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AMERICAN JEWRY STANDS BEFORE THE JURY OF HISTORY:

A Tercentenary Sermon

This year, Jews through the length and breadth of America will celebrate the 300th anniversary of the landing of the first Jews on American soil. And this Saturday we of Kodimoh, as all Jews of Forest Park,¹ devote to that theme — the Tercentenary.

It is an occasion for happiness, pride, and rejoicing.

But aside from the sense of celebration, we American Jews must and will indulge in the ancient Jewish sport of self-analysis and self-criticism. This eight-month period is not going to be, nor should it be allowed to become, a birthday party with a lot of singing, guest speakers, a cake with candles, and a rousing "Happy Birthday." The occasion is too solemn for that. For we must now undergo a collective *cheshbon hanefesh*. And perhaps, upon reflection, we will find that there is much to be desired, and that we must revise our thinking about American Jewry. In the words of contemporary American diplomacy, we may have to experience an "agonizing reappraisal."

¹ Forest Park is the neighborhood of Springfield, MA, where Kodimoh was located. Rabbi Lamm served as rabbi of the congregation from 1954 to 1958, when he accepted a position as The Jewish Center in New York City.

When, as we read in this morning's portion, Israel was about ready to enter its promised land, when it had completed its monumental sojourn in the desert and was prepared to reaffirm its covenant with G-d, G-d made sure to make them aware of the fact that they were now in the historical spotlight. *Atem Nitzavim Hayom*, you are now standing this day, each and every one of you, before the appraising eyes of G-d and before the jury of history. And the analogy, the same one which is applicable to American Jewry today: you stand before the jury of generations, on this day you are to be judged and evaluated — be ready for the task, nay, for the ordeal.

And how are we to judge our people — whether then or now? The *massorah*, tradition, plays upon the word *atem* "you" — sensing that in this word G-d orders a self-appraisal to His people. And the *massorah* connects it with three other verses which begin with that provocative, almost accusative, *atem*. Tradition tells us, as it were, that when *Atem Nitzavim*, when a people stands before the bar of History, it should be judged by the three standards which G-d Almighty prefaces with *atem*.

The first of these verses is the one in which Pharaoh orders his Israelite slaves to provide straw for the bricks and mortar: *Atem K'ch'u Lachem Teven*, you Jews, take for yourselves straw. Show what you can accomplish in the realm of material welfare and economy. Well, what has American Jewry done in laying the foundations of American economy, physical security, and health? Our record here is admirable. Historians are first now beginning to appreciate the role played by the early Jewish peddlers in expanding and stabilizing American economy at the turn of the century and even earlier. One need but mention such names as Baruch and Morgenthau, or Gompers and Hillman,² to realize that American Jewry has contributed heavily to the philosophy and practice of American economics.

Not only in economics, but also in providing for health and in scientific advancement, have Jews contributed to the greatness of our country. In biology and medicine we have the

² Bernard Baruch, Henry Morgenthau Jr., Samuel Gompers, and Sidney Hillman each played pivotal roles in shaping the American economy through their contributions in finance, government, and labor during key periods of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Waksman's; in physics, the Einsteins, Oppenheims and Tellers.³ American Jews have benefited heavily from this great country, along with all its other citizens. But we have contributed as heavily to its financial, physical and scientific progress. *Atem K'ch'u Lachem Teven*, we have been bricklayers for the material well-being of our country. Judged by that standard, American Jewry can rightly be proud of itself.

The second criterion is indicated by the verse in which G-d reminds Israel of what He did to Egypt, of the entire cosmo-historical drama of which they were the protagonists. *Atem Re'isem Asher Assisi LeMitzrayim*, you, Israel, you above all others, you know the full import of the Exodus. You know the bitterness of persecution, the debasement of slavery and the curse of exile from your very own experience. As a Jew, therefore, your duty will be a political one too. Knowing exile, it will be your task to provide a home for your homeless brothers. And knowing what I did to Egypt, you must be a perpetual defender of the civil rights of all people. Zionism, liberty, and resistance to tyranny is the part of the heritage of the Jew. And before the jury of History can pass the verdict, it must know of Jewry's achievements along these lines.

