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 Rabbi JOSEPH KRAUSKOPF, D. D.

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Lincoln—Master and Martyr

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Lincoln—Master and Martyr.

A DISCOURSE, AT TEMPLE KENESETH ISRAEL,

BY

RABBI JOSEPH KRAUSKOPF, D. D.

Philadelphia, February 12th, 1911.

It was fifty-five years yesterday that Abraham Lincoln left Springfield, Illinois, to proceed to the capital of the nation as its President-elect. His friends came to take leave of him, and, while their hearts rejoiced because of the honor that had been conferred upon their fellow-townsmen, there were tears in the eyes of many of them at the thought of his parting from them. Lincoln himself was deeply touched. Had he and they a presentiment that they might never see each other again? "Friends," said he, when the moment of parting arrived, "I know not how soon, or if ever, I shall see you again. A duty has devolved upon me greater than that which devolved upon any other man since Washington. He never would have succeeded except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied. On the same Almighty Being I place my reliance. Pray that I may receive that Divine assistance, without which I cannot succeed, but with which success is assured."

There is little doubt but that the prayers thus asked for were fervently offered, and not by his townspeople alone but also by millions of his supporters throughout the troubled land. Was their prayer answered? There are those who say "No," and, in proof, point to a whole nation inconsolable, because of his martyrdom, a little more than four years later.

As for me, I know of no better instance of prayer answered than that which was offered for Lincoln in the hour of his leaving home. He did not ask for prayers to escape a death of martyrdom, he but asked for supplications that success might attend his labors to save the country from dismemberment and to remove a malignant cancer that threatened the life of the nation. In a little more than four years, the Union was saved, slavery was abolished, and his work being done, the greatest since Washington's days, martyrdom came as a halo of glory.

Of course, had mortals had the disposition of his fate, they would have assigned to him a far different end than death by an assassin's bullet, five short days after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox, on the very day of the rehoisting of Old Glory over Fort Sumter, and but a little more than a month after a grateful people had entrusted itself to his wise and fearless leadership for another term of four years. They would have had him live to a good, old age, they would have had him continue in the full enjoyment of the fruitage of his labor, until death would have gently translated him from the field of former labors to his peaceful and eternal rest.

But, God's ways, as the prophet says, are not our ways, neither are His thoughts our thoughts. When I consider the wisdom that was manifested in the choice of this peerless leader, I cannot but feel that in his tragic end, when his work was done, there may have been a wisdom no less divine than that which called him when his work was needed. Possibly his highest reward lay in having been spared the ingratitude of the nation he had saved. Many a leader might have died happy had he died when his work was done, had he died before adulation could turn to envy, and envy to malice, and malice to calumny, and calumny to base ingratitude.

Man would have
decreed different
fate.

Martyrdom
probably decree of
God.

Every move in the life of Abraham Lincoln speaks of providential call. He was the selected of God before he was the elected of the people. What people, unaided by divine direction, would have dared to select for its leader this untried man of the untrained West of that day, during the crisis in which our nation found itself prior to the outbreak of the civil war? They would have sought among experienced statesmen, among men of proved executive power, of tried leadership, of heroic military prowess. They would have inquired among the universities for a man of exceptional attainments, or among the illustrious families for one whose ancient and distinguished name might dazzle the masses and command the largest following of the select.

Eliminate the will of God, and the election of Lincoln as President of the United States becomes inexplicable. The capitol of Washington had never before, and has not since, seen a President like Lincoln. Never before had a man received so little training for so exalted an office, never had a man possessed such few graces for a position that was to bring him in contact with the most polished of the land. And yet, notwithstanding all these handicaps, no man has ever mastered such gigantic problems, within so short a time, and with so little preparation, as he. Long before his first term expired, there was no statesman in all the land comparable with him, no master of the English tongue superior to him, no military strategist equal to him. Read his deliberations with his cabinet, read his consecration of the battlefield of Gettysburg, his second inaugural address, his orders to his generals, or, better still, retrace your steps to the poverty-stricken log-cabin in the mountain-wilds of Kentucky, where his cradle stood, and then follow his career, step by step, from cabin to capitol, and tell of another like it, in history or in literature, in fiction or in truth.

Was selected by
God before elected
by man.

Never before a
career like his.

