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"ISAAC - HISTORY'S THANKSGIVING SERMON"

The life of Isaac, inspiring and pathetic in its tragic beauty, stands out as History's sermon to Americans, and especially American Jews, in this Thanksgiving season.

Tragedy seems to have followed this Patriarch from beginning to end. His early life was a glorious episode. As a young man he accomplished the most glorious feat in Jewish history - his consent to be sacrificed for G-d when his father Abraham informed him that that was G-d's will. Here was a young man of 30 willing to be cut off at such a young age because it was the Divine will that it be so. The fact that G-d intervened at the last moment and rescinded His command to Abraham makes no difference. The fact is that Abraham finally subrendered his most beloved son, the fact is that Isaac made his decision to give his life, and the fact is that his beloved mother Sarah died when she heard the news that Abraham was preparing to offer up her only son. This great episode - known as the AKEDAH - is the theme we constantly recall in our prayers when we want to advocate the cause of Israel before G-d and plead for Divine Mercy. The early part of his life was, therefore, gallant, glorious and lofty.

Our Rabbis, however, with their customary bent for just and unprejudiced appraisals of the heroes of our people, were severely critical of Isaac. And they expressed this criticism in the form of an imaginary debate between Isaac and Moses. And in this debate, the Midrash quotes Isaac as saying to Moses, ANI GADOL MIMCHA, I am greater than you, because I was willing to sacrifice my life by being bound on the altar, and thus RA'ISI PNEI SHECHINAH, I saw the Divine Presence, that is, I attained great religious insight. And to this Moses answers, ANI NISALEISI MIMCHA, true, but I am still greater than you, because while you may have seen the SHECHINAH, you became blind soon afterwards, as we read in today's Sidra VAYEHI KI ZAKEN YITZCHAK VATICH'NENA EINAV ME'REOS, when Isaac became old, his eyes failed him, whereas I spoke to the SHECHINA "PANIM EL PANIM", directly, and yet my eyesight never failed me.

Here is an interesting dialogue, although we must understand that since several generations separate the two, that the Midrash is not to be taken literally, and also that the arguments put into their mouths are not to be taken as typical of their characters, since they certainly were more humble than that. What our Rabbis did mean to point out was that great sacrifice and the attainment of great vision are terribly important - but the vision must be sustained and the sacrifice repeated if necessary, that the vision must not be followed by failing eyes, that the insight should not be neutralized by blindness, that the moment of greatness should be followed by everlasting greatness and not by an eternity of darkness.

That is the tragedy of Isaac's life. To what great moments he rose when he lay down on the stone altar and calmed his father, directing him in his slaughter! At that moment, as the ages relate, as he was lying bound on the AKEDAH, face upwards, the very heavens split and Isaac saw the Heavenly Hosts and the ministering angels, he saw the PNEI SHECHINAH - and, because of the brilliance of the vision, was blinded. What a tragedy: from visionary to blind man! And even worse, as he grows older he becomes blinder. It is more than physical blindness, for while he remains the great and holy Patriarch, one of the three Fathers of Israel, he, in his old age, fails to discriminate between his good son and his evil son, between an Esau and a Jacob! Unlike Moses who sustained his vision throughout his entire life, Isaac weakens with age, and turns blind: blind to Esau's treachery, blind to Jacob's piety, blind to Rebecca's loyalty. What a pitiful one was that trek from Akedah to blindness.

This, then, is the intent of the Rabbi's of the Midrash, History's Thanksgiving Sermon expressed in the personality of Isaac. It is not enough to HAVE a vision; one must KEEP it. It is not sufficient to HAVE MADE a sacrifice, no matter how great; one must ever be prepared to repeat it. Vision and insight must followed through with eternal clarity.

I say that it is History's Thanksgiving Sermon, because now is the time for us American, and even more so us American Jews, to remember that the splendid visions of Freedom and the noble sacrifices for Democracy which our country made in its youth, and for which we now thank G-d, these visions and sacrifices can be lost, denied and belied in our time by the petty blindnesses that seem to be afflicting us as we grow older.

Let me give you two examples of great victories won through sacrifice and vision, which are now being lost through VAYEHI KI ZAKEN...VATICH'NENA EINAV ME'REOS, through blindness that sometimes comes with age, two great freedoms which, one way or another, we are abandoning and allowing to atrophy.

First there is the precious American freedom, the Freedom of Speech. The American Revolution was the sacrifice our country offered for this great freedom for which we are so thankful. It was primarily Thomas Jefferson who had the great vision of completely free and unfettered freedom of expression. It was he who in 1779 insisted that "the opinions of men are the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction...truth is great and will prevail if left to herself...errors (cease) to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them". This vision was, ten years later, to become part of the Bill of Rights as the First Amendment to the Constitution. It is one of the finest and noblest thoughts which men could envision and for which they might sacrifice.

