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Christian Friends of Israel, 1949.





CHRISTIAN FRIENDS OF ISRAEL

Sunday, March 13, 1949

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



In our Sacred Book we are told to remember Amalek. In fact, the Sabbath before Purim is known as the Sabbath of Remembrance at which time we read that passage from the Book of Deuteronomy which admonishes the people of Israel always to remember the enemy Amalek who, when the people were faint and weary in their wandering through the wilderness, attacked the people of Israel, destroyed many of them, and made their life particularly memorable. Haman, the villain of the story of Purim, is by tradition declared to have been the descendant of this tribe of Amalek, the ancient enemy of Israel. We are admonished to remember our enemies from Pharoah down to this day, for in every generation men arise to destroy Israel. This admonition to remember is intended to put us on our guard, never to relax our vigilance, never to lull ourselves into a false sense of security, not to live in a fool's paradise.

The world is full of bigotry and intolerance, and a minority people is always in danger of becoming a scapegoat for the sins and the mistakes and the sufferings of a people. That is true of ancient Egypt and Persia, and it is still true today. We are admonished to remember this fact, to be on the alert to expose these enemies, to organize against them, to educate men as to their true nature and their menace. It is good for all peoples to remember their Amaleks.

In the 19th century our people in Europe forgot to remember and they were destroyed. But while remembering our enemies, of whom there are legion, we are also admonished to remember our friends. There is a little prayer in connection with Purim which was sung this morning in which blessings are invoked upon all the benefactors of our people connected with the story of Purim - Mordecai, Esther and also Haarbona, a non-Jew who helped Mordecai and who reminded the king that Haman had erected a gallows on which to hang Mordecai. A blessing is invoked upon the memory of this non-Jew for being a friend of Israel in time of need.



We should remember our friends. We recall that we were surrounded not always by enemies, but frequently by friends. Not all men have been the foes of Israel, else Israel could not have survived. There were those who loved justice and truth and humanity, who in the dark hours of peril for our people, rose to champion and defend them. They were like a brother born at a time of adversity. Our ancestors spoke of such people as the righteous among non-Jews, and said that these righteous among the non-Jews would inherit the kingdom of Heaven. And so, when we read the Megillah this week and the story of this bitter enemy of Israel, we should also think with gratitude of those non-Jews who arose frequently in our history to fight for us and with us.

This required a high degree of independence on their part to free themselves of the prejudice of the world in which they were reared, and it required a high degree of courage to defy the world in which they lived. There were three categories of these friends of Israel - those who defended Israel against slander, calumny and hostile propaganda; those who championed the political and civil rights of the people; and those who assisted in the national restoration of Israel. Behind all organized hostile propaganda there was always some carefully calculated and deliberate motive. The aim of this propaganda was always to turn aside the wrath of the people, to turn it aside from government or public officials or the military who, by their corruption and mis-government had brought suffering on a people which was ready to vent its anger upon them, and vent it upon the Jews. This propaganda was calculated to divert the clamor for economic and social reform to the ready whipping boy - the Jew. This propaganda was calculated to arouse the prejudice and the religious fanatics of the masses and incite them to violent attacks upon Jews in order to check the spread of liberal ideas which these entrenched privileged classes were afraid of. The organized attack upon our people had always back of it some political



reactionary interest which aimed at something far greater than mere Jew-baiting. They were fighting for their privileges which were endangered, and the champions of humanity and liberty and freedom clearly understood that at all times. They saw and interpreted clearly the attack upon the Jews as an attack upon themselves, upon freedom, democracy, freedom of the human mind. And in the drama of championing the Jews one clearly sees the drama of the human struggle against all forms of reaction.

Let me give you one or two instances to illustrate this. It was on the eve of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century that a bitter struggle developed between the proponents of new learning and the champions of the old order. The struggle waged hot and bitter because much was at stake. It was the struggle between the medieval and the modern world, and it was at that moment that the Dominican leaders chose to raise the cry of "The Jews are upon you, O Christians!" There arose at that time a renegade Jew, Johann Pfefferkorn, by trade a butcher, by choice a thief. Pfefferkorn supplied the Dominican priests with a time-honored libel against the Jews, and more especially, with the libel against Jewish books and the Talmud. There was the source of the Jewish and it was the cause for Jewish intransigence - destroy the Jewish books, burn the Talmud and you will have destroyed the intellectual basis upon which Jewish lies persist. Pfefferkorn's lies were spread throughout Germany. The Dominicans succeeded by pointing to these charges of Pfefferkorn in persuading the Emperor Maximilian to grant Pfefferkorn a mandate to search Jewish homes and synagogues for books and to burn the books which he found hostile to Christianity. The Humanists of that day saw in this move an attempt to check the new learning which was spreading through Europe, to discourage the study of the Hebrew language, and when the opinion of Christian scholars was



solicited about the advisability of destroying Jewish books, there arose a great Christian Catholic scholar, Johann Reuchlin, a Humanist, a lover of classical literature, a man who had studied Hebrew, a man who had begun to study the Talmud. Joham Reuchlin arose to defend the Jewish books, and from the defense of the Jewish books, he passed on to a magnificent defense of the Jewish people. In answering the charges of Pfefferkorn he declared:

None of these books, as is claimed, contain statements hostile to Christians. For the Jews have their writings for the purpose of their own inspiration and the preservation of their faith in time of persecution by pagan, Christian or Mohammedan, but not to inflict harm on or cause shame to anybody.... It is obvious that they do not recognize Christ as God. That is their faith, but they do not intend to cast aspersion on anybody....

