

Temple File:
Rabbi

"W E A R E B E R E F T"

Remarks on the death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 35th President of the United States. Delivered at Special Memorial Services, Friday, November 22, 1963.

by

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I come before you tonight to speak the unspeakable, to say words that must be but should not be said. For we stand in the midst of a tragedy so intense, of a grief so gripping that there are no words, there are no sounds, there are no meanings, to make us comprehend it all.

We come together in mourning for John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 35th President of the United States. We come together to mourn, without even knowing why. We come to mourn a brave and courageous man, a skilled politician, a wise leader, a dedicated president, a human being: a man who summed up in his own life and his own being so much of our hope, so much of our dreams, so much of whatever fragile chance we had for peace in this world that I am hurt and frightened and I want to hit out and I don't know where; for I see that little bubble of peace broken and disappearing.

We stand in the midst of the most cataclysmic age in history, when the touch of a button will end civilization, humanity, and you and me alike; and one man who stood between us and the hereafter has been taken away.

He overcame so many obstacles in his life. Is it strange to speak of a man born to such wealth as one who overcomes obstacles? In American politics, wealth is a handicap, not always an asset. This is a new development today, when men of wealth alone seem to be considered for high office; but when Mr. Kennedy first began to run for public office the cry of "millionaire" was heard, and the finger scornfully pointed. But because his sympathies were with the miners in West Virginia as much as with the bankers in New York and Boston, he won office, and was elected despite other obstacles to be your president and mine. He was critically watched by the Liberals who expected him to be most liberal of all liberals and by the Conservatives who expected him to be most reactionary of all reactionaries; and each found much to criticize, for he was neither an ultra-radical nor an ultra-reactionary. He walked his own road in his own way, in his own time, and used his frail human wisdom to balance one goal against another, and one means against another. Because he was a Roman Catholic, his road to office was easy and hard. Easy in his home, hard in his nation. But because he was a Roman Catholic and became your president and mine, in this man was gathered up the dream that we call America; for in his person we saw smiling not only the son, the brother, the husband, the friend, we saw in him the dream of every man in this blessed country.

We saw not the rich man making good, we saw the alien making good. We saw the excluded making good. We saw the man who was shut out in some places from country clubs and service clubs, from homes and school and businesses reaching the highest office of his people. And we rejoiced with his family, as we grieve with them now; for who knows how greatly this man contributed to the new spirit of fellowship that walked abroad in America. Please note, I say with hesitation that it walked abroad in America, for whether it still walks only time will tell.

In foreign affairs, John F. Kennedy aimed at one thing only: at peace. Not with fancy words nor necessarily with majestic meetings and designs but by understanding. He began with the simple premise that war is a meaningless term today. There is life and there is death; but there can be no war, for war and death are synonymous. There would not be the death of six million Jews, or six million human beings, but many times sixty million human beings. As president of the United States, as well as a father and a husband and son, he was determined that those buttons should never be pushed, and that some day, perhaps in the life of his son or grandson, those buttons might be dismantled.

He understood that war meant the death of civilization. He sought to prevent it by attempting to understand those who opposed us and by attempting to have them understand us. He was firm without being altogether obstinate. He was conciliatory without appeasing. He sought to walk the tight rope that stretches through life between death and birth and bring from the death of war the birth of peace.

In his domestic policy, he struggled with the two greatest problems of American history. The first is the failure of America economically: the fact that in a land so prosperous, so rich, so wealthy, with such abundance, there is an ever increasing abundance of joblessness, of unemployment; and to this in whatever way he saw fit he turned his energy and his plans.

He struggled with the problem of America's failure socially as well, with the racial injustice of man to man, with the hatred, with the fear, the envy, the terror that walks under the name of a "way of life".

