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“The Problem of the Jew in America,” 1917 April 15.

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April 15, 1917.

THE PROBLEM OF THE JEW IN AMERICA.

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From Egypt to Sinai, from physical slavery to spiritual freedom, marched ancient Israel 1500 years before the common era; and 1900 years after the common era the Jews of Russia have marched from their Egypt to their Sinai, from their physical to political and physical and spiritual freedom. The Jews of Russia, bruised and broken and bleeding in their bodies, crushed also in their spirit, now lift their heads, have shaken off their shackles, and stand as a free people united with the free peoples of Russia. Ancient Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness on its way to the land of promise, and the generation that knew the yoke of Egyptian slavery and also that had been wedded to the flesh-pots of Egypt, was destined to die and perish in the wilderness. Before the Jews of Russia, I doubt not, there will be forty years of wandering in a new wilderness, and the generation that knew old Russia, that expressed the land of bondage both physically and politically, and spiritually, has before it many years of trial, difficulty and hardship. The coming years are to be years of preparation; years of preparation for freedom; years of preparation for self government; years of preparation for all the peoples of Russia, and especially for the Jews of Russia.

I recall to your minds the bold words spoken by the Jewish Deputy, Freedman, in the Duma a little more than a year ago. Standing there before the assembled delegates and representatives of all the Russias, and pointing to the box in which sat the cabinet ministers and officials of the government, he dared to say, on behalf of his suffering and oppressed brethren, in the hearing of all Russia, that the Jews of Russia are not linked with their fate, the fate of their race with the fate of the Russian government, but with that of the Russian people.

The revolution which has so startled the world is destined to revolutionize the life of the Jews of Russia. But I would impress upon you, if perchance you had not had it brought forcibly to your attention, that the revolution in Russia is destined not only alone to revolutionize the life of the Jews of Russia, it is destined also to revolutionize the life of the Jews of America. The rushing tide of immigration perchance will cease to run westward; perchance the tide may even turn and be toward the East. The recent immigrants of the old generation in America, it must be acknowledged with truth, have not been altogether happy here in America, - have not been able to live their Jewish life as they would live it. It has been <sup>an</sup> impossibility for them,



a trial for their children; and America, to which they have after great hardship and privation across continent and sea, has brought disillusionment in their hopes and destruction to many a treasured ideal. Perchance, hundreds and thousands, many thousands, may now return to Russia, their old fatherland, since Russia now is free. There are thousands who are pointing out that if the immigrants shall cease to come, if the tide of immigration shall cease to flow, if Russian Judah and Eastern Judah shall no longer continue to come to America, it will impose a distinct loss to America: for they believe that American Judah has been sustained by the spiritual energies of the Jews of Russia and of Eastern Europe; they believe that the Jews from Eastern Europe have brought to us the quickening and fructifying forces of Eastern energy. Whether this be <sup>a</sup> true or false interpretation, I believe that the American Judaism, if the tide of immigration were to cease and American Judaism might be emancipated--I believe that the American Jews will be free for the first time in almost half a century to live their life, a free life in this land..

What are the problems before the Jews of America? It has been already pointed out that there are thousands of Jews in America, sons and daughters of Israel, who have no religious bond,-who do not enter synagogue and temple,-who are not inspired by her ancient truth, and

in whom her mighty Jewish principles and Jewish ideals bring not the least inspiration. They are inspired by the tie of blood, and the bond that unites all Israel in America is the bond of philanthropy, the bond of common charity, the bond of common heritage and common suffering. There are thousands that believe in this bond of philanthropy and <sup>moral</sup> Hebrew principles, though there will be thousands born that Israel perchance will be destined to lose altogether. At times it has been the custom of some to sneer at charity, -to sneer much at the charity which would solve our most perplexing Jewish problems.

I am not one of those who would sneer at charity. I would <sup>cry</sup> ~~say~~ aloud, all honor to the Jews of America who so courageously, who so unselfishly, for more than a generation past, have willingly borne the burden of millions of their fellow-men. They would not desert their principles, nor would they suffer the door to be shut in the faces of those who were the victims of unrighteous persecution. And now, for three decades we Jews of America have had the unselfishness and willingness, all honor to us, to become absorbed with our strength and energy in this overwhelming problem in the suffering brought so near to us. The fact of this philanthropy has stood in the foreground. So completely has it stood and enlarged that it has transformed our Jewish outlook. It has ordinarily influenced our Jewish thought. It



has given a new direction to all our Jewish institutions, and our life without it would have been altogether different.

Now I believe that the Jews of America are to be free. Now I believe that the Jews of America are to find their life no longer conditioned by this superlative burden which has dwarfed all other conditions. We have believed, this generation past, that it was our moral obligation as Jews that every person should receive a chance for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that no human beings were destined to live in tenement hovels, to struggle hopelessly and die; that it was not destined by mankind that this should be the welcome to those unfortunate millions who here sought peace and happiness. And we, the Jews of America, with strong and valiant spirit, with courage and hearts never failing, have labored to save a persecuted people,-- have labored to recreate a people broken by their oppressions, and have labored forward with thought of Moses: ( He builded pyramids; he blocked out obelisks to humanity.)

