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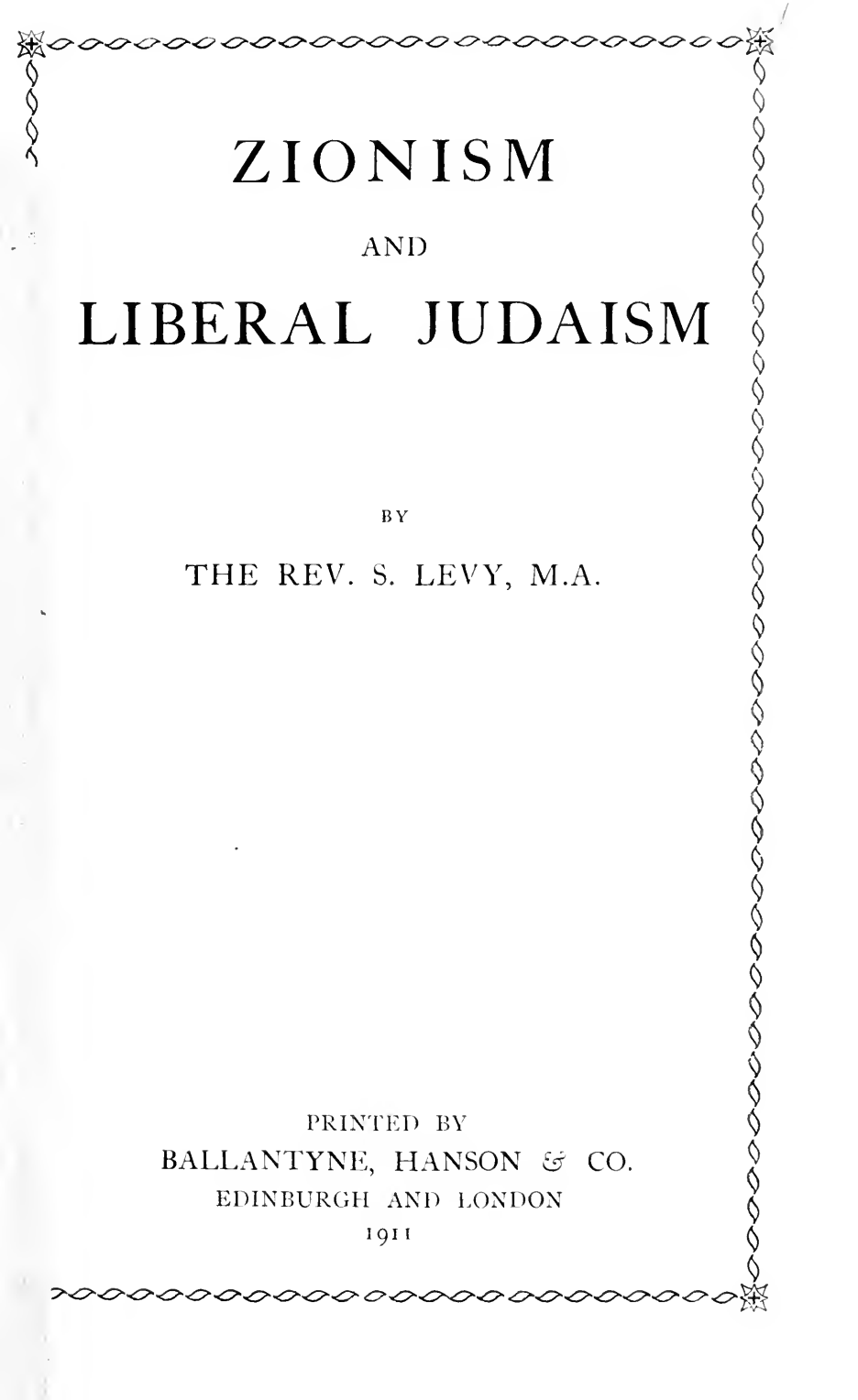
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ZIONISM AND
LIBERAL JUDAISM





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AND
LIBERAL JUDAISM

BY
THE REV. S. LEVY, M.A.

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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PREFATORY NOTE

THIS paper on "Zionism and Liberal Judaism" was read before the Cambridge branch of the Anglo-Jewish Association on January 30, 1911, and before the London University Zionist Society on February 26, 1911. It was originally intended to form one of a series of connected studies on the national and international aspects of Judaism. Pressure of official duties, however, has compelled me to abandon the prosecution of the larger plan, at all events, in the immediate future.

Due allowance must therefore be made if, in consequence of the publication of the essay detached from its proposed context, the argumentation may occasionally seem incomplete or compressed. But even in this provisional outline I may claim that I have endeavoured, not without some measure of success I hope, to disentangle many complicated issues, and to present a working harmony of contradictories, whether merely apparent or undeniably real.