His father was a backwoodsman, shiftless and thriftless, unlettered and unmannered. His mother, an invalid, was laid

From cabin
to capitol.

into the grave before he was yet nine years old. We next see him in the new lands of Indiana, in the midst of the old hardships, differing from the other in one respect only, in their affording him an opportunity for some schooling, seven months long, the only schooling in all his life. But, if of the school of letters he had little, he had more than usually falls to the lot of man of the school of life. From earliest childhood, life had meant for him hardship and struggle. And its meaning continued hardship and struggle until the end of his days, now as a farm-hand, now as a rail-splitter, now as a boatman, as a shop keeper, soldier, legislator, lawyer, congressman, and finally as President of the United States.

And while the slow ascent from log cabin to White House, from farm-hand to President, was marked by flashes of intellectual and moral greatness, revelations of them

His fitness at
first unrecognized.

were vouchsafed only to friends and clients or chance acquaintances. To the Eastern and Southern people, from among whom the Presidents and great men had hitherto come, he seemed, when first they beheld him, a gnarled, homely-featured, horny-handed frontiersman, more fit to drive a yoke of oxen than to guide a nation, at best fitted to direct the policy of a hoosier town, but never to guide the destiny of a great nation.

We have the testimony of the impression his appearance made on a former townsman of ours, Mr. Alexander McClure,

Even by his
friends.

who had done much toward effecting his election, and who had proceeded to Springfield to confer with him on matters of national policy. "My first sight of him," reads the account, "was a deep disappointment. Before me stood a middle-aged man, tall, gaunt, ungainly, homely, ill-clad, slouchy pantaloons, vest held shut by a button or two, tightly fitting sleeves to exaggerate his long, bony arms, all

supplemented by an awkwardness that was uncommon among men of intelligence. I confess that my heart sank within me as I remembered that this was the man chosen by a great nation to become its ruler in the gravest period of its history.”

It was not long, however, before Mr. McClure discovered that Lincoln’s brains were all the richer for the poverty of his clothes, and his spirit all the greater for ^{Fitness made} the homeliness of his style. And it was not ^{manifest at last.} long before the nation discovered that it was God and not men who had chosen Lincoln ; that when the people cast their vote for him, they but expressed the will of Providence, which had decreed that the nation consecrated with the blood of our Colonial Fathers shall not be severed, and that the slave shall be free. They remembered what the Bible says respecting the choice of the shepherd David over his brothers, who, in external appearance, seemed the better fitted for the kingship. “The Lord seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” They recalled the humble origin of Moses and Jesus and Luther, and recognized that they whom God chooses for His work must have other distinctions than looks or wealth or polish. They must have souls of heroes and martyrs. They must serve as anvils in the smithies of affliction, to be prepared to serve as hammers of God when the hour for striking comes.

It was a critical time in the story of our nation, the most critical since the days of our conflict with our mother country across the sea. The hand of brother was lifted ^{And in the hour} against brother. The South stood arrayed against ^{of greatest need.} the North. The hour called for a great man, for a man wise of heart as well as of mind, for a man of inspired soul and of resolute will, for a man whose personal ties and family traditions counted as nothing in the balance, for a man who, being of the common people, could best appeal to that people in the hour of the country’s greatest need. The hour called for a

man whose labors and ambitions were dedicated to his people, and whose purposes were consecrated to his God.

Such a man was Lincoln. A man more honest than he never lived. Rivals derided him, parties ridiculed him, papers caricatured him, yet no man ever dared to breathe
He had the heart of a saint. the breath of suspicion upon any of his motives.

Unlike so many of the schooled diplomats and statesmen, who, in their eager development of brain, stave the heart, his brain was all the richer, because of its blending with his heart, and his heart all the fuller because of its mingling with his brain. An unkind word never passed his lips ; an unkind deed never stained his hand ; an unworthy thought never polluted his mind. His countenance, rugged and gnarled as it was, was as open as a page of Scriptures; his eye as clear as innocence itself.

