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YISKOR IN RETROSPECT:
Residual Religion or Incipient Paganism?

According to Conservative estimates, the continuous performances of Yizkor Services conducted here this past week drew crowds numbering from eight to nine thousand. This Rabbi, heretofore uninitiated into the vagueries of ^a ~~A~~ ^{this} Yizkor-centered religion of the masses, was astounded beyond words by these multitudes. Whatever one might say about this phenomenon- and we shall have plenty to say about it in a few moments - it is quite an experience, and one which sets into motion the wheels of thought. No one can really understand the religious temperment of American Jewry until he has witnessed this spectacle.

Let me tell you of two remarks which were made to me during these services by two individuals who rank high in the echelons of the Officialdom of this Synagogue. One was: "You see Rabbi, despite all your complaining about Yizkor, where else would these people go?". The second remark was: "Rabbi, it makes my heart feel good to see so many people giving honor to their parents". When these remarks were made to me I promised a sermon as an answer. Hence, this talk on what I believe to be an objective analysis of the American Yizkor Cult.

I think that there are three pleasant aspects to this matter of a three-day-a-year-religion. First, the fact that the "Yizkor Crowds", by their contributions, help maintain our worthiest religious institution. I have no quarrel with this argument; and, quite to the contrary, I wish that this show of charity were increased a hundred-fold. The second argument advanced in favor of the Yizkor-Crowds is, that by this act of memorializing their parents they show their respect and abide by the commandment KABED ES AVICHA VE'ES IMECHA . This too reflects favorably upon the Yizkor-sayers, although, perhaps it should constantly be kept in mind that it is vastly more important to honor parents while they are yet alive than afterwards. A kind word in a mother's or father's ears is infinitely more valueable than the most magnificent tombstone over their heads. It is the third argument however which is the important one. And that is, that at least they are here three days a year, and that thereby they show that they still have some vestiges of religion in them. At least their Jewishness consists in more than eating Gefiltah Fish. At least there is some residual religion which a Rabbi can work with.

So yizkor-saying is residual religion! The left-overs of what once was an active religious feeling, but real religion non-the-less! It is this contention against ^{which} I most vigorously protest. I maintain that this yizkor-saying, torn out of the context of complete services and the whole of Jewish religion and ethics, is not the left-over of religious feelings, but the beginnings of a new paganism. I maintain that this form of yizkor-saying is conceived by a distrust of Life, born by a fear of Death, and nourished by sheer Pagan superstition. I had the occasion recently to reread some of the college notes I took some years ago, And I was struck by the strong similarities between the Death Rites of certain primitive pagan societies and the Yizkor Cult of enlightened twentieth-century America. The ancient pagans, too, especially those deep in the Arabian desert, built the greatest part of their worship about dead ancestors. The half-civilized Arab Bedouin offered sacrifices to ~~his~~ his departed parents on their Yahrzeit in an attempt to placate their spirits, much as the modern American Jew will dig into his pocket for a half a dollar just to make sure that his parents' souls, if people have souls, will repose in Heaven, if there is a Heaven. These were the ZIV'CHEI MEISSIM, the ^{tribe} Death sacrifices, against which the Bible protests so strongly. And a certain ^{tribe} on the African Gold coast celebrates not individual Yahrzeits, but collective Yizkor^s. The entire tribe, thousands of them, gathers in the worship tent where all lights are kept ablaze, and while the Chazan beats out the ^{memorial} prayers on a Tam-Tam, the savages chant the names of their ancestors, ~~thereby~~ ^{the} hoping to save them from the miseries of ~~a~~ Nether-world.

But please keep in mind, my friends, that while I trace the similarities ^{of} and customs between the ancient pagans and modern Americans, I do feel that Yizkor and Yahrzeit and Kaddish are all really important in the framework of Jewish religion. But that is just where the ~~k~~ difference lies - "In the framework of Jewish religion." If these ^{Memorial} services are part of the worship of G-d, the practice of ethics, and the acceptance of all that is holy to Jews, then they too become holy. It is only when they replace the holiness of religion and prayer and ethics, that they become the Garment Area's version of Black-Magic.

Now my friends, even if we grant that I am wrong and you are right; that this Yizkor matter is not as I say, incipient paganism, but, as you say, residual religion, even then I maintain that this residual religion is almost without value or worth.

