

Kippur, 5700

Bevis Marks Synagogue

Day of Atonement, Saturday, 23 September, 1939

ואתהלכה ברחבה כי פקדך דרשתי

I can walk in freedom, for it is Thy precepts
that I seek.

(Ps. CXIX, 45)

Last year it was my privilege to address you in
peace time. To-day we meet during war. But the
occasion is the same: it is the same Kippur, with its
eternal, unchanging message of reconciliation. Kippur
and war, two opposites, two irreconcilables ! It is
the absence of the Kippur spirit and the domination of
sin, that has provoked war. We must be very much on
our guard to reject a facile spirit of self-righteousness

which may so easily overcome us just because we feel convinced that, so far as the outbreak of war is concerned, our hands are clean. We have every reason for rejoicing in a clear conscience and the conviction that we are innocent cannot fail to add vigour to our efforts and help us to victory. But we must see to it that resolution does not give way to self-assurance and overconfidence. We must brace ourselves to meet bad news if need be. We must, above all, see to it that the justice of our cause is never besmirched by vindictiveness. Here watchfulness is essential. We are fighting a system and a group: with a large, lovable and guiltless nation we have no quarrel and when, with God's help, the victory is given us, we, as Jews, must do our part just as manfully as in the actual fight, by seeing

that those who clamour for wholesale and indiscriminate ruthlessness are curbed, while those prevail who seek to build a new and better order, based on peace and international brotherhood.

So much for the future, may peace come soon. For the present we must remember that the outbreak of crime and violence which began in 1933 and which has ended in war, began gradually and, indeed, long before 1933. Little by little ancient standards were abandoned, morality was ridiculed and perverted: more and more people were habituated to deeds and doctrines which their consciences abhorred, until a point was reached when consciences became atrophied. The spiritual malady spread with the force of an epidemic: it became endemic, constant and all-powerful. It trampled first on the

individual, then on the group, then on the nation, then on neighbouring nations. It overthrew the moral law and the social order. It vanquished justice and fettered religion. It made self-interest and every evil passion supreme and subjugated every noble sentiment. Thus came war.

All this is obvious to everyone. Everyone can observe his neighbour, judge his neighbour and condemn his neighbour. He is less easily able and less prone to observe, judge and condemn himself. Hence it is so very important for us to beware of complacency and self-estimation. This is a real danger. All these evils had a small beginning and a gradual, insidious development. Human nature is very much the same the world over. We hope and believe that if we had been assailed

by the spread of pernicious doctrines, we should have made a better stand. We pray for strength always so to do. But we must exert ourselves if we are to achieve that strength and for that purpose, for the consolidation of our character, there has been appointed to us this sacred day of Kippur. This day is the fortress which bars the assault on the moral and religious law. This day is the rallying point for the individual. So long as the individual holds out, the group cannot succumb, for the group is ineffective but for its component individuals. So long as the moral law and the religious law hold out, the individual remains firm and immune to mass-hypnotism. That is why we, everyone of us, as individuals must hold ourselves to account on this day of Kippur.

Mass-hypnotism in Germany began by undermining religion. It is not the setting up of Wotan and the old pagan gods that is so significant: this is but a final symptom: it is not the actual disease. The real change was the overthrow of the Bible and of all that for which the Bible stands. This, again, was not done openly and all at once. The attempt could not have succeeded had there not previously been a decay of religion to prepare the ground. This decay was not limited to one sect: nor was it limited to Germany though in Germany it was much more intense than in Great Britain. Nevertheless, every place of worship in Great Britain was acutely conscious of lapses among its adherents. It is the common danger that has brought about a strong religious revival and so, out of evil, comes good.

The same holds good of moral and social law. In these days of wireless, Penguins and book-clubs, there cannot be a man or woman present who has not observed these signs. Mr Wells and writers of his school have long preached the doctrine that self-expression and the full realisation of one's personality demands the breaking of the bonds of self-discipline and that a neighbour's rights - be it his wife or his property - must give way to our own inclinations. Apply this same principle in international law and you get Hitlerism. But the Bible tells us that we are not to go astray after the desire of our eyes, that continence and self-sacrifice are virtues. And it is precisely for this teaching that the Bible is attacked and declared to be a collection of effete superstitions.

