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THE SOURCES OF COURAGE

WAR TIME SERMONS

BY

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NEW YORK
BLOCH PUBLISHING COMPANY

"THE JEWISH BOOK CONCERN"

1943

city

RARY

THE POWER OF FAITH

The prophet must have visualized our own day when he said "The Lord is my strength and my fortress and my refuge in the day of affliction." Apparently he assumed that faith is not only a requirement of religion but that it is also a principle of strategy. There is no theology in his pronouncement. His terminology is purely military. He speaks of strength, fortress, and refuge. Oh, how important for our day such faith is.

Obviously the prophet's conception of faith differs from the common and erroneous notions about it. One of these notions is that faith implies resignation, passivity, supineness. According to that, man is a helpless tool in the hands of an inexorable destiny. Willy-nilly, salvation or defeat is visited upon him. He himself can do nothing about it. That, of course, is not faith at all but fate. Man is not a helpless bark, driven to and fro by the angry sea of life. He is the captain of his ship and can steer it into whatever port he will. Faith is not resignation, it is power. "The Lord is my strength and my fortress."

Nor is faith blind credulity. Strange how people set up reason against faith as though the two were opposed to each other. Judaism surely is opposed to such a conception. To us one is impossible without the other. Faith may apply to one sphere of reality and reason to another, but both are complementary to each other. Faith is the logic of the soul even as logic is the faith of the mind.

Neither has faith anything to do with miracles. How common that misconception is. In the throes of dread disease, faith is supposed to stimulate the hope that by some supernatural intervention a cure will be effected. In the midst of dire perplexity, faith is expected to assure a solution. Confronted by insurmountable obstacles, faith must guarantee success. To that, too, Judaism is opposed. "Do not depend upon miracles," the

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sages of the Talmud caution us. In place of blind dependence upon supernatural intervention, Judaism calls for courage that will discover and utilize every natural means to accomplish a given task. Winston Churchill was right when in the darkest days of England's threatened invasion he said: "If a miracle must happen then it will." But he was even more right when he called for blood and tears and sweat as the natural means to extricate a people from impending doom. Blood and tears and sweat are the raw materials out of which miracles are produced. No, faith is not dependence, it is action. "The Lord is my strength and my fortress."

We had better learn that in our day of affliction. The infantile image of faith will not do for the cruel, harsh and exacting days that lie ahead. God does not stand over man's shoulder like a caressing father over a trembling child and, patting him on the back, speaks to him softly: "Don't worry, old chap, it will all turn out well. Daddy will take care of everything." Do worry, old chap, all is not turning out well. Daddy must not take care of everything. You must be willing to shed tears and blood and sweat. God is your strength, but to use it, you must clench your fists and flex your muscles. Then He becomes your fortress and refuge in the day of affliction.

This brings us to the recognition of an important truth. Faith is challenge. Every achievement of life is the result of that challenge. Challenged by darkness, man invented light. Challenged by distance, man perfected speed. Challenged by nature, he learned to imitate it in art and poetry and music. Challenged by the immensity of the universe, he broke his earthly anchorage and winged his way aloft into the vast stretches of space. Challenged by the mystery of life, he conceived God.

Without faith man could never have accepted the challenge of these forces. He never would have dared to grapple with the darkness or venture forth into the mystery. He would have curbed his curiosity and would have left unexplored the remote frontiers of existence. Faith was the constant companion upon his glorious adventure and the unfailing comrade upon his unending journey.

The eternal quest of man's mind and soul certainly brought its rich rewards. Said the astronomer to the philosopher, "astronomically speaking, what is man?" Compared with the staggering distances of the universe, the rapidly revolving planets, and the swiftly moving stars, what, indeed, is man? Replied the philosopher, "astronomically speaking, man is the astronomer." So this is what challenge has done for man, and it was accomplished not by supineness, not by resignation, but by a faith which was power, by a Lord who was his strength and his fortress.

But faith is more than challenge. It is the stabilizer of moral character. When man turns the dynamics of faith in upon himself, oh, what he does to his moral life. How he transforms it. How he uplifts it. How he ennobles it. It was Emerson who said "our faith comes in moments, our vice is habitual." Man takes these moments of faith, exploits them, capitalizes on them, and gradually diminishes the vice that is habitual, and ultimately curbs it entirely. "The righteous live by faith." Aye, it is faith that makes them righteous. They face life courageously and meet death fearlessly. They encounter difficulty heroically, and suffer disappointment stoically. On the field of battle, they are the MacArthurs, and in the affairs of men they are the Roosevelts. In life they are the pious before whom all bow in reverence and in the end of days they are the saints upon whom history bestows immortality. Oh, for a measure of such faith that can do all this to the character of man. What strength it gives and what a fortress and what a refuge in the day of affliction.

