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Intercession

A Sermon Preached On ש"ק פ'ויגש

Sabbath, December 30th, 5677-1916

by the

Rev. B. N. Michelson, B.A.

Acting Minister of the Congregation

Printed for Private Circulation

[pg 003] וישלחני אלהים לפניכם לשום לכם שארית בארץ ולהחיות לכם לפליטה גדולה

"And God has thus sent me before you to prepare for you a permanence on the earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."—Genesis xlv., v. 7.

In a time of effort, suffering and grief such as this country has never before known, it is well that we should have frequent occasions for a review of the position in which we stand for a strengthening of our sinews to continue the struggle in the spirit of the high and noble resolve which induced our participation in it.

This week-end will be a solemn occasion; it will draw together the religious bodies in a rare unity

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of thought and action. If there be in these times any who think themselves superior to the need of intercession and prayer they are not to be envied. For these are the days in which human values are changing and the folly of human pride and the weakness of human strength are brought home to men—the old-time wisdom of the humble heart is vindicated once more. And so we take advantage of the fact that we are again upon the threshold of a New Year to ask that the blessings of our God may still be poured upon us and those who, with us, are striving to right the wrong and to make the world the better and purer for our fight against injustice, barbarism and slavery. We of this generation feel that we are so ordering our actions—many of us so facing death—that we may be able to say to future generations: “God hath sent me before you to prepare for you a permanence on the earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

The land in which we live is overshadowed, its people perplexed and exasperated by the fears and resentments of a fierce and desperate War; and we must needs strive for balance, both mental and moral, if we would not be swallowed up in the morasses of hate and vengefulness. Whilst we turn to our God for help in maintaining our just cause, which we cannot doubt is indeed His cause, we still must guard our actions and our thoughts, to prevent the blotting out of the moral issues that are at stake.

It would be a wretched perversion of conscience to require of any man, condonation of the infamous cruelties and treacheries which have disgraced our foes during the last two years. The best elements in us rise in irrepressible repugnance before such pageants of wickedness as have clothed the famous name of Wittenberg with infamy and made the story of naval warfare a continuing record of wanton crime. No man can think, without shame, of the so-called civilisation and culture which could palliate such perversions of justice as those recalled by the fate of Nurse Cavell and Captain Fryatt.

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Yet there are two considerations that may help us to feel that the German people, so far from being truly represented by the miscreants who have organised and carried through the atrocities on land and on sea, are wantonly misled and disgraced by them.

History includes the record of similar horrors perpetrated by other nations which nevertheless are justly reckoned among the best human material. May we not hope that the crimes of Germany in the twentieth century provide no truer index to the national character than did those of revolutionary France in the eighteenth?

Psychology unites its testimony to that of History. Civilised man stands as the latest link of a long chain of advancement from aboriginal beasthood, and he retains within himself the germ of all his earlier traits, though these are increasingly suppressed and held in check by higher habitudes. Civilisation represents an elaborate system of auxiliary disciplines, designed to stifle as far as may be the brute in man and to strengthen the acquired qualities of justice, mercy and refinement.

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When some sudden catastrophe such as Revolution or War befalls, there is always great danger that that elaborate system of artificial auxiliaries to virtue will be broken down and the beast let loose in unchecked savagery. Unquestionably this gives the key to the atrocities that stained the French Revolution: it probably gives the key to the crimes of German warfare. It certainly leads us to the contemplation of the horrors from which we ourselves would be free—a contemplation which helps to make our Day of Intercession one not merely of prayer for victory and its material benefits, but for the ennoblement of our minds and the purification of our souls.

The happenings of the past two weeks have led our thoughts to the possibilities of peace and the consideration of peace terms.

May the peace, whenever it come, be worthy of the conflict that it ends, a peace which enthrones justice in the affairs of the world and banishes oppression. May the final treaty include specific provision for the trial and punishment of the men who have organised and carried out the crimes of the war. So shall resentment die, when it is realised that our victory is unstained with injustice, and the German people themselves are helped to return to the fellowship of civilised mankind. Thus shall the nations now at war at last be bound together by the ties of international goodwill. If we are able to realise these high aims then God will indeed “have sent us to prepare a permanence on the earth and to save lives by a great deliverance.”

How great is the debt we owe to those who are bearing the brunt of the struggle—how deeply we realise our dependence upon the manhood of this nation! We cannot allow a day set apart for supplication to come and go without more than a passing thought for those who have sustained wounds or suffered hardship for the maintenance of our integrity and our rights of existence as a nation.

