

Get Out of the Cave —
A Sermon by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis
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(This is a transcription of an audio recording which can be found at www.schulweisinstitute.com)

The Sermon that I wrote to you about -- which you receive in your mail about a month or so ago with the bibliography I was going to be speaking to -- especially to college young people who are returning to the synagogue from the academic world. And now is going to be talking about the internal conflict or tensions that many fit people feel exist between, if you will, secular science which you study in the colleges and the kind of religious interpretation of life and the meaning which you study in the synagogue in the schools.

And I was going to juxtapose 1865, greatest book in centuries, Charles Darwin's Origin of the Species along with the Book of Genesis. And I was going to ask how it is possible to find some sort of a harmonization, if it is possible, between Athens and Jerusalem.

And then something happened on the way to the synagogue as it where on Tuesday, September 11th occurred. And I realized then and there that you don't select the sermon. Life selects the sermon.

You are born by identiforce and you die by identiforce. How you respond is another question. But I look at the talk and I realized it can't be given -- not in . And I didn't sleep that night and I am convinced that in some near is a Jewish trait. Because someone has written, Jews can't sleep and they won't let the world sleep. And I think that's correct.

We have gone through an event of Biblical proportion. The skyline of my beautiful city of New York has been severely altered and in its place a void. Human nature abhors a vacuum. And now a task is to learn, how to fill that vacuum. But it was a Biblical proportion. As you look instead into the television set and repeated it over and over again that grotesque bizarre surrealistic event that look more like a science-fiction monster movie and the earth was and it was unformed and empty and darkness was upon the face of the deep and insanity -- and insanity -- and insanity.

And I turned to my tradition to find some wisdom. And I found it in a very strange story by Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, the great-grandson of Baal Shem Tov, who created the Chassidic movement. Rav Nachman of Bratzlav says, the king called of his councilors together, his cabinet and said, "I've heard a terrible report. The report is that the harvest is such a character that if you eat of it, you will grow crazy. It will make you insane."

And now the question is what are we to do? Not to eat of the harvest is to starve. But to eat of the harvest is to be mad. And he resolved the key. "I want you to eat because you cannot die. But I want you to know also that we are, all of us, insane." But what is it mean to say that you should know that you're insane. Because maybe if you recognize that you are insane, that the world is insane, that the society is insane, you will be able to do something about it.

What has happened to my mind that this is only one person's interpretation is that eyes that have been closed tight forever so long with a wonderful innocence have been ripped open wide. And now there is a new revelation. And we recognize one thing, this is not a metaphor sociologist and philosopher to talk about the fact that there's a global village. There is an awesome interdependence which we have never imagined before.

Now we know that what happens in Kabul has its resonance in New York. What happens in Damascus reverberates in the Pentagon. There has been a globalization deeper even than economic and political and social globalization, a total different way of looking at the world.

The social scientist like the word paradigm shift. It means that you can't think the same way, you can't believe the same way, you can't act the same way. If I had given the original talk, I would be speaking about a clash, a tension within western civilization. Athens, Jerusalem. Science, faith. But now after the terror, I'm speaking about a clash against western civilization. What is happening is much deeper than here and there, a bombing or a terrorizing activity.

What is happening is that the world of negotiation, the world of reason, the world of pluralism, the world of democracy, the world of individualism, the world of universal suffrage, the world of free elections and free speech and free religion, all of these has been challenge by a terrible wide spread and deep miasma of hate and greed and envy; envy of capitalism, envy of our advanced science and our advanced technology.

And one thing is abundantly clear. You can't do business as usual. Forget it. That's what a revolution means. This is a revolution that I can assure you. That the historians will mark as a benchmark for a new revelation, September 11th, 2001.

And how does it affect Jews? It affects us a great deal. How are we going to end of the 21st century after September 11th? Are we going to be the same? Are you going to speak to your kids the same way, going to speak to yourselves the same way? It's a different century. The 20th century, the most terrible, horrible century in history, left all of us as Jews saddened, angry, feeling as Sheila put it in this remarkable phrase, "With the secretion in a sealed vessel of prolonged impotence, a deep melancholy has descended upon us and it is for no wonder."

