

"COME HOME"

As I look about me, on this holiest night of the year, I am both elated and depressed.

I am elated because I see myself surrounded by my congregation, dear friends, good Jews; people who come, in their overwhelming majority, not because they must but ^{because} they want to be here. Around me are people whose presence is a symptom of their soul, their ^{אדם}, their Jewish heart, an aspect of personality that may possibly be obscured most of the year but now shines forth forthrightly Jewish; Jews and Jewesses, young and old, with sincerity, openness, love of Judaism, and a search for Him who has brought us here tonight.

But I am also depressed, because though the sentiments be beautiful, I fear there may not be enough resolve. I detect fine emotion, but I am doubtful if there is sufficient determination. I am afraid that this Kol Nidre spirit will be dissipated all too quickly, that it will not be strong enough to effect any real change in the pattern of our lives or to initiate any genuine movement of the spirit in the deepest levels of our existence.

I confess to you: I look at myself and I am more depressed than elated. If there is ever a time that I experience religious ^{אנש}, genuine spiritual "fear of the Lord," it is this day, beginning with the ^{אש} of the Minhah service on the afternoon of the eve of Yom Kippur and culminating in Kol Nidre. It is to me the most moving period of the entire year. And yet, when I am honest with myself, I am worried, I fall into doubt, wondering if my experience will be powerful enough to survive until Sukkot -- or even until the shofar sounds signaling the end of Neilah...

We all come back to some extent on Yom Kippur, but few of us come far enough. We are, to too great an extent, spiritual tourists who stay for a while, but soon move on to other sight-seeing attractions. We are at best pilgrims in God's presence, when we ought to be permanent residents -- as David put it in the Psalm which we read in this season, ^{אש}, that I dwelt in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

So, to all of us, Yom Kippur issues a major call which we ignore at our own peril: it is a call that is both challenging and promising, both sharp and warm, both critical and comforting. Yom Kippur says to us, all of us: come home! Don't just visit;

come home! No more half-way measures; come home! No more half-heartedness; come home -- *בביתך* , "with all thy heart."

Anyone who has experienced enough Yom Kippurs will recognize the relevance of these observations. But tonight I wish to speak of not only you and me, people who are by and large "shul-people," men and women who are more or less comitted to Torah. My thoughts this evening are especially germane to the wider American and world Jewish community, for whom the problem is not the perennial one of the ups-and-downs of one's personal religious life, but a social movement of great proportions and possibly historic consequences.

I refer to a significant new phenomenon that has developed in the past few years. In the midst of the general deterioration of the American Jewish community, the slide into assimilation and acculturation and deracination, there suddenly blossomed forth a new Jewish consciousness, a sense of Jewish ethnic identity. Who would have thought, only a few years ago, that firey youngsters looking for a cause would find it in Soviet Jewry, not in being Hippies or Yippies or Zippies? Who would have thought, but a few years ago, that those in search of Gurus, magnetic personalities who would overwhelm them with charisma, would look not to a Marcuse, not to Leary, but *(לרבנו של חב"ד)*, to the Lubavitcher Rebbe?

Now, it is true that this reassertion of Jewish ethnic identity has primarily negative causes. Young Jews going into universities, and young Jews leaving the universities for the labor market, are frightened by the rebirth of the "quota" idea, because they know that even if there are benevolent intentions behind the new quota system, they will be its principal victims. Ethnic identity of Jews is encouraged by the sense of discrimination against Israel in the councils of the UN. (And remember that usually even the United States votes against Israel or at best abstains; this last veto was an exceptional one, and it is for this reason that the president of this congregation and I have separately cabled Ambassador Bush and the President congratulating them, as we suggest others do.) Another negative cause is the Jewish response to the ethnic assertiveness of other minorities.

The causes may be negative, but we should not gainsay the value of such negatively inspired emotions. They are powerful, and there is much worth in them. Review them and you will see how very real and substantive they are in reminding us that we have no future unless we band together, unless we learn the secret of Jewish solidarity.

