

# “TODAY”

*a sermon preached*

*by*

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*on*

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Judaism is meant for today — not only for yesterday, and not only for tomorrow, but for today. That does not sound like a startling thesis, yet it is an idea that is sadly neglected not only by the detractors of Judaism, but even by some of its staunchest advocates.

Of course, Judaism has always had the greatest reverence for the past and its sacred traditions. We refer to ourselves as the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and we never tire of remembering the exodus from Egypt. History is sacred for the Jew. We also have an unshakeable faith in the future of our eternal people; that is why we believe in the Messiah, in the world-to-come, and the *malkhut shamayim*, the Kingdom of Heaven. It is foolish to dismiss the past and it is dangerous to ignore the future.

But it often happens that in our preoccupation with preserving the past and in keeping faith with the future, we overlook the present. Between a modified ancestor worship and a euphoric optimism, we forget that there is a today in which God addresses man, in which obligations await us, in which life must be lived responsibly. Once we forget that, we are, for all practical purposes, obsolete. If Torah, with its demands and inspiration and duties, is not for today — with its excitement and complexity and anxieties — then we have nothing to offer to the young Jew whom we are trying so hard to win over to Judaism.

The task of all Jews, then, on the eve of the year 5727, is not merely to search out ancient texts or to undertake sociological studies which will predict future trends, but to live Jewishly today, to show the world that Jewishness was meant for now, that we are alive and dynamic and meaningful and relevant for man in the last third of the 20th century. We must determine to give a new interpretation to that beloved verse we recite after each sounding of the Shofar: *Ha-yom harat olam*. That is usually translated, "Today is the creation of the world," i.e., today is the anniversary of the divine creation of the universe. Let us, however, resolve that we shall interpret it thus: *Hayom*, if the "today" of each of us is dedicated to full Jewish living, if our "today" is the scene of our practice of Torah and its sublime *mitzvot*, then indeed this *hayom* can become *harat olam*, the creation of a new world. There is no greater creativity that we can bring to the world than to demonstrate that Torah was meant for *hayom*, today.

Let us, then, stop living in the past or in the future alone while the present remains for us unreal and chimerical. R. Israel Salanter once overheard two people speaking. One moaned to the other, "das Leben is a Chalom," life is but a dream. The great Rabbi interrupted their conversation: "Pardon me, but that is true only if you are asleep!" Those who do not believe that Torah Judaism can and should be fully lived in 1966 are asleep. They are dreaming. For them, as Mai-

monides pointed out, the Shofar is meant as a kind of spiritual alarm clock: *uru yeshenim mi'shenatkhem*, wake up, O ye slumberers, from your sleep. God calls you here and now. Judaism is the religion of contemporary man. That is why to the challenge of Shofar we respond: *Ha-yom harat olam*, today is the time that we must build new worlds.

One of the most bedevilling of all ideas, which afflicts believers and non-believers alike, is that the Godless self-indulgers have taken over *ha-yom*, the contemporary scene, and have left us benighted souls who still believe in God and Torah as the antiquarian care-takers of yesteryear or the starry-eyed visionaries of the year after next. This world and this day belong to the emancipated secularist, who may rightfully eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow he dies and he might as well take over today; while the next world and some distant time can be safely left to the man of religion.

Orthodox Jews must never take that kind of defeatist attitude, relinquishing their rights to *ha-yom*, and retreating into the past or retiring into the future. That is a solution we cannot afford. We dare not abdicate our claim on *hayom* — our role in meeting and sanctifying *all* of modern life: modern science and modern thought, modern business and modern technology, and the modern Jewish community here and in Israel. But unfortunately, we sometimes tend to do just that, both in our communal and our individual lives. We surrender either Torah or today. Sometimes we react by giving up on the world of today; sometimes by embracing today but rejecting Torah.

Communally, Orthodox Jewry sometimes shows an inclination to run away from *ha-yom*. Some Orthodox Jews act as if we ought to be afraid of secular learning and keep our children away from the universities. They are apprehensive about modern science. They feel we ought to pull out not only of the general community, but even of the Jewish community. That is not as illogical as it sounds. When you remember that so many Jews have, through assimilation, cut themselves off from the past and have, through intermarriage, forfeited their future, there is a strong appeal for the idea of not identifying yourself with this kind of community.

But there is also a deeper reason why observant Jews in America have so often taken such a negative attitude. Why this fear that we are today weak and defenseless? Why have we largely failed to become spiritually mature and confident about our chances?

To an extent, it is because we are still overwhelmed by our great yesterdays. We look back to the heritage of European Jewry — both East and West — and

we feel like dwarfs in comparison. How gallant and glorious those Jews were, how rich their lives, how we look like pygmies beside them! We have neither *gedolim* nor *gadlut*; greatness is not ours. "My father was so learned," says the second-generation American Jew, who denies that *he* is pious, even if in fact he *is*. Such is human nature: how many sons of distinguished men suffered because of the erroneous idea that they could never equal, let alone surpass, their illustrious fathers!

