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The Myth of the Wandering Jew and the Conquering Jew, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE MYTH OF THE WANDERING JEW AND THE
CONQUERING JEW," AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY
MORNING, MAY 1, 1921, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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The legend of the Wandering Jew is undoubtedly based upon a sentence in the Book of Matthew, where Jesus says to some of his disciples: "There be some among ye who will not see death till the Son of Man shall come into His kingdom." That same idea is repeated again in the Gospel of John, where it is intimated that John would be the man that would not die till the Master would come to His kingdom again.

The Wandering Jew is the story of a shoemaker of Jerusalem, who, on the day of the crucifixion, mocked and taunted Jesus on His way to the cross, and because of that Jesus said unto him: "Thou wilt not die till I shall have entered my kingdom." The legend is rather recent. It first appeared in Germany about the year 1602, in a book called "Kurtze Beschreibung und Erzählung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus." This legend of the deathless and Wandering Jew gained rapid currency throughout Europe, and many editions of this book were published and many translations of it made; and you know how very often the story has become the theme of a poem or a novel, one of the most notable of which is from the pen of Eugene Sue--"The Wandering Jew," published in 1844. The most recent is the play by E. Temple Thurston, called The Wandering Jew, produced

in England last year with great success.

Now, the Wandering Jew is undoubtedly the symbol of the wandering Jewish people. The fact of his dispersion, and his apparent immortality, his deathlessness, gave rise to this legend, that is characteristic of most legends. They are the expression of a popular idea or notion or conviction embodied in the story of an individual.

I want to tell you this morning the story of Thurston's play--"The Wandering Jew," because to my mind it is one of the finest usages made of the legend, and also because it embodies a fundamental truth, of which I wish to speak this morning. The play is divided into four phases. The first phase takes place in a house in the city of Jerusalem on the day of the crucifixion. The real drama, the real action, takes place without, but the actors tell of what is taking place outside of the house.

Judith, the wife of a Jew named Mattathias, lies dying, and she calls in her last moments for her child, whom she left when she fled from her husband before she married Mattathias. Her sister Rachael tells her of what has been transpiring in the city during the last few days. It is now Passover, and the conversation drifts to the Nazarene, to his triumph, to his betrayal, and to his coming crucifixion. Mattathias has gone to see the Nazarene, urged by his wife Judith, hoping he would come and lay his hands upon her and heal her. Mattathias returns furious. He is a man that is fierce in love and

fierce in hate--a crude sort of a man. And he tells his wife that the Nazarene had said unto him, instead of offering to come and heal her, that he should permit her to go back to her child and then she will be cured.

Rachael tells of the crowd that is on its way to Calvary. The noise of the crowd reaches the house. Mattathias, in his anger, says he will go out and speak to this Nazarene and curse him and spit upon him; and Judith endeavors to dissuade him from it. Just as the top of the cross, with a halo of brilliancy around it, passes by the window, Mattathias rushes out of the house, bent upon his mission to humiliate the Nazarene. After a while he returns, dazed, ~~sonfounded~~, stupified. He had spat upon the Nazarene; he had taunted him. The Nazarene had turned to him and said: "I will not wait for thee, but thou shalt wait for me till I come for thee again."

He wonders whether that was a curse put upon him. Judith dies; Mattathias feels himself alone in the world; life holds nothing for him, so he determines to die likewise. Taking his dagger he plunges it into his bosom, but the dagger breaks and the pieces fall to the ground; and then Mattathias picks up the pointed piece and plunges it in again, and it, too, breaks. With a cry of horror he exclaims, "The curse, it has begun!"

The second phase of this drama, The Wandering Jew, takes place many centuries later at Antioch, during the period of the first Crusade. It is the day of the great

tournament, and the conversation of the actor tells of an unknown knight who has so far vanquished every opponent. They endeavor to learn the identity of this mysterious knight who is so reckless of his life. A Jew--Issachar-- is summoned to tell what he knows concerning it, and he tells of what he has heard--of a certain strange, mysterious man who goes from land to land, never dying, appearing most suddenly and disappearing as suddenly, a man concerning whom people whisper around the fires of night; and he believes that this unknown knight is the man.

