

AIDS Lecture November 2, 1987
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Address

By

C. Everett Koop, MD, ScD
Surgeon General
Of the
U.S. Public Health Service
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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It was only one day since I had addressed the 4th Presbyterian Church congregation in Chicago.

This occasion was an extraordinary one for me in my crusade against AIDS. With the opportunity to speak to the largest Jewish Assembly available to me and I wanted to put my best foot forward and establish myself not only as a man of faith, but one sympathetic to Judaism and tie the problem of AIDS into some aspect of Jewish faith that would leave a lasting impression upon this audience – especially coming from a gentile.

Therefore, I started out recognizing and appreciating the leadership shown by the group to which I was speaking and mentioned Los Angeles Rabbi Schindler and his early challenge to do something about AIDS. Also, the work of the UAHC Committee on AIDS, headed by Dr. Boris O'Mansky, which already has produced a great deal of useful information on the subject. Rabbi Schindler had invited me to address this session of the 1987 General Assembly.

I made it clear that I was half-way through my second term as Surgeon General and during the previous six years I had spoken to Catholic priests, Episcopalian vestrymen, to Baptist ministers, and to Presbyterian elders as well as Mormon bishops and Navajo medicine men. This however, was my first formal, invitational presentation to an Assembly of Rabbis and Jewish lay leaders. I called it my Bar Mitzvah and from that springboard launched into twelve pages of discussion of the Genesis account of Abram (father of many) his wife Sarai and his nephew Lott leaving Ur of the Chaldees to go on a divine directed journey to the land of Canaan. I went through Abram's change of name to Abraham (father of nations).

There was a reason in all this because I was leading up the passage where Abraham had the "chutzpah" to bargain with the Lord. I reminded the audience of the occasion when the Lord wanted to destroy Sodom, but Abraham argued that the Lord might have to save the lives of thousands of not very nice people, in order to also save the lives of as few as ten righteous people. This was not the first time that Abraham and the Lord had had a conversation. On a previous occasion the Lord had promised Abraham when he was 75 years old, that He would make through him a great nation, He would bless him, and make him in turn a blessing to others. Abram – now Abraham – was doing just that in his conversation with the Lord when he was 99, and he was speaking clearly with a new voice of faith. So, Abraham was becoming a new kind

of religious man – a responsive man – the kind of man Rabbi Leo Baeck in our own century described as a “reverent man”.

I made it clear that I did not pretend to be a Baeck scholar, but did speak of my coming across his writings when I was exploring the roots of Nazism in Germany years before. Rabbi Baeck was an extraordinary human being and a brilliant clergyman. Baeck had wrestled with the meaning of “reverence” and wrote this: “Reverence, is man’s feeling that something higher confronts him, and whatever is higher is ethically superior and, therefore, makes demands and directs, speaks to man, and requires his reply, his decision.”

Concerning Sodom, Abraham, “talked back to God” which demanded boldness, which I personally believed was born of faith.

Because Baeck said that “Reverence is the great impelling force, the active aspect of wisdom.” I was able to take this proposition of Baeck’s that reverence and holiness are not just a couple of notions to sit around and contemplate, but could be used in actual confrontation with AIDS.

So by page 14 of this speech, I finally got around to saying, “this pandemic of AIDS... what it was doing to some of our people...what it could do to all of our people...and what we must begin to think and do in order to conquer AIDS, the most vicious of infectious diseases in the human race”.

I said the final victory of the disease of AIDS will much more likely spring from the impelling force of compassionately committed, ethically motivated, and courageously reverent men and women with little or no medical background at all. Then I went on to explain what I said by my usual litany of AIDS being a mystery, fatal, and talked about how the disease was transmitted.

Through all of this presentation, unlike that which I would make to an ordinary audience, I wove in religious references to affirmation and confirmation and quoted Martin Buber very appropriately in reference to AIDS when he said, “that if mankind is victim of a hideous mystery, we cannot give up on him...we cannot abandon him”. Rather, as Buber continued to argue, we must affirm his life and his condition. We must “liberate him from the dread of abandonment” – which is the foretaste of death.

Statistics were brought in to confirm the position I was taking and I went on to point out that some of the reactions to AIDS were very contrary to western ethical traditions, which I paraphrased as, “We don’t care, because these people with AIDS are as good as dead anyway”.

I went to Rabbi Baeck again, who, when, with others was awaiting death at Auschwitz, would not take an easy way of escape provided him, but stayed with his people facing the gas chambers rather than abandon the lowliest of them all. Marvelous recent historical examples so appropriate to the AIDS epidemic.

I finally got into the fact that I have presented in so many other lectures on AIDS that most people get AIDS by doing things that other people don’t do and don’t like other people doing..

This enabled me to get back to Abraham's pleading with God for Sodom and asking if we should nevertheless work for and plead for the lives of AIDS victims.

That may seem like a theoretical question, but in the climate of the day, it was not. In this regard, I raised the ethical question if we suddenly had an effective safe vaccine for AIDS, who would be the first people to whom we would give it? The answer, of course, would be the people who did things we don't do and don't like, but they are the people who should be given the first vaccine. Are we up to it?

AIDS certainly is a disease for which medicine can only offer a partial cure, the rest has to come from a social and spiritual strength of society.

It seemed appropriate to end with a quotation from Baeck: "The future will signify the right of the present; the future will give its testimony for what the present really is."

Because of the nature of this talk, no index is provided.