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Heinrich Heine, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,

ON "HEINRICH HEINE,"

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 2nd, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.



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Matthew Arnold, in writing on Heine's grave, said, "The spirit of the world, beholding the absurdity of men, their vaunts, their feats, let a sardonic smile for one short moment wander o'er his lips. That smile was Heine!"

It would be difficult in the narrow confines of one brief phrase amply to sum up and to describe this marvelous complexity, this strange, confused paradox which was Heine. But this phrase "a sardonic smile" perhaps comes nearest to giving the key to the personality of the man. Heine smiled, but it was a painful smile. Heine laughed, but it was a bitter laugh. The bright sun played brilliantly upon the surface of the water, but underneath were dark, abysmal depths.

Heine was a romanticist, but a sophisticated one. Heine was an idealist, but a disillusioned one. Heine was a revolutionist, but he hated the coarseness and the brutality of the mob. Heine was a poet, but wielded a sword. Heine's lyrics are on the lips of every German, prince or peasant, even if there are few names that are so much anathema in Germany as that of Heine.

Heine was an exile in France and and Renaissance Germany. Heine was a Jew by race, a German by nationality, a Greek in spirit. Heine admired the Greek ideal of physical strength and physical

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perfection. He himself, through his life, was tortured by disease, and before he was fifty he was half blind and lame, he had lost the sense of taste and smell, and his lips were paralyzed.

Here you have the tragic complexity of this man who smiled while his heart was breaking, whose words shook the foundations of institutions, of thrones and idols and altars. This man was Heine.

I shall not speak this morning of Heine the poet. That is hardly my province. Sometime ago a group of eminent Englishmen were asked to name the ten greatest poets of the world. Two of them omitted Goethe, none omitted Heine. Heine is undoubtedly one of the few greatest singers of the world, of the human race. He is certainly the greatest lyric poet of Germany. Official Germany may refuse to welcome a statue of Heine upon German soil, but long after the very memory of these kings and princelings and dynasties will have been lost in oblivion, the German people will continue to sing the Lorelei, and the whole world will continue to dwell tenderly upon the ineffable charm, the marvelous simplicity, the celestial melody, the vast pathos of Heine's songs.

I want to speak this morning of Heine as he, himself, would wish to have men speak of him--the brave soldier in the wars for the liberation of mankind. And I want to speak this morning of Heine, the perplexed, the

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harassed, the proud, the apostate Jew. Heine called himself a Greek, but he was really not at all in spirit a Greek. Heine lacked the poise, the detachment, the objectivity that one associates with the Hellenic spirit. Heine never created art for art's sake; Heine never could disassociate himself from the turbulent movements--the social, the political movements of his day. He was not an idle singer, removed in his workshop from the glamour and the conflict of the world, fashioning beautiful things while the great world moves away, as one may think Homer was, of

Heine was a child of the storm; Heine was born and lived in the midst of a conflict; he was like a flame spirit we call ; he was a St. George that was slaying dragons. He was born and spent his youth in those momentous years when the ideas of the French Revolution, carried on the bayonets of the Napoleonic armies, were storming the citadels of Medievalism throughout Europe.

His was an unhappy age, an age when an old order is passing and a new one is coming to be,--such as our age is today. And he was the unhappy child of this unhappy age. But he threw himself into the struggle, and his fine, ample, abundant talents, his marvelous genius, his art, he dedicated to the service of mankind.

He says of himself that his art was never

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an end in itself. "I do not know if I desire to have a wreath of laurel laid on my coffin. Though I love poetry much, it was never more than a sacred plaything, a means consecrated to a heavenly end. I have never held my famous poetry of much account, and I care little whether my songs are praised or derided; but lay the sword upon my coffin, I pray you, for I have been a brave soldier in the wars of the liberty of mankind."

