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CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE  
PULPIT

A SELECTED SERIES  
OF SERMONS DELIVERED AT THE  
Central Synagogue, Great Portland Street, W.

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No. 2

GRATITUDE

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A SERMON

PREACHED ON THE FIRST DAY  
OF TABERNACLES

OCTOBER 12th, 5677-1916

BY THE

VERY REV. THE CHIEF RABBI

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S E R M O N

PREACHED AT THE CENTRAL SYNAGOGUE

ON THE

FIRST DAY OF TABERNACLES,

OCTOBER 12TH, 5677—1916.

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מָה אָשִׁיב לַיהוָה כִּלְתַּנְמוּלוֹהִי עָלַי : לֵךְ אֲזַבֵּחַ  
זָבַח תּוֹדָה וּבְשֵׁם יְיָ אֶקְרָא :

*“What can I render unto the Lord for all His benefits towards me? I will offer to Thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the Lord.”*

*—Psalm cxvi. 12, 17.*

Various have been the aspects of Succos that have been dwelt upon in this pulpit as, year by year, it has been my privilege to address this congregation on the First Day of Tabernacles.

We have not, however, so far considered the message of Succos as an annual Festival of Thanksgiving to our Friend and Benefactor on High. Now, the preaching of this elementary duty of gratitude is far from

superfluous. Gratitude is at the root of character. No man can be wholly bad who has gratitude in him, whereas the man who forgets to be grateful has indeed fallen asleep in life. Ingratitude, alas, is common enough; yet, it is strange, each time it shocks us much more than uncharitableness or untruthfulness, each time our faith in human nature simply goes under. The prophets rank it as an unpardonable, an unnatural sin, since it reduces man below the level of a dumb animal, which at least faithfully follows its master and gratefully remembers the hand that provides its food. And a large-hearted lover of his fellow-men in our own time lost his kindness of nature when he thought of this sub-brutish failing, and in bitter and savage irony he declared: "If you take a starving dog on a freezing day, if you warm him and feed him, he will not bite you; that is the principal difference between a dog and a man!" The truth is that men and women, as we know them, seem in need of perennial reminders against lapsing into base ingratitude. Even in the Messianic Era, the Rabbis tell us, all sacrifices shall have ceased—except the thanksgiving sacrifice. There will no more be gross violence, deceit or impurity to necessitate burnt offerings, sin offerings, or guilt offerings; all the others will have fulfilled their educational mission, all, save the one inculcating the duty of gratitude. *That* is to continue for ever.

Perhaps someone, even in this House of Prayer, may now think to himself, "Quite so, gratitude is the beginning of virtue; but, really, what have I to be grateful for?" What have I to be grateful for? If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my eyes and search for them with my fingers, and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet and sweep it through that dish, how it would draw to itself the almost invisible particles by the mere power of attraction. The unthankful heart, like the fingers in the sand, discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day, through the month, through the year, and as the magnet finds the iron, so will it find in every day some heavenly blessing.

True, not all our wishes are realised, not all desires fulfilled, not all our petitions heard. Thank God for it! There are blessings in disguise, but there are also curses in disguise. We yearn for some golden apple which Fate dangles before our eyes; that apple would complete, would crown our happiness. At last it is ours; and we find it to be an Apple of Sodom—fair without, bitterness, gall and ashes within. How deep is the Talmudic saying: "When the Almighty wishes to punish a man for his sins, He grants him all his prayers, withholding nothing." God's grace may be

displayed as much, and more so, in the things He denies us as in what He grants us! And then think of the evil visitations we dreaded that have not befallen us. אלמלי נתנה רשות לעין לראות אין כל בריה יכולה לעמוד מפני המזיקין “If the eye could but see them,” says an ancient Rabbi, “there are ten thousands of demons ever hovering over us to destroy us.” Indeed, our worst misfortunes never come; the catastrophes that threaten our health and happiness, the life, health and happiness of our dear ones, most often pass away without our even being aware of the evils that were about to blight us and ours. Verily, He doth not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite one-hundredth part of our transgressions; He charitably covereth our shortcomings, and healeth all our diseases; He delivereth our life from the grave, and showereth undeserved blessings on us unawares; He crowneth us with sure mercies which endow us with hope and youth, and give us the power, phoenix-like, to rise again from the ashes of misfortune and calamity.

