



TIKVAH
ONLINE
ACADEMY

Jewish Revivalism: Esther Jungreis: “You Are A Jew”

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Thursday, Aug. 12 at 7:00 PM EDT

Course Description:

Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis was one of the most influential American Jews of the late 20th century. After surviving the Holocaust, she moved to America and founded Hineni, an international movement dedicated to “combating the spiritual holocaust that was occurring here in the United States.” Known as the “Jewish Billy Graham,” she was a popular author and dynamic orator, whose inspirational and impassioned speeches convinced many Jews to become more observant. In this seminar, we will study her “You Are a Jew” speech, delivered at Madison Square Garden in 1973 to thousands of attendees, which marked the beginning of the Hineni outreach movement. We will consider her form of rhetoric as well as the reception of this monumental speech. We will also discuss how Rebbetzin Jungreis’ speech fits into broader trends of religious revivalism in America in the 1970s, as well as ponder the implications of an Orthodox woman preaching traditionalism in front of thousands of listeners.

Guiding Questions:

1. What is the point of this speech? What message is Rebbetzin Jungreis trying to get across?
2. What kinds of examples does she use to back up her message (statistical evidence, historical proofs, emotional stories, halakhic concepts, etc.)?
3. What are some of Rebbetzin Jungreis’s rhetorical tactics? In other words, how does she use the way she speaks (choice of words, imagery used, etc.) to make a convincing argument?
4. Do you find her speech compelling? Why or why not?

“You Are A Jew”

Esther Jungreis

18 November 1973

(Singing *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*, throughout in background)

Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis: You are a Jew. You have traveled the four corners of the earth. You have been a citizen of every nation. You have mastered the nuances of every town. You have been a part of every people, and yet you have remained a people apart. You are a Jew. You have created civilization (applause).

You are a Jew. You have created civilization. You have given birth to every ideal that has shaped mankind; justice, peace, love, the dignity of man, have all had their genesis in your Torah. But, above all, you have been given the unique mission of proclaiming the oneness of G-d. You are a Jew. You have traveled the four corners of the earth. You have known oppression. You have experienced every form of persecution. Your body has been scorched by fire. You are weary. Your spirits bled. Your head aches. Your memory fails. You have forgotten your past. You cannot even recall your father's prayer. But there is one prayer, one little prayer that you do remember; one prayer that has been a beacon of faith throughout the centuries of darkness, a prayer that has brought you back to the faith of your ancestors, a prayer that speaks of your own mission in life.

Shema Yisrael, Hear oh Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one (applause).

(Singing *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*) (Applause)

At the dawn of history, the Almighty G-d called out unto man, but there was only one, only one who would heed the voice of G-d. He was my father, he was your father, he was our father Abraham. Abraham answered G-d by crying *hineni*, here am I, oh G-d, ready to serve you, ready to lend *kedusha*, sanctity, to my every act, ready to elevate my every deed through the acceptance of your *mitzvot*, ready to study your Torah *yomam valayla*, by day and by night. Ready to worship you with my every being; ready to proclaim your name for my inner soul; ready to say *hineni*, here am I, oh G-d. And in every generation this cry of *hineni* has been reiterated. Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, all the great prophets of Israel have always said, *hineni*, here am I, oh G-d.

In our generation the cry of *hineni* has become muted, silenced, muffled. *Hineni* no longer exists in the lexicon of the contemporary Jew, and are those prophets of doom who say that the Jew is dying, that he's being absorbed in the great universality melting pot, that he's being swallowed in the quick sand of assimilation; but tonight, tonight I shall tell you a secret. I shall tell you, my friends, that it is not so. The Jew shall always survive. You see, there is a secret to the survival of the Jew. The secret, which is mystical, which transcends time, which defies all logic; we all heard the voice of G-d and His voice entered our soul. His great light entered our hearts and that light of G-d is the *pintile Yid*, the flicker of the flight, a tiny flame, but it is always there in every Jewish breast, in every Jewish heart.

And in the silence of the night there is a whisper that you may hear, a whisper which echoes Jew, come home, come home to G-d, it is the whisper of the *pintile Yid* from Sinai, calling you home. It is a whisper, an echo, that has said *ani ma'amin*, I believe in perfect faith.

(Singing *Ani Maamin Beemuna Shleima bevi'as ha'Moshiach, v'af al pi sheyismameha im kol zeh achakeh lo b'chol yom sheyavo*)

Ani maamin, yes, I believe. I believe in perfect faith and I believed, even when the face of this world was enveloped in darkness. In another time, in another place, there was an old man who I knew. I first saw him at a railroad station. He was standing with his son. We were all waiting, waiting to be taken on a rendezvous with death. There were Nazi guards, savages, beating us on the head, forcing us into cattle cars, shouting and screaming and shooting sporadically into the crowd.

