

# "THE ROYAL REACH"

*a sermon*

*preached by*

**RABBI NORMAN LAMM**

*on*

Yom Kippur

September 16, 1964

\* \* \*

THE JEWISH CENTER

131 West 86th Street

New York City

One of the most moving of all the Psalms in the whole Book of *Tehillim* is Psalm 27, which we read twice every day during the entire High Holiday season. The most significant and characteristic verses in this deeply religious passage are the ones beginning *ahat sha'alti me'et ha-Shem, otah avakesh* — "One thing I ask of the Lord, that do I seek: that I may dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the graciousness of the Lord and seek Him in His Temple." Here is a deeply spiritual prayer of a sensitive, devout soul.

And yet when we turn to the Rabbis for their comment, we find one statement that, at first glance, is almost shocking. Rabbi Abba bar Kahanah said, *malkhut sha'al*, what David had in mind when he said *ahat sha'alti*, I ask for one thing from the Lord, was *malkhut*, the kingdom of Israel. Imagine! David clearly says that the one thing he asks is to dwell in the House of the Lord — and Rabbi Abba accuses him of political designs on the Israelite throne! David explains his prayer as the hope to behold God's graciousness — and a Rabbi interprets his desire as one for power and influence! Are not the Rabbis being unfair to the memory of the "Sweet Singer of Israel?"

Of course they are being fair. On the contrary, if we understand their remarks properly, they are not only being fair, but they are paying David a handsome compliment. For this is what Rabbi Abba meant. Look at David. He is throughout most of his life surrounded by enemies on all sides. Here are Phillistines, there is Saul, and then his own son Absalom — all scheming to kill him, to do away with him once and for all. He is forced to flee for his life, to act insane lest he be trapped, hounded and hunted like a wild animal, hungry, cold, and tired.

What would you imagine should be the first prayer of such a man? "O Lord, destroy my enemies." "God, let me have my revenge against them." "Bread, O Lord, bread to sustain me." "One good victory, God, and I shall be happy."

Yet these are not the prayers of David. Caught in an almost hopeless situation, David has a vision that transcends the battlefield, that surpasses mere food, that stretches out beyond the din of war and reaches to heaven itself: "One thing I ask of the Lord, that I do seek: to dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life . . ."

This then, is what Rabbi Abba meant: David did not pray like a beggar! David did not grovel for crumbs! David did not limit himself to the petty needs of the hour! *Malkhut sha'al*: David asked like a king — he prayed like a sovereign, he never forgot that he was destined to become the great monarch of Israel. And a King, even if he is starving, remains proud, his vision large, his deportment grand, his goals lofty, his purposes elevated high above the crowd. *Malkhut sha'al* — by asking for the House of the Lord, by praying for beholding God's goodness,

by petitioning Him for the privilege of seeking him in His Temple — David acted like a prince, like a king. David had the *royal reach*.

The question that confronts us this holiest day of the year is: how shall we define our own goals and ambitions? How shall we pray: like beggars, seeking only a bigger share of the pie; or like aristocrats of the spirits, striving for nothing less than *malkhut shamayim*, the Kingdom of Heaven?

Look at our *Shemoneh Esreh* and you will find examples of the royal reach. We ask for wisdom — *honen ha-daat* — not merely that we pass exams or appear well-read. We ask for forgiveness — *hanun ha-marbeh li'selo'ah* — not that we merely not be caught in some questionable act. We ask for redemption for Israel — *go'el Yisrael* — not merely for effective anti-defamation and undisturbed leisure for ourselves. We ask for a full commitment to Torah — *hashivenu avinu le'toratekha* — not just a pretty non-sectarian ceremony. And even when we plead for prosperity, it is not just for a better deal or portfolio, or a coup against a competitor, or for more comforts and luxuries and status-symbols, but: *mevarekh ha-shanim*, a blessing for the *years*, for all people of our times, for general prosperity and well-being; not that I make a killing, but that everyone make a living! That is the Royal Reach!