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Many are the movements to which the War has given rise, which aim at alleviating the ravages of the combat. When we think that of the seven-and-a-half million Belgians left in Belgium, more than three-and-a-half millions are being fed by the free canteens or receiving relief in some form from the charity provided in the first place by the large-heartedness of the American people, we shall understand something of the vastness of some of the problems which arise only to be dealt with by outside agencies. The gallant stand of a gallant people is still continued both before and behind the German lines, where the Belgians are as stubbornly resistant to day as they were when their King drew his sword and said: “For us there can be no other answer.” And the passive

resistance of the imprisoned millions in Belgium to the compulsion and cajolery alike of their would-be friend, the enemy, is a factor in the German subduing process the world outside must appreciate. But the Belgians are paying the price. Their resources are diminishing day by day. The world's benevolence is dwindling and they are facing an immediate future wherein life's necessities will have to be defined in terms of the irreducible minimum. The whole nation, we are told, is growing so thin on the small ration that can be provided, that wasting diseases, due to under-nutrition, are increasing by leaps and bounds.

[pg 008] These facts are here referred to, first and foremost, that we may pay some tribute, if only in thought, to these and our other brave allies who have suffered loss incalculable, and in the second place to direct our attention to our own more fortunate position and to remind us that amid all the devastation, the War is being commemorated by works of beneficence and mercy, works intended to show our sympathy for suffering and our gratitude to the God who is supporting us through these terrible days.

He is not a good man who fails to employ every possible effort to supply the needs of those dependent upon him in his own household. No less is he a moral failure who does not lend himself to support every noble effort for the succour of those bound to him by the ties of religious faith, especially when suffering has come upon them through their faithfulness. And so no one could have any compunction in appealing to you as was done a short time ago for your own brethren. But we must not forget that he who builds a fence, fences out more than he can fence in. Israel must be faithful to his own, but his own includes not only the members of Israel's faith, who have the first claim upon him, but all the children of God, who are by the fact of their human birth, his brethren; and to-day the appeal is made to us on behalf of those to whom we have to pay something we *owe*. The sick and wounded of our soldiers and sailors have a claim we cannot ignore: their misfortunes have been brought about by their devotion to our country's cause. It is enough that they must suffer for us: we must see that everything possible is done to alleviate the pains they undergo. The Sick and Wounded Fund asks for your help, and, as I know you, I am sure you will give it with no unstinting hand.

[pg 009] We think to day of our wounded, but we think also of our dead. Men may be willing to die for one cause in one age, and in another for what may seem a different cause, but in the last analysis it will be found that that for which human beings lay down their lives is always what they regard as the Eternal Right.

In every man created in the image of his God there is this strange mystical susceptibility, this urge to lay all he has upon the altar of the ideal that he feels has the right to demand his uttermost. Nothing else so fully demonstrates man's spiritual nature: it is the one great fact that differentiates us from the brutes.

[pg 010] On the one hand is man selfish, greedy, earth-bound, false and sordid in his aims. On the other, at repeated intervals, in great and solemn hours, comes this austere appeal for all he has to give—and he promptly gives it, joyously, willingly, without thought of reward, and derives a greater satisfaction from that self-giving than from all other kinds of gain together. It is deep, mysterious, elusive, this stress of the spirit, but we all know it unmistakably as all generations have known it. There is nothing so strong in human nature as this impulse to fling ourselves away at the bidding of we know not what, the something that incarnates itself now in this cause or objective and now in that, and makes us feel *וישלחני אלהים לפניכם לשום לכם שארית בארץ ולהחיות לכם לפליטה גדולה* "God hath sent us before you to prepare a permanence on the earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance." There is nothing so exalting within the totality of human experience as the elevation of soul reached by the one who willingly dies for the sake of the others.

[pg 011] How many men of character and intellectual gifts, how many thinkers, writers, artists, how many men fitted to promote the prosperity of their country in industry and commerce have we lost in the War! And how many of the rank and file, men who were distinguished for nothing in their lives so much as the manner of their death! How much poorer the next generation will be! To the memory of them all we give the grateful tribute of saddened and chastened hearts: we remember them all in our prayers, we recall their heroism as we rejoice in their manhood and their glory. Never was a time when so many of our best and noblest have gone from us willingly because they have felt it to be their duty and never was a time when their parents and dear ones have shown such a noble example of uncomplaining patience under a loss which to them was the greatest that any loss could be. We may well feel proud not only of the sons but of the parents that they have willingly given their children and have borne their loss with dignity and resignation, not repining and bewailing their dead, but putting their hands to works of charity and helpfulness. Let us who remain be worthy of those who have been taken, worthy of the country that can rear such children. They have revealed to us the soul of the nation, the soul by which, far more than by its wealth or its prosperity or its material strength, a nation lives: and while the soul of England thus lives, England will maintain her greatness.

Let us remember our heroes who have made the supreme sacrifice, not altogether with sorrow, but also with a solemn thankfulness—to God who strengthened them to play their part, to them for their simple example of duty done. The memories of these, our heroes, will for us and for those who come after shine as a holy flame, a light that will burn for ever at the altar of patriotism and of duty.

And so we commend their souls, even as our own, to the mercy of our God, looking to Him in all

humility and trust to vouchsafe us in His good time “a permanence on the earth and a saving of life by a great deliverance.” Amen.

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