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“The Message of the Jew,” 1902 October 19.

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Please return copy to Rabbi Moses J. Gries, 45 Oakdale St., Cleveland, O.

October 19, 1902.

THE MESSAGE OF THE JEW

We are in the midst of the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, the ancient harvest festival. The world wonders at the strange customs of Israel. There is no cause for wonder. This feast, like unto the other great holydays of Israel, is biblical. The law appointing the "feasts of God" has nowhere been repealed. If the Old Testament is the revelation of the law of God, no church has been endowed with authority to make it void.

For us, this festival, like unto all the biblical feasts and holydays, is thoroughly human. It is not God-appointed. Its origin is with the harvest festival of the ancients. All the sacred days in the sacred calendar of church and synagogue have had a like experience. They are not divine days, except as we make them divine. Israel put a new interpretation upon existing festivals; gave them a new historical association, and put behind them an ethical purpose. This was the peculiar genius of Israel: it interpreted the world and life ethically. It transformed heathen feasts of licentiousness into feasts of holiness.

The modern Jew, in spite of the pressure of the ages, which compelled him oftentimes to sordid and mean occupations, still holds fast to the idealism of his fathers. For eighteen centuries, by law removed from the soil, everywhere he treasures the memory of the happy harvest days of old. He prays in the language of ancient poetry, whose every breath is of the fields. He sings with joy of the rushing waters and the great sea, and his eyes are uplifted to the hills and the mountains. Today, in lands of oppression, in spite of deepest

sorrow and suffering intense, he has faith that God will hear Israel's cry of affliction, and he obeys the command of this festival--he rejoices.

The Jew stands today in the midst of the peoples of the earth, forty centuries old: forty centuries old--old in history and law and custom; forty centuries young--young in power and enthusiasm and idealism. We Jews are the living representatives of the historical development which began with Abraham, and whose end is not yet.

What thinks mankind of Israel: "Is not the Jew a survival of a forgotten age and of a civilization that is dead? He is the living curiosity of the twentieth century. Like the mighty cedars of ancient Lebanon, which have been standing these thousands of years, which have been witness to civilizations which have come and gone, he stands awaiting his doom--remnant and reminder of the glory that was."

"The world sees him and looks with pity. Every storm that blows may be the end. Survivor of the fires and floods of the ages, how tragic his life, with the end ever over-shadowing! Eighteen centuries of life, useless, purposeless--life whose destiny is doom and destruction.

"The Jew has been doomed to live--cursed of God--eternal witness to the blindness of his ancestors--doomed forever to live outcast and wanderer. Miraculously preserved of God! The people of God kept racially distinct among all peoples to await the wonderful restoration and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth!"

The Jew lives: not by reason of might, nor yet by reason of number. He was of the weakest among the mighty races and of the fewest among the great nations. Nations more numerous and peoples mightier have aged and declined and passed away. Israel has survived by power of the spirit--the indomitable spirit that has never lost heart and courage--the indestructible spirit of devotion to truth: "And when thou passest through the rivers,--they shall not overflow thee;

whenever thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned."

The Jew ~~lives~~ not as everlasting witness to the truth of Christianity and the falsity of Judaism. He is the living justification of his own history--neither cursed nor punished of God. We dare not so interpret God as to hold God responsible for the awful martyrdom of Israel these many centuries.

Strange though it seems, the Jew has a message to mankind. The modern world needs to learn his ancient truth: The way to God is more than one--there is no one road to salvation. False and out of harmony with the best thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the declaration that "Man cannot be good unless he be Christian;" that we, whatever be the name we bear, we alone shall be saved. Some of the world's noblest souls were not and are not Christian: Moses, Confucius, Socrates, Buddha, Mohammed, and millions of their sincere followers. Of old, the Jew proclaimed: "All the righteous of the earth have a share in the world to come." And wherever the Jew speaks today, the emphasis is not upon believing, but upon doing. Not creed, but conduct, determines the value of life. The thirst for God and the hunger for righteousness were born of the Jewish spirit.

O, the tragedy of Israel's life! Prophet of righteousness, to suffer most from unrighteousness! Psalmist of mercy, to be most mercilessly dealt with!

The world needs the Jew, object of deepest and undying hatred, to teach the world love and justice.

The Jew was when Egypt ^{built} the temples and the tombs and the pyramids. He was when Babylon raised its mighty palaces and its encircling walls with the wonderful hanging gardens. He was when Rome was founded upon her seven hills. He was when out of Greece Alexander went forth to conquer the world. "There

were giants in those days." These are the great names of the great peoples of history. They have given direction to the civilization of the world. They are only memories now. ~~They are only memories now.~~ The pyramids stand like sentinels, fronting the sands of the desert. Babylon's hanging gardens and palaces lie buried beneath the ruins. The Parthenon crowns the Acropolis, suggesting the vanished glory of the past. The Forum speaks visibly of the Roman power and pride and splendor that are no more. Ah, yes, they are fallen. And Jerusalem, too. The Temple of God stands not upon the Hill of Zion. Alone of all, the Jew lives. Child of one of the ancient world races--unquestionably the most wonderful race of human history. Does he live to declare unto the last generation that his mission was to give birth to a Messiah, and then, doomed of God, suffering to endure through the ages? A truer understanding of the old Hebrew Literature will make clear that his highest prophecy was not the Messiah, but the Messianic truth--the prophecy of hope eternal, that justice and righteousness and peace must be in the world. Greece gave art and beauty to civilization. Rome formed our political institutions and framed our laws. "But the Law goeth forth from Zion and the Word of God from Jerusalem.

The yearning for justice is in his very soul. It is his heritage in the hour of his birth. The Jew burns with a passionate zeal for freedom. He proclaims that man must be free: physically, to be master of his own body; intellectually, endowed with the God-given right to search and to know the truth; and spiritually free to believe what reason approves, to worship as the heart prompteth, and to be what God ordained man should be--every man a Son of God.

But here we are in America, the last and the best refuge of hunted and persecuted Israel. Byron sang

"The wild dove hath her nest; the fox his cave;

Mankind their country;--Israel but the grave."

The heart of the Jew longs for America. In lands oppressed, his soul yearns to breathe the atmosphere of freedom. Jews are thoroughly American in spirit. We are not American, in spite of our Judaism. The principles and the purposes of the Republic awaken natural response in the loyal Jewish breast. The spirit of the old institutions of the Hebrews and of the old Hebrew commonwealth--first of the real republics of mankind--and the spirit of the great American commonwealth--the last and the mightiest of all the republics of history--are one.