Forty percent of the people decimated. One million five Jewish children slaughtered because of their Jewishness. And what do you expect, normalcy? Don't expect normalcy. Do you think this is going to be a normal people, this traumatized, abused people, so vividly disappointed by states and by church, abandoned and rejected. And what do you do in such a time? I look into the history. I look at the Gemara. I look at the Talmud; they face the second destruction of the temple in 70 CE. And I look at the Talmud Chabad and I see a remarkable record.

A man, a Rabbi, by the name of Shimon Bar Yochai was sick and tired of hearing of Roman civilization of its aqueduct and of its engineering and of its technology and of its state craft and all of that selfly said, "This is nothing. This is a corrupt civilization. I don't want nothing to do with the civilization. I don't want to deal with Romans. I don't want to deal with anybody else. I want to only deal with Jews. I'm going to run away."

And he runs away, build into a cave. And he brings with him Eliezer, his son. And they bury a hole in the cave in the sand so that their clothes will not be worn out. And they study eternal life things, taura, taura, taura. And they study prier, prier, prier. And they observe for 12 years, they don't leave the cave until they hear that the Roman Emperor has died and they emerge. And what do they see? They see Jews who are plowing the fields and sowing seeds into the ground. And they are absolutely upset and they say, as the Gemara puts it. "You people are giving up eternal life and you are concerned with the worldly pleasures of this moment."

And everywhere that they look say the Rabbis -- wherever they look was burned up. They saw a factory, they saw a field, they saw agriculture, they look at it and out of anger, they burned it up, says the Gemara. A voice from heaven descended and said, ". Did you come to destroy my world? Did you come to destroy the world? Get back into the cave."

Settle down friends, settle down. Nothing has happened. Settle down, concentrate. And think along with me. Because one of the most seductive things in world history but especially in Jewish history is the temptation to escape into a cave. Some people do it by becoming ancillary by concentrating only on the, the four cubits of the law. And some people do it without being pious but they have their own little caves and they fill it with goods, with toys, with pleasures, with television sets and nothing else and they want to have nothing to do with the world. They also live in caves.

. Let us eat and let us drink because tomorrow we die. This is the great struggle of life, the seductiveness of the cavern. When I read this Gemara, I thought of funerals. When I go to a funeral, I go to the home, there's somebody who has lost a son, a daughter, a father, a mother, a husband or wife. They don't want to be with anybody. They want to have their own private grief and their own sorrows and they put the -- they cover the mirrors because they don't even

want to look at themselves. They want to be absolutely alone and away from everybody into their own cave.

And here, they stand as members of the community who says you got to say Kaddish. And for Kaddish, you have to have a community. Because in Jewish life, you can do nothing as holy without community. You can't have without . You can't even recite the seven blessings at the wedding without the presence of the minyan. And this man said, "Let me alone. Let me alone. Let me be with my own -- in my own solitude, in my own sorrow."

And the community says, "We're not going to let you alone. We're not going to let you alone." That's exactly why we have this minyan. You are not abandoned and you're not alone, you are part of the community and we want you to know that and you're not going to be alone. And at the end of seven days, there emerge a wonderful folk tradition, the Rabbi didn't think of it.

By the end of seven days, the comforters who were there take the mourner by his or her hand and take them out of the house, out of the cave into the streets. And we turn them to the market place. That is a concern after every tragedy. A voice from heaven speaks to us and says, "Your place is not in the cave. I am the king of the cosmos, not the king of the cave. If you go into the cave, it will not be your security; it will be your sepulcher."

. Bless are thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe. I am in the minyan. You know what the origin of minyan is? It's from the Book of Leviticus in which God says, " , I will be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel," not in a sanctuary and not in a cave, not in a mountain but in the midst of the Jewish people.

