

"A CREDO FOR THE PULPIT"

A-127

I believe that the first in this season's series of Late Services is the appropriate time for a talk on ~~the~~ "A Credo for the Pulpit", a general outline of the aims of the Jewish pulpit in general, and this pulpit in particular. So often is the pulpit exploited for book-reviews, political orations, sociological observations, psychiatric advice and personal opinions, that a public airing of its functions, responsibilities and aims should be healthy for both Rabbi and Congregation.

The pulpit, to my mind, must fulfill three basic functions: to teach, to preach, and to reach. These three do more than rhyme; they establish an inner rhythm, by which Rabbi and Congregation harmoniously rise to the service of G-d.

The main function of the Rabbi has always been to teach. The pulpit was always geared more to the lecture than to the sermon. The principal object was to teach, to inform, to ~~let~~ the people enjoy the pulpit as an educational tool to open up for them new vistas, new understanding, new horizons that they never realized existed in Judaism.

Study, in Judaism, is regarded as a form of Service or Worship. "TALMUD TORAH" was not only a way leading to the observance of G-d's MITZVOS, but in itself a MITZVOH of major importance. For generations after the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of exile, Jews studied, assiduously, the Laws of Temple Sacrifice and laws applicable only in time of national independence - because the study of Torah is in and of itself a sacred deed, whether practical at the moment or not. The word "MISHNAH", indicating the great body of Oral Law, our Sages pointed out, spells "NESHAMAH", or "soul", when its letters are rearranged. For study is itself a spiritual achievement of no mean proportions.

Historically, that was the primary function of the DRASHAH, the sermon. It followed the reading of the Torah and explained it. The Rabbi rose to his highest function when he was not only a shepherd guiding his flock, but a teacher instructing his students. Of course, it is ridiculous to regard a once-a-week lecture as sufficient education. But it was, and should remain, a mighty educational device.

This pulpit, in the series of Friday Night talks beginning tonight, will be dedicated largely to that end. Hence, as you will notice in the "GUIDE" we have prepared for these services, the talks will often be "Lectures", as well as "Sermons". We hope, during the course of this season, to do some constructive teaching. Some of the topics we presently plan are "Judaism and Science", a series of lectures on the age-old conflicts and some attempts at resolution, as well as some modern trends in scientific thinking which bear out ~~age-old~~ the timeless truths of Judaism; a series of lectures on the "Sabbath", which will explain what is meant by "work" in Jewish Law, and how the Prophets understood Sabbath, and how the mystics of the Kabbalah gave it their interpretation. We hope to have guest speakers analyze for us, in serious terms, what are the goals of the different kinds of Jewish education. And we plan a talk or series of talks on the relations between Jews and Arabs, and between Judaism and other Semitic cultures. Jewish education must - and with the help of G-d will - be an achievement of this pulpit.

The second function of the pulpit is to preach. There are times when a Rabbi must not only inform but also remind and even sometimes demand; not only deliver a lecture, but lecture; not only defend by teaching, but protest by preaching. And while, most of the time, teaching is more important, preaching is both more dangerous and more difficult.

It is more dangerous, because to preach means that you must sometimes say things which are unpopular, and risk disfavor in the eyes of the community. "Certainly," you will say, "a Rabbi naturally is expected to do that." The trouble is that most people want the Rabbi to preach critically only of somebody else. And basically, the modern conception of the Rabbi as a combination of Master of Ceremonies and Temple company-representative and Publicity Agent, does not encourage free expression. In such a role, it is extremely difficult to articulate honest criticism even by subtle indirection. Yet, it must be done.

And it is difficult too. It is difficult because preaching, according to the popular understanding, presupposes a superiority on the part of the preacher. We say: Practice what you preach. Faced with such a challenge, it is terribly difficult to even get near the pulpit. Thus, when I preach Sabbath observance, I must be one hundred percent sure that I observed the Sabbath as required. And how difficult real Sabbath observance is!

If I preach about honesty, I must be willing to publish my tax returns in the public press. If I urge generosity, I must have already uprooted every last vestige of hatred and grudge from my heart. Can anyone, anywhere, say that he has done all these?

My only consolation lies in the Hassidic interpretation of preaching. It is told of the great Baal Shem Tov, that he heard a MAGGID, or preacher, berating his audience for their poor observance and their bad behavior. When the great Baal Shem could bear it no longer, he turned upon the Maggid and said to him, "How dare you so reproach these kindly people? True, they might have sinned, but how would you know the temptations to sin? You learned even as a youth to control yourself, to resist temptation until now it no longer affects you, you have all your life lived in purity, and therefore it's easy for you to lead an exemplary life. But if you were in their position you might not do any better." In other words, preaching is not an address by a saint to a sinner, It is a cooperative venture by a community of sinners who want to be saints. The "abbi must not preach at his congregation. He must preach with them. In his protests and tirades and rebukes, he must include himself, always realizing that he is as humble and poor as the rest; and the congregation must remember that the Rabbi knows this, and therefore not question his right to say his piece. And above all, all must remember that "these are a kindly people", that all Jews have in them a spark of the Divine, and that even more than chipping away their goodness evil, must their goodness be brought out.

Jewish preaching in general must aim at bringing Jews closer to G-d and His Torah - VE'HEVEY MEKARVAN LE'TORAH. And to achieve that, in the setting of our time and our place, it is of the utmost necessity to protest two tendencies which have eaten their way into our spiritual fabric. These two tendencies, which have done so much towards keeping our people from becoming "near to Torah", are ~~mediocrity~~ the cult of mediocrity and the pressure for conformity. One tells us that we must be average, that it is best for us to adjust to society, no matter what kind of society it is. To be superior means to be neurotic, and that is a bad, bad word. We have become communicants in the cult of mediocrity. And the second tells us that we must not be different from anyone else, we must conform to the tastes and institutions and beliefs of the majority. The two

are actually closely related. And both are equally effective in diluting our religious feeling, in regarding Torah as "out-of-style", in maintaining a distance between ourselves and G-d, and in helping us convert religion and religious devotion into a sort of competition to see who is most fashionable in a strictly social way.

