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Has Reform Judaism Justified Itself?, 1923.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

SUBJECT: "HAS REFORM JUDAISM JUSTIFIED ITSELF?"

AT THE TEMPLE--SUNDAY MORNING,

JANUARY 28, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



A convention to which the servants and leaders of American Israel came from all parts of the land was held last week in the city of New York, in celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the founding of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; and as I look back upon this convention, which was extraordinary and remarkable in many respects, the note which to me seemed most dominant was that of sincerity.

The men and women there assembled seemed to come with the purpose not of deluding themselves, not of mere exaltation in celebration only, but they seemed to have come for a heart searching. They were questioning; they were frank enough to lay bare what they regarded as the mistakes and the failures of the past fifty years, even as they were ready to rejoice over the achievements and triumphs of the past fifty years. It was a sort of a general clearing house, a stock-taking, and as such I believe the effect was wholesome in the extreme.

I am going to point out this morning some of the mistakes and some of the failures of reform Judaism in America during the past fifty years which these men and women, rabbis and laity, pointed to during the convention, and some of the mistakes and the failures to which I pointed at the convention. And in doing so I should like to have you bear two things in mind: first, that what I say of reform Judaism holds, in a large measure, equally true of orthodox Judaism. If reform Judaism has not justified itself during



the past fifty years, certainly orthodox Judaism has not justified itself; and I am not interested so much in reform Judaism or in orthodox Judaism as I am in Judaism. I am frank to point to the weaknesses of the one even as I point to the weaknesses of the other. Only an extreme partisan--one who is concerned more with sects and sect rivalries and sect competition, can point to the triumphs of orthodoxy as against the failures of reform.

But when you stop and think that there are two million Jews in the United States, nearly all of them immigrants or the sons of immigrants, who are still unsynagogued; when you realize that there are hundreds of thousands of Jewish children of orthodox Jewish homes who receive absolutely no Jewish education; when you stop to realize that there are so many orthodox Jews who are orthodox <sup>their</sup> by proxy--very liberal in practices but very rigid in their theology and in their ritual--especially for the other fellow, one is bound to conclude that orthodox Judaism faces, perhaps, the very same problems which reform Judaism faces.

Secondly, when I point to the weaknesses of reform Judaism I should like to have you bear in mind that these weaknesses are largely the weaknesses of reform Jews rather than of reform Judaism; that they are not traceable to any inner fundamental, basic weakness of faith, as they are to the religious indolence, the temperamental laziness and indifference of the reform Jews, of the individual men and women. I should like to have you feel as I feel--rather



optimistic about conditions touching Jewish life in this country.

There are prophets of evil in our midst who always prophesy damnation and dire destruction, that Judaism is dying. I do not believe these at all. I believe that we are at the beginning of a marvelous revival in Jewish life. Some people can see only the surface of the waters, and the cross-currents and the roiled and muddy waters of the surface, but they cannot see the swift and silent currents that run straight and irresistibly through the deep-lying channels of our faith. There is an element of the eternal in Judaism; there is an element of the eternal in our faith which endures and outlasts the temporary failures and mistakes of individual Jews or of groups of Jews.

There are more synagogues being built today and more schools and more community centers than at any time in the history of the American Israel; and when you compare this condition with that which now prevails in Western Europe, where Judaism is practically at a standstill as a result of the war, there is reason for rejoicing rather than for despair.

Has reform Judaism justified itself in the last fifty years? What has it to its credit, first of all? It has to its credit chiefly this: Organization. The pioneers of our faith who came here fifty, sixty, seventy years ago, were faced with a tremendous task, and they performed it bravely and courageously and well. Theirs was the task of



organization. They were called upon to organize the first Jewish communities; they were called upon to organize our first schools and our first synagogues; they were called upon to organize our first rabbinic institutions; they were called upon to organize our first philanthropic institutions to care for the needy and the distressed. They performed the task well; and it is a tremendously significant and important task which they performed.

They laid the foundation securely; in the early precarious years of American Judaism these men were not found wanting, and I say all honor and glory to them for the things which they accomplished.

What has American Judaism to its credit? It organized the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Fifty years ago a handful of men, at whose head was that master builder, Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, assembled and founded a Union of Congregations. Today this Union numbers close onto two hundred and fifty congregations in all parts of the land--a very effective and very efficient organization, doing fine work.

American reform Judaism has to its credit a rather contented, functioning, industrious, zealous and loyal rabbinate--the Central Conference of American Rabbis, comprising some two hundred leaders of thought in American reform Judaism--well organized and doing good work.

American reform Judaism has to its credit this fine organization of Jewish womanhood--the Federation of the Temple



Sisterhoods--an organization of fifty thousand Jewish women, whose task is to increase devotion, piety and faithfulness--religious faithfulness, among our people; and they have done well and they have served well.