There was recently published a booklet against the Jews, wherein it is pointed out that their ritual contains a prayer, commencing with the word "Velameshumadim", which is allededly directed against Christians. This is cited to prove that the Jews, in an evil and venomous spirit, curse the holy apostles, their followers who receive baptism, the common Christian churches and the Roman Empire. However, when we expose the prayer to the full light, we find in it not a single word which signifies or implies anything against the baptized, or the apostles, or Christians, or the Roman Empire....

The Jew belongs to God just as much as I do. If he holds his ground, he does so before his Lord. Every one of us will have to give an account of himself. Why, then, presume to judge the soul of another? Only God can do that, and He is mighty enough to set each soul right.

In matters of faith, Jews are responsible to themselves, not subject to any other judge, and no Christian should sit in judgment over them. They are not heretics, for those who were never of the Christian religion cannot be renegades from it. They are justified in complaining that the Christian Church annually on Good Friday calls them "perfidious Jews", i.e., such as are bereft of faith and fidelity.

In addition, the secular law, too, prohibits interference with the Jews since they are members of the Roman Empire and fellow subjects of the Emperor.



This was a most unusual and unique defense of the Jews in the Middle Ages, and it, of course, aroused the hatred of the Dominicans who called Reuchlin a heretic. They said he was a traitor to the church; he was found guilty by Pope Leo X, but he did not give up his fight. He exposed Pfefferkorn. He exposed the forces of reaction behind Pfefferkorn and he summoned all of his friends to rally to his defence and that of the Jews, which they did, and before long a battle of books took place in Western Europe which prepared the way for the Protestant Reformation.

There were other Reuchlins in Jewish history, and we remember them with blessing. In the second category of those who championed the political and civil rights of the Jews, I should like on this Purim morning to call attention to another Christian, the Abbe Gregoir of France. Europe at the close of the 18th century was moving rapidly towards the French Revolution. The philosophers of the 18th century had prepared the way for a new era. A new world was being born and the question on the lips of every Jew was, will the Jews, too, benefit from this new trend towards Liberty, Fraternity and Equality. Will he, too, be permitted to enter this new world? The Jews had their friends among the revolutionists of the French Revolution. They also had their enemies - the clericals, those who hated all the ideas which came to be expressed by the French Revolution. And there appears upon the scene this priest, the Abbe Gregoir. Somewhat earlier he had won a prize on how to improve the position of the Jews. The Abbe Gregoir was elected to the State Assembly and on October 1, 1789, this priest arose in the National Assembly and made a motion to grant the full rights of citizenship to the Jews of France.

"Fifty thousand Frenchmen arose this morning as slaves; it depends on you whether they shall go to bed as free people." The Abbe Gregoir pounded the rostrum with his fists "as a blacksmith beats the anvil" shouting till his voice was hoarse with the effort: "I claim freedom and happiness for the Jews in the name of the sacred principles of my religion, and I will not leave this tribune before you have given me a hearing." Bursts of laughter greeted him at first. Insults followed; also ponderous lawbooks and inkwells "that splashed their contents over his wig and cassock". Splinters of glass cut his face, his hands were bleeding, but the Abbe Gregoire stood firm.



He fought for the emancipation of the Jews for a long time thereafter, and when the vote was finally taken on September 27, 1791, the Abbe had not eaten for 48 hours before the vote was taken, and he cried out: "I can neither sleep, drink nor eat for joy!" He was not satisfied merely with fighting for the rights of the Jews in France. His voice - the first Christian voice in 1800 years - was raised to demand complete political and economic emancipation for the Jews. Throughout Western Europe he travelled. He worked, labored, preached for the emancipation of Israel. Public prayers were said for him in the synagogues of Western Europe. Later he was made Bishop and visited a Jewish synagogue in Amsterdam.

One Sabbath morning Bishop Gregoire, vested in full ecclesiastical robes, carrying his mitre and pastoral staff, made his entry into the Portuguese synagogue of Amsterdam. A thousand candles were lit in the Portuguese synagogue in his honor. "Christianity teaches me that all men are brothers. Whatever our credal differences, I must love and help those who are children of the same Father."

One recalls the name of Abbe Gregoire with blessing and gratitude on a festival when we are told to remember both friends and enemies.