We sneer not at humanity or philanthropy. We know charity and philanthropy are the social obligations of Judaism. It was not for the writers of ethical and social justice to assert Jewish ideals. It was from Judea. We have believed it was our duty to Americanize our millions of immigrants,--our duty to Americanize them so that they

would grasp American principles and purposes, and understand and modify their life in accordance with American institutions and feel enthusiasm for American ideals. We have felt it to be our duty to implant in the heart of the immigrant the very life-blood of America. America gave them a refuge, a home, a country, a fatherland, and we have believed that they should give their hearts and loyalty to America and to America's principles and ideals, and to the stars and stripes and to our love of the American flag.

But our whole problem is transformed. Within coming generations the problem of the Jew of America will probably be absolutely different. We Jews of America are to be free from this pressure--material pressure and necessity. The Jew of America is for the first time to stand face to face with liberty, and now the Jew of America must justify himself as a Jew under freedom. Oh, noble the cause of freedom! Glorious the cause of freedom itself, to which every Jew might well dedicate himself! Freedom is to be for the Jew now, and if not now, surely in the days of the coming future.

Do I need to imply that we in America will not know troublesome prejudice; that we in America, in the coming generation, are not to experience injustice and intolerance? Do I mean that the old pin-pricks and body blows and bruises are to cease absolutely? I do not



mean it. But I mean that if we in America shall not solve unto freedom the problem <sup>that</sup> ~~of~~ prejudice and injustice and intolerance were in the old path, we shall have failed. Here in America the Jews have never known persecution. Here in America has never been any real oppression. Prejudice there has been, intolerance also; and social discrimination and ostracism still continue. It is my firm belief that the social ostracism and prejudice which abates not in a great free land whose social idea is equality and justice, contains in it the germ of evil, the formation of a greater danger and a greater menace to true liberty, true equality and true justice. We Jews may well understand how wrongs may be committed against Israel by an autocracy in which liberty has only been a pretense; in which liberty has never been more than a name and a mockery. But it is beyond our understanding how the lightest wrongs may be committed against Israel or any man, - wrongs like in kind and degree, - may be committed in a democracy whose life breath is of freedom and democracy. And yet, friends, I am Hebrew enough in spirit and in education to believe firmly that education and knowledge will at last banish darkness, superstition and ignorance, and with them their hateful prejudice and human hate. I am Hebrew enough never to despair. I am Hebrew enough to refuse to believe, as perchance many of you believe, that prejudice and intolerance ~~have~~ <sup>having</sup> been



for thousands of years and having been for 1900 years, that prejudice and intolerance have always been, and being now, ever to be. I refuse to believe it. I am Hebrew enough, with absolute faith in that, the Messianic faith of the old Hebrew Prophets, to believe <sup>that</sup> at last ~~that~~ justice will be triumphant in the world and prejudice against the guiltless will cease.

For more than 1800 years we have been sing-songing the lamentations and story of persecution. But now, for the first time, there comes to all Jews of America a magnificent opportunity. It is the first time in Jewish history for 1900 years when the whole Jewish world may perchance be free. Before each one of us is the great cause of human liberty, and to each one of us here in America there comes the appeal for education to this great influence of human liberty. How magnificent the thought of Heine is, that since the Exodus freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent! How wonderful that interpretation that should kindle in every Jewish heart enthusiasm for liberty and bring to every Jewish mind a genuine understanding of what true liberty means!

One of the great achievements of America, one of the original contributions to human government, is the separation of Church and State--is religious liberty absolutely established among men.

- - - - - our racial rights \_\_\_\_\_ and our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The fundamental completeness of our way and conception of life are certain fundamental principles,--the freedom to assemble, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I bid you who think you are champions of freedom,--I bid you who think you are champions of the cause of liberty,--I bid you, in these war time days, beware of tyrannical tendencies; they are symptomatic more of autocracy than of democracy. I remind you that the denial of human freedom--freedom of speech, freedom of discussion, freedom of the press, freedom to assemble,--like all the other denials of ~~human~~ liberty, have ever been a curse upon human kind. The Jew in America must stand as defender of liberty,-- against every encroachment upon civil liberty. The Jew must stand against all injustices, against injustices which invade the rights of the Jew and against injustices which invade the rights of every human being, whatever his race, creed or color. We Jews, by our very life through history, are the living champions of human freedom. That is what \_\_\_\_\_ meant, Premier of Italy, when he wrote recently: "I have devoted my public life to the defense of religious liberty", and he continues with the thought whether it be Jew, Catholic or Protestant, matters not; that he always conducted his life as a champion of the oppressed and perse-



