

"ON TO EDEN"

Yizkor is a time of sacred nostalgia. For a few bitter-sweet moments our hearts and minds go back to loved ones who are no longer with us. From long buried layers of memory, we summon up the security and comfort of youth. Those of us who are now parents and even grandparents revert to a time when we were children, relieved of the burdens of responsibility, cared for and worried over and loved by those in whom we placed full trust. Others relive a happier time when a beloved husband or wife graced our lives, fulfilled our personalities, gave meaning and completion to our existence.

It is an important occasion. We need these precious moments of sentimental recollection and the reminiscence of love. They add another dimension to what might otherwise be merely a drab or prosaic or simply busy existence.

In a sense, all of the High Holiday season partakes of this yearning for the past, for better times that have gone by. From Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur we recite, every day, the Shema Kolenu prayer in which we repeat the words of the Torah (Lam. 5:21), hadesh yamenu ke'kedem, "renew our days as of old." We pray for a reversion to "the days of old," to a lovelier and more satisfying life.

Nevertheless, and this is the burden of my remarks this afternoon, while it is good to indulge such feelings, it is dangerous to overindulge them. Nostalgia is refreshing if it is a limited experience. But it cramps and even destroys our creativity if it ~~overwhelms~~ ^{overwhelms} all the rest of life. Too often people abandon themselves to an aching, wistful, passive worship of their past, and forego any real effort at improving the present and securing the future. It is a profound social commentary on the fate of Judaism that for many families the end of Jewishness and the beginning of full assimilation was marked by the reduction of all Jewish observance to the recitation of Kaddish and Yizkor. Man cannot long live by longing alone. The dream world of the past may be the playground of the imagination and sentiment. But it is also a trap that lures us with the bait of bygone loves in order to neutralize whatever ambitions we might have ^{for} the active improvement of today and tomorrow.

The danger of the nostalgic experience, if overdone, is that it is an effortless and easy triumph; just by turning on my imagination I can relocate myself in a situation in which warmth and love and affection surround me -- all without exertion. But Judaism, with all its reverence for the past, is most concerned with an active existence here and now. Torah prods us on to hard work, to strenuous effort, to victories that are earned and deserved by strain and struggle and even suffering.

I believe that this is what the Rabbis had in mind in a most remarkable interpretation of the verse we cited: hadesh yamenu ke'kedem. Normally, that verse is translated, "renew our days as of old." But the Midrash (Lam.R., end) understands the word kedem not temporally but spatially. The word can be a time-word, "old" or "ancient," but it can also be a space-word, "east." And the Rabbis maintained that kedem here refers not to "days of old," but a specific place, namely, East of Eden. In Genesis we read that the Lord expelled Adam from the Garden of Eden, va-yashken mi'kedem le'gan eden et ha-keruvim v'et lahat herev ha-mit'hapekhet lishmor et derek etz ha-hayyim, and He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden (at kedem of gan-eden) the cherubim and the flash of the turning sword in order to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

What a strange statement! We ask God to restore our days, to renew our life, as in the days of kedem -- and the Rabbis say this refers not to the "good old days," but to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden! One would imagine that we would ask God to renew our days as they were in Paradise, not after we were chased out of Paradise, symbolized by "East of Eden."

But this is the vital, marvelous secret which Judaism wants to teach us.

Every man and every woman has his own private gan eden, the paradise of his dreams and his youthful ambitions. For some people it is a vision of great wealth, walking into a life where

he has millions at his disposal. For another man it is a great novel that he will write without sweat, a great scientific discovery without perspiration, the great legal theories or philosophical discourses that he will develop at the drop of a hat, or a life of love and popularity and fame and happiness and satisfaction without exertion. Often this craving for instant success and achievement is merged with our vision of a past whose agonies we forget and which we idealize and romanticize. The delicious past becomes the symbol of our easy, private paradises.

What the Rabbis are telling us is that this sort of paradise which hangs on the gossamer threads of our imaginations and is glued together by the cement of our wish-fulfillment, is something that is terribly dangerous, that if we try to enter it we simply fall into an endless pit. Such a gan eden is really a gehennom.

Look at Adam himself. When he and Eve disported themselves in God's paradise, they got into trouble: they submitted to all kinds of blandishments, they caused curse and conflict to come upon the world, and they began to hate each other.

