

**A TIME  
FOR  
AFFIRMATION**

*A sermon by*

R A B B I N O R M A N L A M M

*delivered on*

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## I.

**A** ROSH HASHANAH SERMON, like the Shofar itself, should normally fulfill a prophetic function. It should shake up the listener, disturb his prejudices, make him uncomfortable in his routines of habit and thought. It should consist of *musar* and *divrei kabbushin*: jarring words, words which challenge and judge and criticize. The only problem facing a Rabbi is how to formulate that message, how to articulate it, and how to illustrate it in the context of the times.

But this Rosh Hashanah is different from most others we have ever known. On this Rosh Hashanah I shall suspend any rebuke, no matter how remote, even by suggestion or indirection.

For this is my thesis: we live in times of such confusion, such uncertainty and self-doubt, that many of us decent people are no longer sure whether we are right or wrong — indeed, what is right and wrong — and whether the premises of our existence as a people are just or unjust.

So this is a time for affirmations: individually and collectively to re-assert the rightness of our cause, our commitments, and our purpose in the world.

## II.

For indeed, our confusion is unprecedented. The world about us assails us furiously and incessantly with a stream of doubts. We begin to question the very bases of our lives, which we had always accepted as axiomatic. We find ourselves wondering whether it is not true that civility is hypocritical and manners phoney, that education can be received not from books or from teachers or from growing up in a tough discipline, but by shouting obscene epithets in a wild demonstration. Young people begin to think that indeed the past is meaningless and morality is obsolete. Parents question whether discipline and teaching are part of their task, or whether these are merely a capitalistic device for asserting Establishment authority. Americans ask, suddenly, whether the whole basis of American life, that of rationality and orderly process, is not just a disguise for the oppressive "System," a horrid mistake that can be corrected only by burning the country down. Jews, to use a current example, are faced with a new dilemma. We were inundated this week by eulogies of Nasser and panegyrics to his immortal leadership, and we began to wonder whether this man whom we recognized only a week ago as a Hitler of the Nile, as a two-faced, unctuous hypocrite who spoke peace to Western correspondents and rallied his own people to push the Jews into the sea — whether he really ought to become Our Hero as well. And religious Jews are anguished by the thought that maybe it is really not worth pursuing a life of Torah, maybe it is nothing but a relic of an irrelevant and ancient life style.

So we are plunged into fitful and fateful doubt, and we are disturbed and vexed and perplexed, unsure and restless. In the past we usually accepted the interpretation of Shofar given by Maimonides — *uru yeshenim mi'shenatkhem*,

"wake up ye slumberers from your sleep" — understanding Shofar as that which challenges our accepted patterns of thinking and prejudice, that which unsettles us and disturbs our phoney peace. But that is not what we most need today. We do not need alarm clocks; we are all insomniacs.

We enter the New Year already unsettled, already diffident, even our prejudices lacking in passion. We come in burdened with generation gaps and cultural transformations, with moral upheavals and social displacements, with political instability and spiritual perplexity, with an uncertainty that not only makes the stock market reel like a drunkard, but keeps our inner lives gyrating in all directions. A profound political philosopher, Arnold Brecht, has pointed out that today there are not even any good atheists left; even the skeptics are today skeptical of their own skepticism.

So today we must listen to the Shofar not as a disturbing alarm, as Maimonides would have it, but rather in the way Rabbi Saadia Gaon interpreted it: our Shofar is the symbol of the Shofar that sounded at Sinai, heralding revelation, and the *shofro shel Mashiach*, the Shofar that will one day signal the Messianic redemption. Shofar, according to Saadia, is the assurance that behind us there stands the great tradition of Sinai, and ahead of us the great promise of Jewish and universal redemption. It is the affirmation of the basic rightness of our cause.

### III.

That Judaism, for all its liberality of thought and its distrust of smug complacency, urges us on to confidence and resoluteness in unequivocally advocating the rightness of our fundamental human and Jewish loyalties, we learn from one single letter. The climax of the *Malkhiyot* section of the Musaf service is the great verse which summarizes Jewish monotheism:

ובתורתך כתוב לאמר שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד

"and in Thy Torah it is written, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.'"