A few simple examples from recent life: the massacre at Munich. I do not refer to the terrorism of the Arabs, for that is a separate problem. But what of the Germans, and all other West Europeans? The bodies were still warm, still in Munich, when the Olympic games resumed as if nothing had happened -- what callousness, what cynicism, all at the expense of Jewish life and dignity! Or, take the article that appeared in the Sunday Times of a week or two ago, on the first page of the travel section, by an assimilated Jew who traveled to Germany last Yom Kippur. In meeting Germans who had been active in World War II, and now were assigned to be his hosts, this assimilated Jew suddenly came to realize that, whether he wanted to or not, he was Jewish, and he might as well love it. Perhaps most symbolic of all is an event that occurred this past Spring when Arab terrorists commandeered a Sabena jet at Lod airport. What most people do not seem to know is what happened shortly before the Israelis stormed the jet and took it over. The Arab terrorists did something that was harshly reminiscent of Hitler's Germany: they came on to the jet and decided to separate the Jewish from the non-Jewish passengers. Now, remember that the non-Jewish passengers were people coming on a Belgian airliner to Israel, whether as businessmen or pilgrims or tourists -- but they were coming to the Jewish state and hence presumably friendly to Israel. When the terrorists said, "who is Jewish?," 53 hands of non-Jews shot up as their owners screamed out, "We are not Jewish! They are Jewish."...

Jews now know certain things. Russian Jews know they must get out. American Jews know, whether because of a Fuentes of Forest Hills or quotas, that ominous signs are multiplying, despite the partial justice on the other side of the ledger. Jews know that when a wild-eyed fanatic by the name of General Amin of Uganda justifies Hitler in murdering six million Jews, it is just that he is stupid and ignorant enough to say aloud what so many others think in their hearts. So, many Jews who used to think of themselves only as Americans or humans or citizens of the world or universalists, now know they are Jews and know they had best affirm it proudly.

And yet, the burden of my message to you this Yom Kippur eve is that, welcome as this surge of ethnicity is, it is not enough. Not nearly. Ethnic-cultural Jews are only half-way tourists; they have a long way to go before this Jewishness of their's becomes meaningful. They still have to come home.

Why is this new-found ethnicity insufficient?

First, because ethnicity alone can become racism. And Jews should never be bigots. Even when we feel isolated, oppressed, and paid in the coin of ingratitude for all we have done for other minorities, we must never, never submit to the human weakness of racial anger and bigoted discrimination. For ethnicity to remain positive and constructive, Jews must come home to a full Jewish life, from folk to faith, for that alone can grace our identity with moral and ethical dimensions.

Second, ethnicity alone is self-defeating. It divides as well as unites. It separates not only Jews from non-Jews, but Jews from Jews. Take ethnicity far enough, and you conclude with the ethnicity of sub-groups. Remember that Israel contains not only Jews in general, but Georgian Jews and American Jews and Rumanian Jews and Yemenite Jews and Russian Jews and Moroccan Jews... If ethnicity is the sole criterion, then you have the kind of situation that developed about a week ago in Migdal Haemek, where a near riot between Russian Jewish immigrants and Oriental sephardim assumed large proportions. To avoid divisiveness, we must go beyond being mere ethnics and re-discover our spiritual roots and historic identity, recapturing the Jewish vision of the future, a future of a united people and of a united mankind.

But most important, ethnicity is only a stop-gap measure. It will not last. It is too thin and anemic a diet, and remains unfulfilling for a questing heart and mind. Jewishness without learning and without duties is too easy and too empty. It can lead to an untutored and vain pride. It will never satisfy the spiritual longings of young and intelligent people who are genuinely searching for something deep and meaningful. A youngster who is "hot under the collar" for action and therefore joins the JDL today, will eventually calm down as he grows older; if he has not come all the way home to Judaism, where will he locate himself later? Youth's breathlessness in its round of protest meetings is commendable -- far better than the adults who consider themselves too delicate and their reactions too fastidious to engage in such matters as protesting for the rights of Jews elsewhere; but life ultimately demands something deeper, something more enduring. What then?