Joan, the princess, falls in love with this mysterious knight because of his great prowess and bravery; and the unknown knight summons her to his tent. And Joan comes alone. Joan, however, soon learns from the things the knight says to her--the strange things that he says to her, that he may be that unclean thing that even lepers avoid--the man who spat upon the Nazarene on his way to Calvary. The knight is bold, the knight is passionate, the knight takes his favors wherever and whenever he lives; he is irresistible to every one. And yet Joan, passionately in love with him, soon learns to loathe him, because she discovers in him that loathsome creature--the Wandering Jew. And she struggles, tears herself from him and rushes out. The curtain falls as the bell of a leper sounds in the distance, and a voice is heard: "Unclean! Unclean!"

The third phase of the story takes place in

Palermo, in Sicily, in the year 1290. The Wandering Jew is now a merchant by the name of Matteo, a modification of his first name, Mattathias. A friend of Matteo comes to him with information that new expulsions and massacres of the Jews are being threatened, and he urges him to gather together his effects at once and leave. Matteo cannot go. He is very much sorrow-stricken; his son but recently died, and the affections of his wife have been estranged from him for one reason or another. He suspects that a priest is responsible for the estrangement. He asks his wife to flee with him at once, and she asks for a delay, which makes Matteo very suspicious.

On that same afternoon he finds the priest and his wife in conversation, and he attacks the priest and denounces him; but his wife soon tells him that she is determined to leave him--not for the profane love of the priest but for the sacred love of the priest's faith. She is determined to leave the faith of her fathers to enter a convent, to accept the faith of the Nazarene. Matteo is stunned; he is broken, for he loves his wife, and all his hopes are wrapped up with her. She is the one last stay and prop in his life, and he pleads with her; he begs her not to leave him.

He now realizes that the Nazarene has deprived him of his sacred love, even as years ago in Antioch he deprived him of his unholy love. But his wife will not abide with him; she leaves him; the curtain falls, and

Matteo, a broken old man, remains alone in the falling darkness.

The last phase of the drama takes place three centuries later in Spain, in the city of Seville. Matteo, who is now Matteos Battadios, is a Marano--a secret Jew; an eminent physician and benefactor of mankind, a healer not only of bodies but of souls. The surly Jew of Jerusalem had been transfigured through the successive stages of the bold, reckless, passionate knight of Antioch, and the wealthy, mercenary bourgeois of Palermo, to the idealistic servant of humanity--the Jewish physician of Spain.

Among the many whose souls Battadios healed, now that he had grown wise through the weary centuries, and been purged of all his dross, was a woman of ill repute--Olala Quintana, the Magdalene of the New Testament. Olala is deeply in love with the master, Battadios. He showed her the new way and the new light; but inadvertantly she makes public something which the master had told her. The master had said it would go hard with Christ to know his own if he would come again. Olala drops this remark to strangers, and the ever present Inquisition learns of it, and it immediately begins to trace the source of this heresy, and it is traced to the house of Dr. Battadios.

Olala comes to him and tells him not to acknowledge, not to confess that he is the author of this statement. Battadios, who is willing to face death, who has been praying through the long centuries for death, is

most anxious to confess; but she begs him out of her great love for him not to acknowledge the statement. And he promises. But a Judas--Zapportas--the Judas of the New Testament, coming to him one day, bringing his lad to be healed, learns by accident, as he reveals by accident, that the doctor is a Jew, even as he (Zapportas) is a Marano, a usurer. And it is this Zapportas, whose child Battadios has healed, that betrays him to the Inquisition, and the doctor is summoned to the tribunal.

At this tribunal a most magnificent scene is enacted. Zapportas faces the doctor and betrays him, and he is paid for his betrayal. Even Olala, threatened with torture, breaks down and confesses to the thing which she urged the doctor to withhold. And then the doctor, clearly, gravely, unflinchingly, says he is a Jew; he denounces the faith of his inquisitors; he calls them the Christless Christians; he says that he, as a Jew, is infinitely more Christian than they, whose crosses are studded with the gems and the tears of Christendom.

He is urged to retract and is promised clemency; he refuses; he begs for death, and hopes that God will now grant him that which he was so long denied--death. And the drama closes in the market place of Seville, when Battadios is led through the howling mobs, with the ladies and courtiers of Seville decked in gala attire; he is led to the stake, guarded by soldiers, who apply the torch to the faggots. At first the faggots will not catch fire,

and poor Battadios lifts his eyes to Heaven and says:

"Great God, is my release not yet?" But soon a light seems to steal down from Heaven and the faggots catch fire, and they creep over him and his garments are burned and his body is charred; and then a voice--one of the soldiers--answers: "Battadios the Jew is dead!"