In the Torah scroll itself, that first word, *Shema*, "hear," is written with an unusually large ע; thus שמע. Why this sudden change in orthography in the Torah script? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch has suggested that the ע is written large in order not to mistake it for another silent letter, namely the ס. For if we should make such a substitution, the word would read שסא — which in Aramaic means: maybe, perhaps. For then, we would read an essentially infidel statement: שסא ישראל (SHE-ma), "Perhaps, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Therefore we write a capital ע to make it clear and unmistakeable: שמע ישראל (she-MA), "Hear O Israel," understand it without doubt and without question: "the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

Today we declare שמע, not שסא — the שסא of contagious confusion, of a self-imposed spiritual and intellectual masochism which we have caught in our sophisticated, progressive, self-doubting environment.

Today we proclaim: שמע, Hear O Israel — not שסא. maybe or if or perhaps — Israel lives! God lives! Torah lives! And we shall live through them.



#### IV.

There recently appeared in the Israeli literary journal *Molad*, a posthumous poem by the late Hebrew poet, Nathan Alterman. In it we find Satan pondering how to defeat and ensnare an innocent victim. Satan thinks to himself: this intended victim is too courageous, too capable, and too wise to be taken in by my usual wiles. Then — in my free translation —

*Then said Satan: his strength I shall not drain  
Neither curb nor bridle his might,  
Nor into his heart cast fright,  
Nor weaken his hands once again.*

רק זאת אעשה! אכהה מוחו וישכח שאתו הצדק  
*Only this shall I do: dim his brain  
That he forget that his cause is right  
Thus spake Satan, and as 'twere,  
The Heavens paled in fright  
As they saw him rise  
To execute his evil plot.*

Indeed, Satan's most effective weapon is to convert decent people from שמע to שמה, from "Hear O Israel" to "Maybe O Israel." When our brains are dimmed, when our convictions waver, when we expose ourselves to the ranting of the maddening world and forget שאתו הצדק, that our cause is right, then it is a calamity. So today we must determine that we shall place a large ע on our שמע, that we shall not allow the שמע to be turned into a שמה, that we shall unequivocally affirm the שמע's of our existence.

#### V.

I know that some will suspect, understandably, that the pulpit is being turned into a platform for propaganda, that it is forfeiting its critical function, and indulging in brain-washing. Religion, I will be told, should be prophetic, it should speak words of תוכחה (rebuke, reproach). That is correct. But it must be remembered that the Prophets spoke not only תוכחות but also נחמות, consolation. When the Prophets found their people smug and complacent and indifferent and morally somnolent, they challenged them and upset them. But when they found them anxiety-ridden and on the border of despair, they spoke to them words of consolation and reassurance.

The reaffirmation I plead for today is not one that should be asserted without thought or reflection, certainly not without compassion or tolerance. I too have contempt for the self-righteousness of the closed mind. Of course, we must be open to correction by new facts as we learn them. Certainly we must test our beliefs in the free marketplace of ideas. But no one, not even the most dedicated liberal, can conduct his life without ultimately accepting some kind of ideals on fundamentals as definite and, at some point in his life, beyond question. We must



learn, despite the liberal dogma in which all of us were raised, that one can be definite without being dogmatic; strong-willed without being closed-minded; clear without being cavalier; believing without being bellicose. There must be something in life that is dear and cherished beyond doubt. There must be something of which we are so certain that we are willing to give our lives for it. Because unless we are willing to die for something, there may be nothing left worth living for.

## VI.

What are some of the things we affirm today, without שמא?

We affirm *Malkhiot*.

שמע — that "the Lord is our God, that despite the dogmatism of the materialists and the narrowness of the preachers of scientism, this world is not the totality of existence, there is a transcendent sphere, a world of infinite value beyond our senses; and unlike the cultists of the drug culture, we affirm that that world of transcendence cannot be attained in a narcotic stupor, by pill or injection, but can be confronted only by Torah and prayer and *mitzvot*.

