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What has become of the Melting Pot?, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
"WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE MELTING POT?"
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
OCTOBER 22, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.

Some few days ago I reread Israel Zangwill's "The Melting Pot," and I am frank to acknowledge that this masterpiece, which, when it first appeared in the days before the war, seemed so real and true, now, on rereading it, seemed to be almost grotesque. And I am rather confident that the author himself, were he to reread his work, would experience a similar reaction.

A few days ago I read an article by Israel Zangwill in which he says: "America, instead of holding fast to the faith and spiritual vision of her founders, is hardening into a nationalism all the narrower for her physical breadth, and is falling back for the solution of her problems upon the barbarous old methods whose futility has already been proved to Europe."

When the immigration law was passed by an overwhelming vote in Congress, I suspected then that there was something wrong with the theory of the "melting pot." It was not the principle of restriction of immigration itself that worried me. I can readily understand that immigration may at times be restricted as an economic expedient; but a new principle was introduced into this law, and immigrants to this land are to be admitted not on the basis of fitness or intelligence of character, but on the basis of an artificially constructed three per cent of the nationals in this country already resident in this land in 1910.

That was clearly a racial test which, with the exception of the Asiatics, was never applied in this land. That was ominous for those who read the signs of the times. Do you recall what these champions of restriction said two years ago or three years ago? "Why, America is overcrowded and Europe is threatening to flood this land with hordes of impoverished immigrants from the war ridden centers of Europe, and if we are not careful and shut our gates in time the whole American nation will be submerged under this tidal inundation of the riff-raff and the scum of Europe." And everybody became frightened.

I never knew how sparsely settled this land of ours is and how perfectly futile and meaningless this statement of overcrowding is, until I had the good fortune a month ago to cross this continent twice on a lecture tour; and for the first time in my life I was privileged to see the marvelous expanse, the vastness, the emptiness of this great continent. We spent a day and a night--twenty-four hours--traveling in a straight line through one state; and for miles and miles one scarcely sees a human habitation. One begins to realize then the immensity of this land and how readily and with what comfort it can support a population five to ten times its present numbers.

That is not all. The almost ludicrous thing about this immigration restriction is this: that during the past two years actually more skilled and unskilled laborers

have left our shores than have come here. During the past year some 150,000 immigrants came here and some 143,000 left, and of the 150,000 who came the majority were women and children, and of those who left the majority were laborers--real laborers, the men who dig the ditches and work in the mines, who build the railroads and the highways, and different hard work--the work to which the American is no longer accustomed. So that actually last year there was a shortage of thirty thousand laborers--a net loss; and during the past three months I read that numbers that came fell far below the quota that was permitted to come. And I suppose before very long Wall Street will give the wink to these restrictionists and tell them to "lay low" because Wall Street will soon need men to work in the steel mills and in the mines, and you will soon hear again the old slogan: "Welcome to the immigrant! the choice of the world are coming to us bringing their brain and their brawn!" and all that sort of thing.

I was a little worried about the melting pot theory when the immigration law came into effect, but I was startled--we all were--when this same percentage basis, this racial test, was invoked in far different places. When our universities began to foster the spirit of old New England instead of the spirit of new America, when they began to apply as tests for admission, not scholarship or character, but race and antecedent and social qualifications, I knew that the melting pot theory had gone all awry.

It is not worth the time to go into the whys and the wherefors of this situation, and the pros and cons of it. Granted from the very outset that it would be much more preferable and desirable that Jews instead of congregating in a few large universities would disseminate and scatter all over the land; granted that it would be desirable that these Jews who do apply for admission have an ancestry of three generations of aristocracy and fine lineage, instead of coming from the pale and the ghetto and poverty; granted that it would be desirable that less Jews would follow academic careers and crowd the professions,--granted all that, the startling fact still remains that American universities, the citadels and the strongholds of light and learning, and the fortress of American democracy, which heretofore knew of neither class nor creed, nor race, nor color, are today publicly and avowedly and confessedly applying racial standards.

Something has gone wrong with our melting pot theory, and anyone who looks about and sees organized hate--groups and organizations hiding behind masks and hoods and secrecy, organized for hate--sworn to undying hate of Catholic and Jew and Negro and what not; when racial and religious antipathies are expressing themselves in highly organized groups in this land, then one is forced to acknowledge that our melting pot theory, for one reason or another, temporarily, at least, has collapsed.