It would take too long and it would indeed be unprofitable to examine all the forms which these attacks on religion assume. One may be selected as a specimen, since it is popular, plausibly written and directed against religion in general. It is a school of thought which is known as Behaviourism. It maintains that we cannot understand human nature by introspection, by examining ourselves, but only by observing our neighbours' actions and the causes which produce those actions. Some of you may recently have heard a broadcast duet by two scholars of this school, in which they endeavoured to shew that everything we do, every word we utter, every thought we frame, is the result not of our own volition but of some external circumstance or some physical cause within us. Therefore our initiative is

lost and with it goes our responsibility. This is indeed serious. If we are not to be held responsible for what we do, all actions become ethically colourless. There is no such thing as good or evil. Mark you, good vanishes as well as evil. We can have nothing of which to be proud, nothing of which to be ashamed. No longer are we answerable for our deeds, neither the man who saves his brother nor the man who murders him. Hitler himself is free from blame: it was his visceral stimuli that guided him, a mere robot, to engulf the world in war.

The first thing to be said about all this is that it is not new. ^{ולית} ^{לית מאן דין} "There is no law and no judge, the cord is broken" is an old cry. The repudiation of responsibility on various grounds is ancient and has been condemned over and over again by

our Rabbis, Judah b. Nahmani said "If the evil inclination says to you "Sin and God will forgive you", believe it not." Sin does matter: sin is a grim reality.

Secondly, it does not in any way follow that the assertion of these scientists is true. It may well be that some of their experiments and their deductions therefrom are valid and that they have obtained certain information that is correct and advantageous. But none the less they cannot claim carte blanche. Their general conclusions may not be acceptable to their colleagues, who alone are in a position to evaluate them. This is, in fact, the case. Behaviourism is not generally accepted in its entirety.

Thirdly, it may well be the case that when leading Behaviourists deny the existence of the human soul and

instinct, when they assert that the restraints which religion imposes on conduct are merely totemistic survivals and relics of superstition, when they find no place for God or revelation in their scheme, they are telling us nothing but their own preconceptions, not the results of their experiments. Here they speak not as scientists but as laymen and our opinions are as good or bad as theirs. It is therefore necessary to determine how much of that which this school teaches is true and how does it affect us as Jews and Jewesses. This is our task this Kippur day.

It is indeed rash for one who is not a psychologist to attempt to speak about this theme. In English Universities there are several Jewish scholars who are experts in Ethics and Philosophy. Yet, so far as I am

aware, none of them has set before us the implications of this problem. We, Jews and Jewesses of this generation, wish to know where we stand in respect of this attack on personal responsibility and this attempt to water down the gravity of sin. We cannot ignore this ever-increasing campaign in the Press, in cheap books and on the wireless.

It seems, to me, at least that if we do not shirk the issue but make a fearless examination of it, we shall find a satisfactory answer. What we can ignore are dogmatic assertions which are outside the province of the psychologist and which represent nothing else but his personal views. Here our own are equally good. We need not accept his categorical denial of the soul, of God, of revelation but we must see what he has to say

with regard to Free Will and responsibility. He says that man does certain things spontaneously: he is born with the capacity to breathe and to digest: he is born with certain fears: he is born with a complete muscular and visceral outfit which is of supreme importance in regulating his behaviour. In fact he undertakes certain acts, utters certain words, thinks certain thoughts not because his mind bids him do so or his moral judgment asserts itself, but because of the action of certain gastric or other juices or because certain physical stimuli, of which he is completely unconscious, have taken command of his being. This sounds terrible. If I have no mind, no soul, of what value am I to anyone, to myself? If I am the sport of my nerves and muscles, am I any better than a cork in the stream or a leaf in

the breeze ? Is there any purpose in the world ? Is there any progress ? Is struggle worth while ?

All this is in flat contradiction to what religion teaches us. On waking, we proclaim that the soul which God has given us is pure: on sleeping, we commend our spirit into God's hands once again. The Torah tells us that we have the choice between good and evil, as we read only last sabbath

ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים
ואת הטוב ואת הרע

"See I have set before you this day ~~good~~ life and good, death and evil, and thou shalt choose life (Deut. XXX, 15)." We believe in progress and human development, for that is what we call the doctrine of the Messiah. And even those who reject the Bible, agree that man has responsibility. "I think, therefore I exist", is still

the declaration of Cartesian philosophy. We cannot abandon our spirit and our intellect.

But God has endowed us with an intellect and it is our duty to use it. If, then, human intellect has discovered that muscles and other physical causes have a profound influence on our actions, if our material environment and training can play so great a part in what we think, say or do, then, if this is true, what does it mean to us ?

Now the Behaviourist has something else to tell us. He says that these muscular stimuli can be trained or conditioned. Habits can be instilled so that a desired reaction can become automatic. This is a very different matter and one of the highest importance to us. No longer are we in opposition to him, we are his ally.