Yet — the American Jew of today must not deny himself the opportunity to create a today as great as his European father's yesterday. Spiritual eminence is possible today, *ha-yom*, in America, in the Space Age.

The renowned Rabbi Nathan Adler, the Rav of Frankfurt, and known as the "Great Eagle," recognized this problem as one that is well nigh universal. Isaac had no experience of revelation until after Abraham died: *va-yehi aharei mot Avraham va-yevarekh Elohim et Yitzhak*. Jacob was quite ordinary whilst he was at home, under the shadow of Isaac. But when *va-yetzei Yaakov mi-be'er sheva*, when he left and went on his own, *va-yahalom*, he experienced his great prophetic vision. Joshua was only a *naar*, a young disciple, while Moses flourished; only afterwards did he rise to history's call. Indeed, all of Israel suffered, in this sense, from the greatness of Moses. And Moses recognized this; that is why, in recounting the story of the revelation at Sinai, he says to his people: *Anokhi omed bein ha-Shem u-venekhem*, I was standing between God and you. He does not mean that he was the one who mediated between God and Israel, but quite literally: *I stood between you*, I prevented you from achieving your full spiritual stature, from contacting God, because in the presence of master and father, disciple and son usually suffer.

But this situation does not obtain forever. That is why, at the end of his life, the great Moses calls all his people together and addresses the assembly with the immortal words: *Atem nitzavim ha-yom kulkhem lifnei ha-Shem Elohekhem*; now that I am about to pass away, all of you can stand on your own, *ha-yom*, this very day, before God. Now *ha-yom*, "today," belongs to you!

Certainly, American Jewry looked pale beside European Jewry in its hours and centuries of greatness. But, alas, that great and fertile source of Jewish life and thought is no more. The spiritual father of American Jewry has been murdered. Yesterday is gone and it will never return. Whether we like it or not, it is now *our* turn to blossom, to mature, to play our role on the stage of Jewish history. *Atem nitzavim ha-yom kulkhem lifnei ha-Shem Elohekhem*, we must stand, erect and proud, before God, and it must be *ha-yom*, today, with *our* initiative, *our* enthusiasm, *our* sense of mission. We must strive for *our* achievements, as we meet

our challenges in our times. *Ha-yom harat olam*, by realizing Torah in the world of today, we shall create a great new Jewish world of which even the past can be proud.

But while a significant part of the community tends to deny *ha-yom*, others ecstatically embrace every aspect of contemporary life while neglecting Torah as a vital element therein. Jewishly, we live in all tenses — except the present.

Some of us live altogether in the future: I will study Torah and Talmud — when I retire. I will give *tzedakah* — in my will. I will become active in Jewish organizations — when my son begins to take over more duties in the business. Meanwhile, Rabbi, forget about me; there's no hope for my generation. Concentrate on the children instead.

What a sweet and charming faith — and what a devilishly clever way to avoid the responsibilities of *ha-yom*, today! Of course, retired people should study Torah, and semi-retired people should be active in organizations, and people should leave their money for charity in their wills, and synagogues should be concerned with youth. But that is no excuse for forfeiting Jewish and human obligation today — now, right now. For there is one thing wrong with this procrastinating into the dim future: who knows if there will be a future, if there will be a tomorrow? *Im lo akhshav—ematai*: if not now, when then? If there is no today, there can be no tomorrow.

There are some people who avoid the present by living in the past. "My father conducted such a beautiful Seder" — but how about yours? "My mother prayed so warmly" — well, why don't you? "Once upon a time there was so much fervor in our observance" — but why "once upon a time," why not now? Should we not strive for a Jewish today at least as good as the Jewish yesterday? On the verse of the Shema that we must observe the commandments which the Lord commands us, *hayom*, the Rabbis commented: *ha-yom — bekol yom va-yom yiheyu b'einekha ke'hadashim, k'ilu kibaltem otam ha-yom me'har Sinai*; "This day" — let the commandments appear to you every day as if they were brand new, just given to you at Mt. Sinai this very day. To live Jewishly *ha-yom*, today, means to experience marvelous discoveries, true zeal, fervor, passion, love, and enthusiasm. Today, as Franz Rosenzweig once put it, is not only a bridge to tomorrow; it is a spring-board to eternity. *Ha-yom harat olam*.

Let us, then, leave the synagogue today with this message of the Shofar: *ha-yom*, today and not only yesterday and tomorrow. This very day we shall be more agreeable, more responsive, more cheerful, more charitable. This very day we shall make a friend feel good, compliment a neighbor, forgive a wife or husband

or parent or child. *This Musaf* we shall pray with renewed *kavvanah*. *This year* we shall make the effort to pray with a *minyan* even during the week, *this year* we shall study Torah and attend classes, *this year* we shall be more observant of Jewish law, *this year* we shall strengthen as never before our devotion to and love of everything Jewish.

Let us be Jewishly creative: *ha-yom harat olam*. And in return, we shall hear the affirmative response of Almighty God to our closing prayers: *ha-yom te'amtzenu, hayom tevarkhenu, ha-yom tegadlenu*. May God give us courage — today; may He bless us — today; and may He endow us with genuine greatness — today.