All of a sudden I saw that the old man's son fell. A bullet pierced his heart and the old man fell upon his child and he tried to revive him, only to discover that one of the German guards jeered at him and laughed; don't worry old man, a few more minutes, a little while longer, and you will join him. And soon we were herded into the cattle cars. Perhaps we were a hundred, perhaps we were two; like so many sardines there was no air to breathe, there was no food; there was only shooting, shouting, fear, agony. And I noticed the old man, he was sitting not too far from me. He was mumbling to himself. I couldn't understand why he did not drink his little water. Each of us had a small canteen of water. Why didn't the old man drink? And then I realized, poor old man, he must have lost his sanity. And so the train rolled on to our rendezvous with death.

All of a sudden the train came to a stop, the doors opened, shouting, screaming, bullets, rifle butts; *achtung*, and the old man was placed on line, on a line that he would be ready food for the flames of the crematorium. And suddenly I noticed something strange; the old man, he opened his canteen of water. And I said to myself ah, now, before he dies, the poor old man will quench his thirst, he will drink. But, strangely enough, the old man, he did not drink. Instead, he took the water and he poured it over his hands and he cried out *Yiskadal v'yiskadash shmei rabbah!* An old man who took his last drop of water to sanctify the name of G-d. You and I, we are the heirs of that old man.

(Singing *Ani Maamin Beemuna Shleima bevi'as ha'Moshiach, v'af al pi sheyismameha im kol zeh achakeh lo b'chol yom sheyavo*)

Yes, we are the heirs of the old man and, yet, a generation has been permitted to grow up without knowing him, without understanding him, without comprehending why he lived or why he died.

Meet Melanie. Her story is the story of our generation. Her life is a reflection of the agonies of our time. Melanie was a student at Boston university. She became involved with the drug scene, and when she was not on drugs, she transported her mind into another world by turning onto music, and the music always had to be loud, very loud. The music had to shriek, had to rail. The music had to be so loud that it would obliterate her environment, that it would dull her senses and deaden her mind and numb the agony in her soul.

Who can help Melanie? Who will understand her pain? Perhaps a change of environment, a change of place? And so Melanie is transported to Tel Aviv, but instead of spending her days and nights at the University of Tel Aviv, she spends her time tripping out on the beaches of Eilat. And then Melanie writes in her diary that she knows no peace, she has no rest, her soul aches, frustration on every level. It is not drugs that Melanie seeks, but a way of life. Melanie wants purpose, reason for existence, and Melanie is told that in India there are Jewish students who are joined in Ashram.

So Melanie takes a trip, a voyage of self discovery, to India. But, on her way, she stops off in Kabul, Afghanistan, and over there in a chicken bizarre she takes an overdose of drugs and, at the age of 19, she dies. A young Jewish girl, dead, in a chicken bizarre in Kabul, Afghanistan. Melanie died because there was no one in this whole room to speak to Melanie, to reach out to her, to tell Melanie that her name was not Melanie, but that her name was Miriam Devorah Rachel; Melanie, Melanie. Is it reason, purpose that you seek in life? Then open the books, you are part of *mamlechet kohanim*, a priestly kingdom. Melanie, Melanie, you stood at Mount Sinai, you heard the voice of G-d. His great light illuminated you so. Open the books, discover your inner self. You are part of *mamlechet kohanim*, the priestly kingdom, the holy nation, you have a purpose in your life!

(Singing *Yedid Nefesh Av Harachaman Meshoch Avdecha El Retzonecha...*)

Come with me to the universities. Meet the Jewish young people of this generation, young Jews who have expertise in every field; science, technology, all at their command. They are entwined in the world of culture, and yet their own heritage eludes them. I confront them with a challenge and I say unto them, *banay*, my children, *mamlechet kohanim*, the descendents of the priestly kingdom, who amongst you could tell me, could identify, the names, the titles of the great books of our People? Not the contents of the books, I know you never studied; but just the titles. The titles of *chamishei chumshei Torah*, *shisha sidrei Mishnah*, the books of the Talmud, the great books of our Sages. Who amongst you could identify just the names?

And my challenge is always greeted by silence, a silence which chills my soul. And I say to myself, *Ribbono Shel Olam*, Almighty G-d, *mi eleh*, who are these? What happened to us? Was it only yesterday that we had young people, children, who were able to record from memory the holy words of the Torah? Was it only yesterday? And all of a sudden I realize that the tables are turned. It's not the blacks, it's not the Puerto Ricans who are deprived; but it's the Jews. Young Jews who grew up in the quilted ghettos of suburbia, who have been given everything and yet they possess nothing. Young Jews who have been given everything that money could buy, and yet they are poor and deprived.

Experts in every field, and yet their own heritage eludes them. A generation that cannot recall its past, a people living without a memory. This is the generation that has been described by the Prophet Amos, *hineh yamim baim neum Hashem*, and they shall come upon you, says the Lord, *v'shalachti raav baaretz*, and I shall send a hunger into your land. *Lo raav lalechem*, it shall not be a hunger for bread, *v'lo tzama lamayim*, nor shall it be a thirst for water, *ki im lishmoa et divrei Hashem*, but it shall be a hunger for the word of G-d.

