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Back to Israel, 1925.



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"BACK TO ISRAEL."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

NOVEMBER 22, 1925, CLEVELAND, O.

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WRHS



JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



The book "Israel" which we shall discuss this morning is significant for two reasons: first, for the author himself; secondly, for the message of the author. "Israel" is in the nature of a spiritual autobiography; it is the story of a man's wanderings through many alien worlds to his own. It is the story of a man on a pilgrimage who wanders far into many countries and worships at many strange shrines, but at last his pilgrimage brought him back to Israel and to Zion.

In this regard the author, Ludwig Lewisohn, is not unique. There have been many sons of Israel who wandered far from the fold of their people, who sought peace and self-expression in other worlds. They found the Jewish world a bit too cramped, a bit too narrow, a bit too uncomfortable for themselves, and they were attracted by what they thought was the spaciousness and the freedom of the world outside. And so early in life these gifted sons of Israel took the road that led away from the people, and the road at first seemed so tantalizing, so fascinating; it was so full of promise; but then most of them soon discovered that the road begins to drop after a while very sharply into dark and noisesome valleys--valleys of disillusionment. What they thought were oases turned out to be mirages; what seemed to be inviting turned out to be forbidding.

Many of them, when they found themselves in these dark valleys, were broken in spirit and their days were



consumed in vain hankering and in unrequited devotion. They were like strange fantasms, estranged from their own people, unwelcomed by other peoples. But some of them--the wiser of them, the stronger of them--the Lewisoohns, the Wassermanns, the Einsteins, the Brandeises, the Nordaus, soon turned sharply about and returned like doves returning to their cotes--returned to the compassionate fold of their own people; and Israel, ancient and wise and understanding, was always happy to welcome back these returning sons.

Ludwig Lewisoohn, in this book "Israel" - always, of course, thinking of himself and of his own life's experiences, tries to give the reasons why some Jews, cultured, prosperous, free, seemingly not burdened by any economic or political urge or necessity,--why such Jews are seized with a precipitate craving to escape from Judaism--to leave their people. He tries to understand their reasoning; and he should understand them because he was one of them. The argument was this. He says: "We are living in an enlightened age and are citizens first of the country of our birth or allegiance, next of that central domain of Western civilization of which our country is a part. We are in no respect different from our fellows. Their history, literature, tradition have, in point of fact, become as our own. Our minds are as much at home as our body and, anyhow,--at this point a perceptible hesitation always sets in--to admit any difference in tradition or, above all, instinct, is merely to play into the hands of anti-Semite. As it is, we bear a burden for which we can



find no inner reason, suffer exclusions to which nothing within us consents, have thrust upon us a guilt of which our souls are free. And that is why--here our friends commonly become passionate--we dislike Jewish superstition, ignorance, vulgarity, assertiveness, display, servility, extremes of wealth or poverty, or that we find it so easy to tolerate in Gentiles, because we are made responsible for all these things, are made co-sharers of them, bearers of whatever guilt or ugliness they involve. That is why, broad in our sympathies as the world, we exclude all things Jewish from these sympathies, for it is our supposed portion in these Jewish things that shuts us out from clubs, fraternities, office, emoluments, opportunities, friendships, alliances, Jewish characteristics become an ache to us. The Jewish face becomes unbeautiful. Are these not the whips held over us and the irons wherewith we are branded? We will escape, we must escape this meaningless curse, this dreadful shadow, this simulacrum out of a past of which we know nothing."

This seems to me a fair summary of the conscious or unconscious reasoning of the Jewish assimilationist who seeks escape from Judaism.

I should like to call your attention to two things in this paragraph, two outstanding features of this conscious or unconscious deliberation or reasoning of the assimilationist. In the first place, we are in no respect different from our fellows. To make this statement true, it should be translated into a wish: "We wish to be in no respect



different from our fellows." And why do we wish that? Because as the world is constituted to-day to be different is to be singled out for some form of physical or spiritual crude or subtle persecution. The world today hankers after uniformity. The minority which stands out distinctive by reason of certain peculiar ideals will find itself not alone misunderstood but actually persecuted. Even democracy, which set out to emancipate the individual, to give each man a chance to live his own life,--even democracy, through the tyranny of the majority, is suppressing and submerging the minority. A minority is like a thorn in the flesh of a society which is stereotyped, especially a minority like the Jewish minority, which is so distinctive by race, by history, by tradition, by culture,--such a minority will find itself misunderstood, persecuted, in one form or another,--by political disabilities, by social disabilities, by the knout or the pen, by blood or by venom, in some form or another; through lower anti-Semitism or higher anti-Semitism, the minority will find itself singled out because it is different.