Here too, American Jewry has conducted itself extremely well. America has not been deficient in providing Zionist leadership. Brandeis, Wise, Silver, Mrs. Bessie Gotsfeld and countless others have given direction and inspiration to the greatest Jewish political achievement in twenty centuries.⁴ Israel might never have been if not for the concerted political pressure of millions of American Zionists. Israel, once created, might never survive if not for the financial contributions and economic know-how contributed by American Jews. Jewish charity has always been famous, but it has never reached quite such heights as it did in the U.J.A.

³ In biology and medicine, Selman Waksman revolutionized treatment with his discovery of streptomycin, the first antibiotic effective against tuberculosis. In physics, Albert Einstein fundamentally changed our understanding of the universe with his theory of relativity, while J. Robert Oppenheimer led the development of the atomic bomb through the Manhattan Project. Edward Teller further shaped global security by pioneering the hydrogen bomb, cementing his legacy in both theoretical and applied physics.

⁴ In law and politics, Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice, championed social justice and Zionism, offering a voice for Jewish causes. Rabbi Stephen Wise was a key leader in American Zionism, advocating for Jewish rights and the establishment of a Jewish state. Abba Hillel Silver, a rabbi and Zionist leader, played a pivotal role in securing U.S. support for the founding of Israel. Mrs. Bessie Gotsfeld, a leader in the Mizrahi Women's Organization, worked tirelessly to support Zionist education and welfare projects in Israel.

And Jews have contributed mightily to the battles for civil rights for all minorities in America. Negroes have found not a few champions from Jewish ranks. One of the most active groups campaigning for mutual understanding with and tolerance for the new Puerto Rican immigrants, is a rabbinic body.⁵ The ideals of democracy and liberty are close to the Jewish heart — for *Atem Re'isem Asher Assisi LeMitzrayim*, you Jews have yourselves seen the end of Egypt, and hence the consequences of any kind of tyranny.

On the first two counts, therefore, the material and political, American Jewry will be given a clean bill. It is the third which must arrest our attention. It is the third which, according to the opinion of this Rabbi, must perhaps give birth to a Jewish "agonizing reappraisal."

And that third criterion is epitomized in Isaiah's words, *Atem Eidai*, you, the children of Israel, are My witnesses. A Jew must always conduct himself in such a manner as to bear witness to the Oneness of G-d and the Divinity revealed in Torah. He must be a living testimony of G-dliness. In other words, the third test is the religious one.

Let me begin by taking exception to statements some of my colleagues have been making. They have been complaining bitterly that in summarizing the achievements of the last 300 years in America, somehow the religious angle is lost. We talk of peddlers, capitalists, labor leaders, scientists, authors, farmers, anti-semites, and philanthropists, but rarely any talk about the progress of Judaism as such on these shores. Why not dramatize the contributions of religious leaders to America and American Jewry?

In principle, I would be the first one to agree. Certainly, show the religious contribution. There is only one trouble with that. And that is, if we are to be perfectly frank and honest with

⁵ In the post-World War II era, rabbinic organizations such as the Synagogue Council of America, the American Jewish Congress, and the Rabbinical Assembly advocated for Puerto Rican immigrants, promoting tolerance and combating discrimination, especially in urban areas like New York. Drawing from Jewish values and shared experiences of marginalization, these efforts aimed to build bridges between the Jewish and Puerto Rican communities through social justice initiatives.

ourselves, that we have little to show. As witnesses to G-d's Torah, we have not succeeded. It is perhaps a terrible thing to say, but it is true.

