

LITTLE BY LITTLE

Rosh Hashonah Morning

October 3, 1959

Jewish tradition decrees that we are observing a significant event today. Rosh Hashonah is said to be the anniversary of creation. It is known as Yom Horas Olam -- the birthday of the world. Now, birthdays are occasions for joyous celebration. They mark another milestone in the journey of life. They are cause for light-hearted rejoicing. And, indeed, even in the sombre prayerfulness of our New Year, we can detect such a note of lightness. A taste of honey symbolizes the hoped-for sweetness of the year to come. Our prayers are filled with gratitude for days past and still happier days that lie ahead. The thread of optimism runs through the tapestry we weave in an unmistakable design of courage and hope.

But today, we live in an age when an overall pattern of unrest and unhappiness hides the thin, bright thread of hope. Beset by problems of survival, adrift in an age of uncertainty and potential terror, men in our day may look back with joy -- but ahead they see only darkness and death. In our world, the words of introduction to the story of Noah and the flood leap to mind. God says: "The end of all men has come before Me. For the earth is filled with violence through them." For us, too, a mood of despair fills our hearts. For ours, too, is an age of violence. Children riot in the streets, flout the law, and commit wanton and senseless murder. Mobs march upon our schools, defy the courts, and create confusion and anarchy. Dynamite explodes in churches and private homes, directed even against officials whose dedication to the law marks them as targets. All this at home -- in our own towns and cities -- while the greater threat of world violence smolders and sparks. Tibet overrun, Laos invaded, the Middle East a tender-box, Asia and Africa in ferment. And over all, the constant and terrible threat of total destruction beneath the awesome cloud of the Hydrogen Bomb. Has the end of all flesh come at long last -- or is there some ark of safety for us? Can we use this day to put fear to flight, to find again the bright thread of hope that alone gives meaning to life?

Sometimes, the blackness of despair conceals the light. Sometimes, we search in vain for a panacea that can cure all our ills in one treatment -- and, when none appears, give up the struggle in blind terror. Yet, the tomorrow of which we dream need not -- indeed



cannot -- be achieved miraculously in one moment. Slow and arduous will be the journey, filled with pitfalls, a failure that seems to offset every gain. Our task is to recognize the progress and to see the sun's most feeble ray. We need, in our day, the wisdom of an Isaiah who counselled those of another age:

"Precept by precept, precept by precept,  
Line by line, line by line,  
Here a little, there a little." (Isaiah 28:13)

How greatly do we need such a lesson of patience and understanding. Man cannot live in a world of helpless terror. He needs a hope and a goal. For once he despairs of tomorrow, then he faces annihilation today. Our trouble is that we look for the walls of frustration to crumble all in a moment. And when our complex problems do not disappear as by a magician's wand, we are blinded to the small, slow symptoms of a healthy world. What are these symptoms? Do they really exist for us in our sick universe? Let us see if we can restore the happy mood of our New Year's observance by rediscovering them this day. Armed with the wise counsel of Isaiah, we begin our search for contentment and for joy.

## I

A dramatic demonstration of our deep and disturbing sense of fear served as an awesome prelude to this Rosh Hashonah observance. The Russians sent a rocket to the moon. Just think of it! Men were able to aim a missile through outer space -- and hit a moving target over 200,000 miles away. Without regard even to the propelling force needed for such a feat, its accuracy alone is incredible. It has been compared to striking the edge of a penny at the length of a football field! Humanity should sing paeans of praise to God's gift of mind and heart. We ought to exclaim with the ancient prophet: "How wonderful are Thy works, O Lord." What limitless achievements lie before us. Our immediate reaction was, of course, quite the opposite. This magnificent achievement only heightened our worst fears. Now, indeed, we are faced with doom. The enemy has demonstrated once again that he is far ahead of us in the race to conquer space. And if he has a missile to hit the moon, then of a certainty he cannot miss a continent or a city -- or our house -- when he aims at it. And if it were not so truly tragic, a by-product of Lunik might afford us some amusement. For the argument already rages over whether this means that the Russians can now lay territorial



claim to the moon. Imagine, a world so potentially wonderful -- and yet so horribly fearful that its people can argue with dead seriousness over which nation owns the moon!