Heine, born in 1797, spent his youth, as you may well see, during the days of Napoleon. New ideas were in the air--democracy, fraternity, equality, the end of feudalism, the beginning of a new era, the dawn of a new day. And Heine imbibed that spirit; he became saturated with these ideas, the more so because he was a Jew, because for the Jew Napoleon was the hero of a new day. It meant emancipation, it meant political equality, it meant economic opportunity, it meant new education and culture--a new civilization.

And so Heine threw himself heart and soul into the struggle to smash feudalism in Germany, to end political autocracy and political oppression; and he fought with all the ardor at his command. He attacked, he challenged, he daunted, he mocked, he scoffed; sometimes he hit with sledge hammer blows, sometimes with sharp, rapier thrusts which drew blood.

He loved Germany, Heine did,--the real

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Germany, the Germany with whose crown and scepter he said the monkeys were playing. But he hated the old, official Germany--"the mouldering land of the Philistines." And he hated the Prussians. It might be well in this day to read what Heine had to say of the typical Prussian ninety years ago.

He said: "I did not trust this Prussian, this tall, canting, white-coated hero, with his big belly, his big mouth and parading cane, which he dipped in holy water before he struck. I have no liking for his philosophical Christian militarism (one thinks of Treitschke and his clan), with his conglomeration of white deeply . . . lies and impudence. Repulsive, aye, repulsive to me was this Prussian, this stiff, hypocritical, sanctimonious Prussian, this . . . among the nations."

This was said ninety years ago. Of course this frankness on the part of Heine, these crushing blows which he administered, soon won for him a host of bitter, implacable enemies. And after the revolution of 1830 Heine found his native land too uncomfortable for himself, and he left to spend almost the entire remaining period of his life in exile, in France. But even in France as an exile he continued his struggle for German freedom and the emancipation of the German people.

Young Germany was born out of the agony and labors of this man Heine and of his friend Ludwig Borne,

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a Jew; and the revolution of 1848 and the things which it set in motion owe much to the flaming spirit, the sacrificial devotion of this Jew, Heine. He was alone, an exile, maligned, traduced, despised. Heine in Paris drank to the very bitter dregs the cup of suffering which every great leader of men is called upon to drink.

No one describes his fate as forcibly as does Heine himself. He says: "For more than thirty years I have been defending freedom's struggle among I knew the fight was hopeless, never ending, but still I fought, wounded and battle tossed. In those long nights I have often been frightened, but only fools are not afraid of fear. But I would whistle until the terror lightened, and sing my mocking rhymes to give me cheer. Yes, I stood, my musket primed and ready, on guard, and when some rascal raised his head, I took good aim--my arm was always steady--and let him have a bellyful of lead. And yet those knaves, I may as well have admitted, could shoot quite well. The rascals often chose a splendid mark; what is more, they hit it. My wounds are gaping and my blood still flows. One post is vacant; as a bloody token I wear my wounds. Another takes my part. But though I fall, my sword is still unbroken. The only thing that is broken is my heart."

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And yet with his broken heart and his broken body, he continued to fight to the very end; and nothing sums up his marvelous spirit as much as the hymn he wrote not long before he died:

"I am the sword, I am the flame;
I have lit you through the darkness, and won the battle again.

I fought in the first rank and led you on; roundabout me lie the bodies of my friends.

But we have triumphed; we have triumphed; but roundabout me lie the bodies of my friends.

Amid the valient songs of victory the dirge of the funeral is heard; but we have neither time for rejoicing nor for sorrow.

The trumpets are sounding again; there shall be new and holier battles.

I am the sword, I am the flame."

It is impossible to understand why a romantic soul like Heine's, a lyric poet, could throw himself into the maelstrom of a national struggle, of a bitter fight for social righteousness--unless one took into account the fact that Heine was a Jew. Heine called himself a Greek, but indeed he was a Jew; in every fiber of his being he was a Jew. Not alone in the stamp of his character, not alone in the style of his writing, not alone in his peculiar type of wit and sarcasm and irony was he Jewish, but in this elemental and all-absorbing

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passion of his life for righteousness and justice and freedom. For freedom, righteousness and justice was he the Jew; the spirit of his race embraced him, completely filled him; and whether he knew it or not, it was the racial genius and the spirit of his people that was struggling through him, through his mind and his soul and his songs, for the eternal principles for which our race endures.