So, ethnicity is a step, not a goal; a gesture and not a reality. Come home!

Permit me to explain this point by way of a parable from the Talmud, and especially from the law of divorces. The Talmud discusses the problem of a conditional divorce. A man gave his wife a get (divorce) on condition that it be effective only if he

does not return home within a specified time, say 30 days. At the end of this period, he returns home -- but something happens. He stands on the other side of the river, across the way from his home, but paska maavra -- the ferry that usually crosses the river, has ceased operating. He therefore stands across the river from his home, and calls out 'הלך נא , "See, I have come!" The question posed by the Talmud is this: is this called "coming home," and hence satisfies the condition stipulated, so that the divorce is invalid -- or is the fact that he did not actually and fully come home across the river, indicate that the condition was not fulfilled, and hence the divorce is valid? The decision of the Talmud is:

הלך נא לא הורה נא -- a mere announcement of his presence from a distance, shouting 'הלך נא , "See, I have returned," is inadequate. It is not legally considered and recognized as home-coming, and therefore the condition remains unfulfilled and the divorce is valid, and they are no longer husband and wife.

I can think of no more vital, symbolic message this Yom Kippur than: come home, all the way! Cross the river, swim if you must, but "come home." Otherwise, everything is liable to break up.

The new ethnic consciousness is a return, but not far enough. Those who have newly discovered their Jewishness in a racial or national sense, still stand far from the home of Judaism proper. They must cross the river of spiritual emptiness, of a non-Jewish home and communal life, of the absence of Torah. Merely saying "I am proud to be a Jew," when there is no Shabbat and there is no Tzedakah and there is no "family purity" and there is no study of Torah, is like announcing yourself with a wave of the handkerchief, saying 'הלך נא , "look, I am here!" But the decision of the Talmud is clear: you have not yet arrived: there is no home, no family, no permanence. There is only divorce and heart-break.

If the current revival of Jewish awareness is to prove of lasting value, it must go all the way, it must make the leap from ethnos to ethos, from rallies to religion, from protest to practice, or -- as the late Rabbi Maimon used to say -- from kultura to kol Torah! Unless there is such an authentic turn, the new Jewish ethnicity will last only as long as the danger lasts; it will not survive the improvement in the political, social, and economic conditions of American and world Jewry!

But that message, friends, is directed not only to Jews, but to us too. I return to that with which I began: our problem, that which depresses me even while I am elated, the

spiritual problem of those of us who are in the fold, who identify with an Orthodox synagogue. To us Yom Kippur is a reminder that we can no longer be satisfied with mere gestures. Merely coming to "shule" at Kol Nidre, or even much more often during the year, and grandly announcing our presence to God, crying out 'הִנֵּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ, "Look, God, I have come, here I am" -- that is not enough. We must take the plunge and cross over. We must come home.

This home-come message is directed to parents for whom the Jewish education of their children is a kind of 'הִנֵּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ, as if elementary education in Judaism alone can magically ensure a Jewish future. But that is not true: 'הִנֵּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ. Gestures are not a reality of return. If we do not follow through with the crucial high school and college years of Jewish education, all our efforts during the elementary age will be largely wasted. I have recently had an opportunity to do some retrospective thinking about my experience for five years in the pulpit I had before I came to The Jewish Center. We had an elementary day school in that community, but no high school. I checked back and discovered that those children who had been given only an elementary Jewish education, have for the greatest part strayed from the Jewish path. Those whose parents sacrificed to the extent of sending their children away for the high school years, and made sure to give them a high-school Jewish education -- those children, each and every one of them, is today a happy Orthodox Jew, observant even while engaged in the professions or business or married. The others -- all that remains with them is a vague recognition of what is that they have failed to do. So, to parents Yom Kippur calls out: Come home, all the way.

