

“The End Of The Age Of Reason”

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THE END OF THE AGE OF REASON

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RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: This is the place and this is the time. Here and now God waits to break into our experience.

CONGREGATION: To enable us to see the world and whole of life in a new light. To focus our sight with insight, to soften our hearts with compassion.

MINISTER: This is the place, as are all places; this is the time as are all times.

CONGREGATION: Here and now let us worship the God who beckons.

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SERMON

In the history of the human species and of the civilizations we have created, each has been characterized by a title. Historians and scholars speak about the Bronze Age or the Iron Age. We are familiar with the Age of Greece and the golden age of Rome. And, for almost two hundred years now, we have been told that we are living in the Age of the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. I believe that Age of Reason has passed and that we have denied its death; that we have chosen to believe that it is truly alive and well.

In his closing column of December 18, 2001, written after 32 years as a reporter and columnist, Anthony Lewis wrote that he was greatly concerned that the United States was drifting from a sense of reason. He titled the column – Closing this column with worry about a U.S. drift from reason. He took a brief look at the external world as we know it today, commented on religious and national extremism throughout the world, and then stated: “Faith in reason was the foundation stone of the United States.” Concluding his final column, Anthony said: “In the end I believe that faith in reason will prevail, but it will not happen automatically.”

I have been reading and re-reading this column at least once a week since it was published on December 18th. I now understand my obsession with the piece. I believe that Anthony Lewis thinks that reason will lead us into the light that will bring inner and outer peace to our fragmented world and selves. I feel quite differently. I feel that reason has in some ways severely limited us by suggesting that for every critical question there is an impartial, rational, logical, answer; that if we could properly phrase the question, we could find the answer...some of these answers would be found sooner than others. Though in its birth and lifetime, reason was seen as the great promise of the future, it has not proven so in the world of human relationships. In science, it may be different. The age of reason by which we have lived since the announcement or

designation of the enlightenment has long since died. It was, I believe, like the prophets of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, appropriate and even messianic in its time; but its time has passed. The age of reason taught us that there could well be an explanation to everything we experience consciously and even unconsciously – and that if we could understand the rationale behind or beneath something, or some persons or nations, we could begin to resolve the conflicts that rage within us and between us. And in some ways it was true and effective. In others it was and is a miserable failure. You need only look at today's political and geographic world ...to the daily news, to read the obituary of reason.

There still lives a hubris that led us to believe that if I – or others much more knowledgeable than I could understand something, we could ultimately change it. But, there is so much that you and I do understand about our world and about its peoples and beliefs and conflicts...and we cannot change them.

According to the rabbis, when God told Adam to name each of the animals, it was based on the premise that if you named something, you would know and understand its essence and thereby be able to control it. If you knew the essence of horse or cow or sheep, you could dominate, manipulate and use it to your advantage. It was a nice story adapted from earlier stories of the Fertile Crescent. But, it was and is a story. Yet, reason has not altered our desire to control the other; it's failure has made the desire more intense.

Reason, however it was understood by its framers and for all the good it has brought, has also brought an entrenched nationalism, concepts of racial and ethnic and religious inferiority and superiority – and the entire world – once again – to the brink of disaster. Until nationalism gives birth to internationalism - or intra-nationalism – a mutuality of humanness - for more than money, and reason gives life to more than control of the other, and justice roars like a mighty stream...blood will be shed on altars to false Gods and ten and twenty years later no one will even know why...but will try to "*reason a reconstruction of reality.*" Reason did not prevent and reason did not cause the Holocaust or the Viet Nam wars...or the current Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. And today, 30 years after Viet Nam, Americans and others are travelling to this place and this people we had earlier labeled as less than human.

I am not opposed to reason. I am opposed to making reason my God! The concept of reason as our guide is a human decision believed to be driven by the desire to make things better; but who benefits from this "better" is often and purposely manipulated and mismanaged. That is not an act of God; but a failure of humankind and of desperation.

I celebrate the use of reason in the pure sciences, even with its limitations. If we are talking about how one cell or even one gene may respond to selected stimuli or manipulation, reason and faith in our ability – and faith in The Source of our ability, may lead us in a necessary and ultimately good and universally beneficial direction...

If we are speaking about people who have been diagnosed with a universally agreed upon disease or severe limitations, reason may aid us; with Down syndrome and M.S., cancer and diabetes, reason may lead us. But then, even then, we are not talking about people. We are talking about diseases...and despite what reason may say, we are more than the sum of our disabilities. Too often reason reigns where the soul must be seated.

Reason has brought us to the brink of disaster with a world filled with nuclear war heads and nations – enclaves of spiritually isolated and often insulated people – posturing and threatening – and hoping that reason or something more – perhaps a mutual respect – will prevail. Reason has created nations and national identities, and like time none of this will be turned back. It may be rewritten, denied or diluted...but will not be reversed. Revisionism is not unique to the holocaust. It is a universal phenomenon!