More than this, what he is telling us represents the definite and determined teaching of Judaism all through the past. What, then, have we lost and what have we gained ?

We have lost the old conception of automatic free-will. Free-will of that sort had but little ethical value. If it meant no more than spontaneous action, such as the closing of an eyelid, we could not claim to have made an ethical decision every time we performed an act. Whether we did wrong or whether we did right, our deed meant no more, ethically, than does the spontaneous recitation of the multiplication table: virtue or sin have no place in such a scheme.

But things are very different if we are able to discipline our stimuli. The Behaviourist chooses to

say that we have neither mind nor soul but that we can condition our glands and muscles so that our conduct conforms to ethical standards. But who is to decide what is ethical ? Who is to do the conditioning ? Surely something in us that is capable of making a moral decision ? Let us not quarrel about terms when we are agreed about the result. If, as a consequence of strenuous effort, we can rise above our physical machinery and take command, we have gained all that we wish. We have asserted ourselves. We prefer to say that it is something within us, something we call conscience or soul that controls our muscles: he prefers to say that, by conditioning, our muscles have been trained to do the right thing spontaneously.

The gain has been great. We now know that every

decision we make is neither easy nor automatic but the result of hard exertion. We acquire our free-will by strenuous effort: it ceases to be a mechanical process like the digestion of food. It becomes an act of courage and manhood. But is there really anything new in all this ? Is it not merely a matter of terms ? If instead of glands and visceral stimuli, we speak of the Yeser ha-Ra, the evil inclination, we are at once in line with Jewish tradition. אל תשלט בנו יצר הרע

"let not the evil inclination have dominion over us", is our daily prayer. The Behaviourist today can tell us no more than did Rabbi Judah the Prince, who framed these words (Ber. 166). The sentiment comes over and over again. וכף את יצרנו להשתעבד לך

"And subdue our inclination to Thy service": such

thoughts occur to all of us, they are fundamental to

Jewish teaching: *they are common to every form of religion.*

Secondly, there is nothing new in the recognition that the subconscious tendencies to sin are persistent. Remember the Rabbinic use of the word *Abak* which literally means "dust": it is used in the sense of "tendency", "something akin to sin". It means that even in the best of us there is this insidious danger. Thus, R. Amram said in the name of Rab (Baba Bathra 164 b foot): From three sins a man cannot escape every day, from wicked or lustful thoughts, from inattention at prayer and from slander. R. Judah questioned this and modified it. Not by the sins themselves is man assailed but by the subconscious tendency to commit them. In most men, he said, there is an innate inclination to acquisitiveness; in a

few, this takes the form of lewdness and in everybody there is the temptation to repeat unkind gossip. In fact if we examine the elaborate chart of man's actions, which the Behaviourists have drawn up, we shall find that in almost every instance the Rabbis have anticipated them. The chart amounts to no more than the Widdui or Confession of sins which we repeat so often this very day of Kippur.

Thirdly, the theory of conditioning or training is not new. That the evil inclination is both insidious and persistent and that constant exercise is needed to overcome it, is a commonplace of all religious teaching, Jewish and Christian alike. R. Joḥanan b. Nuri said (Sab. 105 b): "This is the plan of the evil inclination. Today it says "Do this trifle": tomorrow it says "do

that trifle" until at last a man commits the greatest of all sins." But against our vigilance and conditioning, it cannot prevail. In the school of R. Ishmael it was taught (Kid. 30 b): if abominable thoughts assail you, drag them to the Beth ham-Midrash. If they are hard as stone, they will be crushed. Most striking of all is Raba's great statement (B.B. 16a): though God created the evil inclination, He created the Torah as an antidote against it. Here the whole situation is summed up. These tendencies are natural parts of our being but equally natural and implanted is the force to resist them. Let no man, therefore, be afraid of them, let no man plead them in extenuation for evil deeds. If he exert himself, he is captain of his Soul, his conduct is in his own hands. As the Psalmist says "I walk in

freedom, for it is thy commandments that I seek." It is the Torah that gives us Free-will, **חירות על הלוחות**, on the tablets there is freedom.

Let us be practical. How shall we condition ourselves ? First as to the mind, for in the Amidah, the prayer for intelligence and discrimination, **דעה בינה**, **והשכל** comes first of the petitions. We must train our minds to reject the shabby and tawdry. Too often, especially in these times of stress, do we drug ourselves with cheap anodynes. We clog our minds, we arrest the power of thought. Must we always be listening to the wireless ? Must we weaken our thinking faculties by constant reading of cheap and sensational journals ? Can we not sit still and think, or, if we must read, read something worth while. The hardest command which Moses

gave the Israelites was to observe inactivity in the face of danger. "Stand still and see the Lord's Salvation". This was not to be a passive inertia but a standing to attention with eyes fixed on God. In the face of similar danger, we, too, must be stationary and on guard, but prepared and watching the working out of God's purposes in history. Let us give our minds free play unclogged by the aimless lust to be always chattering, listening or reading the trivial and unworthy. So shall we resist spreading panic and false rumours, so shall we be alert and ready to do our duty when the call comes.

