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Wise, Stephen S. Eulogy by Philip Bernstein. 28 May 1949.

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Stephen S. Wise

EULOGY ON STEPHEN S. WISE

delivered by

Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein

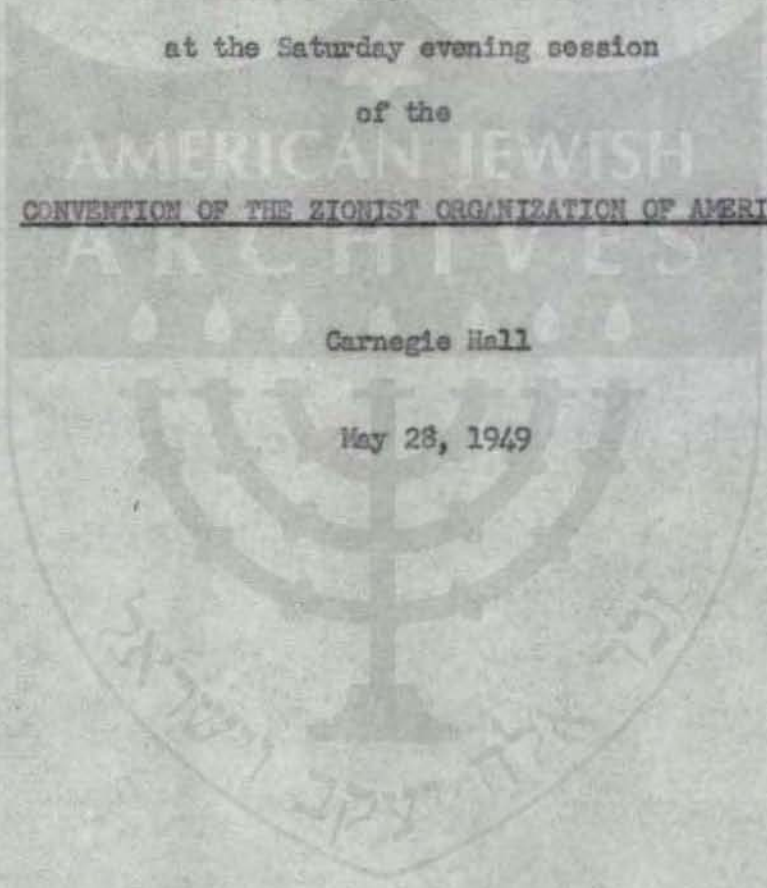
at the Saturday evening session

of the

AMERICAN JEWISH
CONVENTION OF THE ZIONIST ORGANIZATION OF AMERICA

Carnegie Hall

May 28, 1949



Project: American Jewish Archives

AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES, U.S.A.

In this great hall we feel very near to the living presence of Stephen S. Wise. We see again his striking, majestic figure here on the platform which he adorned for nearly half a century. We hear the great, rich, resonant voice in prayer, in prophetic affirmation or denunciation. We smile again at the flashing wit. We see the great crowds that thronged to hear him that they might be entertained or helped or inspired by him. Here was a great New York and American institution and it went by the name of Stephen S. Wise.

He was a rare human being with a remarkable combination of qualities. He was strong and he was kind. He was courageous and he was generous. His life was stamped with integrity and his human relationships were infused with love. He was a giant among men and yet he was humble. He was a prince but no one more completely identified himself with the masses of his people.

In a Memorial Day sermon delivered here on October 10, 1932, Rabbi Wise said, "Remembrance is gratitude for precious gifts of life and love. Hope is the unvoiced supplication for their renewal....remembrance will not let die life's beautiful and precious bonds; hope dares to breathe the spark of immortality into what has been. Thus memory is a guardian and hope is a liberator."

What shall we remember about Stephen Wise? For what precious gifts shall we be grateful? What are the bonds that link us to him in death as they did in life?

Fundamental to his outlook was his faith in his fellowmen and his love for them. A profound faith in democracy was in the very core of his being. He helped to form and he led the American and World Jewish Congress because they represented the democratic approach to the problems of Jewish life. Because he found the American pulpit not unfettered, he established the Free Synagogue. Because he was dissatisfied with the limitations imposed on the training and the outlook of the rabbinate, he established a new, progressive, liberal seminary, the Jewish Institute of Religion.

His was a passionate love for America. Unlike those born in this country, he said, "Foreign born Americans like myself do not take America for granted. We look upon American citizenship as the most precious and sacred of boons." But he loved America not just as it was but at its best. He resented and resisted exploitation, discrimination, corruption. He attacked dishonesty in high places and bigotry in low. No consideration of expediency could deter him from speaking the truth. "Because I am an American I am free. Because I am an American I shall live and labor to the end that all men be set free."

He had a passionate love for his own people. The crucial test of a Jew is his feeling of identification with the fate of his fellow Jews. It was because the American Council for Judaism could not successfully meet this test that he detested them. He could not forgive them for attempting to impose an ideology born of timidity and sycophancy, on European Jewry struggling desperately for survival and national rebirth.