"When blessings bring Thy sunshine to our heart,
Let gratitude uplift each soul at rest;
And when to bear our griefs becomes our part,
Let faith and hope exhort us — God knows best."

If faith supplies challenge and furnishes moral stability, then it follows that it assures progress. From the caveman to modern society is a long and tortuous road that has taken centuries to traverse. There were detours and dead-ends, blind alleys and dangerous curves. Draw a graph of man's history on this planet and see the peaks and depressions. But notice, too, how the trend

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is irresistibly forward and upward. The greatest miracle that faith has wrought is that man did not remain in those depressions. He was counted out so often in the arena of life only to rise again and knock-out opponent after opponent. To be sure, man is not undefeated, but he is champion nonetheless. What faith does to individual character, it did for the collective character of humanity. Without it, progress would have been impossible. With it, every setback stimulated an advance and every retreat furnished additional momentum for a greater leap forward. Out of tyranny into democracy, out of slavery into freedom, out of the dark ages into enlightenment, out of inequality into social justice. Always the Lord was strength, fortress, and refuge in days of affliction.

This, my friends, is the most comforting thought for our day. There is within man an unextinguishable flame which you may call by various names. The psychologist calls it the desire for new experience. The scientist calls it the spark of life. The philosopher refers to it as the *elan vital*. Men of religion call it faith — the most dynamic, energizing and activating influence of life. It is the source and the assurance of the unending progress of man.

This faith fortifies our confidence in the undefeatability of the human race. It says to us: Man's destiny is not the jungle and humanity's goal is not back to the dark ages. The hatred that seeped into the soul of man cannot long remain there. The wells of human goodness will never dry up. And God cannot forever be banished from the hearts of men. Even amidst the roar of cannon and the clash of swords man can already glimpse and hope for the world of tomorrow as the Kingdom of God on earth.

Here is the astonishing proof of the unquenchable faith of man. General Douglas MacArthur greets President Roosevelt on his 60th birthday with these words: "Today, January 30th, the anniversary of your birth, smoke-begrimed men covered with the marks of battle, rise from the fox-holes of Bataan and the batteries of Corregidor to pray reverently that God may bless immeasurably the President of the United States." Today, men can still pray reverently to God. The Lord is *still* our strength and fortress and refuge.

CALLING ON YOUR SPIRITUAL RESERVES

In days like these the normal qualities of personality are insufficient. Additional powers must be summoned to sustain us. We must call on our spiritual reserves.

Jeremiah provides us with the most adequate metaphor for a situation like ours. Says the prophet of the ideal man: "And he shall be like a tree that is planted by the waters and by a stream spreadeth out its roots, which feeleth not when heat cometh and its leaf remaineth green, and in a year of drought it is undisturbed and ceaseth not from yielding fruit."

What the prophet said of an individual is true of our entire generation. Suddenly a scorching and devastating fever descended upon us. A wilderness of savagery engulfed us. Nations succumbed because of a spiritual drought. Human genius was arrested and ceased to yield the fruits of the mind and the heart that are the life of civilization. Salvation for humanity is possible only if it can sink and spread its roots to those deep pools of spiritual and moral refreshment by which it can be revived and recreated. Indeed, humanity must call on its spiritual reserves.

As we reflect upon this metaphor, let an immediate truth be stated. Calling on reserves is not merely a pursuit of the spirit. It applies in the realm of the physical as well. The athlete is familiar with it and is trained to resort to it. As he feels his limbs growing heavy and his muscles flagging, he calls upon those hidden reserves of heart and sinew and experience that exhilarating spurt that is the result of what he calls his second wind. His ability depends upon his capacity to utilize the physical recreation thus generated.

The doctor is familiar with it. When all that science has wrought is utilized and the surgeon's skill is spent, the ultimate cure depends upon the capacity of the patient to call upon the reserves of resistance and strength that have been stored up for just such an emergency.

What second wind is to the athlete and accumulated resistance is to the body, spiritual reserves are to the personality. To remain impervious "when heat cometh," to continue undisturbed "in a year of drought," never to cease from yielding fruit—all of that depends upon our capacity to spread and sink our roots to those reservoirs wherein are stored our spiritual reserves.

A second truth is obvious. To be able to call upon spiritual reserves, one must have spiritual reserves to call upon. Such reserves are the result of a process of accumulation. From infancy through adolescence and throughout maturity, spiritual surpluses are stored within the repositories of personality. The lessons of school, the idealism of the home, the guidance of a father, the self-sacrifice of a mother, the example of a teacher, the companionship of a friend—all of these contribute abundantly so that there is enough for immediate use and sufficient to be stored away for a critical hour.