Much more, however, than all this is involved in the Jewish conception of gratitude preached by this festival; nothing less, in fact, than a moral paradox, as profound as it is original. We must thank God, says our sacred Faith, not only for the good we have received, but we must thank Him as well for the evil that befalls us.

“Under every conceivable vicissitude of fortune or misfortune,” declared Rabbi Akiba, “a man ought to say : ‘What the Almighty doeth is for the best.’ ” לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל דעביר רהמנא לטב עביר To thank God only when we receive good at His hands, is in the last instance no more meritorious than to obey Him when it suits us, when it serves our purposes ; no more meritorious than to be patriotic so long as such patriotism is at one with our self-interest. A man must be ready to hallow God’s name even when the waves of adversity threaten to engulf him. Judaism bids its children meet misfortune manfully, without murmuring, and bear bereavement in resignation and dignity ; and teaches them to exclaim with Job : “The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Gratitude, thus widened and spiritualised, becomes the highest proof of soul-strength, the finest test of manhood and womanhood. For thousands of years has Judaism been preaching this duty in its broadest and deepest connotation. But even in our own camp many had never heeded this sublime teaching, had never understood it. Succah and Lulab were to them far-off, empty symbols—the one had crumbled and the other had withered. The world-war, however,

now holding the fairest portions of earth in its grasp, is proving a mighty educator. It is teaching men and women the language of religion; it is opening their eyes to the vast and infinite meaning of religious symbols. During the South African War, I visited various coast towns in Cape Colony whither the British Jewish population from the Boer States had gone for safety and shelter. At Port Elizabeth I found hundreds of refugees living in tents. They were quite cheerful, however, and said to me: "For years we have not properly observed Succos. We are doing so now." In the same manner, many a Jewish household and many a son and daughter of our people, who had never observed this beautiful festival, are to-day ready to understand the teaching of the Succah, when it bids us leave our homes and, in a frail hut, entrust ourselves to the Providence of God; when it commands us to emancipate ourselves from the tyranny of things, and in joyful gratitude acknowledge God as our Father and Friend on High.

The vital message of the other symbol of this Festival—the Lulab—is likewise forcibly brought home to Jews, observant or non-observant, by a grave communal problem arising out of the War. The Lulab proclaims the responsibility of the majestic palm-branch and aromatic esrog for the myrtle and

willow ; i.e., of the wise, rich and strong, for the weak, erring and ignorant. And it insists *that this responsibility is mutual*. ארבע מינים מעכבין זה את זה Each one of the four plants can “hinder” the others, says the Din ; an unfit willow renders the whole cluster unfit, just as much as an unfit esrog does. It is a great pity that a few thousands of our foreign brethren, who do not realise that this is no time for theorising on individual liberty or militarism, have it now in their power to neutralise the patriotic achievements of the overwhelming majority of their brethren in belligerent countries, and to “hinder” some of our fairest hopes and aspirations.

But the message of Succos extends far beyond the domain of the individual, or of the community even. We have only recently been told that “for generations Europe will be a seething cauldron of national hates.” What can, therefore, be more timely than the world-embracing and man-redeeming ideals of the unity of mankind which Succos enshrines ? During the Festival of Tabernacles, we are told, there were offered on the Altar in the Temple of Jerusalem seventy bullocks on behalf of the seventy nations then inhabiting the world. In modern speech, this means that Judaism recognises each people, each historic group, endowed by Heaven with an inalienable right to its own language, to its own traditions, to its own ethnic personality.

We have long known that there were *duties* for the fulfilment of which a mother willingly sends her only child to almost certain death. The War is now recalling the ancient Succos lesson to the conscience of men and nations, that there are also *rights*—political, cultural and linguistic—which are absolute, which cannot be withheld or robbed from any human group yearning for them.

Our Succos thoughts are ended. May our reflections to-day touch our hearts with the divine magnetism of gratitude and trust in God, so that with all our being we rejoice before the Lord on this Festival and bless His name Who hath kept us in life, preserved us in health, and enabled us to reach this sacred day. May we bless His holy name for having chosen us to be the heralds, announcing the sure advent of that glorious day when mankind shall form one band of brotherhood, united under one Paternal roof—when in the words of our Haftorah, “The Lord shall be King over all the earth, in that day shall the Lord be One and His name One.” Amen.

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