S. L.

ZIONISM AND LIBERAL JUDAISM

§ 1. *Conservatism and Liberalism.*—There are two tendencies in human nature which can be traced in varied relations and aspects of life, in religion, in politics, in literature, and in art. On the one hand, there is the settled disposition to maintain the old order or the *status quo*, in stern resistance of all change: and, on the other hand, there is the throbbing impulse to create a new world in the endeavour to harmonise ideals with facts, or to make facts reflect ideals. We may describe these two attitudes of mind by the general terms, Conservatism and Liberalism.

These two views of faith and life are both inevitable consequences of the complex character of the human soul, and are necessary conditions of existence and intelligence and activity. Rigid Conservatism would result in inanition, sterility, and death. Unchecked Liberalism would lead to revolution, disaster, and destruction. The free interplay of both forces in action and reaction is needed to keep the world healthy and to save it on the one hand from stagnation, and on the other hand from chaos.

Conservatism and Liberalism are therefore not irreconcilable opposites. They do not necessarily and ultimately exclude each other absolutely. They complement rather than contradict each other. The pendulum must swing from side to side within a definite space of movement if the hands of the clock are to point the hour with regularity and accuracy, but the clock will go wrong or stop altogether if the pendulum swings too far or not far enough, too violently or too slowly in either direction. Liberalism would force the pace. Conservatism would slacken the pace, and the

mean rate of progress is obtained by the resultant balance between the two. Therefore it sometimes happens that Liberals propose measures and Conservatives later adopt them as their own policy and pass them into law. Such a course of conduct need not provoke the venomous comment of the cynic. It is simply the natural product of a sane and active rivalry of ideas, indicative of the real life of the organism, society, nation, or religion.

§ 2. *Conservative Judaism and Liberal Judaism.*—With these preliminary observations of a general character, I am now in a better position to come to closer quarters with the subject of my paper, “Zionism and Liberal Judaism.” I use the terms “Conservative Judaism” and “Liberal Judaism” to mark the two characteristic tendencies in human nature, which I have already explained, in as far as they are reflected in the sphere of the religion of Judaism. I should also like to add that I am dealing with the broader aspects of Conservative Judaism and Liberal Judaism, and not with their particular manifestations in this country. It is quite possible to be a staunch adherent of the cause of Conservative Judaism, and yet be wanting in sympathy with the special expression and representation of Orthodoxy in England. It is quite consistent to be an enthusiastic advocate of the cause of Liberal Judaism, and yet be a stern critic and implacable opponent of the special programme and work of Reform in England. Life is not grim logic, and we have always to reckon with curious cross-currents when we endeavour to apply general principles to particular instances.

§ 3. *Conservative Judaism and Development.*—Using, then, the terms Conservative Judaism and Liberal Judaism in their wider signification, the first point I wish to urge is that Conservative Judaism, while observing a due norm of restraint and reverence for the past, has never been a religion of changelessness, paralysing all growth and development. It is of paramount importance to remove the erroneous notion that Conservative Judaism inevitably

and invariably spells reaction or rigidity. If we closely examine the history of our religion from its first creation as Hebraism, through its passage into Judaism, and its evolution into its present form to-day, I think we shall find that Conservative Judaism has always betrayed the features of a living organism, and without swerving from the straight path of development or losing its essential individuality, has made ordered progress in adapting itself to new needs called forth by the lapse of time and made insistent by change of conditions and environment.

§ 4. *Illustrations of Development in Conservative Judaism.*—Let me give a few illustrations in proof of such development in Conservative Judaism, both in doctrine and practice, where solid and enduring harmony has been promoted and real progress has been ensured by the wise setting of the passing season “in chime with seasons played out long ago,” and seasons yet to come.

(a) In the sphere of doctrine we may point to the momentous change from monolatry to monotheism, the transition from the worship of God as a tribal, local, or national deity, to the recognition of God as God of the whole world, so that in the phraseology of the Prayer Book, “our God and God of our fathers” is also “our God, King of the universe.”

(b) In the domain of ceremonial there have been the gradual changes in the attitude towards the sacrificial system, and since the destruction of the Temple prayer has been regarded as the substitute for sacrifice.

(c) In the sphere of ritual it is now a commonplace to say that the Jewish Liturgy is not fixed, but has always been more or less fluid, and that, for instance, round the recital of the Shema' and the Amidah as central ideas, there have grown many additions to the Prayer Book in different ages.

(d) Then there has also been an evolution in the interpretation of laws laid down even in the Bible itself. Thus, in temperate and cold zones, fires are allowed on the Sabbath in strict homes of Conservative Judaism, in

spite of the injunction in Exodus xxxv. 3, "Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day."

(c) Again, in the sphere of human relations, there has been the submission to the decree of Rabbinu Gershom for the institution of monogamy. Further, there has been the acceptance of the voluntary prohibition of marriages permitted according to Jewish law, but in conflict with the laws of the land in which Jews happen to live. For example, the marriage of uncle and niece is allowed according to Jewish law, but the synagogue in this country does not countenance and would not solemnise such a union, because it would not be sanctioned by the law of England.

It may be objected that I am here quoting instances where Conservative Judaism has made new restrictions and has stiffened Jewish law. Let me therefore now recall an example of relaxation of Jewish law.