שמע — Israel must know clearly that "the Lord is One," that to Him all of Israel will return in the *teshuvah* of the entire people.

שמע — that "the Lord will be King over all the earth," and that ultimately all the world will acknowledge God and vindicate the age-old faith of Judaism.

שמע — and not שמא!

We affirm *Zikhronot*.

שמע — that man is not a cosmic accident, with a comic posture and an irrevocably tragic fate, but he is the only symbol of God, the "image of God."

שמע — that God takes notice of man, that He cares for him when he is sick and hungry and lonely, that He remembers him even when he is a hostage in a burning desert.

שמע — not שמא!

We affirm *Shofrot*.

שמע — that Torah is *min ha-shamayim*, "from Heaven"; that Sinai is relevant; that Judaism is both timeless and timely.

שמע — that the link between Sinai and Messiah must never be broken; that the one who assimilates, certainly the one who marries out of the faith, betrays Jewish destiny, draws blood from the Jewish soul.

שמע — that the *geulah* (redemption) is assured; that with all our sympathy for Arab refugees and our readiness to yield territory for peace, our basic cause is just, *שאתו הצדק*. We shall advance that thesis without שמא, without question or self-doubt, against Arabs and Russians, against Englishmen and Frenchmen, against Protestant clerics, against the hoary sages of the New Left, and even the hairy young radical Jews who now question the right of

Israel to exist. We shall press our case of **שמע** on behalf of the State of Israel against those of our own young spiritual mutations who, in advocating the three M's, have forgotten their ABC: in suddenly discovering Marx and Marcuse and Mao, they have forgotten Auschwitz and Buchenwald and Concentration camps of all descriptions — death camps from which our people were liberated as desperate and struggling remnants only twenty-five years ago.

**שמע** — we shall not consent to this abnormal situation whereby the State of Israel is the only state of 150 nations in the world whose right to exist is kept on the agenda of moral considerations of the world. **שמע**, we are here, and no **שמא** about it.

## VII.

Now, three objections may be posed to this exercise in affirmation. Some will question the value of merely getting together and affirming the rightness of our cause. Others may maintain that psychologically, once you have fallen into self-doubt it is impossible to recapture the old affirmation. And yet others will deny that the past can be of any value to us in finding our way out of the accumulated uncertainties of the present.

The first objection has to do with the value of collective affirmation. Of what good is it merely to get together and share our beliefs? Can that strengthen them?

I believe it can. For we must remember that to the largest extent our self-doubt is not something that was born of intellectual reflection. Its genesis is social, not cognitive. It is our morale, not our clarity of thought, that is being attacked. We have fallen into doubt not because of philosophical questioning, but because the world about us has begun to assault us with ideas that degrade and sully all that is sacred to us. Society has adopted ideas and attitudes that may well, according to objective standards, border on the mad and the insane — and Freud (and 800 years before him, Maimonides) already told us that it is possible for an entire society or entire civilization to become insane. And when the world shouts at us and screams at us with all its fury, it makes us think that perhaps *we* are mad.

So we gather together in the Synagogue as a community, a community which affirms civility and God and Torah and Israel and reason and respect and reverence. Then we recognize that maybe there is a larger society that is opposed to ours; but at least we here have a community of our own which upholds unquestioningly the tenets on which we were raised, in which we believe, and to which we aspire. So here, in the Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, each may add his strength to that of the others, his affirmations to those of the others, knowing that here no madness reigns, that here we may say **שמע** without the rot of **שמא**, that here we will not permit Satan to dim our brains so that we forget **שאתו הצדק**.

## VIII.

The second problem is raised by those who maintain that self-doubt and uncertainty are a dead-end street, that they are a sign of irreversible cultural, spiritual, and psychological disintegration, and that one can never overcome them.

That is not so. Rather than arguing the point abstractly, let me point to a specific personality: Abraham, founder of our people and our faith.