But you know all this as well as I. I recall it only to emphasize the deep and horrible fear that lurks in our hearts. We desperately seek peace -- yet every new achievement only seems to lead us further from the goal that beckons us. Here is the real crux of our despair and hopelessness. As man matures, the right kind of world becomes ever clearer in his mind. We know just what sort of world we want -- we see it clearly. We have brought it almost within our grasp. If only we could achieve it, such peace would bring undreamed of comfort and opportunity for all men. Yet, the clearer the vision, the more remote its attainment becomes. The very knowledge that makes fruition possible seems only to move it still further away. So our despair is more real than that of any age before us. We are tantalized by the vision of a peaceful world all but in our hands -- and when we close our fingers to grasp it -- peace suddenly becomes the horrible spectre of annihilation.

Where, then, is the thread of hope in the cloth of our despair? Signs there are -- not panaceas, but omens of brightness and hope. Some of them shine forth from the embattled arena of world politics. Thus far, wherever a little war has broken out, the machinery of the United Nations has been able to contain it. The latest example involved the civil war in Laos. As in Korea, an internal struggle was fostered by the Chinese Communists. But, unlike Korea, no army needed to be sent to end the strife. The Security Council met, voted to send a fact-finding commission -- and the shooting stopped. Two strands of hope shine through the bleak pattern of conflict. First, the strengthened value of a world organization. And secondly, the seeming reluctance of the Reds to resort to violence in the face of world opinion.

The most brilliant thread, however, has been woven by our President. His recent visit to the capitals of Europe has lifted the cloud of despair and united free men under the sun of hope. As exemplar of the free world and its best hope for peace, Eisenhower was greeted with an almost hysterical fervor wherever he went. Even the traditionally unemotional British were moved to tears of excited joy. Why? Surely not because of his rousing oratory. He spoke in the same flat voice that is his for better or worse. But he brought a message of hope and became a symbol of determination somehow to achieve a peaceful world. When he said:



"I will use the last ounce of my energy to secure peace", when he exclaimed: "The dignity of my office is a little thing compared with the peace of the world," he spoke for tens of millions of us who have no chance to speak at all. The fact is that men want peace. They will rally to the banner of the leader who is ready to seek it out to the last measure of his strength.

Neither am I one who looks with foreboding at the visit of Nikita Khrushchev now so imminent. This invitation, too, it seems to me, was a wise move on the part of our President. Co-existence must become a term without anathema. It can never be achieved unless we seek grounds for mutual understanding. Such understanding cannot be gained without an end to alley-cat hostility and a real effort to find mutual agreement. I am not unmindful of the treachery and broken promises of the past, the ruthless and wanton slaughter of men seeking to be free. Nor do I forget the threats and the intransigence. But the hand of friendship cannot be extended in error. Force opposed to unyielding force has led us to the very brink of destruction. Perhaps the quiet voice of our great land desperately seeking to understand and to help will enable us to leap the chasm of annihilation and lead us safely to the path of peace.

## II

The spectre of total war is but one of the nightmares that pursue us. Unhappily, we sense a similar failure in meeting our problems here at home. We are in the midst of a social revolution that seems impossible of solution. There are areas in our land -- our own State included -- that have, in effect, declared war on the legal foundations of our democracy. They refuse categorically to accept the decision of our highest court as binding upon those who choose to disobey it. We have lived with this stubborn intransigence now for over five years. We have heard heads of State counsel violence. We have seen rioting in the streets. We have witnessed children going to school protected by the armed might of federal troops. And we have watched in wonder as schools were closed. The same generation that shot an arrow to the moon chooses ignorance for its offspring! Now, the problem creeps closer to our own community. Soon we shall face the self-same dilemma, no longer in academic discussion, but as an all too real fact.



The nearness and the inevitability of the battle joined before our very eyes fills us with despair. A fateful mantle of resignation slips upon us. All of us -- you and I together -- are equally guilty. Atlanta will be worse than Little Rock, we say. If it took Virginia eighteen months to open its closed schools, it will take Atlanta four years or more. Here, too, the hopelessness, the resignation, the surrender to the seemingly inevitable. No wonder we look to the future with fear and trembling. When that future holds nothing but strife and failure, why should we run to greet it?