American reform Judaism has to its credit this: that it saved thousands from apostasy and assimilation. American reform Judaism has this to its credit: that it showed conclusively, by example as well as by theory, that Americanism is not incompatible with Judaism; that deep loyalty to Jewish faith and to Jewish life goes hand in hand with great loyalty to America and American institutions. It bridged, as it were, what seemed to be a gulf, a chasm; it linked firmly the ideals of the one with the ideals of the other. And that is a tremendously important thing which it may justly claim to its credit.

Now, what has American reform Judaism on the debit column? And because I believe in American reform Judaism I point to these weaknesses in the hope that they may<sup>be</sup> remedied in the future, for they can be remedied. First of all--and to my mind, the most important weakness--is this: we have not yet reached the masses of our people. Reform Judaism has not penetrated the Jewish masses. It is almost circumscribed to one social level. Now just what the reason for it is, I am frank to confess that I do not know. But this is a fact: that in the great East Side of New York, where perhaps three-quarters of a million Jews live, many of whom are workingmen, there is today not one reform Jewish congregation.



Now, it is not that they are all orthodox, or that their children are orthodox. Perhaps seventy-five per cent of them do not belong to any religious institution; but somehow we have failed to appeal to them. Is it because we are not sufficiently democratically organized? Is it because our liturgy does not appeal to them? Is it because the masses, the working classes of Israel, are unreligious, or non-religious, or anti-religious?

But that is the fact, and one with which we shall have to wrestle in the days to come. Perhaps the children of these classes of Israel will ultimately come to us. Perhaps through our religious schools and our clubs and our community centers they will ultimately come to us. As yet not many have.

The second weakness of reform Judaism I believe is this: we havenot fostered the tradition of Jewish learning in our midst. Judaism is a religion based upon study, learning. The Jew always placed the study of the Torah above the function and the ritual of the high-priest. One of the rabbis said that a non-Jew who studies the Torah is of higher rank than the high-priest who does not. Learning was the strength and the sap and the substance of Jewish life.

Judaism cannot exist and Jewry perishes whenever a community thinks that it can depend entirely upon worship and observance and charity to perpetuate itself; that community ultimately perishes. That is one of the inexorable laws of our existence, and there is no escape from it. Read Jewish



history; read the story of the Hellenist-Jewish communities in Egypt, of the destruction of flourishing Jewish communities, those communities which failed to kindle the lamp of Jewish learning by the study of the Torah, and depended entirely, as so many of us do today, upon observance, upon worship and upon charity to perpetuate Israel's faith, and they perished and they despaired. "It is the tree of life only to those who lay hold of it."

I said once, and I say again, that we are the people of the book. We gave life to the book and the book now gives life to us. Now reform Judaism has not as yet succeeded in disseminating the love of the study of the Torah, of Jewish lore and Jewish learning, through the rank and the file of the people. We have relegated the study of the Torah to the professional few, to the ministers; and they, themselves, because of the drive and the urgency of their manifold tasks, are very often compelled to forego the joy and the duty of a study of the Torah.

But the Torah, men and women, was not given to the rabbis: the Torah was given to the people, to the whole people, to the masses of Israel. If Judaism is to continue as a democratic religion, if it is not to degenerate into an ecclesiastical hierarchy, then it must be on the basis of Jewish knowledge and Jewish thought and Jewish learning and Jewish philosophy, broadly disseminated through the ranks and classes of Israel.

We need an educated Jewish laity, and that is



something that American reform Judaism has as yet failed to achieve.

And the third weakness to which I point is this: the inadequacy of the religious education of our children. Let us be frank with ourselves; let us acknowledge it only in frankness. Will we ever be able to evolve the remedy for these conditions? Our religious schools, the best of them, are inadequate; they are curricular, rudimentary and faulty. The time allotted for the religious education of your children is all too brief--one hour a week, perhaps thirty-five weeks a year. One and a half days in 365 days of the year! Thirty-five hours a year to devote to the religious education of our children!

I maintain, and I say it to my friends in New York, that we cannot transmit a heritage of three thousand years--the wisdom and the learning of thirty centuries--ethics, religion, history, literature--in the brief space of one hour a week during the few years of a child's school life. We cannot do it. We must transmit to our children, as I take it, in our religious schools, the essential mental and spiritual qualities of our people. We must transmit to them, as I take it, the collective Jewish soul and the collective Jewish mind, and the Jewish attitude and the Jewish point of view, the passion of the prophet, the piety of the psalmist, the dream of the poet, the faith of the martyr, the high hope, the sacrificial valor, the morale of the race.