What is it mean then? How we to respond to tragedy? We do so with the great wisdom of our history. That's why we're a people of 4,000 years. If there is globalization, if it means that there is a radical interdependence, it means that Judaism has to be globalized. You have to be globalized. How do I know this? I look at the text. I take a look at what we're going to be reading on the Haftorah of Yom Kippur from a six century before the Common Era Isaiah who speaks to a people who are in exile, some place in Babylonia. And they complain and they say, "What's the matter with you God? Where are you God? Look at us, we are fasting. Are you blind? We are afflicting our souls. Are you blind?"

And God says, "Who needs it? Did I ask for you to bow your head like a bulrush that I want you to spread sackcloth and ashes over your head or beneath your feet? I want you to do one thing, move out of the cave." What is it mean to move out of the cave? He tells you what it means. Undo the bands of the yolk, deal your bread to the hungry, cover the nakedness of the impoverished, get out of the cave.

. One hour in this world says the Talmud. One hour in this world. , with turning, with transforming and with a practice of good deeds is worth the entire world in the future. Don't give me [inaudible] [00:18:23] and don't give me paradise and don't give me nirvana. This is the place. Get out of the cave.

Get out of the cave? Yes. Because filled with hunger? Yes, hunger. There are one billion chronically undernourished people in this world, one quarter of a world population. Ten million children die every year from malnutrition. It's our agenda.

. There are people who are choking because we have poisoned the atmosphere, because the waters are toxic. Fish are dying. Is that our agenda? It is if you think of Judaism as a world religion. If you do not think of yourself in small petty, provincial, parochial terms, you globalize Judaism and you return to the Judaism that we had.

In the Book of Genesis we are told, "You are to be the custodians of the universe. You are to see to it that this world is protected and treasured. You are a world religion." I haven't even heard that word. Judaism is a world religion? A world religion? If it's a world religion, then you have to deal with world religions.

You have to have some contact with Islam, one billion people. How can I have any contact with one billion people hearing what is said in the mass, I understand that. But I say to you. And I say to you out of Jewish experience because I'm older than you are. And therefore, I have seen more than you have.

I can say to you first of all that not all Muslims are cut of the same cloth anymore than all Christians are cut of the same cloth. But I believe that. But I'm older than you. So I know a lot more stuff than you do. I know that Abraham Joshua Heschel, my teacher was criticized when he spoke about the need to going, flying to Rome to the Vatican II in 1965 and thereafter to speak with Cardinal Bea and to urge the Catholic church to eliminate this dreadful scheme in which they were going to use in energies to convert Jews to Catholicism.

And the people said to him and I know who they are, very distinguished Rabbis, said to him, "Heschel, we don't believe that you are going to succeed." And Heschel said, "Because you don't believe we should not try?" And you know what happened? You know what happened. You don't even have to read the newspaper but you know what happened. You know the remarkable revolution that took place, not long ago.

When the pope, the first in 2000 years, entered into a Roman synagogue and prayed and referred to Jews as the -- as our elder brothers. A Catholic church with all of its inflexibility and its slow-moving ways recognized diplomatically the State of Israel. The church introduced a new Catechism which you are to read because it has eliminated and cleansed the most anti-Judaic aspects of Christian liturgy.

And how do we come about? Because we said -- some of us said, "We have got to make contact with the Catholics." And they told us, "You're knocking --, you're knocking your head against the wall; nothing will happen, nothing will avail."

Well I know better because I am older. You know it's better too. You had hear in this very synagogue, on this very spot. The great Cardinal Mahony of Los Angeles, not once, not twice but three times with his monsignory and his nuns. When I was ordained from the seminary in 19 -- last century, anyhow.

When I was ordained, I was asked to speak together with a Catholic priest and a protestant minister an interfaith dialogue. And I remember very clearly because it was in New York, a guess was ordained. And the minister or the priest came, I came. And the priest said, "I'd like to do it." He said very embarrassedly. "But you know, you got to build a platform for me that will be higher than yours." So we said, both the minister and I in a ecumenical burst of surprise, "Why is that?"

And the priest really was embarrassed never, this is 1950, that's before the Vatican II. It's because we can't give the impression that we're all on the same level. But 15 years later, in Oakland, my first congregation, Bishop Begin of Oakland who would never step into a synagogue or allow his Catholic parishioners to walk into the shul came to the synagogue. We didn't want to speak from the pulpit. He wanted to speak in the social hall.