No ambition, no lust of power or wealth or fame bore him to the heights he occupied. He had never sought an honor or an office, had never thought himself fit for a position of responsibility when it was entrusted to him. There was no more surprised man in all the land than he was when the choice of President fell to him, and it would have been difficult to find one who could have accepted it with greater reluctance. Forty years long had he yearned for the coming of a man strong and wise enough to rid the nation of the curse of slavery, without severing its bond of union. Forty years long had that hope of emancipation burned within him as a like hope had burned within the heart of Moses. And when the call came to him at last, as it came to Moses, when the voice of God called out to him, through the voice of the people, saying : " I have seen the afflictions of the enslaved. I am weary of the strife that is tearing the nation asunder. Get thee to Washington, and enter there upon the work of redemption and of union," when that call came, he was mastered by a dread like that which overcame Moses. How should he

hope to succeed where the mightiest had failed? "Seek ye another and an abler man than I am," said he, "This is a work for giants, not for pigmies."

It was a work for a giant, and for just such a giant as he. It required a giant's heart to make an entry into the capital of the nation, as President-elect, such as he was And the soul of a hero. obliged to make to escape the assassin's hand— in the dead of the night, by stealth and by a circuitous route. It required a giant's mind to present an inaugural address such as he presented on March 4th, 1861, and to outline a policy such as he laid before his cabinet. The members of that cabinet, proud of their statesmanship and scholarship and polish and influence, had believed that the untrained West-erner would be but a figurehead, and would gladly submit to the superior wisdom of his secretaries. They soon learned that their chief was a ruler by the grace and call of God, a ruler with the inspiration and heroism of an ancient Jewish prophet, with the wisdom of a sage, and with the compelling force of a conqueror. Before a month of his presidential term had elapsed, the nation marvelled at him as much as it had doubted, and the South realized that it had entered upon a war from which there would be no turning back until either the one side or the other had been crushed.

And a war to the finish it proved. There was no abatement in its vigor, no change in its policy, until the South recognized the stars and stripes as the common His purpose immovable. flag, until it conceded to the enslaved negro his liberty and his other human rights. There had been irresoluteness and vacillation too long and at too terrible a cost. Had the issue been squarely met, had the voice of God been listened to instead of the voice of politics, had radical measures been adopted instead of compromises, in short, had a Lincoln been in the Presidential chair half a century earlier, there would have been no civil war, no ravaged states, no

devastated cities, no paralyzed industries, no impoverished people, no six hundred and twenty-five battles, in which human blood flowed like water, which widowed and orphaned and darkened tens of thousands of homes.

Others before him had seen as clearly as he the calamity that threatened the nation. Long before him, Patrick

Others dared not
to risk their
political future.

Henry had said that the slave question "gives a gloomy prospect to future times," and George Mason had written to the legislature of Virginia "the laws of impartial Providence may avenge our injustice upon our posterity," and Jefferson had said: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and that His justice cannot sleep for ever," and Madison had said "where slavery exists there the Republican theory becomes fallacious" —but, while they saw the danger as he saw it, they feared to dare as he dared. Convinced that it had been divinely ordained that our nation should be a union of all states without a slave in any one of them, he saw no other road to harmony between the North and South than a decision upon the battlefield whether or not individual states had a right to secede, and whether or not all men are born politically free and equal, under a Republican form of government. It was in our old Independence Hall where he solemnly declared his belief in the Declaration of Independence and in its guarantee of liberty to all, and reaching a climax, and speaking as if inspired he said: "If the country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I would rather be assassinated on the spot than surrender it."

He did not surrender it, and he paid for it with his life. The assassin's hand struck him down, but not until he had saved his country, until the stars and stripes waved again over the North and South, until the shackles of slavery were broken off the American negro.

He dared to risk
even his life.

The turf has grown thick upon the graves of those who fought and died in that long and bitter contest. The enmities of half a century ago are forgotten. But not forgotten in the name of Abraham Lincoln. Not forgotten in the sacrifice of martyrdom which he laid upon the altar of his country. Annually, on his natal day, a grateful posterity burnishes into new lustre his crown of glory, and piously resolves that, as long as our vast oceans shall beat against our shores, as long as our mighty mountain systems shall lift their heads into the blue empyrean, as long as our proud Old Glory shall wave over Northern and Southern capitols so long shall the name of Abraham Lincoln live in the loyal American heart as the bravest of our heroes, as the greatest of our martyrs.

The most valient of
our heroes, the
greatest of our
martyrs.

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— BY —

Rabbi JOSEPH KRAUSKOPF, D.D.

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