He successfully met this test all his life. The Jews of the world knew that Stephen Wise loved them. His name was a symbol in Europe. In the concentration camps, "Stephanya" was the password for America.

I will never forget the scene in the Zeilshelm displaced persons camp in August, 1946. All the inhabitants had gathered in the public square to greet the visitors from America. Prominent as were the others, Wise was the center of the people's interest and affection. As he completed his talk he saw a little girl about six years old. He lifted her up in his arms, pointed to himself, said, "Jüdischer Vergangenheit," then pointing to the little girl, "Jüdischer Zukunft." It was a dramatic gesture but it was full of meaning. The people understood that here was a man who loved them and who had faith in their future.

Under-girding this faith in the Jew as well as his faith in America was Rabbi Wise's profound religious conviction. He was never more genuine nor more stirring than in prayer. His meditations before the Kaddish were among the most

moving religious experiences many of us have ever known. His accomplishments in the founding of the Free Synagogue and the Jewish Institute of Religion can be measured. His spiritual influence on the millions who listened to him in the course of half a century is imponderable.

These qualities culminated in his Zionism. It was nurtured by the deepest prophetic impulses of Judaism. He was the living answer to those Jews who, mostly unreligious themselves, attack Zionism as secularism. His was the prophet's not the philanthropist's love for Zion. His, too, was the prophet's love of his people. Thus he responded immediately, passionately, to Herzl's call. He participated actively in the Second Zionist Congress and was fond of recalling Herzl's prediction that within fifty years there would be a Jewish State in Palestine. He became a founder of the Zionist Organization of America and was its first secretary. He poured his great gifts into the organization and extension of the movement and, in time, became its President. His eloquence was always at its service. No one spoke more effectively nor worked more assiduously for the United Palestine Appeal and in time he became its Chairman. Widely respected for his unflinching devotion and his leadership he became a spearhead of political activities on behalf of the movement, and found his rightful place in the leadership of the Jewish Agency, the World Zionist Organization and the American Zionist Emergency Council.

It is important to note that Stephen Wise did not regard Zionism as a form of defeatism or escapism. He saw it against a background of Jewish history and Jewish needs as the democratic, progressive, statesmanlike solution of the Jewish problem. It was not because he despaired of democracy that he was a Zionist but because he believed in it and in its extension. So he had faith in America and he loved it with a fervor akin to his love for his own people. I know of no one who was more completely a Jew and an American than he.

The lesson and the example of his life are very much needed today.

The establishment of the Jewish state is one of the noblest and most heroic achievements of modern times. Its accomplishments on every front, - defense, immigration, agriculture, industry, culture already surpass our fondest hopes. There will soon be a great, flourishing Jewish state with a population of millions which will not only solve the basic Jewish problem in the world but will adorn the family of nations. To this consummation American Jews have made and will continue to make significant contributions.

However, there will remain in this country a great Jewish community. Its roots will be deep in American soil. We will face problems but we must not and will not run away from them. We will meet them with two-fisted courage, confident that the struggle against injustice is not only good for the Jew but for America and all mankind and will ultimately yield victory. Stephen Wise once said that, "True redemption will come to the Jew only if he bears his name and every other burden imposed upon him by destiny with gleaming courage and with radiant nobleness which whether or not they evoke the love of the world without shall justify the Jew in his own sight and hallow him anew in the presence of the Eternal to Whom alone he is ultimately accountable." He taught the Jew to meet his problems here with courage and self respect. At the same time, he labored that "the spirit of American freedom rule over all the sons and daughters of men."

He believed, as we must, that the survival of American democracy is indispensable to the welfare of mankind. And what hope would there be for little Israel if democracy should go under and world organization with it? The answer to the Jewish problem as to the total human problem is the freedom and the equality in which Stephen Wise so passionately believed.

It was this democratic approach to Zionism which made him so effective an interpreter to the American people and their leaders. He touched a responsive chord in the hearts of innumerable Americans who sensed in the Zionist enterprise the same pioneering spirit which founded this country and made it great. He won a host

of converts among the great leaders of the land, particularly among the progressive elements. He helped to establish a sympathetic climate of opinion in America without which the establishment of the Jewish state might have been long delayed.

I spoke with him not long before his death and know that the crowning satisfaction of his latter days was the realization of the dream for which he had labored so magnificently and sacrificially. He had lived to see Israel redeemed. He had lived to see the fulfillment of his faith as expressed by the poet, Tschernichowsky,

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In that day shall my own people
Rooted in its soil arise,
Shake the yoke from off its shoulders
And the darkness from its eyes.
Life and love and strength and action
In their heart and blood shall beat,
And their hopes shall be both heaven
And the earth beneath their feet.
Then a new song shall be lifted
To the young, the free, the brave,
And the wreath to crown the singer
Shall be gathered from my grave.