

SOLDIERS IN A NEW DEMOCRACY

BY

RABBI LOUIS ENGELBERG

Chaplain U. S. Army

We assemble today on a solemn day of prayer at a momentous hour in the history of mankind. The freedom of beseeching the Creator of the Universe for a New Year of happiness is denied to a large portion of humanity, and their liberties have been abrogated under the oppression of Fascist rule. Tremendous segments of the world's surface have been momentarily crushed and their inhabitants destroyed under the heels of vicious tyrants who would fain eliminate liberty-loving people from the face of the globe.

And yet out of this ruin and destruction there is being recreated a new world. Out of the terror and fear that encompasses us today, a new appreciation of liberty is being born. The old approach towards democracy, an approach based on selfishness, is giving way to a new and vital understanding of what the democratic principle really is.

Perhaps a clear cut understanding of these changes can best be presented by reference to the Biblical reading of the day. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah we read of the birth of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. Both parents were extremely old—Abraham 100 years, Sarah 90 years. The mother, giving birth so late in her life, felt that she would be ridiculed by her friends and thus

she says צחק עשה לי אלהים כל השמע יצחק לי "G-d has made a laughing stock of me—all that hear will laugh at me."¹ But, as you know, the child Isaac grew up to be a source of pride to both his parents in their later years.

There is an interesting Midrash that describes the effect of Sarah's child-birth on the rest of the world. The Midrash states that: בשעה שנפקדה אמנו שרה הרבה עקרות נפקדו עמה, הרבה סומים נפתחו, הרבה חרשים נתפקחו. "On the day that Mother Sarah gave birth, many other barren women likewise had children; many who were blind, had their eyes opened; many who could not hear, began to understand."² Yes, the birth of Isaac was accompanied by three important miracles; those that were *sterile* became *productive*; those that could not *see*, had *vision* given to them and those who could not *hear*, began at last to *understand*.

This Midrash may well be applied to the fundamental changes that democracy has undergone particularly during the last few months in America, since the declaration of war. And now that Mother Earth has just given birth to a New Year—the Year 5704—we can see these three apparent miracles very clearly and distinctly. In fact, the history of Democracy parallels the story of Sarah. Do not the Fascist nations laugh at and ridicule the Democratic impulse? They say Democracy is old and has lost its virility; it is sterile and can not produce; it is stagnant, and can not create. Yet we find that within the last year the lie has been given to their derogatory remarks. A real miracle has taken place, and our lazy, wise-cracking,

1. Genesis XXI:6.
2. Beraishith Rabba LIII.

pinochle-playing American Democracy has suddenly come of age. Brought out of our selfish reverie by the cruel impact of the sure death that awaits us and our principles unless we awaken, America is revealing the inherent virility of a liberty-loving people, and we have begun to produce! First of all we are giving birth to men—soldiers who hold high with distinction the American Flag on the extended battle-lines of the United Nations! We are also producing arms—arms with which to equip the courageous Russian defenders of Stalingrad and the Caucasus, arms for the Chinese to drive the brutal Japanese out of their homeland, arms for Britain to defeat the enemy wherever he rears his ugly head, arms for the American soldier to deliver the death-blow to the forces of Nazism. Finally we are creating ideas by which a new world will be guided when the war is won. Ah yes, we are no longer sterile! Democracy has been reborn and in turn is giving birth—to men, to arms, and to ideas.

But a second miracle is also taking place הרבה סומים נפתחו
Many who were blind have had their eyes opened. Many who could see only themselves are now beginning to see others. Not only individuals, but entire nations have broadened their vision. The Atlantic Charter, written by our great President and Prime Minister Churchill, is an ample testimonial to that "Lifting of our Sights." Small, petty, selfish nationalism is giving way to a larger, broader perspective of international concern. The Midrash tells us that when Mother Sarah desired to prove to her skeptical friends that she was the real mother of Isaac, she nursed from her breast not only Isaac, but also the children of the prominent families of her age. So too, America, no longer

nurses liberty, freedom of the seas, free access to raw materials and to the markets of the world for herself, but also for all other democratic nations in the world. Truly the blind have gained vision, and democratic nations today realize that freedom can exist for *one* nation, only if it exists for *every* nation.

The third miracle has also come to pass within recent weeks הרבה חרשים נתפקחו Many who pretended to be deaf, have begun to hear the voice of an aroused America. Many who refused to understand the meaning of Patriotism, have become wise to themselves. Labor, capital, business, and the farmers have suddenly awakened to the fact that the interests of democracy are more vital than that of any one class interest in the nation. True, we seem to think that the country is filled with strikes and ceiling-price violations, but that is the result of a "Newspaper Psychology". The millions of workers and farmers and business men who form the backbone of our nation, and who are loyal to the extreme to America, do not make sensational copy. But the fact remains that today, with few exceptions, all classes and individuals, even those that were deaf in the past, are beginning to listen, to understand, to obey.