It was only after God did them the favor of expelling them from this gan eden which He, God, had created for them, that they became human. They built a family and learned how much they really needed each other. In essence, the human biography of Adam, the story of man as a fully creative human being, begins only after the expulsion from paradise.

So, hadesh yamenu ke'kedem does not mean "renew our days as of old," give us back that dream world of parental love given free, of security achieved without struggle, of a paradise there for the asking and the wishing, but -- give us the courage to face life East of Eden, to throw ourselves into the fray for a fuller and finer life, to forge a new world, indeed a new paradise, after we were expelled or pulled ourselves out of the Eden we never paid for or fought for. To create a new paradise mi'kedem le'gan eden, east of our outside the prefabricated one, is more satisfying, more fulfilling, more noble. Hadesh yamenu ke'kedem!

In counseling young couples in marital disputes, one comes across many difficult situations. But the one that most disturbs and distresses me is when a young person says about a new husband or wife, "I just fell out of love with" him or her. It is the symptom of a profound malady that afflicts all too many people today, perhaps all of society. The idiom "fall in" or "fall out" of love implies effortlessness -- you just tumble happily into a euphoric state of love and affection, without testing the resources of your own character, without the rigorous and tough trial of adjustment, without the trying adventure of exploring another and different personality. It implies that marriage and love are a cheap paradise. And easy come, easy go -- what is acquired without strain is lost without pain.

But that is a lie -- a dangerous and costly life. To all young people of marriageable age here I plead to keep this in mind. Of course it is wonderful to fall in love. But if you do not work at developing a relationship, if you are not ready to sacrifice and give and renounce and even suffer, you may not be "falling in love," but just "falling in." In one of the sheva berakhot, the seven blessings recited at a wedding, we ask of God to make the young couple happy ke'sameihakha yetzirkha be'gan eden mi'kedem, as You made Your creatures, Adam and Eve, happy in Eden mikedem -- East of Eden, after the expulsion, when he and she had to give up their childish illusions and struggle to create happiness rather than inherit it. In a ready-made Gan Eden, as Adam and Eve learned to their sorrow, there can be no real happiness and satisfaction. It is only after being expelled from that illusory paradise that ve'ha-adam yada et Havvah ishto -- in its literal sense rather than in its idiomatic signification, Adam first begins to understand and to know and to recognize his wife. There is an existential closeness that develops between them, as love is reciprocated and effort is rewarded and the family is built and the human story begins.

Ten centuries ago, Saadia Gaon taught that the observance of the commandments affords man happiness. But, he asks, could not the Creator have granted us happiness without the need for performing difficult, demanding deeds? Yes, he answers, He could have -

but it is in the nature of things that what is earned, worked for, strived for, gives a man much more joy and fulfillment and satisfaction than what is received merely as a gift. ¶ It is the failure to understand this principle that vitiates so much of the rhetoric of the younger, "Now" Generation. When, only a few short years ago, young people expressed their dissatisfaction with the status quo of society by volunteering for the Peace Corps overseas, or the Domestic Peace Corps, that was admirable, a sign of idealism in its most mature expression. They were going to build a paradise -- and if they would not succeed, at least they would make the world inhabitable, no longer a Hell. But when their successors today want a society of love and peace and a "groovy" time for all -- without work or sweat or pain or exertion, but only by driving into Eden in their father's car and using his expense account, then they are ready to be driven out of Eden much less ceremoniously than they drove in. Hadesh yamenu ke'kedem -- mi'kedem le'gan eden.

For a long time, too long a time, Jewish life in this country was afflicted by the same passivism. So much of Yiddish literature and drama in the early years in America was a loving evocation of der alter heim, a brooding contemplation of the glory that once was. And all this time Jewish life was permitted to crumble under the onslaught of acculturation and assimilation. They dreamed of the Gan Eden of once upon a time, and failed to make that move to kedem le'gan eden, East of Eden, to active up-

building of Jewish life and institutions. There was too much Yizkor and too little Musaf, too much nostalgia and too little pioneering, too much Eden and too little East of Eden.

And this, of course, is what the State of Israel is all about. It came into being when Jews stopped dreaming of Eretz Israel as a primitively beautiful paradise into which Messiah was going to lead us miraculously and without any effort by us; a land flowing with milk and honey without the need for farmers and dairymen; a land in which (as Yehudah Halevi put it) the very air is filled with souls without the necessity to build schools and persuade the skeptics and teach the ignorant. But such a paradise never existed -- nor, perhaps, did it deserve to exist. The real paradise that is Eretz Israel lies mi'kedem, East of Eden; it was drained from the swamps and built on rocks and defended against marauders and sanctified by dedication and devotion and teaching and toiling.