Perhaps I can best illustrate what I mean from the material covered in today's Reading from the Torah. In today's portion the Bible tells us which animals are fit for eating, that is - kosher, and which are unfit. And the Bible gives us certain signs by which we can differentiate between the Kosher and the Non-Kosher animal. Similarly, we are told how to ~~at~~ tell apart kosher from non-kosher fish. However, when it comes to birds - fowl and the like - here the Bible is somewhat vague, and the Rabbis gave four SIMANIM or signs to help us tell the kosher from the non-kosher bird. The four signs refer to the shape of the stomach and the gullet, the number of fingers, and the manner of catching its prey. However, there was one bird, called the ZARZOR, which our Rabbis found difficult to identify. Is it kosher or non-kosher? Rabbi Eliezer says SHACHEN IM HA'TMEI'IM TAMEI, SHACHEN IM HA'TAHORIM TAHOR. According to this Rabbi we must find out with whom the bird associates; if it associates with clean birds it is kosher, if with non-clean birds it is non-kosher. The Sages give a second hint. They say that it must be NIDMEH that is, if in appearance it is similar to an unkosher bird it is non-kosher, and if ~~it appears~~ it looks like a kosher bird, it is kosher. And both agree upon a third sign. And that is KOLATE MIN HA'AVIR. That is, if the bird does not settle down to pounce upon its prey, but rather grabs it from the air while it is flying, then it is non-kosher. My friends, if you would know what sort of bird the average Yizkorite is, if you would know whether these people are kosher or not, then see if they pass these three tests. The first one is SHACHEN IM HA'TMA'IM, with whom do they associate with? I believe that the average Yizkor-sayer passes this test with flying colors. These people are not assimilationists and their goal is not to secede from the main body of Jews. They live amongst their fellow Jews, and no doubt many of them have some form of affiliation with some Temple or Synagogue, whatever the case may be. This bird, ~~but~~ called not "Zarzor", but "Yizkor", is a SHACHEN IM HA'TAHORIM, he associates with the pure and the clean and the kosher and is, therefore, by this standard, kosher and Jewish. However, it often happens that a person can associate with fine people and still bear no resemblance to them. We must therefore apply the test of the Chachamim, the Sages, and that is NIDMEH. What do they look like. And here too my friends the Yizkorite passes his test. He is kosher on appearance. No, not by virtue of a long nose or a high forehead. Such are not the appearances to which I refer. I mean the appearance of the Jewish Eye, the Jewish Tear, and the Jewish Sigh. As I spoke from this pulpit last week and my eyes

roamed from individual to individual, I was able to see the deep nostalgia of sons and daughters for father~~s~~ and mothers, the deep feelings for the life of the Jewish home and the real exercise of the ^{Jewish} heart. So that by this second test of appearances, the Yizkor sayer again remains a kosher Jew. But it is that third test which is the crucial one. And that is KOLATE MIN HA'AVIR, does this type of Jew base his religious life solidly or does he fashion it out of thin air? Is he, by his Yizkor, feathering his religious nest or merely coasting aimlessly? I fear that the Yizkor-goer ^{here} ~~here~~ fails to prove his Kashruth. For this sort of religion is indeed the flimsiest possible. It is a strange bird indeed who comes to shul once or twice or three times a year and commands G-d "Yizkor Elekim", "G-d, remember!" when he has not visited G-d's house sufficiently to be sure that his demands are solidly backed up. If all of his religion is based upon the recitation of a one-minute prayer, then that religion is based upon air, of a particular temperature. And how unfortunate, that this aspect of a Zarzor, ~~of~~ this non-kosher bird, this flightiness and superficiality, is so characteristic of all of American Jewry. Religious education, with the one exception of the day school movement, is nothing more than based on air. ^{the} Sunday School movement and the ~~the~~ Talmud Torah movement have both proven to be equally insubstantial. And ~~x~~ in community life too, how light-hearted and weak-willed and flighty are most of those who join worthy religious or social or welfare institutions. KOLATE MIN HA'AVIR, it is grabbed from the air. And no more extreme example of this non-kosher characteristic exists than the yizkor-sayer. He simply swoops into shul on a wing and a prayer, deposits his prayer in the synagogue, ~~and~~ takes to his wings and flies out again, not to be seen until Shevuoth.

My friends, if I have been harsh on some of our fellow Jews please realize that it comes from love of Judaism, and not, CHALILAH, from dislike of Jews. For as we shall read this afternoon, before we study the first chapter of AVOS, the Ethics of the Father, KAL YESRAEL YESH LAHEM CHELEK ~~HE~~ LE'OLAM HA'BAH, Every Jew has a share in the world to come. But let me remind you of what one Chassidic Rabbi said about this statement. He translated it to mean not "Every Jew owns a share in the world to come." But, "Every Jew can own etc." And how can this be done? When, as we read further, it is MA'ASEI YADAI LE'HISPAER, The work of my own hands of which I can be proud. Every man must himself creat his own OLAM HA'BAAH with his own hands.

And the creation of this world-to-come, my friends, cannot be accomplished by a request that G-d save one's parents' souls. For Yizkor is not Prayer, and without real T'FILLAH how is one to aspire to OLAM HABAAH? Our Rabbis point out that one may not speak between GE'ULAH LE'T'FILLAH, between Redemption and Prayer, that is, between the blessing GE'AL YISRAEL and the SHMONEH ESREH, which is the essence of Prayer. And they say; who is assured of a share in the world-to-come? And they answer, HA'SOMECH GE'ULAH LE'T'FILLAH, he with whom GE'ULAH, Redemption, is akin to his prayer. My dear friends, if Yizkor is to be meaningful as a hope and aspiration for OLAM HA'BAH then it must be SOMECH GE'ULAH LE'T'FILLAH, then the Yizkor which is the request for Ge'ULLAH, the redemption of the ~~the~~ Soul, must be part and parcel of the complete services, the complete davening and prayers, and not out out of context and repeated in continuous performances,

Let us hope that the time will soon be coming when the religious stature of American Jewry will outgrow its incipient paganism, when people will return to Judaism BE'LEV SHALEM, when Yizkor will assume its rightful place in their Prayers. And may G-d then grant that the OLAM HA'BA, the Utopias for which we all pray, will come to be as our rightfully earned lot.