

"A STEP BACKWARDS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION"

1. This sermon is occasioned by two factors:
 - a) the eternal appeal of the Ten Commandments to all people - the entire Western world, and even - or perhaps especially - those who least observe them.
 - b) a comment made to me the other day, which I am sure is indicative of a large body of unstudied and unlearned and misinformed opinion, to the effect that "you Orthodox Jews want to turn the clock back, you are against progress."
2. This evening, therefore, I want to invite you to accompany me in an analysis of the idea of Progress from a broader and more informed point of view. Let us see if we all always mean what we say when we talk of "progress"; let us stop playing with slogans and analyze concepts; let us see if it is not true that sometimes you get the right time when you "turn the clock back", whether Orthodoxy is really doing that, and whether sometimes you must take a step backwards in the right direction.
3. I think it was Abe Lincoln who over 100 years ago pointed to one of the commonest fallacies of our age, one which is most tragic in its consequences, when he said that "too many people mistake change for progress". No, change by itself is absolutely meaningless - you can change for the worse as well as for the good.
4. Of course, it would be most silly for us to say that we should give up the real advances of civilization. Modern man has made some terrific, good progress. The Salk vaccine, the unfolding of democratic government and the strides made in psychiatry, to mention only a few of the numerous advances we have made, are here to stay, we hope, and will always a monument to the great constructive and creative forces unleashed by modern civilization. BUT - as in even the most radical modernist will admit, our moral and ethical progress has been left behind in the race to keep up with technology. We have not more but perhaps less great moral insights than the generations - or some generations - of the past had. Theoretical physics has given us radiological treatment of cancer, but also an H-Bomb; gynecology has given us greater protection for human beings, but also barbarians who boast of the ability to sterilize a hundred Jewesses a day - and are let off scot-free. Philosophy has produced many giants and many masterpieces, but not one has been able to approach the Torah, the Ten Commandments.

Indeed, since the giving of the Ten Commandments we have a startling number of developments in human thought. Instead of "I am the Lord thy G-d", we have been told that Science, or Man, or Psychology is our god. Instead of destroying idols, we have regenerated them in new forms. Instead of murder, Neitzche blazed the path for making a virtue of it, and Hitler applied the philosophy. Don't steal? Marx had a different philosophy, and Lenin and Stalin applied it in Communism. No adultery? Kinsey has documented the antiquity and irrelevancy of that Mitzvah. Indeed the world has changed. But who will maintain that it is not time to take a step backwards in the right direction? If returning to that day on Sinai 3,500 years ago is "turning the clock back", I am all for it.

5. Going even further back in the annals of mankind, we again discover that the greatest progress was composed not always of change, but equally as much by rediscovering lost insights of the dim past. Most modern anthropologists have assumed that in the dawn of man-kind humans were superstitious idol-worshippers, and only after many centuries was there developed the belief in One G-d. More recently, however, a good number of prominent scholars have changed their minds. Scientists like Andrew Lang and Engell now maintain that in its dawn, humanity had a montheistic belief, and only afterwards did it degenerate into polytheism - idolatry and the like, until the fathers of the Jewish people recaptured the lost insights and proclaimed SHMA YISROEL...ECHAD. Thus, we know that Paleolithic Man

(of the Stone Age) had a magical cult for his religion - i.e. he was a pagan who fashioned his idols out of stone. But, many anthropologists now say, pre-Paleolithic man believed in One Author of all existence! (See GW Anderson, The Hebrew Religion in the Old Testament etc)

But are the anthropologists the first to discover this fact - the fact that religion has frequently retrogressed instead of progressed with time? Decidedly not! Basing himself on obvious Biblical texts in Genesis, and confirming material in the Talmud and Midrash, Maimonides (Yad, Hil. Avodah Zarah, chapter I) shows how originally man's faith was pure and noble, and that later idolatry appeared and corrupted this pure faith (bi'yemei enosh huchall...etc.).