On Yom Kippur, certainly, we must be honest. Let us then admit it. Orthodox Jews, most of them, were wrong in giving a passive interpretation to the idea of waiting for Messiah. True, it is the pious Jew who kept the hope of a redeemed Israel alive so that it could be realized in our times. But passivity simply was not a sufficient answer. We were trapped in the vision of Eden itself, and failed to take the crucial step to East of Eden, to active work to create a viable Jewish state.

At the same time, let it be said that Israelis are making a grievous error if they allow the present grave problems of the State to distract them from the even graver spiritual problem that they will have to face sooner or later. The spiritual-cultural-religious problem will not resolve itself automatically. The great question is: will Israel really remain Jewish? This much is certain: it will not retain its uniqueness, its individuality, its very soul without a painful confrontation with the Jewish tradition and Jewish faith, without formidable, daring, and unremitting efforts to shed its secularist infatuation and come to terms with Torah and its challenges. Today we know, with the benefit of hindsight, that Zionism erred in failing to plan a program for the period that would follow the declaration of the State; it was defeated by success. Israel must plan today -- despite the pressure of military threats and international cynicism and the betrayal of so many of its supposed friends -- for the time when peace will come and the spiritual problems will suddenly loom large. Unless we -- all of us, for the future of Judaism in the Diaspora is unthinkable without a vigorous Judaism in Israel -- unless we plan and work and struggle now for Jewish education and character and tradition and observance and faith, Gan Eden shall elude us. Wadesh yamenu ke'kedem.

At the end of this summer just past, General Dayan addressed the graduating class of an Officers' School in Israel and offered his explanation of a Biblical verse that I think is completely

correct. When God said to Jacob, al tira avdi Yaakov, "do not be afraid, My servant Jacob," that did not mean that Jacob would stay on the side-lines while God would fight for him and assure him success. Not to be afraid means to be courageous, and courage is not necessary for the spectator. Fearlessness is necessary for the fighter, for the one who enters the fray and takes up arms and charges into battle. God told Jacob, in effect, that he must throw himself into the struggle for building a people and fighting for the triumph of his ideals and bringing God into the world, and that since he was going to be an active participant, the soldier of God, then it was important to give him courage and tell him not to be afraid when things seem tough and the future looks dark.

That is an interpretation worthy of a General of Israel and a national hero. And it applies not only to military life but also to the even greater battle for the supremacy of the Jewish spirit and the integrity of the Jewish soul.

We American Jews must not falter, and more important, we must not expect miracles to save us from assimilation and ethnic obsolescence. We hold the future in our hands. Unless we resolve to give our children maximum Jewish education -- and that decidedly includes what they see at home even more than what they are taught in school -- they shall remain with less than the minimum. No man can survive a divinely prepared paradise; we must be expelled. There are no heavenly guarantees for our survival as Jews. Only

arduous, heroic, passionate action here and now, mi'kedem, East of Eden, will create the kind of society in which our families can carry on the Jewish tradition and secure the peoplehood of Israel. Easy triumphs are an illusion, and nostalgic brooding a vanity. Paradise is never inherited; it is built.

Hashivenu Hashem elekha ve'nashuvah, Turn us to Thee, O Lord, and we shall return -- or: do teshuvah. And how does one do teshuvah? How does one succeed in redirecting the course of his life? Only when he prays hadesh yamenu ke'kedem -- mi'kedem le'gan eden, not for a magical return to the womb of effortless convenience, the total security of infancy, but for divine help as he throws himself into the grimy battle for conquering his own paradise, for building it painstakingly and persistently, piece by piece, bit by bit.

As we recite the Yizkor, let us savor deeply of these sweet and sad sentiments of reunion, as we relive old loves and experience old pains. However, let Yizkor be not a substitute for life, but a spur to better living; not a fruitless nostalgia, but an opportunity for refreshing re-creation at the fount of yesterday's memories, drawing the courage to build a liveable today and a better tomorrow; not a petrification of ancient recollections, but a perpetuation of the vital heritage of the past; not just a longing look back to what was, but the lapping up of strength to face what will be. As we turn to the past and evoke love which has not grown

stale, let us find the inspiration to turn, thereafter, to the future with equal love and undiminished determination.