Today in this room one of you asked me: why did it happen? How can there be a God to let things like this happen? I said then and I say to you now, I would give my life to be able to answer you, but I cannot, except to say this from the heart of Jewish tradition: I believe in man. I believe, even today, in man. I believe that man is a free being, endowed with the right to do good, to create beauty, to love, to bless. And if so, he must have the right also to do evil, to create ugliness, to destroy and to curse. But it is man who does these things.

I heard today among many statements made, one of the representatives of Texas in the House of Representatives, saying: there is a wild animal loose among us. That wild animal is a man, a human being like you and like me. Whether he be bereft of his sense at this moment

or not is immaterial: he is a man with human emotions who has done the most ghastly thing we have seen. But has he?

Is his crime less than yours and mine? Are we not stained with the same blood-guilt as he is? Where have our voices been? Where have been the cries of conscience when murder and terror and assault have walked abroad in our land? Where have we been, where were we twenty years ago, when murder walked in other lands? The same place we were today, silent, quiet, watching in a different direction.

When William Moore walking through Alabama was shot down, where were the voices raised, not denouncing the crime, but insisting that the law be enforced so that such crimes be not only forbidden but prevented? When Medgar Evers was assassinated in Mississippi, where were the voices of protest doing anything except piously lamenting another murder? A Professor at the University of Mississippi has called that a police state, which we tolerate in our midst. When four children were blown to bits by a bomb in Birmingham, where were our voices raised? We gave money, we passed resolutions, we expressed our sympathy.

How often have I said to you that "I'm sorry" means nothing. As long as murder is allowed to walk through this land, more murder will be committed. As long as men are taught to despise and defy the law, there will be no law in America, there will be no justice in America, there will be no freedom for any man.

We pay the price for tolerating the cancer of hate. Those who encourage men to defy and despise the law, to subvert the law, those men have murdered the president of the United States. Whether they pulled the trigger on the gun or not, it is their spirit behind it: the "Fair Play for Cuba" Committee and The John Birch Society alike, the radical rightwing politicians, the Black Muslims and the White Citizens' Councils, the Governor Wallaces and Burnetts everywhere, the Brookfield School Boards and all their ilk. For it is only one step from saying: I detest the law, to pulling the trigger on the gun that strikes down the President of the United States. We have learned this, we Jews. Not just you and I, for our crime has been great; but all our brothers.

We have been silent when we should have been in the streets marching, not only for Negroes but for ourselves, for America, when we should have been in the streets demonstrating the right of man to worship freely and privately or not to worship at all, when we should have been in the streets with the other brave heroes; we were in our comfortable beds, or stores or easy chairs.

We must end this cancer, it has cost us more than we can afford to pay. The fragile communication between nation and nation is a very delicate thing, and one man who was half of that communication is dead.

We as a nation stand at the brink of the abyss. What happens to us now is in the hands of God. We cannot tolerate this kind of change, this kind of violence, this kind of hatred, this kind of perversion; but we must end it with love not with suppression, not with counter-

violence, not with massacre, not with repressive control, but with law that can be enforced and that must be enforced, with law that must be enforced from the national government on down to the smallest village or township.

You cannot legislate morality, you cannot force men to do good, but you can prevent them from doing evil. Wednesday night, five of us here sat in the ballroom of the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago and heard one of the greatest men of our time, Martin Luther King, say these deathless words: the law cannot make you love me, but it can keep you from lynching me.

It is time that we ceased being a government of men and became what we were intended to be from the beginning: a government of law.

To the widow and children our love, our sympathy, all the prayers and hopes we have. Belatedly they are all we can offer. To the family and friends our condolence, tragically.

Where will we go? Who can tell? So we must pray for John Fitzgerald Kennedy, but we must pray even more for ourselves, and we must pray most of all for Lyndon B. Johnson who has become President of the United States. We must remember that he will be himself as President. He will not be the image of Mr. Kennedy nor walk in his shadow. He will need more than our good will, he will need our strength, he will need our love, he will need everything we lavished on John F. Kennedy. With God's help, he will lead us from the dark despair of this moment into light.

Amen.