In the third category of those who assisted in the restoration of Israel as a nation may be included the names of many Christians. Just as many played a decisive role in the first restoration, so in this second restoration, non-Jews have played a very, very important role. It was Cyrus, you will recall, who gave the Jews permission to return from Babylon and to rebuild their Temple. The prophet Isaiah calls him the "annointed of the Lord", and in the first chapter of the Book of Ezra we read:

Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying: "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord, the God of heaven, given me; and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.



Whosoever there is among you of all His people - his God be with him - let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord, the God of Israel, He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And whosoever is left, in any place where he so journeth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with bests, beside the freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem."

In the drama of the second restoration which culminated last year in the establishment of the state of Israel, non-Jews played a very important role. There was a Christian propaganda for the restoration of Israel active in England in the 17th century and continued right to this last hour. That was bound up, of course, with Christian theology. The theory was that the day of the Second Advent was near at hand, but could not take place until all the Jews were first scattered throughout the world, and therefore, Jews should be permitted to return to England, and that thereafter the Jews converted would return to Palestine to reestablish their state, at the same time coinciding with the Second Advent. This belief was responsible for the readmission of the Jews into England under Cromwell. In the 19th century this took on a far more practical and political turn. As early as 1840 the Earl of Shaftesbury sent a memorandum to Palmerston recommending the reestablishment of Palestine as a homeland for the Jews. He wrote:

There are many reasons why more is to be anticipated from them than from any others who might settle there. They have ancient reminiscences and deep affection for the land; - it is connected in their hearts with all that is bright in times past, and with all that is bright in those which are to come; their industry and perseverance are prodigious. ....Long ages of suffering have trained their people to habits of endurance and self-denial; they would joyfully exhibit them in the settlement and service of their ancient country.

Many noble Englishmen gave of their energy to rebuild the state of Israel. Laurence Oliphant, for example, long before the Balfour Declaration, went to Palestine, projected a scheme for Jewish settlement there, wrote a book on that subject, worked with the first Zionists among the Jews, spent the last years of his life in



Palestine working for the return of Israel and the rebuilding of the state of Israel.

One of the noblest spirits of Great Britain, George Eliot, wrote "Daniel Deronda" in which she presented the case for the national rebirth of Israel and the restoration of Israel in as magnificent a form as we have in all Jewish literature. British writers worked for the rebuilding of the Jewish state. And of course, during the first World War this movement culminated in the Balfour Declaration. The British Cabinet was almost unanimous in the issuance of the Declaration. The only one opposed to it was a Jew by the name of Montague.

Not only Balfour's name is to be mentioned in blessing, but David Lloyd George, Robert Cecil, Jan Christian Smuts, Josiah Wedgewood, Winston Churchill, and many others, and although the British government did not always live up to its true obligations under the Mandate, and especially under Bevin, and while in recent years we have had occasion to fight the government of Great Britain, and while we may still have the unwelcome need of resisting policies of the Foreign Office, nevertheless, Israel will never forget the debt which it owes these Christians who stood by us, helped us, fought for us, worked for us in the realization of this dream of our people.

We had such friends in France and other parts of Europe, and in the United States. The Jewish state of Israel is indebted to men like Woodrow Wilson and Truman who will go down in history, I believe, with the name of Cyrus, the Great, as having been responsible to a large measure for the favorable vote in the United Nations a year ago last November and seeing to it that the United States was the first country to recognize last May the state of Israel. Numerous Congressmen, Senators, Cabinet members - they will have the blessing in the annals of Jewish history. Senator Lodge, , Wagner, Taft, Vice-President Barkley, Dr. Walter Clay Lowdermilk, James G. McDonald, the first Ambassador of the United States to Israel, General Hilldring, Bartley Crum,



Senator Vandenberg, John Foster Dulles, Sumner Welles, President Green of the American Federation of Labor, and Murray of the C.I.O. One can mention dozen upon dozen of great Christian men and women - writers, editors - some from the United States and other parts of the Western hemisphere and some from the British Commonwealth. I am not in position to say that the state of Israel would not have come about without the help of these people. It was God who brought it to pass. It was the will of the Jewish people which finally achieved it, but surely no story of the second restoration would be complete or true without making the most generous provision for the role that these good men and women in all walks of life - non-Jews - contributed to help the Jewish people rebuild its national life.

These things are good to remember and recall, especially on a day on which we are inclined to think of enemies of Israel. It is good to remember that in all of our great hours of crisis, danger, hope, we could turn to non-Jews who were ready to stretch out a helping hand even as non-Jews could at all times turn to us in their hours of need and receive from the Jewish people support in their national struggles. There is a fraternity of goodwill in the world. There is a companionship of fine, free spirits in the world. There is a world of goodwill in the world with which we ought to remain constantly aware as we fight for our rights.

• We ought constantly to reach out and find kindred spirits among all peoples, for they are the men and women who, like ourselves, are interested in the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, a world of brotherhood.