You and I are disillusioned--are we not? And rightly so. We thought that America would be different; we thought that because of our isolation, our freedom from foreign entanglements, the freshness and the newness of our continent, and of our conviction that we would be sort of a chosen people, that the almost infallible and inevitable laws of the history of human relationships, of racial contacts and religious conflicts would not apply unto us.

But in our case history would not repeat itself. We are now compelled to acknowledge that America is no different, that history does repeat itself, and that these laws hold good this side of the Atlantic as they do the other side of the Atlantic; certainly as far as the Jews of America are concerned the law of cycle holds good here as it holds good in every land in the world.

The Jew is subject to a unique law. We call it a law of cycle; his destiny moves in a circle. Here is a land prosperous, economically independent, and it has few Jews, and those Jews enjoy great prosperity as a result of it; and there is no discrimination and there is no anti-Semitism. Then the Jews from the less fortunate lands of the world, when they are denied and oppressed, begin to flock to this land, and their numbers increase and multiply until they become a problem; then anti-Semitism begins, and then there is discrimination and oftentimes persecution. And then the cycle begins all over again.

What are we going to do about it? I, for one, am reconciled to the fact of the "almost eternal hatred of the eternal people." I do not mean to say that prejudice will always exist in the form in which it now exists--it may assume less obnoxious manifestations--but I am reconciled to this fact: that as long as the Jew lives so long will anti-Jewish feeling live; as long as the Jew remains a challenging, virile minority, having its own convictions and its own faith and its own outlook, so long will there be opposition and conflict.

What of it? Are we then to bemoan our faith? Are we then to permit ourselves to become demoralized? Are we then to grow apologetic? Are we then to commit national suicide? No! What are we to do? If we are to be discriminated against, if we Jews are to be singled out for attack, let it be on the basis of that which is intrinsically and essentially and characteristically Jewish in us! And not on the basis of that which untoward fortune and circumstance and the afflictions and the miseries of fifteen centuries of exile ingrafted into our characters and our personalities and our modes and our manners and our methods.

We are being blamed today for the things in us which un-Christian Christendom forced upon us. Everywhere you hear the cry of the Jew--of his rapacity, of his money madness, of his greed! Well, who took a people, a pastoral, agricultural people, whose very religion is built around the

field and the farm,--who took that people and made of them martyrs and capitalists; whose very security and life depended upon the amount of money which they could pay out in bribery or in taxes? Un-Christian Christendom!

We are accused, some of us, of our ungainliness, of our crudeness, of our aggressiveness, of our pushing manners, of our lack of refinement. Well, who gave those Jews that persecution complex which expresses itself in all these unsavory characteristics? Why, the ghetto and the yellow badge and fifteen centuries of mockery and derision! And now the Jew is held responsible for the sins of Un-Christian Europe.

If we are to be discriminated against let it not be on these grounds; for give the Jew two or three generations of prosperity and ease and he will regain his grand manner, which comes with prosperity and ease. These Brahms of the Almighty, these refined Anglo-Saxons, did not come by it from the very beginning of time. Those who came as immigrants to these shores fifty years, a hundred years and two hundred years ago were not the suave, polished, manicured gentlemen in evening dress; they were rough and crude and hard and poverty stricken. Of these very Englishmen a great Englishman (DeFoe) said, "They are the most churlish people of any people alive"--the ancestors of these chosen ones of the Almighty.

If we are to be discriminated against let it

be on the basis of that which is essentially and intrinsically Jewish--and some are unhappy unless they do hate--let them hate us for our ideals and for our convictions and for our enthusiasms and for our faith; let them dislike us for our passion for justice, for freedom, for individual and personal liberties. If we must be disliked, let them dislike us not for our attempt to imitate them or to flatter them, but for our desire to lead them in the ways of truth and of God.

Let them be afraid not of our money madness but of our God madness; let them be afraid of the dynamics of an awakened Jewish spirit, of the two-edged sword of prophecy in the hands of our people. If they must dread us let them dread a glowing passion of a priest people!

What are we to do? Why, we are to stand today, men and women, exactly where our race, where the seers and the leaders of our race stood three thousand years ago; we are to fight uncompromisingly for justice and righteousness and truth and enlightenment and freedom everywhere! I say everywhere! And I want to stress this point this morning. Do not for a moment think that it is your concern to defend your freedom and your constitutional rights and to be careless and indifferent to the rights and constitutional privileges of other peoples. I have known Jews who were loud in protest when their rights were invaded, but when the rights of other groups and other peoples and other individuals were trampled upon they were either indifferent or cynically hostile to

them.