(Singing *Lo raav lalechem v'lo tzama lamayim ki im lishmoa et divrei Hashem*)

This is the generation that has been raised to worship at the altars of sophistication, culture and education. They have been led to believe that that veneer of intellectualism is the passport to success in the great American society. But this is the generation that has seen these gods fail. I can testify to this, I have seen the limitations and the sterility of education. I am a graduate of Bergen-Belsen. I saw doctors, graduates of medical school use their knowledge of medicine to dissect infants, to operate without anesthetics. I saw lawyers, graduates of law school, use their knowledge of law to enact the Nuremberg Laws which made Jews subhuman. And I saw scientists use their knowledge of science to build factories where death was manufactured. And I saw chemists discover

gases that would annihilate our people in seconds. For the first time in the history of human beings, man was turned into matter. My hair and the hair of my people was transformed into blankets. My skin and the skin of people was shaped into lampshades. My born and the born of my people were ground into fertilizer. And all this was done in an ambience of culture; Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner always playing in the background. The Germans were a cultured people, sensitive to the nuances of music, and yet completely insensitive to the pitiful cry of an infant.

Tell me, my friends, what sort of a man is this man? A graduate of universities? What is the meaning of this education? After Auschwitz, we discovered the gods that failed; man stands alone, defenseless, naked, frightened, terrified.

(Singing *Ken Nafshi Taarot Eilecha Elokim*)

Lo al halechem levado yichye ha'adam, not by bread alone does man live. There must be something to life which transcends the body. Education cannot simply be an intellectual exercise, the acquisition of subject matter. If education is to have meaning, it must touch you in the soul. It must give reason for your existence. It must lend meaning and purpose to your life. A man has a soul and his soul yearns for G-d. *Nafshi taarog eilecha Elokim*.

(Singing *Ken Nafshi Taarot Eilecha Elokim*)

Tonight I tell you that we belong to a privileged generation. With our very eyes we have beheld the fulfillment of Jewish destiny; G-d's promise to His People. After 2000 years of exile, we have returned to our Land. Who would have believed it possible? As the heavens and as the earth, if there ever has occurred such a thing, a nation coming home after 2000 years; the words of the prophet have been realized; *kob amar Hashem*, thus says the Lord, *hineh ani lokeach et bni Yisrael mibein bagoyim*, behold I will gather my people, the Children of Israel, from among the nations. I shall bring them home. They shall dwell in their land, never again to be uprooted. Yes, we have returned home, home to our Land. We have come to redeem our Land, through sacrifice, through *kedusha*, sanctity.

(*Hatikvah* playing in background)

In *Eretz Yisrael* there was a young boy who volunteered to be a *tzanchan*, a parachutist, in the war. He was hit by a sniper's bullet in his left arm. He was taken to the hospital. And over there the doctors had no option but to operate and amputate his arm. After the operation, they were concerned that this boy would go into shock. After all, when a boy wakes up to discover that his arm is missing, it's only natural that he should go into shock. But this boy, when he awoke, do you know what he said? He said please, I would like to speak to the rabbi here in the hospital. And the rabbi came and he said, *beni*, my son, what can I do for you? And he said, rabbi, all my life from the day that I was *bar mitzvah'd*, every day I put on *tefillin*. And now, now the Almighty has given me the privilege to give part of my body for *Yerushalayim*. I not only want to put on *tefillin*, but I want to sing *Hallel*. I want to *daven*. I want to pray. But, rabbi, my arm is missing, and the Jewish law requires that the *tefillin* upon the left. Tell me, rabbi, where do I put the *tefillin*? Where do I put the *tefillin*? And the rabbi answered and he raised his hands towards heaven and he said, *Ribbono Shel Olam*, oh mighty G-d, *chavivim Yisrael el Hamakom*, beloved and important are the Jewish People to you. *Kensharim kalu*, they are swifter than eagles, *ume'arayos gaveru*, and they are stronger than lions, *la'asos retzon konam*, to do your will.

And the rabbi went back to the boy and he said to the boy, *beni*, my son, it is my decision that you should place the tefillin upon the remaining butt. I will help you. And the boy said, *rebbe*, do not be angry, my rabbi. Please, you could arrange it. Take me to the Kotel first, to the holy wall, and let me put on my tefillin over there. And by helicopter, on a stretcher, the boy was taken to the Wall. And as he was taken close to the ancient stones. He was washed the stones with his tears. He kissed the crevices with his lips. Tell me, friend, have you ever heard of such a thing? A brave strong soldier who walks (inaudible) into fire. Why does he crawl like a baby when he sees an ancient stone? You are a Jew and you know the answer; because you are also crying. It's the *pintele Yid*, the flicker of the flight, that tiny flame which is dormant in your soul which comes from Sinai which whispers to you day and night, Jew, come home.

Each of us, you and I, we can all become the flame again; to each child, *shavu banim*, come home. You were at Mount Sinai, you heard the voice of G-d, the Torah is your possession, your *yerusha*, *v'higata ba yomam valayla*, and you should study it day and night. *Mamlechet kohanim*, a priestly kingdom.

Children, *shavu banim*, come home, children, all of us. A flicker of the flight, a tiny flame, and if you will it, that tiny flame shall become a great fire from which the word *hineni*, here am I, oh G-d, shall emerge. *Hineni*, here am I, oh G-d (applause).

(Singing *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*)