

# CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS

THIRTIETH ANNUAL CONVENTION

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NINETEEN HUNDRED AND NINETEEN  
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Isaac M. Wise Centenary



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EDITED BY RABBI ISAAC E. MARCUSON

Resolution of the Executive Committee of the  
CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS  
anent the resignation of  
RABBI MOSES J. GRIES  
of Cleveland, Ohio

*Whereas*, Our beloved friend and colleague, *Rabbi Moses J. Gries*, rabbi of Tifereth Israel Congregation, in Cleveland, Ohio, has felt impelled to withdraw from his many public activities, by which he conferred invaluable benefits upon the Jewish community at large and shed new lustre upon the vocation of rabbi in our country; and,

*Whereas*, He has severed his connection with all the activities of the *Central Conference of American Rabbis*, in which for many years, as a member of its Executive Board, and especially as President of the Conference, he distinguished himself by his unselfish devotion to the cause of liberal and progressive American Judaism, of religious education and broad philanthropy, as well as by his rare tact and practical wisdom, his fairness and goodwill to all his colleagues,

*Be it hereby Resolved*, That we, his colleagues of the Executive Board, express our profound regret at being henceforth deprived of the valuable aid of his sound wisdom and counsel and of his calm judgment in our deliberations, while at the same time we assure our beloved colleague and friend, *Rabbi Moses J. Gries*, of our warm appreciation and admiration of the noble character and the self-sacrificing devotion he displayed during the twenty-seven years of his ministry, and particularly of his single-hearted efforts on behalf of the communal welfare of his city, by which he became a shining example and an inspiration to the younger generation of rabbis in this country;

*Be it further Resolved*, That we voice our hope and

prayer, in common with our colleagues and his dear wife and children, that a benign Providence may spare him for many years to come in health and happiness so as to enable him to carry out his best intentions for the benefit of his family and the good of his community in which he lives, honored and beloved by all who know him.

However, we would be remiss in our obligation to the departed if we did not supplement these resolutions by facts helpful in recalling him to us as he was in life.

Mine was the privilege not only to have had him as my predecessor in the Presidential office of the Conference, and thus to have reaped what he so wisely sowed, but also to have known him intimately as colleague, classmate, fellow student and friend since boyhood days.

Moses J. Gries was born in Newark, N. J., January 25, 1868, and died in Cleveland, Ohio, October 30, 1918. He was one of eight children who had come to bless the union of Jacob Gries and Katherine Frances Gries (nee Holzer). When three years of age Moses J. Gries lost his father, and when seven he was deprived of his mother.

His early secular education was obtained in the public schools of Newark and his elementary Hebrew training from Rabbis Joseph Leucht and Joseph Hahn, of the same city. In 1881 he entered the Hebrew Union College and Hughes High School at Cincinnati. In 1889 he graduated with the degree B. L. from the University of Cincinnati and with the title "Rabbi" from the Hebrew Union College.

Gries's first pulpit was in Chattanooga, Tenn. He continued in office there from 1889 until 1892. From Chattanooga he went to Cleveland, Ohio, acting as the rabbi of Tifereth Israel Congregation for a quarter of a century. About a year before his death, on account of ill health, he voluntarily resigned his position.

When Gries came to Cleveland he found a congregation numbering no more than 125 members and a congregational Religious School with an enrollment of about 80 children. The old



temple on Huron Street soon had to be abandoned, because Gries's organizing genius gave marked impetus to the congregation's growth.

Gries played a prominent part in the affairs not only of the Jewish community, but also of the general community. There was no institution or movement for betterment in Cleveland which did not come under the influence of his powerful personality. He was a civic factor of the highest magnitude. Moreover, as he interested himself in Cleveland's local affairs, so he rendered valuable assistance in the launching of national organizations, secular as well as Jewish, and in the administration of international Jewish relief.

June 3, 1917, the day he retired from the pulpit, was made a Testimonial Day by his congregation. As Gries's personal friend and the Conference's representative I was present on this occasion. I shall never forget the inspiring character of that celebration, which, within the breast of everyone, evoked the mingled feelings of joy and sorrow—of joy that public service was appreciated—and of sorrow, that an illustrious career had to be cut short.

What Moses J. Gries was in public life can be regarded the natural flowering of his earliest ideas and ideals. Gries, the child, was the father of Gries, the man.

