

“THE SUN HAS SET”
A TRIBUTE TO
PRESIDENT JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY

preached by

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When Father Jacob was reunited with his son Joseph, whom he had long thought dead and for whom he had grieved so many years, and whom he now saw before him in flesh and blood, Joseph ran to his father, embraced him, and wept on his neck. But Jacob neither greeted his son, nor embraced him, nor kissed him, nor wept. Instead, according to our Sages, he recited the *Shema* (Rashi to Gen. 46:29).

What our Tradition meant by this was that there are times when our emotions are so overwhelming, our experiences so profound, that they far surpass our capacity for articulation. At times of this sort, when language falls shamefully short of the tasks demanded of it, the Jew instinctively turns to Torah in order to find expression for the essentially inexpressible. For only in the superhuman words of Scripture and Tradition can man communicate ideas and sentiments which, by the extent of their joy or their grief, test the limitations of his mere humanity.

The unspeakably disastrous, calamitous, cataclysmic dimensions of the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy represent such an experience. Ordinary language is miserably inadequate to the task of giving voice to the immeasurable sorrow and dismay that well up within us. How shall mere eloquence relate the stark tragedy of a country that has seen its beloved leader, in whom so many placed their confidence as he guided our destiny, cruelly cut down? How shall we, with our own petty words, tell of the personal sense of loss that each of us has sustained with such ugly suddenness? Is there one amongst us who has not vicariously identified with one or another member of his distinguished family? Have we not shared in his parents' pride, their "*nachas*?" Have we not thrilled at the sense of family solidarity with his wife and young children and his brothers and sisters? And who will venture to deny the impotence of any oratory in expressing not only our profound sympathy but also our unbounded admiration for that gallant young widow who, a mere hour or two after her illustrious husband's murder, had the courage and the fortitude to accompany his successor as he took his oath of office?

If human language is inadequate, let us then turn to the words of the Torah and of the Sages, and in those pregnant images and metaphors, in those sacred verses and ideas, try to find release for the burden of sorrow that we together bear this day.

On the opening words of today's Sidra, "And Jacob went out from Beersheba" (Gen. 28:10), our Rabbis commented: *yetziat tzaddik min ha-olam oseh roshem*, the departure of a righteous man from the world makes a tremendous impact on it — *panah hodah*, *panah zivah*, *panah hadarah*, when he leaves there also leave its majesty, its glory, its beauty.

These sentiments hold true not only for a *tzaddik*, for a religiously righteous individual, but also for a *manhig*, for a great leader. The assassination of John Kennedy has left an indelible impression on the conscience of this nation. A shameful chapter has been written in American history. With the death of Pres. Kennedy, the stature of our country has diminished. Our glory has been tarnished. The majesty of a great nation that has successfully placed its trust in a young and brilliant leader and then failed him — this too has left us. This country will never be the same.

“A Jacob went out from Beersheba.” It was just a short time ago that John Kennedy went out from relative obscurity to the greatest position in the world. He had just barely begun his career. He had just emerged to the greatness for which history will remember him, just begun to grow into his office, with so much promise and hope. It was only — it seems — but yesterday that he stirred the hearts of his countrymen and reawakened in us the eternal youthfulness of America when he announced that the torch had been passed to the hands of Americans born in this century, and that he would not shrink from the burdens imposed upon a nation that aspires to greatness.

Yet in those few years — less than three years — he took us very far indeed. “And he lighted upon the place” (Gen. 28:11). Our Sages saw implied in these words of Scripture the rapidity with which Jacob came to this place. They called it *kefitzat ha-derekh*: it was as if the road leaped towards him, for he covered the ground with miraculous speed. When historians will assess the record of our late President they too will find a *kefitzat ha-derekh*. In these few years of his incumbency, this youngest man ever to be elected President of the United States created a revolution in the hearts of his countrymen and in the inherited patterns of his nation’s behavior. His very election as the first Roman Catholic President shattered for once and for all the shallow prejudice that had denied our nation’s most exalted office to others than the members of only one faith, and opened up the leadership of America to its sons of greatest talent and ability, no matter what their religion. He earned the love and gratitude of all mankind in using the great powers of his office in effecting a limited ban on nuclear testing and reducing the imminent danger of world-wide nuclear holocaust. He and his wife breathed new life into the culture of our people and raised it to a position befitting a great civilized nation. He brought to his duties vast personal charm, extraordinary vigor, inner dynamism, and the courage one associates with youth, and then showed that he balanced these with a wisdom and understanding that are characteristic of age and long experience. His greatness was manifested in his delicate balancing of idealism and realism, of principles and pragmatism. He evoked the best in us, he stirred and inspired us, he gave the whole nation a new style and a new tone that reflected upon all aspects of the national life.