What do we see from all this? We see that Abraham, who propounded the belief in One G-d, took a step backwards in the right direction, even as ten generations before him, Noah did the same thing. We see that Moses, in transmitting the Ten Commandments, took a step backwards in the right direction. Of course so much of what Moses gave - G-d's Torah - was new and bold. But in essence, it was a return to a purer and higher and nobler conception of life. That is what our Rabbis meant when they said that Abraham and the other Patriarchs observed the whole of the Torah! When a man is walking straight to the brink of a precipice where he can fall to his death, then taking a step backwards means going in the right direction. And that is true morally and religiously as well.

6. So that Orthodoxy, if at times it insists upon a return to old concepts and ideas, is certainly going in the right direction, not in the wrong direction. But is it "making progress"? I have been saving that term for clearer definition. That word has become a political slogan, preempted by anyone who wants to sell his idea to unthinking people. We automatically assume that the word progress is a synonym for good and decent and holy. So much so is this idea ingrained in the modern mind, that I hesitated to include this discussion in my sermon. Someone might leave this synagogue and tell his neighbor, "Rabbi Lamm is solidly against progress. He said so himself." I beg of you, therefore, even if I should tell you that I am against certain kinds of "progress", keep it a secret. A Rabbi should never be, I am told, on the unpopular side.

Allow me to read to you, in this connection, a short passage by the late Ludwig Lewisohn which I read in his short masterpiece, "The American Jew". Speaking of the fact that so many Jews have come back to a realization of the eternal values of Judaism, he says, "More and more Jews are confronting this inner act of re-cognition and re-alliance within themselves. But when they seek to draw the right inferences in action, when they set out to change their lives, they are met, from many quarters...with the cry: 'But you cannot do that in this world and age; do you think the clock can be set back? We are in the middle of the 20th century. History races on.' Ah yes, history races on; every age has been progressive. The Latin word from which progressive comes, the verb 'progredior', means to march forward. Forward - to what goal? A murderer marches forward to the scene of his crime. Forward movement in space or time has no virtue of its own. The quality of the goal of movement determines the quality of the act. People are foolishly proud of being, as the silly saying goes, forward-looking. To what do they look forward? Usually to a multiplication of the sins and evils with which man is already afflicted."

Well, there you have it. And few could express it better than the man who has been called the greatest stylist in the English language of the 20th century. The slogan "progress" or "forward-looking" has no virtue of its own. And quote Lewisohn, not me, if you tell this to someone else.

7. You have asked me, just last week, in full and genuine sincerity, if the invention of the incandescent electric bulb has not out-moded the laws of Shabbos and the principle of recognition of G-d's creation and Lordship of the Universe. And this week I ask you, in the same sincerity, if the invention of the H-Bomb and Cobalt Bomb has not created a new need for just such laws, and just such recognition. The mere invention of new tools does not make Religion outdated, any more than the invention of new stone idols by Paleolithic man made the earlier belief in One G-d out-of-date, and superstition right.

Human nature has not changed much these last thousands of years. Man is still gripped by love and by hate, by sympathy and meanness, by superstition and by insight, by a passion for justice and by just plain passion. The teachings expounded on Sinai 3500 years ago, teaching man to repress the hate, the meanness, the superstition and the passion and lust and bring out the love and sympathy and insight and compassion, they are central to the solutions of man's moral crisis no matter when he lives; they are completely independent of the tools he has forged and the extent of his mathematical knowledge. Murder remains murder whether committed by a Paleolithic man or by a modern scientist. And idolatry is perhaps more sinful when committed by contemporary man than when resorted to by a primitive.

8. Rereading the portion of the week and the ten commandments our ancestors heard at Sinai as the earth quaked and the heavens exploded, we too must be gripped by a new strength and a new courage and a new insight. We must learn to resist the onslaught of empty slogans and hollow epithets. We must learn to seek for that which is good, whether that lies in the past or in the future. We must learn that G-d does not change, but that man must; and that that change must be in the direction of G-d. We must learn to understand that frequently we are called upon to take a Step Backwards in the Right Direction.