough structure of a good Jewish education. You may be alone for a while - it is certainly easier to effect a good Jewish upbringing in Brooklyn or in Jerusalem - but you will be alone with Gd. ~~But~~ the reward will be so much more lasting and effective if you will listen to the heavenly command of *ק' סו' .* And that satisfaction which will fill your hearts will radiate from you, *ויגד קרן וזר ענין*, that great halo of Moses will shine from this community, and its light will serve as a beacon for others to follow.

* Every one here should feel instinctively that all the beautiful sentiments in the world weigh less than a single good action.