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MS-53: Moses J. Gries Papers, 1850-1934 (bulk 1890-1930).

Series D: Sermons and Addresses, 1893-1917, undated.

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“What It Means to Be a Jew,” 1903 October 11.

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WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A JEW.

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The purpose of our Sunday service is not the abolition of the Sabbath. It is the establishment of a Sabbath, in order that we, who by economical necessity, have no Sabbath, should have a real Sabbath of rest, and holiness and worship. The Temple stands as representative of our Jewish cause. As it flourishes, our Jewish cause advances. We should associate with The Temple, with its work and with its spirit, every man and woman of heart and intelligence, all born of Israel having duty here.

What does it mean to be a Jew? And what is the purpose of our congregation and The Temple, and what the chief work of the Rabbi? How many of us believe that the chief effort of all should be, first, to lessen prejudice against the Jew, and second, securing freedom for the Jew, at last to end the persecutions and oppressions of the nations. The Jewish spirit is commendable that wants the Jew respected and that demands fair play, but this intense Jewishness is not the whole nor the largest part of Judaism. If prejudice were forgotten and persecution were ended, what then would be the work of the Jew. Should he cease to be, surrender, deny Judaism in word and thought and fact? The conclusion is plain; the Jew should not pretend not to be a Jew, nor play too much upon the non-sectarian string. He should be good Jew and good American. He will thus earn the respect of the men and women whose respect is worth having. Americans are respecters of freedom of conscience.

To be a Jew means burden and sacrifice and danger, and perhaps in the near future, it will mean increased burden, and sacrifice and danger to the Jews of the world. It means burden and sacrifice to be a soldier fighting for one's country. A patriot glories in sacrifice and danger; it is the test of manhood. None but the coward fears burden and runs from danger. Let those Jews who will, shrink from sacrifice and hide from danger. The world always despises the coward, always respects and honors the brave. Think you the Jew has struggled and suffered and survived all the centuries only to die defeated? Think you he should die at last by self-destruction

or that he should perish from wanton neglect? The Jew is fighting for freedom to live and to serve God, and in the future he shall continue to fight until the day shall come when the Jew shall be needed no more. That time is not now. We live in an era of rationalism and of racial glorification; and still Universalism holds sway over the minds and hearts of men. Mankind is larger than the nation and the race. When the world shall accept and practice righteousness and justice, the Jew will have fulfilled his mission.

The purpose of the Jew is neither to end persecution nor forever to make denial of Christianity. Judaism is not a negative religion although the Jew is the real protestant of history. If there were no prejudice, to be a Jew would mean something positive. To lead a righteous, reverent life - to be the prophet of the better age - to be the preacher of hope - the Jew is the optimist of the centuries. The Jew is the prophet of peace. Israel's prophets, in the age of war and strife, proclaimed that swords would be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks. The Jew is the prophet of justice and righteousness even in our age of world problems and world enlightenment.

The Jew was the herald of the Messiah. Historically he has also been the denier of the Messiah. Messiah, the anointed one, has been the hope of nations. I believe the Jew was right. Eighteen hundred years ago he denied the Messiah. I believe the Jew is right these thousands of years he has been heralding the Messiah. The real Messiah will come not in one man, but through one mankind. The Jew historically is prophet of the Messianic hope, the herald of the Messianic age and the preacher of the Messianic principles. His teachers of all ages announced the world hopes and the world ideals. He has always believed; and if he will be a Jew today, he must believe and work, in order that righteousness and justice and love and peace shall be established in the world.