More than that: I am concerned about parents who indulge in the same magical thinking and believe that school alone can guarantee the Jewishness of their children. But children are perceptive even if they are inarticulate, they see even if they do not always express. And what child is going to take his Judaism seriously no matter what the school tells him, if his home is empty? What does it mean if he learns about Shabbat in school if he sees it desecrated in the emptiness of his home? What matters it if he learns about kashruth and eats a kosher meal in school, if at home he discovers this queer dichotomy about "kosher inside, treif outside," or recognizes a flippant attitude towards kashruth and a derogatory attitude towards those who take it seriously because, as one parent told me, "after all, everyone makes up his own *mitzvot*!" To parents who so delude themselves, Yom Kippur calls out: cross over, come home, because otherwise what you are doing is merely announcing that you are a Jew -- 'הִנֵּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ -- and what you should be doing is not proclaiming but practicing, taking the plunge.

This come-home call on Yom Kippur is directed to each and every one of us. Now, it is no secret that I identify with what is called "Modern Orthodox Judaism." I have written about it, I advocate it, I defend it, I preach it. But to you, my friends who are within this camp of Modern Orthodoxy, I confess my worries. I am troubled by our emotional thinness and spiritual tinniness. There is, for instance, something wrong with our prayers: the lips move, and the heart remains cold. We join in the singing perhaps, but what of the davenning? What of those times when each individual closes his eyes and pours out his soul before God? I fear that we are not sad enough on Tisha Be'av, not happy enough on Simhat Torah, not frightened enough on Yom Kippur, not confident enough on Passover. A river -- a deep, ugly one -- keeps us from coming home to God and Torah when we fail to show up at a היום הזה (Holocaust Day) service to shed a tear and remember the six million martyrs; when we absent ourselves from יום העצמאות (Israel Independence Day) services, and fail to express gratitude to God for the miracle of Israel which we ourselves have witnessed.

So the call comes to us: Come home, all the way, with all your heart, without reservations. Take the plunge, swim across, reintegrate yourself with the warmth and holiness and the sweetness of Torah and Judaism which is your spiritual home.

For indeed, the metaphor of marriage and divorce, family and home, is a real one for us. The relation of the people of Israel with the Almighty is not only of Father and children (אב ואבנא), not only of King and subjects (מלך וקנא), but also that of loving Husband and beloved wife: איש ואישה. And as happens with most marriages, affection waxes and wanes and sometimes relations cool even dangerously. During the year it sometimes can appear that God and Israel go their different ways, headed for a separation. We leave His home, we absent ourselves, God and Israel desert each other, and it almost seems as if a conditional divorce has been declared between us. But, on Yom Kippur we return. We come back to God. On Kol Nidre night we are almost home -- almost, but not quite. We stand at a distance, on the other side of the river of alienation and lack of resolve, and we call out השׁוּבָה יְיָ, "look, God, I have come back!" But the law is: לֵךְ וְשׁוּבָה -- if you don't make the leap, if you don't really come home -- it is not considered a return. The marriage is in danger, it is dissolved, and the historical covenant between God and Israel is ended.

But when we return wholeheartedly; when we arrive here with the determination to come here לְבַיְתָּךְ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, to dwell in Judaism all the days of our life, then the House of

of Israel is whole once again. Then we shall again be the beloved of God, who will grant us a year of happiness stability and joy and -- peace.

ה' אלהינו יי אלהינו . Almighty God, we have come home. And if we have not come home all the way, it is not because of a lack of our sincerest and most fervent intentions. It is because something within us holds us back, something which we find difficult to resist. So we ask you, O Lord: help us come back, reach out to us from across the river and pull us back into the home of Torah and the warmth of Jewishness. Pull us back, and we shall return.

ה' אלהינו יי אלהינו . Renew our days as of old.