The *akedah*, which tells of how God tried Abraham by commanding him to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice, begins with the rather mysterious introduction: **ויהי אחר הדברים האלה**, "and it was after these things." The Rabbis of the Midrash saw in this a subtle psychological reference. The word **הדברים** was interpreted not as "things," but as "words" or "thoughts": **הרהורי דברים היו לאברהם**, Abraham was troubled by many disturbing thoughts. Scanning Abraham's life we may add a number of other illustrations to that mentioned by the Midrash. When Abraham was first informed that he would become the progenitor of a people, he reacted with self-doubt: **במה אדע**, "how do I know?," as if questioning whether he was worthy of it. When he made the big party for Isaac's weaning, it was a "secular" party, not acknowledging God's presence, as if he were embarrassed by the thought that he could be rewarded with a successor to carry on his mission. When Isaac and Ishmael engaged in a struggle, he tried to decide the battle by the standards of ordinary human morality, ignoring the fact that Isaac was the progeny of his blessing — which Sarah recognized and God affirmed. Yet, despite all these hesitations, God wanted to show Abraham that he could emerge from doubt to definiteness, from bemusement to belief, from his faltering uncertainty to a sterling faith. And so he commanded him to undertake the *akedah*; and with all due respect to the famous Kirkegaard interpretation of the *akedah*, there was no **שמא**, no hesitation by Abraham, for no self-doubt and inner conflict are recorded in the Scriptural account, only **שמע**. The Biblical narrative shows us a man who was certain of what he must do. **והאלקים נסה את אברהם** — God tried him, and showed that a **נס** or miracle of character can take place; a man can emerge from **שמא** to **שמע**, to a daring and courageous mission, to a steady hand and a stout heart.

## IX.

Finally, I have been urging this time for affirmation on the basis of our historic experience, and the specific affirmations I propose derive from ancient tenets. Some may object that our human condition today is so perplexing, so radically new, that you cannot still self-doubt by appealing to the past.

I appreciate the spirit in which this criticism is offered. I agree with it in part. You will find no solution for the Vietnam issue in the *Shulchan Arukh*, no military directions in the Talmud, and little political guidance in the



Bible. But this I will say: without being anchored in Bible and Talmud and *Shulchan Arukh*, no answer will suffice, and we shall never find a way out of our perplexity.

Let us admit it: we are lost. And when you are lost, you will never know where you are going and where you must go, unless you first know where you come from.

Permit me to illustrate this by something I heard from a journalist in Israel only two or three weeks ago.

In recent years there has developed a bitter-sweet tradition in Kfar Chasidim. The town annually organizes a collective Bar Mitzvah celebration for children of soldiers who died in battle in 1967 or in the various border incidents since then. To this mass Bar Mitzvah are invited not only the families of the young boys, but also the most important members of government and army.

This past year the guest speaker was the Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, General Chaim Bar Lev. In his talk, the Yugoslavian born Israeli General said the following:

"Sometimes we are lost in life. We come to a crossroad, we look for the sign, and we can find none — for the signpost has either fallen down or been chopped down. You raise it up and turn it in all directions, but you do not know which of the four signs belong to which of the four directions of the crossroads. You are lost.

"What can you do in order to find your way? If at least you know where you came from, then you have the key to your solution. You rotate the signpost so that the name of the town from which you have come points in the direction from which you came — and, suddenly, you discover that the other three signs all point in the right direction.

"You boys, who have had a traditional Jewish education, are lucky. You know where you come from — and so, finding yourselves at the crossroads of life, you will know where to go and how to get there."

These words, spoken by a military man, are worthy of a sensitive man of the spirit. They speak of the value of the past in determining the way out of the perplexities of the present as we make our way into the future.

That is the meaning of Shofar for us on this eve of 5731, at the crossroads of a vexing and turbulent age.

It tells us to remember where we came from. That way we will know where we must go. And where we *must* go, there we *shall* go — with courage, with resolution and with fortitude. And we shall go without hesitation and without weakness.

Let us be done with שמא — because

ובתורתך כתוב לאמר שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד.

