

"IF I WERE A PROPHET"

a sermon

preached by

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Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur represent two great and eternal themes. Rosh Hashanah is the *yom ha-din*, the day of judgment and justice. Yom Kippur is the *yom ha-rahamim*, the day of love and compassion and forgiveness. *Din* (justice) is harsh, demanding, unswerving. *Rahamim* (love) is patient, gentle, forbearing. Both are aspects of God, and both must be ever-present in life.

Just as the two qualities are separated in time, with Rosh Hashanah emphasizing *din* and Yom Kippur expressing *rahamim*, so are they incorporated in two types of personality in Jewish history: the *Navi* or Prophet, and the *Kohen*, the Priest.

While their functions sometimes overlap — in real life the *Navi* was somewhat of a *Kohen*, and the *Kohen* sometimes a *Navi* — in essence they are totally different; prophecy and priesthood often stand at opposite poles. The Prophet, as the man of *din*, is a radical: like Moses, chief of Prophets, he holds fast to his root-ideals, and insists upon the complete and immediate application of his pure principles without compromise. The Priest, as the bearer of *rahamim*, is a realist: like Aaron, first High Priest, he knows the conditions in which his ideals are to be lived, he appreciates the stubbornness of circumstances, the failings of flesh, and the frailty of human nature. The Prophet is the angry critic, while the Priest is the tolerant teacher. The Prophet summons man to God, while the Priest pleads with God for patience with man. Moses, the man of *din*, of justice, hurled at his people the historic divine challenge. Aaron, the man of *rahamim*, the fatherly guardian of Israel, practiced love and mercy and compassion — even while his people danced about the Golden Calf. In his passion for justice, Moses smashed the Tablets to bits. In his love and forbearance, Aaron picked up the broken pieces of his people and tried to refashion them into a self-respecting nation of God.

The rabbinate is heir to both traditions — of *din* and *rahamim*; it has historically been expected to combine both functions: that of Moses, and that of Aaron, of *navi* and *kohen*. The Rabbi, as interpreter of *all* of Torah, was expected to reproach his people and encourage them; criticize them and inspire them; judge them and love them.

Most of the time, *din* has been in eclipse. Rabbis have usually allowed the prophetic dimension of their vocations to be muted. They have in them much more of Aaron than of Moses; they teach, encourage, socialize, visit — but much less often do they raise their voices in harsh criticism or indignant protest. *Rahamim*, especially in modern America, brings more results than *din*. It is more attractive and also more effective. More is accomplished with friendship than with reproach, in love than in anger. Besides, Prophecy is much too dangerous: prophets are usually killed by their resentful people.

Yet the Rabbi is true neither to himself nor to his congregation nor to his God if he eliminates entirely the prophetic element from his personality. Rosh Hashanah, as the *yom ha-din*, is the day that calls this prophetic dimension to mind.

On Rosh Hashanah, therefore, I wonder aloud, with you, about the great theme of *din*, and the role of prophecy. Have I done justice to the historic blend

of judgment and compassion, of *Kohen* and *Navi*? If I should don the mantle of the Prophet, would my people understand? Would I bring them closer to Judaism, or alienate them from God? What, indeed, would I say to you if I were more of a Prophet? What would I tell you if I were driven by a divine passion and had the fortitude to overlook amenities and ruffled feelings; if I were willing to ignore the consequences and to tell the truth as God has allowed me to see it; if I were willing to step on toes in order to elevate hearts and raise souls? Dare I, indeed, silence this spirit that agitates me?

O, if I were a Prophet! If I had the courage of an Isaiah and the fearlessness of a Jeremiah! I would turn to the higher social classes of American Jews and tell them that they cheapen and vulgarize themselves when they nurture as their most powerful and most secret ambition — to become Jewish WASPs, Jewish counterparts of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. I would accuse — without concern for this or any other season's fund-raising campaigns — many of our great national organizations of pious fraud for their myopic obsession with anti-Semitism and pleading with the Pope, when the really great danger to Jewish existence is ignorance and assimilation. I would thunder against those who have made of our *holy-days* mere *holidays*, abandoning the synagogue during the most sacred festivals. I would be indignant mostly towards those who *do* come to the synagogue — who come and find nothing better to do than discuss the market or their neighbor's clothing, thereby desecrating the synagogue and making a mockery of Judaism.