There is real beauty in this drama, and its central beauty is that of that wonderful thought which, somehow, this non-Jewish author has caught--that the Wandering Jew is of the Christ people. Jesus, called the Christ, was only one of the choice sons of this Christ people, not the first nor yet the last, but it is this people itself, passing from one tribulation to another down the ages, wandering physically from land to land, and spiritually from one stage of development to another, that is in very truth the Christ people, the anointed people of the earth.

That even the old prophets of Israel conceived. That vision has remained with our people; and the author has also conceived of this great truth--that it is the very suffering of our people that has exalted us and purified us, from the surly, hard-hearted Jew of Jerusalem to the proud, arrogant, lustful knight of Antioch, to the mercenary, imperialistic Jew of Palermo, up to the heights of Battadios of Seville--chastened by suffering, purified by trial, a lover of man, a saint and a martyr.

There you have the story of our people--the record

of a continuous transfiguration of a mighty and deathless race. Wandering, my friends, wandering! That is the great characteristic of our people. From the day that God said unto Abraham, "Get thee out of thy land and thy home to the land that I will show thee," up to this day, our people has been^a wandering people--even when it dwelt in Palestine; for it is not physical wandering--that is the important thing--it is the spiritual wandering of the mind and the soul; the constant seeking, the constant pilgrimage to the shrine of truth. And it is that which has been the priceless heritage of our race.

A man can wander in his garden and discover the universe. You know this wandering has made our people eternal. The Wandering Jew is known in the Germanic countries as "Der Ewige Jude"--the Eternal Jew. They are synonymous because the Jew has been constantly wandering from one truth to another, and from one height to another--seeking, reaching, learning, adapting himself, never becoming hardened and fossilized so as to be driven out of the stream of ever onward moving life. And because of that he has survived.

Evolution, my friends, is nothing else than an eternal wandering; the eternal wandering of the life force, of the life stream, seeking ever anew new forms and new ways in which to express this irresistible elan vital--this vital force which somehow, by the grace of God, is in the world and in the universe. And it is because the Jew

was able to slough off one form and take on another form, to surrender the useless and the outlived and accept the new; it is because of his marvelous adaptability, spiritual, mental, even physical, that he is The Eternal Jew.

And in death, as the author truly finds, the Jew found deathlessness; in his martyrdom, burned at the stake, he found the life eternal.

That is a beautiful legend--the legend of the Wandering Jew. But it has now been transmuted or distorted into another legend--the legend of the Conquering Jew. It is now no longer the man homeless, wandering from land to land; it is now a scheming, secretly organized exploiter of humanity, planning to dominate the whole of the world, if necessary by first destroying all the civilization of the world. And they are beginning, through their great control of finance, the press and the other agencies to make real their ancient purposes, their nefarious desires. And this legend is to be found not only in stupid pamphlets, such as The Jewish Menace and Jewish Uber Alles, but it even invades the minds of the scholarly and the thoughtful and the unprejudiced--even as a legend makes its way, insidiously, stealthily, unconsciously into the hearts of men.

Now, it is not my intention this morning to refute these charges. That has been done so often and competently by others. The last splendid argument which I have read was from the masterful pen of that genius,

Israel Zangwill, in his new book, The Voice of Jerusalem. Those who have read the trenchant, exotic, incisive writings of Lucian Wolf have realized how patently stupid these charges are, and how, moreover, they are intertwined with other things much more harmful--an attempt to discredit all progress of liberalism by identifying them with a Jewish conspiracy, the attempt which was made decades ago to discredit the French Revolution, and the revolution of Cromwell, and the revolutions of 1848, by calling them the work of Jews and Free Masons.

I say, it is not my intention this morning to refute these charges because, as Zangwill truly says, prejudice is not logical, it is psychological, and all proofs and all rectifications are of no avail if the psychic background is not corrected. It is just as worthwhile to persuade a man who believes in witches that witches do not exist as it is to try to convince a confirmed anti-Semite that his fears are groundless. Just as the belief of witches, as Joseph Jacobs truly points out, disappeared over night--and no one knows how--so will this thing have to disappear, but no argumentation, no proof, will help it.