And therefore these sons and daughters of Israel seek escape from this difference, from this uniqueness thrust upon them, by means of self-effacement, assimilation. They wish to lose themselves in this majority, so that they will not be recognized as different and will not therefore become a butt of all persecution.

And then I should like to call your attention to a second thought expressed in this paragraph. "We bear a



burden for which we can find no inner reason, suffer exclusions to which nothing within us consents, and have thrust upon us a guilt of which our souls are free. We will escape this simulacrum out of a past of which we know nothing."

Out of a past of which we know nothing. Most of the recruits in the ranks of the assimilationists come from those who know nothing of the past of their people. They are uninformed; they know neither the life nor the literature nor the history nor the ideal nor the passionate cravings of their race. Their roots, their cultural roots, have been planted elsewhere; they are out of contact and out of touch with the living soul and the throbbing spirit of their people, and therefore when they are called upon to endure suffering and persecution they resent it; when they are asked to bear burdens not sanctioned by instinct within them they fret under the burdens.

You see, a martyr can find some consolation; a man who suffers for an ideal can find some comfort in the thought that after all his suffering has a purpose which may some day help mankind. That is a tremendous comfort; that is why a martyr can march singing to his martyrdom--because he is sustained by the hope that he is dying for an ideal. But when a man suffers as these suffer, purposelessly, without rhyme or reason or meaning or end, their suffering is simply brutal, crude. They know not why they suffer.

Mr. Lewisohn, after having given the reasons which prompt the assimilationist to escape, then sets about



to answer these arguments; to refute them. In the first place, he maintains, that even if it were desirable for the minority to lose itself in the majority, even if conformity were a laudable and a commendable act, the Jew could not lose himself if he wished; the Jew could not conform if he willed. "He cannot shake off," says the author, "the impress of the experience of seventy generations. The point is too simple to be labored. It is assimilation that would be the miracle, the break in the eternal chain of causality. Our assimilationist may never think a Jewish thought; he may never read a Jewish book. In the essential character of all his passions as well as of all his actions he remains a Jew. The groundwork of Jewish character is his; the terrible post-exilic experience is his; he remains a strange mixture of passionate prophet and beaten cur, leader and outcast. If he has forgotten the call to 'restore the preserved of Israel,' he throws himself into the business of giving 'a light to the Gentiles.' He is liberal, reformer, practitioner or patron of the arts; he makes discoveries in medicine or, as a lawyer, pleads the causes of those for whom none will plead. If he does none of these things he is a sordid scoundrel. But the sordid scoundrels are a minority. The average decent Jew in business, in the professions, in journalism or the arts sustains a perceptible relation to the prophets of his people."

A man cannot step out of his skin; a man cannot, however much he tries, undo or change the racial complexes, psychic or mental, which ten thousand invisible hands of ten



thousand yesterdays have moulded and fashioned and deposited within. It does not matter at all whether we regard ourselves as a pure race or as a race at all. There are no pure races in the world. The important thing is that there are in this world definite ethnic groups, definite groups of people who have shared for long periods of time common historical experiences, and are today sharing common loyalties and common interests, and that these experiences of a long past and these loyalties of the present have somehow given these groups distinction and character and uniqueness so that they can be recognized, and among these ethnic groups the Jew is one--ineffaceable, ineradicable, real and recognizable. The Jew may speak German better than the German, as he often does; the Jew may write German literature better than the German, as he often does; but the Jew will never be a Teuton. He may be, as he has been, a very loyal and in all regards an actively participating citizen of Germany, but he will never be--he should never try to be--a Teuton.

That is the first answer to the assimilationist. We cannot destroy our difference, even if we should wish to. And in the second place, maintains Mr. Lewisohn, the world does not wish us to be assimilationists. While it professes a desire that we should assimilate, in reality it thwarts every effort on our part to assimilate. If a nation were really eager to have the Jew lose his identity and become completely assimilated, why, they would welcome the Jew in every school and in every college and in every university and



in every office and in every club and in every fraternity. They couldn't have enough of Jews if they actually wanted them to be merged. What actually happens? They resent the effort of the Jew to assimilate. Whenever their numbers go beyond a certain, to them, reasonable proportion, at once they raise the cry that the Jew is crowding them out. As Pharaoh of old said, "There are too many of them and they are too mighty." And the universities begin to ask for a limitation of Jews to five or ten or fifteen per cent. The

Kreutzer" in Germany complains bitterly that the Jews have monopolized the press and the literature and the stage and the commerce of the country. He is too good an assimilationist, they maintain. They don't want us to be such a good assimilationist. Belloc, in England, resents the effort of the Jew to be in all regards like the Anglo-Saxon; he prefers to have the Jew ghettotized a little more. So that even if assimilation were desirable, and even if the Jew could assimilate, the non-Jewish world really does not wish it to assimilate.