Those are some of the things I might say if I were a Prophet. And they should be said, especially on this *yom ha-din*. But the Prophet is not the only authentic personality in Judaism. As a Rabbi, Jewish tradition bids me incorporate as well the role of the Priest and find genuine sources of *rahamim*, of encouragement. *Hanah la-hem le'Yisrael*, do not be too harsh with the Children of Israel, our Rabbis counseled. *Im einam neviim, benei neviim hem* — they may not be Prophets, but they are the children and grandchildren of Prophets (*Pes.* 66a). Despite all, we are God's covenanted people, the children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and generations of the lovers of God and Torah. We may occasionally fail, but we bear within us the genes and chromosomes of spiritual greatness. Every cell in our body contains a summary of Jewish history, a recapitulation of generations of Jewish nobility. Some of us may aspire to be Jewish WASPs, but most of us would love to be better Jews if only we were a bit stronger. It is true that we should spend many times more on education than on defense against anti-Semitism; but who can blame Jews who are still frightened only one generation after Auschwitz? Yes, people desecrate the service by their foolish conversation — but as long as they come, maybe they will learn and mature. *Hanah la-hem le'Yisrael* — let us be happy over and not too critical of our fellow Jews! They can certainly be redeemed!

If I were possessed only of *din*, I would castigate all those who pay tribute to Judaism and then arrogate to themselves the honorific title of "a good Jew" — the *shomer shabbat* who is delinquent in *tzedakah*; the philanthropist who has abandoned the Sabbath; the Jew who comes to the synagogue only rarely and

feels that he has thereby done his duty; and the Jew who comes daily but is a failure in *middot*, in character, forgetting that God demands a clean hand and a pure heart. I would repeat to them the abrasive words of the Prophet Isaiah: *mi bikesh zot miyedkhem remos hatzerai*, who asked this of you that you trample my courtyard underfoot (Is. 1:12); that you act disloyally in home and marketplace and then dare to invade the sacred precincts of the House of God with spiritual smugness and self-righteousness!

But I am not a Prophet. I am a Rabbi, and have been taught that God combines *din* and *rahamim*, and that man must do likewise. I therefore prefer to address to them the words of the Psalmist: *Barukh ha-ba be-shem ha-shem, berakhnu khem mi-bet ha-shem* (Ps. 118:26), no matter who you are, how infrequently you come, how badly you have failed to measure up to your Jewish destiny: if you come in the right spirit, then blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the House of the Lord — bless you and welcome you most cordially, and invite you to come again and again and again. For you are our brothers and sisters and we are all children of our Heavenly Father. No child of God is ever rejected, ever unwelcome in the House of God.

If I were a Prophet I would thunder against Jewish writers who see nothing but ugliness in Jewish life; against Jews with Jewish-sounding names who seek to subvert all decent society by being the chief purveyors of pornography and smut; against Jews who do not shrink from becoming slumlords; against Jewish groups who sponsor banquets serving foods that are abominations in the eyes of God; against Jewish parents who have been derelict in their duty and have raised a generation of uninspired self-centered materialists. A recent survey of college students reveals that most Catholics and half the Protestants regard as their highest ambition to serve God and their church — whereas most Jewish students consider their greatest goals the achievement of economic security and advancing their careers. No God, no Torah, no Israel, no mankind! All they can do is repeat that dull litany of selfishness, centered about the unholy trinity of I-Me-and-Myself. I would say, with Isaiah, *Hashmen lev ha-am ha-zeh* (Is. 6:10), the heart of this people is coarse, its spirit dead, its eyes blind, its soul insensitive.

The Prophet, in his passion for justice, sees all the faults and the failings. But spiritual leadership embraces both the functions of *mokhiah* and the *melamed zekhut*, the critic and the defender; and the element of *rahamim* and priesthood lets me see redeeming features too. I cannot condone what the Prophet in me repudiates, what I know is unjust, in violation of *din*. But I know that this is a rootless generation, whose Jewish education was sorely neglected; that it is not in conscious revolt against God, but only acting out its ignorance, imposed upon it by the past. Its sins are *shogeg*, unwitting errors, not *mezid*, malicious rejection of God and Torah. I see certain sanguine, positive factors: a marvelously generous generation that, despite its professed egotism, has created a UJA and JDC; idealists who help underdeveloped countries and volunteer to assist backward peoples; Jews who have little idea what Torah is all about and yet give unstintingly to Yeshivot, whose functions and significance they do not truly comprehend. With the Sages of Israel I see them as *rahamnim benei rahamanim*, merciful and com-

passionate people. And this compassion and goodness confirm me in my optimism and confidence about the Jewish future of Jews! R. Elimelech of Lizensk offered this comment on a well known verse from the 23rd Psalm: *akh tov ve-hassed yirdefuni kol yemei hayyai, ve'shavti be'vet ha-Shem l'orekh yamim*, usually translated, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever." The word *yirdefuni*, R. Elimelech said, means not "follow" but "pursue" or "drive"; and the "goodness and mercy" refers not to pleasant things happening to me from without, which would make this a plea for the soft life, but the goodness and mercy we possess within ourselves. This, then, is the meaning of the verse: surely the goodness and mercy that are within us, the benevolence and decency and charitableness that distinguish the "Jewish heart," these will drive and inspire the Jew to dwell in the House of the Lord forever, to return fully and completely to God and Torah and Synagogue!