From this pulpit we have condemned both these tendencies. We have done so a number of times, and will, with the help of G-d, continue to do so many more times. We must be awakened to the fact that society is not religion, that the average is far below the best, and that to be religious you have to have more spine, more courage and more bravery than it takes to make a war hero.

Perhaps I can best illustrate this insistence upon preaching against what we have called the "cult of mediocrity" and the pressure to conform, by relating to you a brilliant Chassidic comment on an old Midrash. Our Sages related, in a Midrash, a beautiful allegorical story concerning Man's creation. When G-d ^{took counsel} ~~counselled~~ with His heavenly hosts concerning the creation of Man, NAASU MALACHEI HA'SHAREIS KITOS KITOS, opinion amongst the angels was sharply divided as to whether Man deserved to be created or not. EMESS AMAR AL YIBAREI, Truth came before the Divine Throne and argued against the creation. Mankind would not keep Truth, and therefore should not be willed into existence. SHALOM AMAR AL YIBAREI, Peace also argued against Man, since he would constantly be involved in war and controversy. But TZEDEK AMAR YIBAREI, Justice maintained that he should be created, since it is just that he first be given a chance to prove himself. It was, then, two to one against Man. What did G-d do? He threw EMESS, Truth, down to earth and out of Heaven. Therefore there remained a tie, Peace against Justice, and here G-d Almighty Himself entered the debate, and cast the deciding vote, breaking the tie in favor of Man. And thus was Man created. A beautiful story, filled with meaning for those who can discern it. But there is one difficulty in it. And the question is, why did G-d dispose of EMESS, who counselled against the creation, why did He not cast away SHALOM, who similarly argued against man? And the great R. Alexander Moshe Ibn Lapidos answered, "because had Truth remained and argued its point, it would have prevailed under any circumstances. For Truth outlives and outweighs any majority."

To that end, primarily, will the preaching of this pulpit be dedicated. Truth, and not majority. Truth, and not conformity. Truth, and not mediocrity. NOACH ISH TZADDIK TAMM HAYAH BE'DOROSOV, Noah was righteous in his generations. That is the true test of character - if one can remain righteous even in such a vicious and corrupt generation, if one can defy the majorities and the pressure to conform to them and remain a Noah. We must rekindle the passion for Truth that lies dormant in the Jewish breast.

The third function of the pulpit, to reach, is by far the most difficult. It is: to reach into people's souls, and there so to move and stir them, that they reach upwards to G-d Himself. It means to inspire. It means to uplift. When the pulpit has achieved a measure of "to teach" and "to preach", it may be ready "to reach". But this too is not a one-way affair. Inspiration is not an impromptu gift from heaven. It needs preparation and study on the part of him who is to be inspired. A congregation must be ready to receive inspiration. Nay, even more, a congregation must inspire its Rabbi, if the Rabbi is to inspire it.

The pulpit dare not remain throughout a staid and smooth lectern. Listen to Franz Rosenzweig, the Jewish philosopher of the early part of this century who almost became a Christian and then became a great Jewish thinker, listen to him describe a great sermon: "...something else is involved here, a final quality, a rapture of the whole man, so that one wouldn't be surprised if he took wing in the end and disappeared". Or later, he maintains that the very words must rise "to heaven in a vast flame". (F. Rosenzweig, His Life and Thoughts, by N. Glatzer, p.104). That is precisely what we must have if we are going to shake ourselves out of our life-long sleep and come to grips with reality, with G-d Himself, like Jacob wrestling with the angel.

I think that Prof. Heschel has a point when he maintains, in his very latest book (Man's Quest for G-d, p.80) that "the test of a true sermon is that it can be converted to prayer". Assuredly so! Not the kind of smooth, dignified, expedient prayer we sometimes witness in some of our modern Temples, where a Cantor and Rabbi chant, and that is regarded as if the congregation has prayed. No, certainly not that. But rather, prayer in its most intense, and hence most Jewish, form. Prayer in which one's whole being is on fire, in which all our pettiness is consumed in the grandeur of G-d of Whom we first become conscious

The ultimate goal of the pulpit must be so to reach into the cores of the congregants as to convert them into prayers, to make them feel as David did when he said ANI TEFILLAH, "I am prayer", to the point where the ^{entire} personality is wrapped up in an awareness of the greatness of G-d, in Whose shadow we live all our lives, but of Whom we become aware in only our greatest moments. The pulpit must beware and not allow dignity to obscure depth, efficiency to eclipse inwardness, courtesy to overshadow the inner fire and decorum to prevent the inner torrent of tears and heartbeats and the blessing of wonder and reverence. The pulpit must ever remind us, by reaching into us, that our synagogues have too much administration and too little worship, and that we have too much expediency and too little fire.

To say that this pulpit will accomplish those three goals of "to teach, to preach and to reach" as we delineated them, and especially that last one, would be foolish as well as presumptuous. But they are the aims and the goals, and for them shall we strive - and we shall strive together, Rabbi with congregation. Together, we will blend into the rhythm of teaching, preaching and reaching, of Education, Ethics and Ecstasy, the harmony of TORAH, MUSSAR and HISLAHAVUS, of Knowledge, Morals and Spirit; and in this symphony of mutual estimation and common dedication, may we rise to the service of G-d Almighty.

YIHEYU LE'RATZON IMREI FI, may the words of our mouths, Almighty G-d, be acceptable to Thee. Amen.