Perhaps, however, we should keep before us the vision not of Noah's flood, but rather of Isaiah's hopeful counsel: "Little by little, line by line" -- not all at once, no gigantic earth-shattering explosive victory. Rather, imperceptible pattern of bright threads to lighten the gloom. Where are they, then? The first can be discerned in a growing awareness of the consequence of closed schools. It may not be acceptable yet in the South to favor integration on grounds of moral decency and justice and righteousness. It is permissible, however, to point out the dire consequences of cutting off public education. People are beginning to talk more openly about economic famine and bankrupt businesses and the absence of new industry. It is possible to speak out against the horror of a generation unequipped to live in the Space Age, to paint the tawdry picture of illiteracy and ignorance in our twentieth century. More and more of us are doing just that. Every time I see a car displaying the H.O.P.E. emblem: We Want Public Schools, I see also the bright thread of courage and sanity in a frightened and insane society. When I witness the calm courage of the Little Rock Chief of Police -- and the victory of law he achieved -- I am convinced that the John Kaspars and the Orville Faubuses cannot win. Their defeat will not come as a sudden miracle. Our ultimate victory will not be achieved without pain and danger and the slow, tortuous striving of fearful men. But the signs are already here. The lines are being broken; the hard core of resistance retreats into an ever smaller circle. The recalcitrants become more and more desperate. In the end, their own violent acts will spell their doom.

Another ray of hope can be discerned in the very desperateness of the defenders of a "Southern way of life". The tactic they have chosen is that of intimidation and innuendo.



The tools they use are violence and the threat of violence, along with the frayed technique of guilt by association. There is a strange parallel between the methods they employ and those of a certain Joe McCarthy of ill-fated memory. Thus, in Appomattox County, Virginia, the school board refused to renew the contracts of two teachers who were accused of being "soft" on segregation. Even the conservative Richmond Times-Dispatch was moved to say: "The impression has been created ... that it is becoming dangerous in Virginia for teachers to express even a mild dissent from majority community opinion on the race problem." In his maiden speech in Congress, Dale Alford announced that he would reveal "the close alliance between Communism and 'racial agitation' in the South." In Louisiana, a committee of the State legislature heard testimony by Manning Johnson, a New York negro, self-confessed ex-Communist, and a notorious and discredited paid witness of the McCarthy era. The Attorney General of our own State made a speech, later given saturation distribution in printed form, in which he sought to equate negro leadership with the Red cause.

But McCarthyism has had its day in America. There is no cultural lag in the South that makes us only now aware of its techniques. It is being used deliberately and knowingly as the most effective method of winning a fight that is all but lost already. The whole shoddy performance of equating a controversial issue with Communism, and then identifying as fellow-travellers those who seek to confront the issue, is a desperation move. America finally emerged from the McCarthy era -- shaken but wiser. Let us, then, recognize the tactics of Southern leaders for just what they are -- an attempt to reduce a difficult and complex problem to a simple, emotional appeal. They would substitute for sober logic a rope and faggot reflex. I have far too much regard for my fellow citizens to believe that such methods will succeed. Certainly they are foredoomed to failure if we recognize them for what they are -- the last, desperate gamble of players who know they hold a losing hand. Intimidation, violence, guilt by association -- all dangerous weapons, but all of them today the final, convulsive gasp of an anachronism in modern history.



How, then, can we recapture the mood of joyous hope? We live in an age of tremendous contrasts. On the one hand, it is a time of great promise. Never in human history has mankind had so magnificent an opportunity to achieve its goals of friendship and peace. Its horizons have been extended to the heavens themselves. Who would not wish ardently to be alive a hundred years from now to see that wonderful world of the future. Alongside the promise is ranged a great peril. It is the danger that man's heart lags behind his head and renders him incapable of using wisely the achievements he has wrought. Who among us has not felt the fear that no man shall be alive to enjoy the magnificent potential of tomorrow?

Here is the challenge of our New Year: Peril vs. Promise. To deny the peril is the course of fools. But to let it overwhelm us is to live out our days in fear-ridden musing. So with the promise: to see it as the inevitable wave of the future is to lose it. But to deny it altogether brings us to that same life of fear-ridden misery. In the realm of the spirit, there can be no victory without danger. But neither can there be achievement without confidence and courage. Let us, then, look for no easy triumph in our struggle for a happy tomorrow. There will be none -- of that we can be sure. But neither dare we fail to recognize the inherent decency of men everywhere. The signs are there -- the pattern is not all darkness and gloom. Let us join our hopes to the shining promise and add our hearts to the bright courage. Let us bring our wisdom to the red embers of the sparkling mind and our hands to the shuttle that weaves the glowing thread. Then: "Precept by precept, line by line, here a little, there a little" shall our world of tomorrow be formed -- and in the challenge and the hope we shall face each New Year with courage and with joy.

Born in 1911, Rothschild grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He became an ordained rabbi in 1936 at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. Rothschild assumed the position of rabbi at the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation in Atlanta in 1946.