Again he quotes Germany as the classic example of an assimilationist bankruptcy. In no country in the world does the Jew try assimilation as persistently and thoroughly as he did in Germany from the days of Moses Mendelssohn to this day, a period of almost 150 years. He was in every sense a one hundred per cent German; he identified himself with the life of the people completely--in speech, in manner, as regards the duties of citizenship, as regards patriotism and



loyalty, and he gave to Germany those precious gifts of a Heine and a Gustav Mahler and a Max Lieberman and an Einstein and a Hermann Cohen and a Wassermann, and he enriched the cultural life of Germany. With what result? Germany was the first country in Europe to have an official anti-Semitic party in the Reichstag. Germany was perhaps the first country in Europe to have an anti-Semitic press. In no country in the world has racial chauvinism, which is aimed, of course, directly against the Jew, been so elaborated and so evolved as in Germany. Twelve thousand Jewish boys died in the last war for Germany, out of a comparatively small population of five or six hundred thousand Jews, because that is all the Jews there are in Germany. When a memorial service was held in Berlin last year for the German dead, the Catholic priest was invited to participate, and the Protestant was invited to participate, but every trick was used in order to keep the Rabbi away from the memorial service, and no public recognition was made of the twelve thousand Jewish dead who died for Germany.

Assimilation, then, maintains our author, is bankrupt. In a sense, the more you have assimilation the more of anti-Semitism you will have. What, then, is the solution? And here Ludwig Lewisohn gives his positive message to the Jewish world, and when he speaks he speaks with the accent of his ancestors, the prophets of Israel. There is a ring there which has an echo of the authentic theme of Jewish life. The Jew has been burdened with a uniqueness and a



distinction from times immemorial. In God's omniscience Israel was given a peculiar mission and a peculiar destiny-- a prophetic mission and an overwhelming destiny. From times immemorial a certain indefinable yearning after justice and freedom and peace has become integrated in the very life, the core and the fiber of Jewish life; a passion seized hold of him and he became enslaved,--a passion for social justice and social righteousness. Out of the genius of his life these ideals were evolved. He formed them; they in turn formed him. These ideals made him a unique people; these ideals brought him agony and suffering and the crown of thorns; and these ideals also made him immortal.

Why should the Jew today try to destroy this unique personality, grounded in these mighty traditions of three thousand years. What compensation has life to offer him for turning his back upon this resplendant and heroic and tragic career of three thousand years? Why cease to be different? What has the world to offer him for the flesh-pots of conformity, the ease, the absence of irritation and discrimination? Are these things for which men sacrifice all the glory and the grandeur of a marvelous past? Why cease to be different if our destiny has forged us and fashioned us to be unique? We ask of no other people to be like unto us; we ask of no people to surrender their past, their traditions, their beatitudes. Why should we be asked to do so?

All we ask of the world is to be let alone.



to work out our own destiny; all we ask of the world is to share the inalienable rights of human beings--rights given by God to all men, and not the gifts of men to their fellowmen--the inalienable rights of life and of liberty and of the pursuit of happiness, each man and each group according to his own life. We wish to share the common life of the people; we wish to share in the duties of citizenship, we wish to share in the arts, we wish to share in the philanthropy, we wish to share in the industry; we wish to give of ourselves to the advancement of life wherever we find ourselves.

We ask and we cater for no social recognition. Social recognition, my friends, cannot be asked. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can be demanded because they are the inalienable rights of all human beings, but social contacts and social relationships,--these cannot be asked; these must be given voluntarily from man to man, and they must be given as to equals and must be accepted as by equals. We do not wish to be received into social life as crypto-Jews--as washed-out crypto-Jews; we do not wish to be welcomed on the basis of a propitiatory imitateness. If we are to be welcomed we wish to be welcomed as men who have many things in common and many things that are not in common; who can give and take; who can exchange ideas and ideals.