And the royal reach must characterize our aspirations for Judaism and the Jewish community as well. It is not enough for us to strive for Judaism to survive; we must make it flourish. We dare not be satisfied with 55,000 children in Day Schools; we must strive for 250,000 and more. A royal reach is not satisfied with more synagogue members and bigger organizational budgets; it demands more *shabbat*, more *kashrut*, more *taharat ha-mishpahah*.

A psychology of *malkhut sha'al* is unhappy with religious "tokenism" and "gradualism." It means that we must no longer be satisfied with mere water-skiing on the surface of Jewish life; we have got to do some deep-sea skin-diving. As the poet Robert Browning put it: "A man's reach should exceed his grasp." We have got to reach for higher and higher goals — *le'ela u-le'ela*, as we say in the High Holiday Kaddish.

*Climb high,  
Climb far,  
Your goal the sky,  
Your aim the star.*

A higher aim indeed! The great philosophy professor at C.C.N.Y., Morris Raphael Cohen, was renowned as a fascinating, scintillating teacher. People would come to hear him from all over the world. Once a colleague who audited a class,

said, "Morris, you were brilliant, but don't you think you were way over their heads?" To which Prof. Cohen answered, "I aim for where their heads should be!" *Malkhut sha'al* — a high aim, a royal reach!

Last night, after we ushered in the holy day with the *Kol Nidre*, we recited two verses that are most significant. They are part of the dialogue between God and Moses. First we repeat Moses' request: *Selah-na la-avon ha-am ha-zeh ke'godel hasdekha* — "pray forgive this people with Thy great compassion." And then we recite God's answer, which is as relevant today as ever: *Va-yomer ha-Shem, salahti ki-devarekha*, "and the Lord said, I will forgive, according to thy words." I will grant you "according to thy words," *ki'devarekha*, no more and no less. If you ask for crumbs, if you desire little — that is what I shall give you. But if you ask like a King, if you aspire to a true and sublime reconciliation with God which will give you a sense of purpose in life — then that is what will be granted to you: *ki'devarekha!*

In that case, friends, we dare not appear before God on this sacred day with trivial goals, with petty dreams, with puny wishes — because there is the danger that God will grant them!

Low goals make a man small. High goals let him grow tall. The spirit is like the mind, and the mind is like the stomach: use it, and it stretches; starve it, and it shrinks. No wonder that on Yom Kippur we fast and we pray. By denying ourselves food, we learn to want less of the trivial, material things in life. And by spending the day in prayer, we learn to expand our spiritual horizons: *malkhut sha'al*.

Today we think too of our responsibilities to our children. What are our goals and ambitions for them? That they succeed, even if it means that one must play rough, be ruthess and unyielding, because that is the only way to achieve success — and presumably success is the ultimate good that ensures happiness? That we spoon-feed them Yiddishkeit and glow with self-satisfaction if their crowning accomplishment will be to read a Haftorah by rote, even if they abandon Judaism for ever after? That when a son looks for a wife, or a daughter for a husband, that they seek nothing but appearance, money, and status, forgetting such things as character, kindness, genuineness, religious training and observance, a true Jewish *neshamah*, so that parents thank Heaven that at least they did not marry out of the faith?

This is not the way of the true religious aristocrats we ought to be, the *mamleket kohanim*, the Kingdom of Priests.

Do you know what the royal reach requires of us in defining our goals for our children? We find it in the moving blessing that the author of *Hayye Adam*

has written for a father to bless his children with on Yom Kippur eve before coming to *shul* for *Kol Nidre*:

May God make you like Ephraim and Menashah. May it be the will of our Father in Heaven that He place in your heart the love and fear of Him, that your face reflect reverence for Him, that your craving be for Torah and *mitzvot*, that your eyes see into the distance and your mouth speak wisdom and your heart harbor the fear of God; that your hands engage in good deeds and your feet run to perform God's will. May He grant you, some day, righteous sons and daughters who will engage in Torah and *mitzvot* all their days. May He prepare for you *parnasah*, sustenance, which will be honorable and easy and plentiful, granted to you by His gracious hand, so that you will not have to rely on the goodness of flesh and blood; and may you always have enough so that you will be free to devote your time to His service. And may you be inscribed, my child, for a good and long life together with all the righteous of Israel, Amen.