Of Father Jacob we are told that "he took of the stones of the place and put them under his head and lay down in that place to sleep." Our Tradition avers he built a stone wall about his head to protect himself against the *hayyot ra'ot*, predatory beasts. Furthermore, each stone clamored for his exclusive attention: "let him lay his head only upon me." A miracle occurred, and all the stones merged into one, and so they all received his attention (Rashi). John Kennedy came to his office to find problems as hard and as unyielding as rocks. The country was divided by a sectionalism that has been with us from before the Civil War. Each of the terrible problems demanded his immediate, undivided, exclusive attention. The President did not spare himself in approaching this task. He knew that many predatory beasts lurked in the background: nuclear war, deadly fallout, revolution, violent change, hunger, the threats to freedom from without and to equality from within. Yet to each of the enormous problems that confronted him — civil rights, disarmament, economic growth, foreign policy — he gave freely of his tremendous intellectual gifts and powerful personal endowments. By political brilliance, statesmanlike persuasion, moral firmness, personal vigor and courage, he did all that a human could to merge the stones into one powerful structure that would protect the integrity of the nation and become a foundation-stone of world peace. He "put them under his head" — he gave to these his head and his heart, his mind and his soul. He "lay down in that place to sleep" — these concerns for the welfare of our people and the peace of the world never left him, not for one moment. He was an ever alert guardian of the trust the nation put in him. He fully deserved his enormous popularity with his countrymen.

Jacob's immortal dream of the ladder planted on earth and reaching to heaven, a ladder upon which angels *olim ve'yordim bo*, ascend and descend, has always inspired mankind. Jack Kennedy's dream also consisted of a ladder. For his vision was but a new version of the great American dream of the limitless possibilities of man, allowing each and every person the opportunity to scale the ladder and reach as high as he can. This vision found its greatest expression in civil rights. He wanted every citizen, no matter what the color of his skin or his national origin, to have equal rights in developing to the fullest his God-given talents.

John Kennedy was assassinated just about one hundred years after the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, met his violent death. It is no accident that for the majority of America's colored citizens these two names are inextricably linked. For Pres. Kennedy inspired his people to a twentieth century version of the nineteenth century dream of Pres. Lincoln. One began the great struggle for freedom for the country's most persecuted and disenfranchised minority, and the other continued it on a new plane. Each of them had to learn the same lesson: how to balance sterling convictions, that lie at the heart of this country's conscience, convictions about freedom and human dignity and the natural rights of man, with

the practical wisdom of advancing those rights without allowing passions to be inflamed. To be sure, John Kennedy had many who disagreed with him. Disagreement is not only permissible but vital to the functioning of a democracy. But in the course of raising our society to the level of its own image, the identity it had of itself in its dream, he awakened a hidden source of violence in the psyche of this nation, one that is a disgrace to us. There is an element in the American character that we had hoped was gone, but is not: the atavistic echo of the lawlessness that once characterized the Old Frontier in our younger pioneer days. In the course of erecting the great ladder of opportunity of the New Frontier, that coarse, crude, and dismal aspect of the American character came to life like a deadly moribund reptile suddenly springing to life. John Kennedy had to learn, like Abe Lincoln before him, that the higher the ladder you build for the people, the greater the risk that the harder the fall. For the many to rise, some must plunge to their deaths. He who would set sublime standards, who would establish lofty and imposing goals, must also be prepared to fall from the dizzying heights, to become a sacrifice on the altar of his most cherished beliefs, of freedom and peace and dignity. He must be prepared to become the victim of the most cruel and senseless and meaningless of crimes.

We do not know yet for certain the identity of his assassin, nor do we know the motives. But in truth they are only of minor importance. More significant is the fact that, in a measure, all of us are guilty for having tolerated in our society an atmosphere conducive to violence. We have failed to appreciate the infectious nature of fanaticism and extremism that know no limits. Anyone who has ever hurled an insult at a man because of his color or faith — is guilty. Anyone who has allowed himself to corrupt a difference of opinion into a personal hatred — is guilty. He who has shamed a fellow-man to the point where he has provoked deep animosity — is guilty. Whosoever has suffered enmity and violence to supplant rational discourse in mutual respect — is guilty. The man or woman who has, however imperceptibly, raised even by a fraction of a degree the temperature of hatred in our society — is guilty of having pushed the ladder from which our beloved, brilliant, young chief was hurled to his death.

“And he slept there all night because the sun was set” (Gen. 28:11). Our Rabbis put that even more poignantly: *shak'ah lo ha-shemmesh pitom she-lo be-onatah* — his sun set suddenly, before its time. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, in the charm of his vibrant personality, in the brilliance of his penetrating intellect, in the innate goodness and big-heartedness that were so evident, was the bright sun that illuminated the United States in the early 1960's. Now that sun has set — suddenly, precipitously, before its time. How discordant the words “lying in repose” or “rest in peace” sound when applied to a young man of his vigor and liveliness! Now our

country is dark at noon. A pall has descended and our people have sustained a frightening eclipse.

There is nothing anyone can do to bring him back to life. But we can determine to uproot from our midst the seeds of violence that bring out the worst in us. We can, nay we must, continue to develop the dream, the vision of the ladder of freedom and opportunity, which he placed before us.

Now our country must unite behind its new President and, in the words of our late, beloved leader, "move forward" once again. We must strive for unity of the nation — North and South. And we must aspire to unity of the world — East and West. Again in the words God to Jacob, "and thou shalt spread abroad to the west and to the east, and to the north and to the south" (Gen. 28:14).

Having done that, we may yet salvage what is deathless in the life and labors of John Kennedy. "And in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (*ibid.*) May his life and memory be a source of unending benediction to all the families of our world, and to untold generations yet unborn.