He was an excellent student, but never strove for scholarship as such. All Jewish knowledge he acquired was by him regarded merely a mental discipline, the better to prepare him for the many-sided communal tasks the American rabbinate is called upon to perform. Because Gries did not aspire after erudition, his work is not any the less valuable. Society, as it is now constituted, calls for a ministry consisting of preachers dowered with a variety of special qualifications. The exhorter, the lecturer, the scholar, the authority, the organizer and the social worker, all have their place among the rabbis in the Jewish body politic.

And yet Gries had the highest regard for the scholar. On one occasion in the early days of his career, Gries was the applicant for a certain pulpit. He learned that the week after he had delivered his trial sermon an older man of profound learning was to be given a probationary hearing. He took me into

his confidence and told me of his determination, which he forthwith carried out, to withdraw from pulpit competition. His reason was none other than his unwillingness to see erudition humiliated in defeat.

Gries had an exceptionally analytical mind. I know no one who proved more competent in getting the substance out of a book than he. He was in the habit of making an abstract of everything he read and everything he said. Having the proper respect for the intelligence of his audiences, he never spoke without preparation. If it was impossible for him to prepare in detail, he was sure to work out at least a synopsis of his thought. He was thoroughly practical. His executive ability exhibited itself in every one of his undertakings. He was systematic and precise, not only in his work, but also in his recreation.

He was every inch a man. Sincerity marked his every act, look and word. He was "clean of hands and pure of heart." He did not "lift up his soul to falsehood nor did he swear deceitfully." He held that whatever else a man was, as Jewish teacher, his outward protestations had to harmonize with his inward motives. כל תלמיד שאין תוכו כבדו אל יכנס לבית המדרש. What Gries practiced he preached, and what he preached he practiced. He advocated only that which became conviction with him. He did not compromise with the truth. He never minced words. He had no patience with pretense. He could not tolerate falsehood. He was no respecter of persons. It made no difference to him who the social leper was, the cry "Unclean, Unclean" was in no case withheld.

Gries could grow righteously indignant whenever there was call for righteous indignation. Therefore, it may be stated that while he was loyal to his friends, he did not hesitate to condemn them whenever he knew that they did wrong. Like the prophet Nathan, he would hurl at them the accusation, "Thou art the man!" אתה האיש

As his loyalty to friends did not prevent Gries from criticising them, so did his loyalty to institutions not restrain him from indicating their mistakes or their opportunities for improvement. Thus it happened that his *alma mater*, the Hebrew Union

College, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, to cite only two examples, were the frequent beneficiaries of his corrective counsel.

Gries felt deeply. He was markedly emotional. He worked indefatigably. When he saw a duty he performed it. In all he undertook one could observe his intensity. In fact, it was his intensity which tended to shorten his days.

His bearing was always marked by dignity. The rabbinate and the Jewish community could count upon being properly represented by him. It mattered not whether he spoke at dedication of temples, national Jewish conventions, interdenominational meetings or before Christian Chautauqua audiences, he could always be relied upon to say the right word. Several years ago when he addressed "The Baltimore City Club" on "The City Beautiful", a subject which had for its purpose the introduction of municipal reforms, every Jew present rejoiced over the impression Gries made upon the large non-Jewish element in his audience. He may be included among those of whom it is said: **בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדֵּשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכְבֵּד** "Through them that are nigh unto me I will be sanctified and before all the people I will be glorified" (Lev. X, 3). Gries understood it to be his duty as a rabbi **לְהוֹרֹת אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל הַחֻקִּים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֵלֵיהֶם בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה**: "to teach the statutes (the permanent things) which the Lord had spoken unto Israel by the hand of Moses" (Lev. X, 11).

And all that Gries evidenced in life, he exhibited also in his literary style. His diction was clear. His sentences were terse and trenchant. He knew how to put things. One always knew where Gries stood on any issue. His aim seemed to be not only to be understood, but also not to be misunderstood. He was neither ambiguous, verbose nor pompous.

When he mounted the rostrum, either in consecrated edifice or secular building, his lips seemed to be touched by the living coals of truth taken from God's altar. An illustration of his impassionate oratory is the address delivered by him at the John Hay Memorial Service, which was held at the Chamber of Commerce, in Cleveland, in 1905, and which our Conference, upon

invitation, attended in a body. Stirring is his peroration which reads:

"The lives of the sons of the nation, pure and great, exalt and ennoble the whole nation. John Hay was a patriot—a true patriot, a true type of America's noblest and best. What words, more fitting to be spoken, than those immortal words, spoken on the field of Gettysburg by Abraham Lincoln, whom he loved and served so well! 'It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.'"