cuted. America is one great country in which the Jew has always been free. We Jews of America, and our grandfathers and fathers born here before us, we Jews have never known anything but freedom, have never experienced oppression. But the Jews of America should not forget out of what bondage they and their fathers before them sprung. Scorned and reviled, hated, hunted, persecuted and oppressed for 1900 years now. Is it any wonder that Russia declared the martyrdom of the Jews? Is it no wonder x x x expressed the belief x x instincts of life are sacrificed? Israel, that has withstood twenty centuries of oppression, so we are now told by a careful student of our Jewish life and conditions, is not now imperiled by all civilization. And x Leroy Boulyea, an enthusiastic friend of DeMaurier and of Israel, whose book is one of the finest contributions to the study of Israel's life through the centuries, Leroy Boulyea has declared

The Jews of America have before them the most glorious opportunity in history. The Jews of America have before them a magnificent opportunity. Can we grasp the truth? Can we be awakened to extend our

own life and experience? Can we see clearly that the Jews of America will never add a single page to the life story and record of Jewish history if they be only glorious because they are powerful as merchant princes; if they be only glorious as magnates of finance or rulers of the market places; if they be only captains of industry? Or if they only be leading in the arts and sciences and the music of modern time? This is no new contribution to the thought life or spirit of the world. Behind every one of us is an intellectual heritage. Have you ever stopped to reason out why the Jews of the last generation are supposed to be gifted with the same new intellectual mentality--why Jews are gifted with brains and intellect? It is because of our intellectual spirit of the past. It is because thousands of years ago our ancient Rabbis declared the scholar takes preference over the king. It is because it was deemed for Israel an honor to have distinction in learning.

We Jews in America have a magnificent opportunity here to recreate the life of the people under freedom; here to give rebirth to all the children of oppression; to reproduce the rebirth under the sunshine of freedom. To every Jew in America there comes the sacred obligation to live and work honorably; that the people shall sustain



its intellectual interests and power; but, more than that, that the people shall be inspired by its spiritual ideals, by its spiritual leadership through centuries past. Think you this unreal? Think you this cannot be realized? Think you it is too abstract, that it cannot be visualized? I remind you that throughout this land there have been and are now Jews living as Jews ought to live. And there have been whole Jewish communities whose spirit was sacred to the cause of righteousness, justice and freedom. And so all Jews in the nation not holding themselves separate and distinct, should feel within themselves that same consecration for liberty, for justice and righteousness, the spiritual ideals of ancient Israel. This will bring honor to the name of Jew. The world cannot declare thus a Jew lives; that he lives not by accident of birth; that he shall not cast off his old heritage and deny his birthright; but that a Jew lives but because he believes in the heritage of his fathers.

Jews are living in the world today. Jews are living in the 20th Century in America. No more wonderful statement could be made than that the Jews, who began their lives 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, today are not fossils that must have been dug out of ancient geological strata, but are alive in the world. If the whole of Israel were to be destroyed; if not a single Jew were to remain alive, never

in spite of it would there be blotted out the record of the unforgettable and immortal history of the Jewish people. In that immortal and unforgettable history there is one outstanding element: it is religion. In that immortal and unforgettable history there is one distinctive contribution. The Jew had a genius for religion. It was the distinctive genius of the ancient people, and through the long years of history, <sup>of</sup> glory and disaster, and through that of the long years of suffering and martyrdom, the Jew has stood before mankind a God-intoxicated people, whose common thought 2500 years ago instituted ideals that are destined forever to influence human thought and civilization.

The Jews through history and through martyrdom, as a writer has most interestingly said, inspired moral and spiritual ideas. Then when we Jews in America ask ourselves: who are we, and what is our problem and what our obligation? how do we interpret our duty and destiny? We do not answer that we are children born here in America. We do not answer that we are children of yesterday. We do not answer that we are children of our fathers that came. But we do give answer that the Jews of America are the historic, true-born children of Israel of all time, running back to the very source, such as the Prophets of ancient Israel, which gave glory to modern thoughts, and spiritual ideas to mankind.



But the Jews are alive today for one supreme purpose. If they be not alive for that, they should cease to be and be assimilated by the nations of the world. The Jews are alive today but for one great purpose,--to live out their spiritual ideas, to apply their spiritual ideals and moral obligations to all the needs and problems of human society. The Jew in modern life is the representative of the supremacy of the moral law and of the glory of the moral ideal. Is this an opportunity that thrills you? Is this an opportunity that ennobles your life? Is this an opportunity that glorifies your life? Is this an opportunity that grips the imagination of the young men and women of Israel, that we are dedicated as a chosen people to the most glorious purpose and the noblest ideal,--every Jew, everywhere, in America and over the world,-- to be the exponent of the spiritual, to be the exemplar and the model x x (Shemai Y'esroail)

--that he shall be ever the champion and fighter for God.