And he said, "Bishop, you got to speak in a synagogue. It's the very -- it's happened, Vatican II has happened." "You're right." And he spoke. And the people came. And the Catholics came. And they came wonderfully well as they came, by the way, on Friday night. Friday night when we had this emergency Sabbath service, there were Catholics who came.

So don't tell me, it can't happen with the Muslims. Because, and this I know and have read and William Safire in the New York Times had a very wonderful article in which he talked about the fact that main line Muslim clergymen are now aware that they have been -- that the Koran has been hijacked. And you'll begin to hear, not everybody, but this is a war and so war between them two when Catholics had that kind of war too but you are beginning to hear and you will hear.

In fact in the program that I appeared with the other night -- the other day, the man who represented Islam, a man from the east said, "It is wrong what they are saying. It is wrong that anybody who commits murder on innocent people is going to go to paradise and be feted with virgins. It is wrong to think that the word Jihad refers to a battle against the people of the books, especially," not many but important. And it's important that we be there. It's important that we be there and it's important to begin over here.

I don't want to talk about somebody else, talk about VBS. VBS I want you to know, beginning with October, you will see it and it's a very important, the Karuth program due to the generosity and thoughtfulness of Jess and little Beime. We are going to have here sessions on Judaism and world religions. And we are going to have leading scholars and clergymen from Buddhism to Mormonism to Catholicism to Protestantism and to Islam.

And I want you to be there. And I want you to bring your Muslim friends. You don't have any Muslim friends, make some Muslim friends and bring him here. Because I said to Dr. Nazzir , after many, many conversations. I say your picture is going to be in the paper. I want you to know we're advertising this. And I said I don't want you to talk about and I don't want you to talk about politics. I want you to talk about the Koran as a religious person understands it because our people doesn't know this. They don't know about Koran and they do not know about the Surahs of the Koran and they don't know anything about the Sharia. And he said I will come.

And I said to him. "We owe it to humanity. We have done a terrible job, we, the religious people. But we are -- I, as a Jew, am the father of the monotheistic traditions and we have got to transcend this. We've got to introduce healing and understanding." And he will be here. And I want you to be there.

And why I am doing this? Because we have got to get out of the cave. We're a world religion. Do you feel like you're a world religion? Or do you feel like you belong to ishtiba? Are we going to go on with the globalization of Judaism?

On April the 12th, you be the first to know that we will have here the Princess of Bulgaria. The daughter of King Boris who was forced by the Sabranie, by the Bulgarian Parliament, people like Demetre Perchef . And by the Bulgarian Orthodox church whose prelets said to King Boris, "We will lie down on the track if you deport our Jews from Bulgaria because this was the upsetion of the Nazis." And 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria were saved.

You got to celebrate it. There'll be Bulgarians here. And it's got to be you here. Why? Because you are a part of a world religion. Get out of the cave. Get out of the cave. And your children are

asking questions, tough questions, from the last century on, why shall we be Jews? And why should we be loyal to Judaism? Don't give them the answers that you gave them. You must be Jewish because we do not want to give a posthumous victory to Hitler.

Are you a Jew because Hitler said no? Are you a Jew out of spite of anti-Semitism? What is it that you say positively? You're going to now in a globalize Judaism have to be Jewish affirmatively not in spite of Osama Bin Laden, not in spite of Hussein, Saddam Hussein.

You're going to have to be able to show your kids and yourselves, you are important to the world. If not, who needs it? This is globalized Judaism. And I tell you where it comes from. It so happens that we have got to, when we get out of the cave, start finding out the origins. Your children know, for example, how compatible Jewish thinking is with this universalism, they don't. Because the world doesn't -- maybe the Jewish newspapers. My god, do you think the whole world sent us around the orthodox and the conservatives and stuff like that? That's baby stuff, primitive and dangerous.