—(Yearbook, Vol. XV, pp. 133, 134.)

And now let us consider the keynote of Gries's preaching and the Jewish activities in which Gries was particularly interested.

While Gries was conservative in his youth, he became a radical the moment he entered the ministry. Few men justly are willing to go to the lengths Gries did in adjusting Judaism to the spirit of the times. Reckoning with the past is essential in Judaism. It defines the exact line of our religious development. The Torah was not read in his temple. Sunday services took the place of the traditional Sabbath devotion. Perhaps only one other congregation is known to have thus departed from established customs.

Whether we endorse his point of view or not, his call to Reform, presented in his Conference sermon delivered in 1911 and entitled "The Opportunities of Liberal Judaism in America" is noteworthy. It expresses better than anything else from his pen his position on some of the principles of Jewish Theology. Says Gries:

"It is a time of moral and social crisis in the religious world and in the Jewish world, yet leaders in Israel are insistent upon conformity rather than upon conscience. They seem to value ceremony as more powerful for life than conduct, and ritual more than righteousness. The modern world needs the awakening of conscience; individual, corporate, national and interna-



tional. The age demands a rebirth of moral passion. Therefore we liberals are so insistent upon the Jewish ethical emphasis and have so little confidence in a religion of pots and pans, of rites and ritual. Neither internal dietetics nor external genuflections will save the modern Jew. *Needed* for the Jew and for the world is the *Jewish ethical interpretation*, vital and with power, of life, of the world and of history.

Let us look the Sabbath problem squarely in the face. It will never be solved by rhetorical rhapsodies about Sabbath Candles; nor yet by a pleasant glossing over of real difficulties in religious belief and religious life. Let us work for a genuine Sabbath for the Jew—a day of rest in honor of God, for worship and for spiritual uplift. I am unwilling that an hour on Friday evening or Saturday or Sunday morning shall be Sabbath for the chosen few, while the vast multitude of Israel remain Sabbathless and religionless.

Liberal Judaism has a duty also to the immigrants, in the great cities and in the smaller communities throughout the country. Let us not build, not suffer to be built, a wall of separation between Jews and Jews.

The Liberal Jew must interpret ancient Judaism to the modern world. He speaks to the twentieth century. Education has changed the thought of the world. Never again will mankind hold the former views of religion. Inter-communication has changed the whole face of the globe. Never again will the Jew be an isolated nation.

I believe in the mission of the Jew, and I believe that mission to be in the world and to the world. Ours the duty to proclaim our Jewish thought to the world in which we live; not to convert the world, but to teach mankind the Jewish view of life and of history. The time will come when we shall regret that we have not been inspired by the missionary enthusiasm.

An obligation rests upon the Jews of America. Judaism has survived the yoke of bondage and the sword of oppression. Judaism must prove itself triumphant under freedom. Judaism must be a *religion of freedom* and not a religion of persecution. Not forever must our characteristic note be the wail of sorrow, under the pangs of suffering, with unceasing martyrdom. We have been delivered from the ghetto walls. We must be emancipated from the ghetto spirit. Our Judaism must inspire life under freedom.

Only a free, emancipated Judaism will ever be a true world religion. Therefore some of us are so insistent that the Jew and Judaism in America shall be American and not oriental. Our American Jewish congregations are not oriental transplantations. They need not appear oriental in the form and language of worship, nor yet in the practices of life."

(Yearbook, Vol. XXI, pp. 143, 144, 145, 147.)

In the light of his enthusiasm for his particular Reform, as well as in that of existing requirements, we can readily appreciate his recommendation to organize the "Forward Movement", as contained in a paragraph taken from his Presidential Message in 1914 and reading as follows:

"Judaism's principles, teachings, and ideals are true, but we need the voice and the power of the prophets to appeal to the hope and the idealism of the youth of America, and to kindle the enthusiasm and to command the spirit of consecration of our college men and women. If the remnants of Israel, scattered among strange peoples in far distant lands, do not stimulate our imagination, surely the thousands upon thousands of the unsynagoged and the untempled—the lost and the strayed of Israel—at our very door, in every city of America, should compel our sense of obligation. Have we the wisdom and force to inspire and to organize this Forward Movement of the laymen of Israel? I would awaken, not the memories of the dead

past, but the strong consciousness of the living present—our duty, teachers and leaders, to the living generation.”