Why, even in his songs he was Jewish. When he wrote of passionate love Heine perhaps thought that he was a lovely Hellene on the shores of the blue Aegean sea. He was but reechoing the strains of the Song of Songs. And when he was disillusioned, he perhaps thought that he was some Greek cynic. He was but giving expression to another mood of his race, the mood of Koheleth of Ecclesiastes--"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

And when tortured on his mattress, grave, he challenged God; he was Job uttering the wild lament. And when he spoke in burning word and phrase of freedom and justice, why, he was perhaps one of the ancient prophets of our people, an Isaiah, whose life had been touched by the burning coal of the inspiration of his race.

He was Jewish in the essential motif of his life. His Hebrew education as a child was meager. Dusseldorf, where he was born, was not a center of Jewish learning, but he had enough to impress him, to impress his

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soul indelibly with a keen and fine appreciation of the beauties of his faith. Had Heine lived in an environment that was more congenial to the spirit of the Jew, had he lived among cultured people who were less contemptuous of Jews and Judaism, when his associates were in the first flush of emancipation, Heine would have remained a loyal son of Israel to the very end.

But Heine could find no anchorage in Judaism. The old orthodoxy did not appeal to him because it lacked the esthetic and the beautiful; the new reformed Judaism, which was then coming to life, did not appeal to him because it was cold and lacked fervor and enthusiasm, and mysticism and culture. The intelligencia of his day truckled to the non-Jew for social favor and position, and were contemptuous to everything Jewish.

In spite of these facts Heine, in the early days of his life, tried to help his people. He associated himself with an organization for the advancement of culture among Jews, and he planned to write the epic of Jewish history; he planned to write a book which would sum up all the grandeur and sublimity, the tragedy and the nobility of his race, in his "Rabbi von Bacharach." But unfortunately the organization with which he was identified collapsed. The environment was hostile and uncongenial; many of his closest friends submitted to baptism, and before long Heinrich Heine himself was baptized.

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Concerning his baptism, he says: "For my way of thinking, you can well imagine that baptism is an indifferent affair. I do not regard it as important, even -ally, symbolic, and I shall devote myself all the more to the emancipation of the unhappy members of our race. Still, I hold it as a disgrace and a stain upon my honor that in order to obtain an office in Prussia, in beloved Prussia, I allow myself to be baptised."

He had hoped to gain an office. He did not. And not long after he writes to a friend of his: "I am hated alike by Jew and Gentile. I regret very deeply that I had myself baptised. I do not see that I have been the better for it since; on the contrary, I have known nothing but misfortune and unhappiness."

This apostasy of Heine undoubtedly added much to the confusion of his soul, to his perplexities, and thereafter we find a Heine that eludes all classification. You find him at one time denouncing Judaism and at another time denouncing Christianity, and still at another time denouncing them both. At one time he would mock his people and their faith. Judaism, he said, was not a religion but a misfortune. And then again he would turn bitterly and savagely upon the religion which he had but just then adopted and laugh at it in scorn, and then he would couple Judaism and Christianity and compare them both to their hurt with the spirit of Hellas, with the

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spirit of light and freedom and beauty.

He was troubled and perplexed and harassed and broken and scattered; he was a wilful, errant, fretful child adrift in the world. But in his profounder moments Heine could plumb the depths; he could find in the depths marvelous truths, because Heine was honest--honest with himself, honest with his convictions, honest with his ideals; and in his quieter moments of introspection and reflection Heine saw the beauty, the glory in the souls and in the lives of those very people whose external appearance sometimes impressed him as ungainly and unsightly. He recalled the beauty of the Jewish life, of the Jewish home, the inner glory of the Jewish faith, and in his poems like "Princess Sabbath" and "Jehuda ben Halevy" he immortalized in marvelous phrase and diction the imagery, the eternal verities, the glories of our faith.