This is what's Jewish. This comes from the. I call heaven and earth to witness that whether it be gentile or Israelite, men or women, slave or maid servant, according to the deeds that they do, so will the Holy Spirit dwell upon them. You know what you're going to read on Yom Kippur for god's sake. If you come on time, most of these stuff is over by the time you come. I don't mean you. I mean those who can't -- who hadn't even come here. When I leave, I think it's the second service coming, it's not true. It's the straggles from the first service, the first coming in. And they say what are you going to preach about? I said finished. I did it. Well, they say I'll get it on tape. That's right. Get it on tape, get the whole service on tape. You get the whole service on tape but you're spending money.

I'm going to read something that is absolutely mind boggling and I hope you discuss it at the table talk. You're going to read me the story of Jonah. Jonah is a Jewish prophet who doesn't want to preach to the galleon. And he runs away from God. And the Rabbi said, "That's the book you're going to read, a Yom Kippur." You know why? Because Jonah says, "I'm going to run away and going to run away afar from Palestine because God only dwells in Palestine."

I'm going to go far away. And then he spat upon -- sped out onto the shores of Nineveh. And Nineveh, all the Rabbis knew that Nineveh is the capital of Babylonia that is destined to destroy Jerusalem in the six century before the Common Era. And Jonah said, "Listen, why am I talking to you? You got a -- you got a maxhir ? Open up the maxhir. Why do you come here to rest? I don't sleep; you're not going to sleep. Look at 4:13 in your maxhir. Look at 4:13 in the maxhir. And when you go home, when you talk to your kids about it, look at the -- I'm not going to read the whole thing.

Here is Jonah; he doesn't want to preach to the people of Nineveh. The last three of four paragraphs. And when God saw their works that they turn from the evil way, these wicked people turned, God repented of the evil which he said he would do unto them and he did it not, you know what this means? God repents. Why does He repent? Because people repent. And Jonah is unhappy.

Look what it says. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry and he prayed unto the lord and said, "I pray thee, oh lord. Was not this my saying when I was getting my known country, therefore, I fled beforehand unto Tarshish for I knew that thou what a gracious and compassion and long suffering God, I knew you're a softy God. And if you're going to see, the people are going to change; you're going to change. It's not good for your -- it's not good for your dignity. I want to protect your immutability. I want to protect your omnipotent. I want to protect your power, your word."

And God says, "You're a fool, Jonah. You think that I am a God because I am stubborn and punitive and vindictive. I am a soft God. I am the mover of the universe," who himself is moved. That's radical. And who does it? The enemies of the Jewish people.

One final word. Well, not final but it's close to final. We have heard so far the introduction of my talk. Now, we come to the major part of it.

They said that American youth is corrupt. I heard panels discuss the fact that American youth is only concerned with sex and drug addiction, terrible dissonant music, vulgarity, coarseness, selfishness. But look at what happened. Think of what happened. You had lines upon lines of young Americans who lined up to become inducted voluntarily into the defense forces. You had lines upon lines of young people who gave blood.

Don't you understand the lesson here; for us too and your children? Our children don't want to live in the cave. They are yearning for idealism. They are yearning for sacrifice and for [inaudible] [00:36:27] and for passion and they want to find it in Judaism. And if you give it in Judaism, don't spoil them and don't overprotect them. Give them a Judaism of world prominence which has a significant -- which makes a significant difference in the international community. And I guarantee you that they will not disappoint you.

People want idealism. And we have got to give them Jewish goals, Jewish purpose, Jewish idealism, Jewish humanitarianism, Jewish sacrifice.

Let me finish as I began. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav said, "I don't know what to do. If you eat to this harvest, you go crazy. If you don't eat, you'll starve. So eat but understand that it will make

us crazy. But eat and understand that you are insane and you will find a new path back to normalcy, more to greatness.” You’re a great people, we’re a great people. And now is the moment more than ever in the history of the world, when Judaism in its globalize form can introduce a renaissance of Jewish values, ethics and morality. May we have a year of health but most important, a year of peace and a year of significance.

Will you join with me by rising for the which you will find in your , your maxhir on page 165.