But this is not merely a professional dilemma for Rabbis; for the Rabbi is nothing more than a teacher. It is the Torah itself which speaks to us in two voices — that of the *Navi* and *din*, and that of the *Kohen* and *rahamim*. Some of us respond better to the direct remonstrance of the Prophet, others to the fatherly plea of the Priest. Both are the authentic voices of Judaism. Were there only the unconditional demand of *din*, some might be shocked into resentment and despair, and totally alienated from God. Were there only the gentle plea of *rahamim*, others might be lulled into paralyzing complacency, smugness, and self-righteousness. Few can bear only the white heat of the *Navi*; none ought to be exposed only to the pink cloud of the *Kohen*.

God has given us two ears; let us open both, one to the bitter but vital truths taught by the *Navi*, the other to the encouraging and patient coaxing of the *Kohen*. Indeed, let us listen with both ears to the call of the Shofar. For it denotes two different themes — and both are valid and relevant.

The Prophet urges us to hide in fear and trembling at the mighty sound of the ram's horn. How did the Prophet Amos put it: *Im yitaka shofar be'ir va'am lo yeheradu*, shall the Shofar be sounded and the people remain unafraid (Amos 3:6)? As surely as the sound of Shofar brought down the walls of Jericho, so the *teruah* today strips us before God, rips off our disguises, tears away our vacuous excuses for trying to avoid our Maker, exposes our sham to the searing light of justice, and leaves us like Adam and Eve in Eden — uncovered, ashamed, afraid, and embarrassed, as the voice of God, in the form of the Shofar, thunders deafeningly in our conscience: *ayeka*, where art thou? What have you done with your life? Where are you going? What is your purpose? When you were a youngster, you had great, idealistic dreams; what happened to them? Why do you flee your destiny? As we stand before God on this *Yom Hadin*, the Shofar should send a shiver down every spine as it confronts us with the Truth we have been evading.

But there is also a view of Shofar that accords with the other tradition — that of compassion and gentleness. Shofar represents not only the awesome demand of the Lord, but also — the sound of weeping: of God — as it were — crying! *Be'mistarim tivkeh nafshi*, "in the secret places doth My soul weep," says the Lord.

Why does He weep? The great Hasidic teacher, the Maggid of Mezeritsch, once met his young grandson who was crying. "Why do you cry, my child," he asked the youngster. "Because, grandfather, I was playing hide-and-seek with my friend, and I was hiding and waited and waited and waited — but my friend never came to look for me." "Ah," said the Maggid, "that is why God too weeps. For He waits for us to seek Him out, and He waits and waits and waits . . . and we, His children, fail to search for Him."

Be'mistarim tivkeh nafshi — the Shofar is the weeping voice of God Who waits vainly, in His secret places, for us to look for Him. That is Shofar — God is not angry, but sad, pleading with us to put aside our distracting trivialities, our foolish preoccupations, and lovingly to look for Him, not to disappoint Him; for if we look, He will let Himself be found.

Shofar means both things; both must penetrate our hearts. Which will be more effective depends upon the individual constitution of each of us. But we must listen to both with all our hearts and with all our souls.

We stand at the brink of a New Year, a new life, a new world. The Prophet commands us to be loyal *avadim*, servants of the divine Judge. The Priest urges us to act like loving *banim la-makom*, children of our Heavenly Father. It depends upon each individual whether he will react as servant or as son; whether aroused by the Shofar as a mighty blast, or attracted by the Shofar as a divine sobbing; whether we respond to the steel of *din* or the velvet of *rahamim*.

Hayom harat olam, today a new world is born; the destiny of each of us is decided anew. *Im k'avanim im ka'avadim*, some will go forth from this day as *children* of our Heavenly Father, coaxed by the *rahamim* and tenderness of the *Kohen*; and others will walk fearlessly, driven to obey the Will of the divine King as His *servants*, challenged by the ideals of justice of the *Navi*. Each of us must resolve this fateful day to answer the call of God, whether it is addressed to us in the majestic and awesome idiom of the Prophet, or the patient and encouraging accents of the Priest.

And we, in turn, in both capacities implore God for a blessed New Year. *Avinu malkenu*, God is both our loving Father and our just King; *im ke'vanim*, *rahamenu ke'rahem av al banim*, if we be like children to Thee, then treat us lovingly, as befits a Father; *V'im ka'avadim*, *lekha enenu teluyot ad she'tehanenu ve'totzi ka-or mishpatenu*, if we be servants to Thee, O divine King, we look to Thee for a judgment as clear and as shining as light itself. In either case and in both cases, bless us with a year of personal happiness and universal justice, a year of dedication to both peace and truth, a year of joy and gladness for us, for all Israel, and for all the world.