We must transmit to our children, but we cannot do



it--we rabbis frankly acknowledge our failure--we cannot do it in sixty minutes a week; and without the cooperation of you men and women, of Jewish fathers and mothers, I do not know how this problem is going to be solved. I suppose if I would suggest to the men and women of this congregation that we hold religious school twice a week instead of once a week, on Saturday and Sunday morning, there would be a howl of resentment. "What! Saturday morning? My child must go to the dentist on Saturday morning." Or to a music lesson, or to dancing. But I am going to make this suggestion very soon to the men and women of this congregation, and I hope that the men and women of the Temple will be the first, bravely and courageously, to resolve as a sample and an example for the rest of American Jewry, that our children, at least, shall be given an opportunity to become intimately acquainted with the soul and the spirit and the learning of our people; so that when they go out into life they will be enlightened Jews and not ignorant Jews.

And lastly there is perhaps this weakness: American reform Jewry has not evolved a religious discipline. Our religion--let us be frank with ourselves--is very much a matter of convenience. Isn't it? Not alone is our Temple attendance a matter of convenience, but our religious observances in religion are matters of convenience. We do things when they do not require any exertion or any sacrifice on our part. We have discarded most of the Jewish practices and Jewish ceremonies and Jewish observances not because they are not



beautiful, not because they have no longer any meaning or any significance to us or to our children, but simply because they require a certain amount of exertion, because they require a certain amount of thought, because they require a certain amount of energy on our part.

We have assumed, tragically and pitifully, that religion must be a matter of convenience. But it is not, men and women; religion is not a matter of convenience; religion is a matter of sacrifice. If religion is to mean anything to your life it must teach us restraint and discipline and exertion and sacrifices of the highest order; for only through these things do we develop, do we rise to the higher levels and the purer air.

We have de-Judaized our homes--the Jewish home, that citadel and fortress and stronghold of Jewish life; that harbor of love and peace and devotion; that place where Jewish loyalty and Jewish reverences were fostered and nurtured, where the spirit of our people dwelt; where the Holy Ghost of God found its shrine and its sanctuary. That home we have made so utterly prosaic, so ordinary, so commonplace by de-Judaizing it, by driving from it all the romance and all the beauty that once went with our faith.

We seldom pray in our homes, and we seldom listen to the praying lips of children in our homes; we seldom hallow the Sabbath; we seldom sanctify the Sabbath by special observance or a special prayer or a family reunion; we seldom sanctify the Jewish holy day; we seldom take down our Bible,



and, in the circle of our family, read parts of it. We have not built up a Jewish atmosphere in our lives.

I believe that all these things can be done, and I believe that it is your task, the reform Jews of today, to do it. Fifty years ago the pioneers were faced with a task and they did it well. Now our task is yet another one. We must evolve a rich and colorful, purposeful, meaningful Judaism in America. We must readjust our faith to our greater spiritual needs; we must integrate Jewish purpose; we must direct and organize Jewish purpose. We Jews of today must bring God back into our lives and into the lives of our children--the God of our fathers, and the God of our children, the God whom you need and the God whom they need; the one steadfast purpose amidst the confusion and the tribulations and the fretted moods of this world. God--the mighty kinsman, the loving friend! We must open the doors of our homes and the doors of our hearts and let God in as a light, as a mighty sun, as a great emancipation.

Our task, men and women, today is to raise the standard of Jewish learning. Our task, men and women, today is to heighten the pitch and accelerate the tempo of Jewish life in America. And we can do it; you must do it; you must do it individually--you, and you, and you--everyone in your home, in your sphere of influence, must look to it, you must take the task upon your own shoulders. Do not relegate the task of the perpetuation of our faith to the synagogue, to the rabbi. It is your task and your duty; it was given to



you and to your ancestors.

More schools and better schools; more high schools and better high schools for our children; more text books and better text books; more educated Jewish laymen; greater piety and devotion and religious consecration in the home; more interest on your part in what is going on in universal Israel; in the great cultural movements of our people, in the encouragement of Jewish scholarship and Jewish scholars, who are today desperately in need because of the conditions abroad.

Don't you see that Jewish schools were shut down and Jewish academies were destroyed and the scholars and the students and the libraries today have been scattered to the four winds? America today is the last refuge and the last stronghold of the cultural life of our people, and you men and women must look to it. You cannot any longer suffice yourselves with taking care of orphans and hospitals and the homes for the aged; there is much more in Judaism than the sick and the needy. There are the physically well who are spiritually ill; there are those who are physically competent but are morally, culturally, mentally and spiritually in need of food--the food of the spirit, the food of the mind.

It is your task, everyone of you. You must become pioneers and builders, even as those fifty years ago were pioneers and builders. You must take the great heart of Israel to you, the great concern of Israel to you; you must bring yourselves in touch with the palpitating heart of our people.



We are passing through troublous times; we are passing through very serious, critical hours, and we need today loyal, faithful sons and daughters who will stand fast and stand by and carry on.

American Judaism will justify itself if you help it to justify itself.

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