Reason has helped us raise our children and care for our aged by suggesting limited options –for children, peas, carrots or beans..you must have one, and for our aged – bingo, sing-a-long or TV – you must choose one. The options are not limited – and the human brain is underused, and we wallow in the “what ifs” we are afraid to pursue

Reason has enabled us to create new economic markets, to address and create needs, all the while telling us that we are improving the quality of life. Deodorants, depilatories and even some forms of diplomacy create and control wealth and guarantee the perpetuity of poverty. And there are too many who would say there are acceptable and logical – sometimes even religiously justified reason behind all this.

Our bodies are odorless while our skies are blackened and our souls are sold the Securities and Exchange Commission. Food is plentiful and people are impoverished – and where is reason?

2000 years ago Rabbi Hillel said: “If I am not for myself, who is for me...If I am only for myself, what am I...If not now, when?” He was not talking about reason. He was talking about self worth, human respect and the immediacy of the moment. He was talking about a mutuality that knows no borders or racial distinctions or artificial distinctions. He was looking at the world through the eyes of my grandsons Max and Jake who do not yet know color and religious barriers...and I can only hope and pray never will. But my prayer is not reasonable.

Reason has taken us into space and through medical advances into the inner most parts of the human body or cavity. But it cannot take us into the inner most part of our being; into the soul that connects us with the greater more and tells us that reason is limited and must yield to respect; for the self and for the other. Reason does not produce true justice; but a greater justice for some and a lesser justice for others.

I reason my way through my daily routines and sometimes that which I cannot reason haunts me at night; yet, even with the clarity of the morrow it limits me. It

limits me from becoming fully me. It is a system – a limited system of thinking, but not of being.

All of the major decisions of my life have been shaped by reason, but molded by respect and something more – a non-rational component; a something that is more than reason. Intrusting my life and my dreams to my wife and mentors, and the hope of a future I could never have envisioned on my own is beyond reason; and at this stage of my life I know that it is beyond the mere physical attraction. Marriage, giving life to children, buying a house – particularly in a world of constant and unremitting uncertainty is beyond reason. Yet, it is the core of my life. Reason cannot help me understand why I love my grandsons in unconditional ways and why I have their names engraved on my heart and tongue. Reason cannot truly tell you why I weep when I watch the Israelis and the Palestinians struggle to find a new reality that is the best for them and may force me and every other thinking and caring person to reconsider the fundamental values of life...and to see a new reality that none of us could even imagine at this moment. Each side – reminiscent of the Viet Nam era – has resorted to body counts, suggesting that the other has exerted more death or more terror and **REASONING** their own counter moves, and moving back...not to the biblical, but to the pre-biblical eras of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and a child for a child...**and knowing all along that such “reasoning” is fallacious and ultimately self defeating...yet FEELING that few – IF ANY – alternatives are available.** And so I weep with all those who believe that the bloodshed and the carnage must end; and who feel limited in the perception of options, and who do know that reason alone cannot yield security or respect or independence or mutuality. And so we weep.

My relationships with other people, those outside my immediate family, have little to do with reason and more to do with a human hunger that craves understanding and stability. Reason teaches us to look out for # 1, but the world of post-reason teaches us that each of us is – **and must see the other as #1.** Descartes said: “Cogito ergo Sum – I think therefore I am.” In other places I have written; “Dubito ergo Sum – I doubt therefore I am.” Today I suggest to you a different paradigm: I suggest that I AM BECAUSE YOU ARE - AND WE ARE INTERCONNECTED IN WAYS WE CAN ONLY BEGIN TO SEE – AND THAT WE WASTE OUR TIME AND PRECIOUS SENSE OF SELF LOOKING FOR REASON IN THIS ARENA.

There will come a time when I will be no more; and internationalism or intra-nationalism will be commonplace and borders will be meaningless and racial distinctions will be more homogenized than they are even at this time. There will be no more forms asking ethnic or national or religious identity, because it will all be beyond reason and beyond the confines of reasons. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, nor will they study war any more...not out of reason, but out of the fullness of their shared humanity. In that day we will celebrate our differences rather than label and belittle them and we will pray to the More that so many want to claim as their own...while denying the reality of the other – the THOU of an I -THOU relationship.

Leo Rosten has written...the rabbis held that reason is not enough for man; that the problems of life – and I would add the potentials of life – cannot be solved or attained without faith and respect. In this they differed from many of the philosophers

of Greece. They also wrote that God conceals God's self from our reason, but reveals it through our hearts.

Five thousand years ago, my people saw the heart as the seat of wisdom, the vessel through which God spoke and the transforming vessel that can open us to a now and a tomorrow many have dreamed, few have articulated, and all deserve.

And if all of this sounds unreasonable, it is; because it is beyond reason and is in the realm of justice and ethics and human caring and universal salvation.

A recent report on NPR noted that there has been a significant rise in enrollments in colleges with religious affiliations. The report did not suggest that people were turning to a fundamentalism or intolerance, but that they were turning to and looking for the More...the More that reason alone cannot give.

I celebrate that More. It is essential to my life and meaning.
May we all bask in its light.