People who want an excuse for Jew-baiting, my friends, will find it. When the charge of Christ-killers becomes old fashioned, when the charge of blood accusations and host desecrations becomes out of date, then other reasons will be found--conspiracies. It is not the reason that is given for anti-Semitism that is the

important thing; it is the cause back of it--the spirit, the mind back of it all. And the thing that is back of it all is what Mr. Sokoloff^{SO} beautifully calls "the eternal hatred of the eternal people." Much of it is perhaps due to what the rabbi so truly said--that it is Sinai that created "sena"--hatred.

It is the law of the Jew, and the religion of the Jew, and the prophetic spirit of the Jew, and the wandering and pilgrim spirit of the race that has perhaps been, more than anything else, responsible for the "sena"--the hatred of that race. When one speaks of the conquering Jew, I cannot help keeping my mind from reverting--and I try hard to keep it from reverting--to Eukrainia, to the hundred and fifty thousand massacres, men, women and children, to those long lines of homeless, raimentless, foodless gypsies, that wait weeks and months at the doors of the consulates at Warsaw, at Vienna, waiting, waiting for the privilege to escape from the hell in which they find themselves; and to the tens of thousands of our orphaned little lads in Austria, and in Hungary, and in Poland--fatherless, motherless, cast out upon the cruelty of an unheeding world. And I think of the little infants, never having a chance to live on beyond their first year, because prenataally they were determined for an early death.

When I think of the tens and the hundreds of old Jewish communities uprooted, and the synagogues burned, and the very sacred ground of the cemeteries desecrated, I

realize then what a gay and a proud and a conquering people we are. The conquering Jew!

When I think of the opposition, rightly or wrongly, that has raged among our own people, to that very little experiment of establishing a little haven of refuge for the body and the soul of our people in that little corner of the world, made sacred by the memories and the history of our people--Palestine--the opposition from within our own ranks, I realize then what a highly organized and unified and imperialistic people we are.

And when I think of cities like New York, Chicago, Cleveland and other communities, and of the Jews that dwell in them,--that when you have two Jews you have three opinions, that when a little congregation holds an election you have two congregations the following day; and when I think of the tens of thousands of unaffiliated, unidentified, uninterested Jews, I realize then what a highly disciplined and controlled body and what an effective organization those elders of Zion constitute.

There are two or three things in this legend of the Conquering Jew that appeal to me. Jews are conquerors. They have in the last one hundred years conquered in almost every field of human endeavor, but the unfortunate thing is that they have not conquered as Jews but as Englishmen, Germans, Austrians, Frenchmen, Americans.

Rachel, Bernhardt, von Sonnenenthal, startled the world, charmed the world with their magnificent, creative,

dramatic powers, but not as Jews at all. They do not add to the physical conquest of Jewry. When our concert masters, and our conductors, and our singers, and our musicians grace the concert stages of the world and delight the hearts of millions, it is not as Jews or in behalf of Jewish conspiracy. Our Disraelis, and our Readings, and our Klotzs, and our Mandels are not working for a Jewish imperialism but for a French imperialism, and a British imperialism, and a Belgian imperialism. It is noteworthy that when five Jews receive the Nobel prize for their remarkable achievements in the fields of chemistry and botany and zoology, it is not done in behalf of a Judaeocracy, nor does Israel, physical Israel, profit thereby. Many of them forget their people, many of them know nothing of the trials and the tribulations of their race.

We conquered the world in the arts and the sciences, but not to help the millions who are walking in the valley of the shadow of death, or to relieve the misery and the hunger of our hosts, but simply to bless the world as we have done heretofore.

My friends, we did conquer the world, and that is the wonderful truth in this legend. We conquered a world and emerged victorious--a world arrayed to break us. "They thrust at thee and thrust at thee to break thee. But the Lord relieved me." And the records of the world tell of no conquest so exalted, so superb, so magnificent as this conquest of a scattered, broken, drifting handful of human

beings, over a world organized, passion-ridden, brutality-inspired.

There is no survival as superb as the survival of Israel. Our conquest has not been the Christian conquest of Mexico or of Peru, nor the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain, where men, women and children were exterminated, and all the viciousness and barbarism and brutality of man were let loose. Our conquest was not made at the expense of other people or the suffering of other men. It has been the conquest over the hatreds, the passions and the ignorance and the superstition of other people. And that is the only true kind of conquest.