Take, for comparison's sake, the Jewries of Spain, France & Germany, Palestine, and Poland, each in its time of ascendancy and most productive era. We Americans have produced more physicians, economists, labor leaders, liberal lawyers, and farmers than all together. But Spain, from Maimonides down to its most obscure religious poet, towers way above us in its array of cultural giants and religious saints. France-Germany, from Rashi to the last Tosafists, is simply not something with which to compare America. Palestine and Poland - the same can be said of them. We have not produced one Vilno Gaon, not one Baal Shem Tov, not one Joseph Caro. Religiously, and even generally in Jewish "culture," we are an impoverished people.

That is not to say that the picture is entirely black. There is some accomplishment, which holds promise for the future. As Ludwig Lewisohn points out in a recent article, the growth of Jewish education has been truly authentic and heroic.⁶ From 1935 to 1953, Torah Umesorah has increased the number of Day Schools from 17 to 156. The total number of Orthodox congregations is now well over 3,000, and the combined total of the other kinds of congregations is just over 900. The Young Israel movement has grown considerably. These are factors to be considered.

But they are meager accomplishments when compared with what American Jews have accomplished in other fields, or with what other Jews have achieved in their religious-cultural life. No great religious personalities have been forthcoming from us. Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen Wise will not be remembered as Reform rabbis. The first will be recalled as a Zionist, and the second as Zionist and social reformer. The great number of Talmudic scholars, while they count some American-born among them, are primarily Europeans.

⁶ It is not immediately clear to which article this refers. Broadly speaking, Lewisohn, an influential Zionist and literary figure, often highlighted the importance of maintaining Jewish identity through education. His work emphasized the cultural and religious revival that accompanied the growth of Jewish schools, institutions, and educational programs, particularly during and after World War II.

How about our contributions to Judaism? Not in the nature of personalities, but in the nature of ideas.

(Skip last paragraph, revise as follows: before last paragraph on last page, insert paragraph on this page beginning "That is not to say" and paragraph following till "Europeans." Include in the first of these paragraphs a discussion of Yeshiva University and the idea of "synthesis" it has introduced as a new and yet ancient ideal in Judaism. Then continue with last paragraph on last page.)

This does not mean, of course, that the situation is desperate. Quite the contrary, it is promising — for the future. The past has shown us to be weak. The future holds the possibility of strength. The positive religious accomplishments of which we are justly proud — Day Schools, "synthesis," dignified Orthodox synagogues — are achievements of a new era on the American scene. It is possible that they will be able to achieve in the next 50 years what we have not here in the last 300. But a task of this sort requires a whole lot of dedication and hard work. It requires honesty of mind, stoutness of heart and, yes, sweat of the brow, to be able to respond to the challenge of *Atem Eidai*, to be the witnesses for G-d.

Certainly, all three standards we have mentioned this morning are important — the material, the political, and the religious. But it is upon the religious that we stand or fall as a collectivity. The jury of history will consider all three counts. But its ultimate verdict will be based upon the evaluation of the Jewishness of American Jews. *Atem Nitzavim Hayom*, American Jewry stands in judgment this year, *Kulchem Lifnei HaShem Elokeichem*, all of us must answer to the Divine Judge and the Jury of Coming Generations. *Rasheichem, Shivteichem Ve'Shotreichem, Kol Ish Yisrael*, our leaders and communal workers and our ordinary members of the community; *Tapchem Unesheichem*, our womenfolk and especially our children and what we do with them, all of us stand ready to be judged upon all our actions, *Mei'Chotev Etzecha Ad Sho'ev Meimecha*, from wood-choppers to water-carriers, from scientists to farmers, we will be judged for all our accomplishments and all our failures. But the main issue, to which all else is subservient, and for which we primarily *Atem Nitzavim*, stand in judgment, is *L'Avrecha Bivrit HaShem Elokecha*, the acceptance of G-d's covenant.

If we succeed in living up to the terms of that covenant, even the wood-choppers and water-carriers will be blessed. If we fail, the not-ingenious high-powered buzz of American Jewry will be stilled. But, if we succeed, the lights of G-d's covenant will burn the brighter, and that we rise to our great destiny as G-d's witnesses.