

Renewing Jewish Faith



Rabbi Irwin Groner

CONGREGATION SHAAREY ZEDEK

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Published in the United States of America by
The University of Michigan Press
Manufactured in the United States of America
⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

2007 2006 2005 2004 4 3 2 1

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A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Groner, Irwin.

Renewing Jewish faith / Irwin Groner.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-9749206-0-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Jewish sermons, American. I. Title.

BM740.3.G76 2004

296.4'7—dc22

2004007889

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Preface

Since 1959, it has been my privilege to serve as rabbi of Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield, Michigan. During these three and a half decades, I have preached scores of sermons, but I have always steadfastly refrained from publishing a book of them, being conscious that the rhetoric of rabbinic discourse differs fundamentally from the style appropriate to the printed page. However, congregants and friends have suggested that these sermons, at least the most memorable, ought to be made available to a wider public and in a more permanent form.

The High Holidays offer the rabbi a superb opportunity to present the fundamental insights and values of Judaism in a popular form. One hopes that through the medium of these discourses, the laity may be led to a greater appreciation of and a deeper commitment to the Jewish heritage. I have sought to interpret the Jewish terms relevant to the modern age in a spirit of sympathy, for our generation is confronted with massive difficulties and great perplexities, virtually unparalleled in history.

This book addresses basic areas of concern in meeting the challenge of modernity. The book begins with a section designated “Folk” and addresses the issues of Faith, Family, Freedom, Forgiveness, and Future in subsequent sections.

The focus of these sermons, often stated explicitly, is the centrality of the synagogue in the renewal of Jewish life. The synagogue is that institution in which Jewish values achieve permanence. Here have been preserved the Jew’s quest for justice, his passion for learning, his yearning for the messianic dream, his awareness of the Divine Presence, his celebration of life’s sanctity, his reverence for hallowed seasons and sacred moments.

These affirmations are conveyed in the form of a sermon, which is not simply a speech delivered from a pulpit but is rather a distinctive kind of discourse, a spiritual ideal validated by sacred texts that proclaim its transcendental truth. A sermon addresses the core values of the audience, values that may have been forgotten or ignored. The speaker seeks to stir the conscience, to exhort and inspire his listeners. A sermon must also appeal to the intellect and should inform the “understanding heart.” Thus, does a successful sermon kindle the flame of the spirit as it transmits its moral imperative.

The preacher of today knows that he was not appointed a divinely gifted spokesman of God’s will, but he believes in the innermost recesses of his soul that he has entered the domain of the sacred. He is summoned to demonstrate his courage and wisdom in response to the challenge of modernity.

The sermons deal with Judaism as a way of life. The author argues that human nature cannot be understood exclusively in secular terms. The religious dimension of human existence must be understood as the basis by which life itself acquires meaning.

Every generation has been required to come to terms with religious belief. Our generation confronts the dilemma of American life, which is how to reconcile individualism and commitment. The American-Jewish community struggles to resolve this issue. That which is most precious to us is the spiritual heritage that has been enriched by the dedication and sacrifice of countless generations. That heritage might soon be lost by the attrition caused by forces of assimilation, acculturation, and intermarriage. And yet, Jewish life is flowering in this country as never before. The sermons give voice to both optimistic and pessimistic opinions about the future of Jewish life in the free world.

Judaism is the world’s oldest religion, and its origin is in the dream of an ancient shepherd who taught that one God created the world and established the moral principles upon which the world could be perfected.

Two and a half centuries ago, the French philosopher Voltaire was engaged in a philosophic discussion with Frederick the Great regarding

the possibility of miracles. The king of Prussia challenged the French thinker to cite one authentic miracle. Voltaire's famous answer was, "Sire, the Jews." We could respond similarly, for our age offers the best evidence of Voltaire's response. During the last third of the most brutal century in human history, when humanity was beset by a sense of hopelessness and defeat, one great and awesome miracle occurred—the survival of the Jewish people. This is most dramatically manifest in the birth and progress of the State of Israel and almost equally in the growth and development of the American Jewish community. These themes find expression in these sermons.

It is my hope that this volume will bring to both Jews and non-Jews a greater understanding of and a deeper appreciation for the relevance and insight of Judaism. May these sermons advance the ageless task that has been enjoined upon us by our tradition—to love all God's children and to be closer to the Torah. Yes, our very existence is a miracle, but that miracle was earned by centuries of loyalty and devotion, sometimes in the midst of unspeakable cruelty and hatred expressed by those who despise the moral teachings of the Torah. The Jewish people bear witness to their heroic character. In the teachings of Judaism, one discerns a clear and courageous faith in life, in God's love, and in man's potential. These sermons have one message expressed in different ways. Compassion, care, and love are not peripheral to a meaningful life. They are forces that make life worth living. With them, we have the strength and courage to meet life's crises; without them, we exist as less than human beings. Scripture declares: "The righteous shall live by his faith." Let such faith guide us and teach us how to live.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Leypsa, who, for the past fifty years, has been a constant source of encouragement and inspiration and deserves a greater tribute than these words can express.

“She opens her mouth with wisdom . . .”

Proverbs: 31

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to A. Alfred Taubman, cherished friend, for making possible the publication of this volume by his generosity and support.

My appreciation goes to my Administrative Assistant, Shirlee Marshall, for her devotion and unfailing commitment to this project. Judy Haynes was of great help in this endeavor. I offer my appreciation to Chris Hebert of the University of Michigan Press for his skillful editing. I recognize with gratitude the wise suggestions of Rabbi Jack Riemer and his counsel, and the guidance of Christopher Tennyson.

The blessed memory of Ambassador David B. Hermelin endures in my heart.

Finally, I offer my appreciation to the men and women and youth of Congregation Shaarey Zedek for their support. They have opened their hearts in response to my concerns, my hopes and my dreams. Their voice can be heard in every sermon.

About the Author

For four decades, Rabbi Irwin Groner has been the spiritual leader of Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield, Michigan, one of the largest Conservative congregations in North America. As senior rabbi, he distinguished himself as an author, a communal leader, and a public speaker. In 2003, he received the Rabbi Simon Greenberg Award for Distinguished Rabbinic Service from the Jewish Theological Seminary. He won recognition for his role as president of the Rabbinical Assembly and for his work as chairman of the “Etz Hayim” Publication Committee that produced the acclaimed commentary on the Torah. His sermons, essays, and articles have been widely published.

Rabbi Groner chaired the Rabbinical Assembly conventions in 1976 and 1977 and cochaired the National Youth Commission of the United Synagogue from 1972 to 1976. In 1984, he was appointed by then governor of Michigan James Blanchard to serve on the Judicial Tenure Commission, the first clergyman appointed to that board. He has been actively involved in interfaith programs in metropolitan Detroit and served as president of the Michigan Board of Rabbis.

Rabbi Groner is the product of a distinguished rabbinic family in Chicago. He holds degrees from the University of Chicago and the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago. In 1982, he received an honorary doctorate from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Rabbi Groner and his wife, Leypsa, reside in Southfield, Michigan, and are the parents of Hon. David and Hon. Amy, Dr. Joel, and the late Debbie Groner.