If we had been like Moses who could keep up a sustained vision, we would have insisted upon the sacred and inviolate character of that right. Instead, we have, with our increasing age, allowed that right of all free men to be gradually curtailed. During World War I, we allowed it to be legislated that to speak out against participation in the war is a crime. Since then, and especially since the cold war, it has become a crime to advocate certain political thoughts. We are becoming blind, losing that terrific insight of our national youth that "truth will prevail if left to herself" and the errors will cease to be dangerous if we are free to contradict them. And now, just this week, we saw what is at one and the same time the most ridiculous and most dangerous of quirks of unintelligent Congressmen. At the same time that certain national military schools forbade its students to debate the question of allowing Red China into the U.N., a Congressman from Virginia, who otherwise has been resting in fortunate obscurity, threatened students from a private college with turning in their names and statements to the FBI if they dare to take the affirmative in this debate. Certainly, this is ridiculous, and many good Americans have rightly damned his statement. But it is a terrible symptom of impending blindness. This season, when we thank G-d for our freedoms, we have got to make up our minds to sustain them in a continuing vision of freedom of speech unblurred by near-sighted bigots.

A second, and even more important example, is that of Freedom of Religion. I need not recount to you the many sacrifices the Pilgrim Fathers and other early Americans had to make in order to assure this great freedom. It was not an easy task, because early America was not free from pernicious bigotry. Early American Jews found prejudice in New York and in Massachusetts and in other colonies. Freedom of Religion was a noble vision and was hard won, only with many sacrifices.

And yet, today we have been somewhat untrue to those sacrifices and we have lost the vision. First, there is a tremendous abuse of this freedom - which includes the proposition that the State favors no one church or sect against another - right here in Springfield and in almost all of Massachusetts. I do not want to go into this matter in detail, because I am saving it for another occasion. But those parents who have children in the city's public schools are only too well aware of the curtailment of religious freedom in our educational system. When Jewish children are forced to participate in reciting a prayer which comes from the Christian Bible; when our children are told that they must sing songs or carols which are most definitely Christian religious hymns; when these and many other such instances are public knowledge - and when these and similar matters are hush-hushed by our Jews because they are afraid to be "trouble-makers", then I say that our democracy is decrepit with age and dying of blindness. If fighting for religious

freedom ~~is~~ makes one a "trouble-maker", then I say that it is a MITZVOH of the Constitution to be a "trouble-maker". Being that kind of "trouble-maker" puts one in the same category with Jefferson and Washington and Penn and Franklin. If we can allow such abominable conditions to go unchecked, because of the silly reason just mentioned, or because of a fatalistic "it-just-can't-be-helped" attitude, then we are allowing our eyes to be dimmed and our sacrifice to prove vain.

But not only in this way are we losing the beauty of our early American dreams. I think that one of the main ABUSES of the Freedom of Religion is allowing to Religion to fall into DISUSE. Is it worth giving your life so that you can worship the way you want to, if you don't worship? By not practicing the religion for which you seek freedom, you blind the democratic insight, you make the sacrifice into a forfeiture and the vision into a pipe-dream. If this Thanksgiving we thank G-d for the Freedom of Religion, let us by all means go ahead and practice it. Otherwise, there is little to be thankful for.

How can we, as Americans and as Jews, keep this vision constantly before our eyes; how can we vindicate the sacrifices, the American AKEDAH, and redream the American dream with unfailing clarity? - By remembering that the Bill of Rights, our most precious political heritage, is not given to us by our government. It is given to us by G-d, and only guaranteed by the government. *When we remember that, then our insight becomes a vision, our vision a prophecy, & our sacrifices become an eternal vigilance & victorious struggle for Democracy.*

In concluding, let me quote to you a similar-minded paragraph from Justice Douglas' splendid book, "An Almanac of Liberty", which was only recently published (p.5):

"The basic premise on which the Declaration of Independence rests is that 'men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.' That means that the source of these rights is G-d, not government. When the state adopts measures protective of civil liberties, it does not **confer** rights. It merely **confirms** rights that belong to man as the son of G-d....To 'secure' sometimes means to obtain, sometimes to safeguard. In the Declaration of Independence and in the preamble to the Constitution to 'secure' means to safeguard...The rights and liberties 'secured' were those which American citizens already had. Government merely underwrote them.

"Therein lies the basic difference between democratic and totalitarian governments. In fascist, communist and monarchical states, government is the source of rights: government grants rights; government withdraws rights. In our scheme of things, the rights of man are unalienable. They come from the Creator, not from a president, a legislature or a court."

.These are the words of a wise judge. It is an American testament. It is something for which the Founding Fathers sacrificed, and which was already envisioned in the Torah, which declared that Man was created by G-d, and that therefore all men are His children.

We are thankful that G-d has granted us these rights, and we are thankful that our country guarantees them. In appreciation of them, we will determine not to invalidate the sacrifices and demean the visions. As our democracy grows and matures, we shall strive to keep it from blindness. Instead, may it forever be capable of profound insight and ever-sustained vision.