We want to conquer the world, my friends, and that is why we live in the world; but we want to conquer the world, even as we want to conquer ourselves, for God, for truth, for justice. We are not a rich people; we are a poor people. Somewhere I read that in the last official statistics of the Russian government before it collapsed, this fact was brought out: that ninety per cent. of the Jews who lived in the then pale--ninety per cent of eight millions of human beings had no staple occupation, and that the average wealth of this fabulously rich, plutocratic, money-grabbing race,--the per capita wealth was five dollars.

We have our plutocrats, we have our bolsheviks, we have our conservatives, we have our radicals, we have our junkers, we have our cosmopolitans; we are not angels

or demons, schemers or fools. Individually we are just human beings, with all the strength and all the weakness of human beings. We have no centrally organized authoritative body; we have no common religious authority; we have no one political loyalty or devotion.

In every land the Jew is intimately and closely identified with the life and the interest and the destiny of that particular land and country, even as any other human being. But there is one thing true, undeniably true, eternally true of the people as a people--for a people has a collective soul even as the individual has an individual soul--and that is a passion, a burning resolve, a holy conviction--a demand, if you will, for universal justice, for unity in the life and in the spirit of the human race.

That is true of our race, friends. Somewhere, somehow--and I do not know how nor when--this conviction entered the souls of our forefathers, that they, by divine will and divine providence, were to become "the light unto the nations"; to bring forth the blind out of the dungeons, and those who are incarcerated out of the prison-house; and that was their peculiar God-given task; and that was real, so real that they sacrificed everything for it. It was not a poetic phrase; it was not an ideal to pamper oneself with, or to dangle before their eyes. It was as Jeremiah truly says--"A burning fire within me, whose flames I could not quench."

It was their peculiar task with all the peoples of the earth to work for truth, for justice, for freedom; to break the chains, to shatter ideals, to smash the shackles of slavery, whether it be intellectual or economic, religious or political; to proclaim freedom. "Thou shalt proclaim freedom throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." To conquer the world for the soul of the world!

That is the conquest we work for, and that is why we gave to the world Judaism; that is why we gave to the world Christianity; that is why we gave to the world Mohammedanism; that is why we were the intellectual intermediaries of the Middle Ages, that paved the way for the renaissance; and that is why we were responsible for the Reformation; and that is why we molded the thought and character of the Anglo-Saxon race; and that is why today the Jew is in the van of every intellectual movement in the world. The Jew is there; he cannot help it; it is the driving force, the propelling, on-rushing spirit within him that urges him on. That is why people speak of us as a restless race, as responsible for the unrest of the world.

There are two kinds of unrest, my friends: there is a blind, stupid, impatient unrest--planless, purposeless. That is not our unrest; that is not the spiritual firmamentum of which we speak. We have another kind of unrest that is spiritual unrest--the unrest that means the critical mind, the unrest that means the intellectual

acumen, the unrest that means the constant lurking, constant inquisitiveness, if you will, ceaseless aspiring, still climbing heavenward.

That is the unrest of Israel, and it is with this unrest that the Wandering Jew will conquer the world for God. Not by force, not by arms, not by destroying anything. "Behold my servant whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul dwelleth. I have put my spirit upon him; he shall make the right to go forth to the nations; he shall not cry, nor lift up nor cause his voice to be heard in the streets." Not through missionary work, not through preachment, not through crying from the house tops. "A bruised reed shall he not break." He shall not even break a bruised reed. Not by force, not by destruction. "And the dimly burning wick shall he not quench, but he shall make the right to go forth according to the truth. He shall not fail nor be crushed till he hath set the right in the earth, and the isles shall wait for his teaching."

Don't you see how even three thousand years ago a prophet living in exile in Babylon, was able to identify the Wandering Jew with the Eternal Jew? He shall not fail, he shall not be crushed till he will have made the right to be established upon earth.

Both legends are true. The Wandering Jew is a Conquering Jew; but even as the Wandering Jew is not physically merely a wandering Jew, but more so mentally,

intellectually and spiritually, so is he to become a conquering Jew, not through the conquest of empires nor through the conquest of lands--he has no desire, nor wish, nor power for it; but he has the wish, and he has the desire, and he has the God-given power to conquer the minds and the souls of men ultimately, ultimately for God, for truth, for justice, for humanity.

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