Fascism has taught us one important lesson—the importance of *discipline*. But Fascism has also taught us by negative example what the basis of discipline must be. Their system of discipline by force has revealed its importance in the tortured lands, where men whose souls are free anxiously await the moment of revolt. Our discipline is born out of faith—faith in liberty, faith in democracy, faith in America. Our great American patriots, Washington,

Jefferson, and Lincoln, serve as our inspiration; the Constitution serves as our guide.

Truly old democracy, just like old Mother Sarah, has given birth to a new child—a democracy that is fertile and productive, a democracy that has vision, a democracy that is disciplined and willing to obey.

Yes, there is a striking parallel between the story of Sarah's giving birth and the creation of our new democracy. But there is also an equal similarity between the story of Sarah's child-birth and Orthodox Judaism in America. For Orthodoxy too, is old, very old, far older than American democracy. And how many are they, even among our own brethren, who scoff at and ridicule the traditional descendants of Father Abraham. They say: "What, Orthodoxy? Orthodoxy is too old; it is too decrepit; it is sterile. How can it give birth in a new land? How can it produce, how can it create?"

Let us, however, test the truth of this contention. We have just spoken of a new democracy. But is it democracy that has changed, or is it that we have just become aware of what democracy has always striven to be? Has democracy today revealed its virility because we have created a *new* Constitution, or is it that we are just beginning to appreciate the vitality of our *old* Constitution? Have we suddenly begun to choose as our model patriots new leaders, or is it to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln that we look back today? No, it is not democracy that has changed. It is we who are beginning to appreciate what old, traditional democracy always was.

It is told³ that a *Baal Tefilah* once came to visit

3. Agnon, p. 47.

a Chasidic Tzadik—Reb Mordecai from the city of Nad-Bruna. After visiting for a while the *Baal Tefilah* asked to be excused. It was almost Rosh Hashanah, he said, and he had to study his *Machsor* and prepare his prayers for the *Yomim Noroim*. The Tzadik replied to him: "Why do you rush home to prepare the *Machsor*? It is the same as always. Prepare rather yourself. It is you who needs *Seder*; it is not the *Machsor*." It is not orthodoxy, it is we who need changing.

One thing is certain. If Judaism is to be a fertile, creative force in the lives of American Jews, it must be Orthodox. Cross-breeding we know, is a common occurrence today in the animal and plant kingdoms. But the cross-breed itself is sterile and cannot multiply. That is equally true in the world of thought. Any faith that is a cross-breed of Judaism and Christianity is doomed to die of its own sterility. Nay, just as we in America are returning to our Constitution, so must we as Jews return to our Torah. Just as we in America choose traditional heroes—Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, so too must we as Jews choose the Hillels and the Akibas as our models for constructive Jewish living. Orthodoxy is *productive*, it is we American Jews who are *sterile*.

The basis of this sterility is two-fold. While orthodox Judaism *per-se* has *vision*, so called Orthodox American Jews are near-sighted. How else can one explain the indifference of our people to the suffering of their brethren in Europe? How else can one understand our lackadaisical interest in the Holy Land at this most critical moment in the life of the Yishub? What can be said in defense of our miserable neglect of our great American Yeshivoth

that today are struggling for their maintenance? How would you answer the charge that in days such as these, synagogues are attended only on High Holidays? It is time my friends that הרבה סומים נפתחו — that those among us who have blinded themselves to the needs of our people and our Faith, should regain their vision.

The second reason for our sterility is the lack of discipline: the refusal to obey. Orthodoxy is a religion of discipline—a discipline based on a Divine and Eternal Faith. Certainly life in this world at war has taught us the imperative need of discipline. Our sufferings and the sufferings of our people teach us the need of Religion. Is it not time that הרבה חרשים נתפקחו — that those among us who have been deaf to the cry of G-dliness open their ears and their hearts?

It is told that the late General Sikorski, Commander-in-Chief of the Polish forces, asked a Rabbi in Palestine what he thought would be the outcome of the war. The Rabbi's reply was: "We shall win the war in one of two ways—either by natural means, or through a miracle. "What," asked Sikorski, "do you consider natural means?" The Rabbi's reply was: "Since we are fighting a just and a righteous war, it is natural to expect Divine intervention—G-d's help." Surprised, Sikorski asked, "What, then, would be a miracle?" To which the Rabbi replied: "It would be a miracle if we won without Divine intervention."

My friends: Let us so live as productive orthodox Jews, Jews with vision, Jews with discipline and obedience to the will of G-d, that it will be natural for Him to intervene in our behalf, and bring this war to a quick and victorious conclusion.