That is asking like a king!

Our own most intimate prayers and wishes, which we present to our Creator on this holiest day of the year — they too must be elevated and consecrated. We

bring so many of our intimate secrets to God; our material needs, our prayers for health, our worries over our children, our fears for the future. All of them are legitimate; God is an understanding Father. But on Yom Kippur we must transcend even these ends. On this day and at this time of the day, genuine greatness and selflessness is demanded of us. Our prayers must be not only for ourselves, but for God, and for His Torah! Let me explain by a story — a true one, recorded by the historian Yaakov Lifschitz in his *Zikhron Yaakov*.

In the days of the anti-Semitic Czar Nicholas I of Russia, in the 1920's, a brutal decree was issued which cast a pall over Russian Jewry, the same Russian Jewry which today suffers under a successor totalitarian regime. In a desire to destroy Judaism, it was decreed that Jewish youths from the age of twelve and up should be conscripted into military service for at least twenty-five years, and that every effort should be made during this time to convert them to Christianity. In practice, it was even worse than that. Children as young as seven and eight and nine were kidnapped on the streets, torn away from their mothers in heart-rending scenes, and shipped off to the frozen Arctic wastes. Thousand of these child martyrs, plucked away from their families and yeshivahs, delicate and undernourished, died silently in the grim barracks and in the jails, some from disease, others from fright or sheer loneliness. Until Hitler's days, such mass child martyrdom was unprecedented. They were beaten and tormented unless they accepted baptism. The youngest ones either perished or were converted and lost to us. The older ones,

those of fourteen and fifteen years and older, either were killed or converted, but some few held out against all the unspeakable tortures inflicted upon them by the representatives of the "religion of love." Of these, few, very few, survived to full maturity, and most of them were lame or crippled in one way or another. Some of them eventually founded their own communities and synagogues. (See Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Vol. II pp. 16 ff.)

Now it happened that in the end of the 19th century a delegation of prominent Rabbis had to visit St. Petersburg, then capital of Russia, to intercede with the Czar on behalf of the Russian Jews. It was during the season of the High Holidays, and they had to spend Yom Kippur in that city. The nearest synagogue was one founded and attended by these Jewish conscripts. When it came to Neilah time, the Rabbis sent one of their number, a distinguished scholar, to officiate. However, the conscripts said to the Rabbis: we appreciate that the man you chose must be a great *Zaddik*, but we have one amongst us who suffered immeasurably for the sake of God, and we should like to honor him; for despite all the cruel tortures to which he was submitted, he never succumbed, and he remained loyal to God. Certainly, said the Rabbis. And then they saw an invalid, emaciated and scarred all over, aged before his time, hobbling up on crutches to the *amud*. Just before approaching the Ark to lead in the prayers, he turned to the congregation and said, "generally one prays for *bani, hayye, mezonei*, for children, for life, for sustenance. We however, do not do so. We need no food, for we are in the army and the Czar feeds us. We are already too old to marry and have children. And as for life, considering our kind of existence, we are better off dead than alive. Therefore," he said, turning to the Ark to begin the Neilah, "all we pray for is . . . *Yitgadel ve'yitkadash shemei rabbah . . .*" May God's Name be glorified and sanctified! May Yiddishkeit survive its enemies! May Torah prevail! May Israel prosper!

A broken, emaciated, deformed, bedraggled man. But he prayed like a king. *Malkhut sha'al*.

No greater tribute can be paid to those we are now to memorialize and no greater monument set up to their memory and in their honor than our prayer and our resolve and our determination that Judaism will never perish; that Torah will never die; that the long, golden chain of the Jewish tradition, of which we are the latest link, will not come to an end with us; that we shall dedicate ourselves anew to the totality of our timeless Torah.

The greatest Yizkeor of all is to cry out royally in rising resolve: *Yitgadal ve'yitkadash shemei rabbah*.

Let that be our "royal reach."