That may come a hundred years from today, or five hundred years from today, but it is not important that it come now or later. All we ask for is our inalienable rights



to live, to be free, to be citizens, to participate in the life of the community. We ask of our people to surrender nothing when we tell them not to assimilate. It is perhaps well that this thought be borne in mind. We ask of our people to surrender nothing when we ask them not to assimilate. "Are we to give up our very souls? For the culture of the West is in our very souls. Are we to stop being, feeling, doing what we have always been, felt and done? The answer is: you are to give up nothing you possess, except the delusion of assimilation. All you have you shall own--but you shall own it as Jews. You shall be less arrogant but prouder, never servile but more capable of the grace of humility. You shall no longer feel excluded. Your own solidarity and your own cohesion shall seem right and natural to yourselves and to others." You shall own all things which you possess, but you shall own them as Jews.

And lastly, Mr. Lewisohn, having this point of view of a conformative Jewish life, comes to Palestine. In Palestine, in the possibilities of Palestine, Mr. Lewisohn sees an intensification of this conformative Jewish life. He wants Palestine as the homeland of the Jewish people, not because he is eager to establish there a Jewish state,--he does not think much at all of political states,--and not only as a haven of refuge for the thousands who are today being driven out of the countries of eastern Europe and not permitted to enter the countries of western Europe or of America. He thinks of Palestine in this sense: about the upbuilding.



about that ideal and that task of the upbuilding of Palestine have been gathered the most positive forces that Jewry has known for generations; the ideal and the task of vivifying the national and cultural consciousness of the scattered tribe. Through them negation of oneself becomes affirmation, fear is exchanged for loyalty, Christianity for a just pride, forgetfulness for self-recollection. Palestine has shielded thousands of souls; it has, through a sense of national and human dignity, to the remotest regions of dispersion, given us recognition as a people and a place in the councils of nations; it has self-recovered its stultification; the upbuilding of the land is the historic task of the Jewish people.

And it is this ideal of Palestine as a means for the reaffirmation of a vigorous Jewish consciousness, for the stimulation of a new spiritual activity throughout Israel,-- it is this hope which has electrified the thousands of scattered communities the world over; it is this hope which has brought thousands from all parts of the world to Palestine; it is this hope which is today making build up the waste places; it is this hope which is today protecting the hands which are unaccustomed to physical toil--to build the roads and construct the cities and drain the marshes, so that they become fruitful lands of blessedness; it is this hope which is today crowning the educational system, which is saturated in the Hebraic spirit with a Hebraic university; it is this hope which is today conducting the most dramatic and



the most romantic experiment of mankind.

I wish I had time to dwell at greater length upon this subject to which Mr. Lewissohn devotes the major part of his book, but it is really not necessary; it is sufficient to note that this man who tries so tragically to sail upstream, this man who tried so hard to escape, has now been carried to the shores of Zion as to a place of refuge and peace and solace.

There is one thing--and this is my last word to you this morning, friends--there is one thing which I missed in this book; there is one note there which I found wanting and which renders the symphony of Israel incomplete: the religious note. God does not seem to find a place in this vision of the returned wanderer. He speaks, of course, of the great ethical idealism of Israel; he quotes the Bible profusely; he understands the prophetic spirit of our people, and yet he somehow fails to understand that all this ethical idealism and all these tremendous Biblical phrases which have rung down the ages and all this passion and ardor of prophecy and all this sacrificial loyalty of two thousand years find their source and their mainspring, their sanction and their consecration in a strong, unswerving faith in God. God was Israel's hope, Israel's pillar of fire by night and his cloud of healing and cooling shadows in the heat of the day.

When the prophet uttered his immemorial phrase, "It was in the name of God," and when the Jews offered themselves on the ten thousand flaming altars of mankind, it was



"for the sanctification of God's name." And when the Jew spoke with prayerful longing and yearning of Palestine, it was Palestine as the home of the shachina--as the home of the spirit of God, where he could live perhaps a little closer and a little nearer to God's own throne of glory.

One cannot write the secular history of Israel as one can write a secular history of France or England or Italy; nor can one announce a secular destiny for Israel in the diaspora or in Palestine. Where in the diaspora, where in this land or any other land is to be found that institution which has unified the people and from which radiate inspiration for a more intense and affirmative Jewish life if not in the synagogue? And where in Palestine will the prophetic spirit of our race be nurtured if not in the synagogue, the temple, where the faith of our people is kept alive?

Perhaps Mr. Lewisohn's pilgrimage is not yet ended. One long, weary journey took him to Zion; perhaps another one will take him to the God who dwells in Zion. One pilgrimage brought him to Israel; perhaps another pilgrimage will bring him to the God of Israel.

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