(Yearbook, Vol. XXIV, p. 190.)

Gries lost no opportunity to prove that Religion, to remain a power, must be Conduct. Typical is the paragraph taken from the Message to which we have just referred and in which he recommends:

“Judaism is life and not articles of faith; life and not a code of laws. This new emphasis has transformed the life-work of the rabbi and the conception of the temple. Religion cannot be, as many people believe it to be, something remote from life. It has relation to the whole of life. It expresses itself in ways other than worship.”

(Yearbook, Vol. XXIV, p. 179.)

As his Cleveland congregation was probably one of the first in the country to put women on the Board of Trustees, so it was one of the first—if not *the* first—to advocate and conduct the Open Temple. In his Conference lecture in 1901 he says:

“Where then is the temple which is doing its full duty to its community—which is open to all and whose gates men and women and children enter with thanksgiving? Of whom may it with truth be said, ‘This is the generation of those that seek Thee!’ I do not wait to hear you protest. . . . .  
Worship is not the all of Judaism.”

I accept the thought and I ask for more than times of worship and hours for religious instruction. . . .  
Confront the conditions as they exist. . . . .

Welcome the movement and the inspiration which will bring back the healthy interests of life. Our temples are not to be monuments, beautiful and costly, to satisfy our pride and vanity. . . . .  
Judaism is concerned with the whole of life. . . .  
It does not divide life and conduct into religious and irreligious . . . . .

Every effort and activity of life, all work and pleasure, are within the province of religion. . . . .  
Our present-day life grows more and more complex.

Men and women are drawn more and more out of their homes to satisfy their desires and their necessities.

The temple shall be the larger home for the congregation—not a substitute for but a supplement to the home. It is the natural center of all congregational and communal life. . . . .  
The organizations and societies of men and women, especially of young men and young women, which exist in most communities, ought to find a home in the temple.

The temple, by reason of its character, and the cause for which it stands, will give a needed uplift to the works and the pleasures of these associations, and they, do not fear, will not make unholy the altar.”

(Yearbook, Vol. XI, pp. 145-147.)

As to whether all that marked Gries's Open Temple is legitimate for the house of God to offer, is still debatable.

The Jewish activity in which Gries was particularly interested is the education of the young. He had the happy faculty of making up with children and winning their love. He knew their needs because he understood child-life.

When he was a member of the Committee on the Unaffiliated, unlike many others, he contended for the admittance of the children of people not members of the congregation, into the Religious School (Yearbook, Vol. XI, p. 73). Both his sympathy for children and his attitude toward the unaffiliated resulted in his creation of one of the largest congregational schools in the United States. Among educational activities, all of which tended to the genuine uplift of growing Jews and Jewesses and for which he was in great measure responsible, are his Temple Alumni Association, the Educational League, the Council Educational Alliance of Cleveland and the Jewish Religious Teach-



ers' Association of Ohio. Nor should it be forgotten, that the Sabbath School exhibits, which were frequently arranged at our Conferences, were originally suggested by Gries.

To insure general Jewish propaganda, both for the enlightenment of Jews and non-Jews, Gries was very much interested in the publication of tracts and favored the publication of an American Jewish Quarterly Review (Yearbook, Vol. XI, p. 89).

His sympathy for world-Jewry, his sense of Jewish solidarity and therefore his Jewish consciousness can, despite his extreme radicalism, be declared to have been especially marked. Listen to what he says in his Presidential Message of 1915:

"The misery and misfortune of the millions of non-combatants are the obligation of their own countries and governments. Each country and government has the imperative duty to care for its own citizens and people. The Jews of America, hearing Israel's cry of affliction, have struggled to lift Israel's heavy burden, but in vain.

Again, in the face of world-wide misery, we discover ourselves unprepared and unorganized. To meet overwhelming disaster, we endeavor to create national and international agencies. We are never ready, though Jews are ever in distress and have not yet escaped the yoke of the world's cruelty, oppression and persecution.