Let me tell you a law of history. You cannot trample it in one instance and expect it to be held in sanctity and in high regard in another instance; you cannot condone lawlessness in one instance and expect it to be protected and defended in another instance. Wherever law is disregarded, wherever the rights of men are invaded, whether they be of Catholic or Negro or radical or socialist; wherever the constitutional rights of free speech, the right of assembly, the right of men to live their own lives, are threatened or invaded, that is where we Jews ought to be found as defenders and champions; not for the cause which these people expound, not for the ideas which they represent--we may be hostile to them--but for the general sacredness of freedom.

There is but one step between lynching and a pogrom, and that step is easily made; and it is as much a part of our effort to the cause of America to see that the rights of this group and that group, of this individual or that individual, are safeguarded and held sacred as it is to defend our own rights. The prophets of Israel never limited themselves to the Jew: they had something to say about the Egyptian and the Assyrian and the Babylonian and the whole world; and we, their heirs in spirit, their descendents, must champion the cause of all men and of all peoples. That is one thing we are to do; not to waste our energy in answering

stupid accusations and in filling our newspapers weekly with countercharges in defense, but in doing the constructive, the upbuilding work for which we Jews came into the world.

And there is one other thing that we Jews ought to do--and of that I spoke once before; it is very near to me--Jewish education. In the face of the ragings of these heathens everywhere, there is one thing to do, and that is to imbue our children with the prophetic spirit and the prophetic mission of their race. Permeate their lives--if only as a means of defense--with the spirit of our Bible, with the passion of the prophet, with the soul of the psalmist, with the dream of the poet, with the faith of the martyr; tell your children that worldly success and wealth and position are not yet the stamp of the Jew, that to be a Jew means to serve quietly and patiently and humbly in all the dark corners of life, to go out into the highways and byways of the world and seek our purpose, but he who in shop or factory or emporium, at the bar, in the pulpit or the laboratory, serves first God and then himself, he who in his own sphere reaches out his compassionate hands to embrace his fellowmen in love and helpfulness--he is the Jew. Tell that to your children. /

Remove the dust from off your Bibles in your homes and go back to the founder of our peoples strength and endurance, to the fountainhead of truth the world over. That is the first thing we ought to do. We ought to do this, too: let us not dissipate our strength by mutual recriminations,

let us not fight among ourselves. Orthodox, reform, Russian Jews, German Jews--these are perfectly meaningless phrases when we face this vast world problem. Neither orthodox nor reform are the last word in Judaism. And I am quite sure that Moses would have as much difficulty to recognize reform Judaism as he would our orthodox Judaism.

Our task is not to pick flaws in one another; we are all imperfect, we are all struggling and striving to express our convictions and our ways. Our task is to be true to the convictions which are ours--of an orthodox Jew to live his orthodox faith honestly, and of a reform Jew to live his reform faith honestly; and combinedly and conjointly our task is to make the truths of our faith regnant and dominant in the lives of our people and in the lives of other people.

And as for America, let us take heart. The America of 1922 is not yet the America of tomorrow; the America of the klan and of a three per cent immigration law and of the hundred and one kinds of restrictions and prohibitions is not yet the America of the future. Life is long and history follows its own law. We are the bounden servants and worshippers of the America as it is today, with all its failures and its frailties and its shortcomings; but the America as it was previsioned and projected unto the hopes and the dreams of the world, the America of tomorrow, that America we are still making, still forging, you and I, with our patient life service and devotion.

It was very simple a hundred years ago for these ideals to be realized. This was a comparatively small commonwealth, a homogeneous commonwealth; but today we are a people of many peoples; our life has grown involved and complex, and the war and the passions of war have snarled and entangled us; we have so many more difficult problems to meet today. America has not sprung full grown from the brow of the goddess of history; it must still go through the cleansing and the purging processes of the ages. Centuries will mould and refine the America, and it is that America which we must keep in mind. Then we shall not lose faith nor hope.

We must begin to Americanize the American. We as Jews must have constantly before ourselves and before other men, our fellow citizens, unstained and undefiled and unclouded, the vision of ^{the} real America which must emerge out of this welter of confusion and strife and struggle. We are not ready to acknowledge that our experiment has failed.

"Blessed is the man who waits and works."
And during these troublous times that is your program and mine, men and women--to wait and work, to live full, purposeful, vigorous lives, true to the faith of our people, and true to the vision of America!

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