And in the eight terrible years spent on his mattress grave, Heine had occasion to reflect upon the mission, the destiny of his people. He came to understand the Jew as he had never understood him before; and he writes in his Memoirs: "Indeed, the Jews are the stuff of which the gods are made. Today they are trampled under foot; tomorrow they are worshipped. While some of them creep about in the filthiest mire of commerce, others ascend into the highest peaks of humanity.

is not the only mountain on which a Jewish god has pled

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for the salvation of the world. The Jews are the people of the spirit, and whenever they return to their spirit, they are great and splendid, and put to shame and overcome their rascally oppressors. The profound Rosenkranz is compared with the giant, except that the giant grew stronger every time he touched the earth, while the Jews gain new strength as soon as they come in contact with Heaven again; a remarkable phenomenon of the most striking contrast. Whilst among the Jews there is every possible caricature of vulgarity, there are among them also the ideas of purest humanity, and as they once led the world in the new paths of progress, the world has perhaps still to expect further discoveries from them."

And then again in his Confessions shortly before his death, he says of the Jews: "I have never spoken with due respect of the master or of his work, the Jews, and this, too, was because of my Hellenic temperament, which was repelled by Jewish asceticism. My preference for Hellas has since declined. I see now that the Greeks were only beautiful youths, but that the Jews have ever been men, strong, invincible men, not only in old days but even to this day, in spite of eighteen centuries of persecution and misery. I have learned to judge them better, and except that any pride of birth were a foolish contradiction in a champion of revolution and its democratic principles, the present writer might take pride in the fact

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that his ancestors belonged to the house of Israel, and that he is a descendent of those martyrs who have given the world a God and a morality, and who have fought and suffered on every battlefield of thought."

And of the Bible it is well to read what this master writer had to say. "Oh, if I could only destroy everything that I have published about German philosophy in some way. I owe the resurrection of my religious feeling to the Bible, that holy book that was for me as much a source of help as an occasion for pious admiration. Strange, after having passed the whole of my life in gliding about the dancing floors of philosophy, and abandoning myself to all the orgies of the intellect, and dallying with systems, without ever being satisfied, I suddenly arrive at the same point of view as Uncle Tom, taking my stand on the Bible and kneeling beside my black brother in prayer, in the same act of devotion."

And lastly, one more short quotation of Heine concerning Moses. "There was a time when I did not like Moses very much, probably because the Hellenic spirit predominated in me, and I could not forgive the law-giver of the Jews his religion and his hate of plastic arts. I did not see then that Moses, in spite of his hostility to the arts, was nevertheless himself a great artist and had the real artistic temperament, only this artistic temperament was in him as in his Egyptian fellow countrymen, directed

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solely towards the colossal and the indestructable, but, unlike the Egyptians, he did not fashion his works of art of bricks and granite, but he builded pyramids of men and carved obelisks of men. He took a poor shepherd tribe and created a people which defied the centuries; a great, eternal, holy people, a people of God, who served all peoples as a model and all humanity as a prototype. He created Israel. With more right than the Roman poet can that artist, the son of Amram, boast of having raised himself a monument which shall outlive all the images of France."

Heine loved his people, but in that peculiar love with which he loved all things dear to him, a love tinged with sadness and tinged with bitterness, for he suffered because of them. His love was like the love of Ezra, that tribe of which he sings--the people of Ezra who must die whenever they love; and the things that Heine loved caused him sorrow and suffering and humiliation; the things that Heine loved broke his body and his spirit.

He died a lonely man. As he himself had said: "No mass was sung, no kadosh was recited over his grave." Perhaps he found the grave that he had hoped for.

"Where shall I, the wanderer weary, find my heaven
and my shrine?

Under palms will I be buried? Under lindens on

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the Rhine?

Shall I lie in desert reaches, buried in a
stranger's land?

Or upon the well loved beaches, covered by a
friendly hand?

Well, what matter. God has given wider spaces
there than here;

And the stars that swing in Heaven shall be
lanced upon my bier."

--o--