Our duty is to send relief, and yet more relief, and it will not be enough. It saddens and shames us to know how inadequate has been our response; but in spite of all discouragement, we dare not abandon our efforts.

Is there one in America, who would witness actual human suffering and refuse help? Is there one among us all, who could see babes perish and men and women die from hunger and exposure and refuse to hear the piteous cry? I am unwilling to believe that the Jews of America 'don't care.' Perhaps when they realize the facts they will do their full duty. America is the only Jewish community in the world able to send relief.

American Jews heretofore, always, have answered Israel's appeal for help. Drive home with power the magnitude of the misery, to compel sacrifice for our unfortunate brothers!"

(Yearbook, Vol. XXV, pp. 142, 143.)

No rabbi surpassed Gries in the appreciation of America and American institutions. Our Committee on Sectarianism was, during Gries's Presidency, reorganized with a representative in every state of the Union, in order to make the work of said Committee more effectual. In this connection, let me quote again from his Presidential Message of 1915 a paragraph headed "Religious Liberty."

"The wisdom of our plan of reorganization of the Church and State Committee has been made manifest. Urgent is the demand for better organization against the associations which menace religious liberty in America. Immediate is the need for more thorough preparedness against the false arguments offered in the interest of legislation, favoring the introduction of Bible Reading in the Public Schools. In the face of tremendous pressure, we triumphed, because of the inherent righteousness of our cause. The duty of leadership and the responsibility for initiative rest upon our State Chairmen, but all of us must study the problem and know the law and be eternally vigilant.

It is the mature judgment of students of American history, that American political freedom would never have been won, if simultaneously religious liberty had not been achieved. In the days of the Revolution the leaders for political liberty were the advocates of religious liberty. 'Church and state, separate and independent, is uniquely American, and constitutes the most striking contribution of America to the science of government.'

Organized forces threaten to invade the sanctity and to destroy the character of the American Public School. With all vigilance and with all might, we must safe-

guard its sanctity and maintain its character inviolate. The public school must be for all the children of the Republic, offering equal opportunity to all and equal, unreserved participation to all. The public school is *the* institution to unify and to Americanize the children of the nation. Religious Liberty is the great gift of America to civilization and to the world."

(Yearbook, Vol. XXV, pp. 147, 148.)

What a pity that Gries was not able to spend the last year of his life in the service of the rabbinate! He loved his calling. He eloquently proved this in the reply he sent on February 9, 1917, to the Resolution of the Executive Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. In this reply he remarked:

"No life-calling is nobler than that of rabbi. To it I was guided in early youth, and to it I consecrated the gifts and powers, with which I may have been endowed.

It was my chosen life-work—and to its service it has been a privilege to give myself, with heart and soul and might.

It has been a happiness to serve the historic cause of Israel and to strive for the fulfillment of its prophetic ideals in and through America.

Though necessity compels me to free myself from the heavy burdens of the active ministry, I hope to be able to continue useful service for Israel's cause."

(Yearbook, Vol. XXVII, p. 26.)

As long as Gries was, on account of the strain which goes with public speaking, obliged to withdraw from the ministry, the hope was generally entertained, that he would be spared to take a leading part in the laity. The realization of this hope was, however, in the wisdom of Divine Providence, not vouchsafed.

Moses J. Gries lies buried in Mayfield Cemetery, Cleveland. He is mourned not only by his beloved wife, Frances Hayes

Gries, to whom he was married June 15, 1898, and by his two sons, but also by the congregation and the community he served so faithfully and all his colleagues in the rabbinate wheresoever dwelling in these United States.

When the new temple of Tifereth Israel Congregation is to be erected, a chapel, to be known as the Gries Memorial Chapel, will, according to resolution, be dedicated to his memory. In the meantime, and ever after, Moses J. Gries shall live in affectionate regard within the hearts of all of us who knew him as President of our Conference, colleague and friend. **זכר צדיק לברכה**

"The memorial of this righteous man is a blessing."

Illustrious as Moses J. Gries was in life, he is one of those of whom it can be said: **גדולים צדיקים במיתתן יותר מבחייהן** "Greater are the righteous in their death than in their life." (*Hulin* 7.)

*Be it Resolved*, That the Central Conference of American Rabbis record on the minutes of this meeting its profound grief over the loss it has sustained in the death of Moses J. Gries, and that an expression of its sympathies be forwarded to our departed colleague's wife and children.