These influences must not be rationed sparingly during the course of early life. They are the springs that come from all directions and bathe the growing soul, all the while forming deep pools into which, during a period of drought and necessity, deep roots may be sent for new life and refreshment. The author of Proverbs put it well: "Train the youth according to his fashion and even when he grows old, he will not turn from it." Not turn from it? He will turn to it and call upon it, for it is his spiritual second wind.

One may find illustration of this truth copiously on every battlefield of this war. Someone remarked that a hero is like any other man only he is that a little longer. "That little longer" is what I mean by the second wind. It is the extra step, the final spurt that transforms defeat into triumph. The Rickenbackers who float for weeks on makeshift rafts in perilous seas, hoping and enduring and never for a moment thinking of surrender — they know what it means to call upon spiritual reserves. The MacArthurs and the Doolittles, the gallant marines on the Solomons, the stalwart men of Russia, freezing and fighting in their wrecked cities — they had spiritual reserves to call upon and it is well for civilization that they did.

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adequate metaphor for the ideal man: "And by the waters and by a river not when heat cometh and in a year of drought it is undisturbed."

It is true of our entire life that a fever descended upon us. Nations succumb. Human genius was arrested. The mind and the heart for humanity is possible to those deep pools of life it can be revived and its spiritual reserves.

It is an immediate truth in the pursuit of the spirit. It is well. The athlete is it. As he feels his limbs give, he calls upon those reserves that exhilarate his second wind. His is the physical recreation

When all that science has done is spent, the ultimate patient to call upon the reserves that have been stored up for

The Bible states this truth in her own fashion. Abraham had dug wells, the Philistines stopped them up and filled them with earth. A period of drought followed. What did Isaac, the son of Abraham, do in the emergency? "And Isaac dug again the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Abraham, his father, and which the Philistines had stopped after the death of Abraham, and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them."

Let us transform that incident into the terminology of our discourse. Abraham dug wells not only for immediate use. He stored up reserves for a day of need. When that need came they were there and Isaac had ready access to them. So, the Abrahams must provide not only for the immediate needs of their Isaacs. They must even store up reserves for them to call upon.

Let us not leave this matter without a more direct and more pertinent application. The world, too, had dug wells to provide refreshment for a parched humanity. At Sinai there was a well, out of which gushed the imperishable ideals of righteousness, justice and freedom. The Magna Charta was a well, which poured forth its soothing waters upon a generation that was just emerging out of the desolation of the dark ages. The American Revolution was another well, the bubbling waters of which sang a new melody to the ancient lyric, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof." And so on through the ages, mankind dug wells of decency, kindness, beauty and charity. Now we find ourselves parched and dying of thirst. The wells have been stopped up. Cruel hands poisoned them. Foul passions polluted them. Angry tyrants threw dirt into them. Yet they are our spiritual reserves and we must call upon them or die. Let us, as Isaac in his day, redig the wells dug by the spirited Abrahams of another day, and which our contemporary Philistines stopped up. Their waters will need refiltering, but oh, how they will quench the thirst of our parched generation!

We cannot leave our subject without a final observation. Religion has an important part to play in the calling up of spiritual reserves. For one thing, it is the most powerful agency to call attention to the fact that man, individually or collectively, is badly in need of additional energy and strength. It is religion

which makes the psalmist say, "My soul panteth after Thee." It is religion which makes the prophet declare that there will come a day when there will be a hunger not for bread and a thirst not for water, but a hunger and a thirst for the word of the Lord. Reverting to a military metaphor, it is religion which sounds the bugle for the assembly of the reserves.

But religion does even more. It *provides* the reserves. It is the granary in which is stored up the sustaining spiritual nourishment for men to use when there is hunger in the land. It is the bottomless well from which a thirsty humanity can drink. Within its sanctuaries there is faith in the ultimate destiny of the world. At its holy shrines there burns the inextinguishable flame of hope. Out of its sacred literature come endless messages of guidance and inspiration. And in its infinite vineyard may be gathered fruits of comfort and consolation.

"The Lord is with me, I shall not fear"—what a reserve of faith in that. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"—what a reserve of hope in that. "The Lord is my fortress and shelter"—what a reserve of comfort in that. "For Thou hast girded me with strength for war, Thou subduest my opponents under me"—what a reserve of assurance in that.

↓ It is reported that William James, while studying medicine, found himself sinking into mental and psychological depression. The disease and the death all about him, the dissection room with its atmosphere of morbidity, the morgue and the autopsy room had their effect upon the sensitive mind of the young student. His own testimony has it that were it not for the recollection of those comforting and stimulating scriptural passages that he learned in his childhood, he would never have been able to survive. Aye, he called upon his spiritual reserves. *in the time of prayer*

A generation whose destiny at the moment is to walk in the valley of the shadow of death, and which is temporarily doomed to live in a vale of tears, whose earthly paradise has been transformed into a universal morgue, must do something desperate and immediate if it is to survive. It must call on its spiritual reserves.