So much for the mind. Our mind is the preliminary. Next comes the soul. Now we take infinite care for the needs of our body. The dictates of hygiene, the demands

of food and comfort, the orders of the physician are alike paramount and unquestioned. The same obedience is unhesitatingly rendered to the commands of our civilian and military defenders, for does not our safety lie in implicit obedience ? No exercise is too laborious or painful, no effort is too great, no financial expenditure is too costly. Whatever we are told, we hear and obey.

We hear and obey. These words did our fathers utter at Sinai. We must re-affirm them. The old words are a new message. Two thousand ~~and~~ five hundred years ago Jerusalem was threatened by a foe as ruthless as is our foe today. The people were divided. Jeremiah proclaimed (VI, 16)

שאלו לנתיבות עולם אי זה דרך העוב
ולכו בה ומצאו מרגוע לנפשכם

"Ash for the old paths, which is the good way: if ye ^{walk} wash therein ye shall find rest for your souls." It is the old paths that Kippur recalls to us. If we follow them, we shall walk in freedom, for it is God's commands that we seek.

How shall we walk in them ? By doing for the soul that which we are willing to do for the mind and body. Every one of the mišwot is a conditioning of the soul. Our whole life has been hedged by the Torah and the Rabbis, by acts and ceremonies which are calculated to bring out the best in us. To enumerate them is needless - they are familiar to every one of us and they have been familiar since childhood. Have we always kept to them ? As we have grown from childhood and passed through adolescence to manhood, have we clung to the promises we made when we were Bar Mišwak ? What part has Judaism

played in our lives ? Now it is quite true that the struggle for existence is hard and the mišwot are many. Sometimes their observance has been impossible, especially under present conditions. But there are cases when impossibility is assumed, when we abandon a duty without making any attempt to fulfil it. Such cases need not now be considered: every man's conscience will be his monitor and on this day of Kippur the monitor will be active. The teaching of parents will be renewed this day with redoubled force, for some of us, out of gratitude to Almighty God for having spared them to us, for others in loving recollection when Hashkaboth are recited. Memories of childhood will return and make us better Jews.

So much about Miswot that have been dropped through neglect. But sometimes we have no choice, what are we to do ? The answer is simple: it lies in the word "Compensation". Make up for the loss in other ways. Never let one loss be the first of others. Whatever be our task in these days of war, we can always begin and end the day with prayer. Our tefillin are a constant reminder of this duty. Even if our time is short, we can spare a few brief moments for quiet meditation. When the air raid signals come and when the all clear follows, we can turn to God in thankfulness for our deliverance. We can make some effort every Sabbath to distinguish the day. Above all, we can read our Bibles. To many Jews it is almost a sacred duty to read the Jewish Chronicle. Are they as particular to read their Bible and prayer

book ? Let each man and woman ask himself and herself a plain question, how much of the Bible do I know ? Do I know anything beyond the parasha and haftarah ? Do I know even this small portion of the Scriptures ? Could I not follow the example of George the Fifth and read half a chapter morning and evening ? Can I not make time ? Can I not manage to use my daily prayer book ? Can I not do something each day to remind me of any religion and enable me to be a better man or woman and of use to my fellow creatures ? This is what we should do this day. On Kippur we should analyse our timetable and examine our habits. Are we satisfied with what we find ? Are there gaps we could fill ? Are there defects which we could eradicate.

You will observe that I have spoken in the widest

and most general terms. If I have seemed vague because I have advocated nothing concrete, it is because I shrink to intrude on your spiritual privacy. לאדם מערכי לב

To each man belong the dispositions of his own heart. He is free to condition them and all the influence of this sacred day of Kippur is brought to bear on him in help. Condition ourselves we must, all the more if we are to bear the burden of these anxious nights and days and do our duty as Jews and as Britons. We must assert ourselves and be free, we must make our choice between good and evil. We can gain our freedom not passively, inertly, spontaneously, but by hard effort and grim determination. So we acquire our free will. So can we declare, each one of us, with firm conviction.

"I walk in liberty for it is Thy precepts that I seek"

ואתהלכה ברחבה כי פקדיך דרשתי