An *Agunah* is "a woman whose husband has either abandoned her, or being absent, has not been heard from for some time. Having no proof of her husband's death, or being without a bill of divorce from him, her status as a wife remains for ever unchanged; for Jewish law does not admit the presumption of death from a prolonged absence merely, nor can a wife obtain a divorce from an absent husband. In order to mitigate the hardship arising from such cases the Rabbinical law relaxed the strict rules regarding evidence, and accepted testimony that in other cases would not have been deemed competent" (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Agunah").

Thus, in the realm of marriage and divorce we can trace two tendencies, the one making for increased stringency, and the other making for increased leniency. On the one hand, there is an enlargement of the table of kindred and affinity in which marriages are forbidden, and a limitation of the grounds of divorce, to secure in both cases a greater harmony between Jewish law and the law of the land; and, on the other hand, there is the

gradual introduction and institution of regulations which in practice and effect place women in a position of greater equality with men.

§ 5. *The Illustrations and their Conclusion.*—Mill, in his “Logic,” quotes Lord Mansfield’s counsel to a man of practical good sense, who, being appointed governor of a colony, had to preside in its court of justice, without previous legal education or judicial practice. The advice tendered was that the judge should give his decision boldly, for it would probably be right, but never to venture on assigning his reasons, for they would almost infallibly be wrong. Similarly, my particular illustrations may not command general assent, but my conclusion will not, I think, be seriously contested, that Conservative Judaism shows an orderly development, and the greater the Rabbi the more he proves himself able and willing to avoid the language and tone of passionate conflict, to find a temperate solution of critical problems in religious progress, and to sanction a wise and smooth and tranquil adjustment of old forms to new ideas and new conditions, without any controversial disquiet or violent disturbance of the religious atmosphere.

§ 6. *The Respective Fates of Conservative Judaism and Liberal Judaism.*—And now comes the remarkable paradox. On the one hand, as I have been trying to demonstrate, Conservative Judaism shows an orderly development in the gradual absorption of Liberal views, but the guiding policy has been *flecti non frangi* (“to be bent, not to be broken”), and the changes introduced have always been conservative modifications within the bounds of orthodox principles. On the other hand, Liberal Judaism is of necessity always exposed to one of two dangers, either absorption from within or fusion from without.

When Liberal Judaism proceeds along evolutionary lines of religious development, its difference from Conservative Judaism is not a difference in the interpretation of the *essence* of progress, but a difference in the

attempted *rate* of progress. When Liberal Judaism succeeds in affecting the trend of Conservative Judaism, its task is ended, and it becomes absorbed in the Conservative Judaism which its influence has modified or transformed. It is the liability to this fate which constitutes the *internal* danger with which Liberal Judaism is always threatened.

When Liberal Judaism ruthlessly snaps the chain of tradition, seeks to produce a clear-cut new development, and abandons the inspiration of history, then, by the sheer stress of facts, its inward or centripetal power of resistance against the vigour of the outward or centrifugal tendency is inevitably weakened, and its gradual absorption by a gentile environment becomes an ultimate certainty. It is the liability to this fate which constitutes the *external* danger with which Liberal Judaism is always threatened.

So, in broad outline, it is a curious fact that the Judaism which has persisted is Conservative Judaism, and the Judaism which has perished is Liberal Judaism. The best instance of Conservative Judaism absorbing within itself Liberal modes of thought and practice is the golden age of Judaism in Spain. The best instance of Liberal Judaism harmonising inherited religion with acquired environment is the Hellenistic Judaism of Alexandria. The Conservative Judaism of Spain survived the expulsion from Spain. The Liberal Judaism of Alexandria faded out of existence before the advance and spread of Christianity.

§ 7. *Explanation of this Difference in Fate.*—What is the explanation of this difference in fate? In Spain, the emphasis was on the “Judaism,” and not on the “Spanish.” In Alexandria, the emphasis was on the “Hellenistic,” and not on the “Judaism.” In each case, the nature of the environment helps to yield the secret of the different consequences. In Spain, the similarities between Judaism and Mohammedanism outweighed the differences of faith in application to

daily life. In Alexandria, the differences between Judaism and Hellenism were far greater than the area of agreement or likeness. Similarly, in Germany, in the nineteenth century, the Reform movement became more German than Jewish, and this led, on the whole, to Reform Judaism being swallowed up in Christianity.

§ 8. *The Persistence of Conservative Judaism.* Why, then, has it happened that Conservative Judaism, while showing itself capable of modification, has not shared the fate of Liberal Judaism, and why is it a stern fact, which has to be reckoned with, that the Judaism which has persisted through the centuries is Conservative Judaism? I think the explanation will be found in the external political conditions which have produced their internal consequences. Outward circumstance has created inward necessity. Roughly speaking, it may be said that Conservative Judaism has been preserved in those communities where persecution has involved the concentration of Jews, and that Liberal Judaism has flourished most in those communities where emancipation, with its attendant advance in material comfort and growth in the acquisition of cosmopolitan culture, has led to the decentralisation of Jews, and this diffusion, in its turn, has produced disintegration and the dissolution of the cohesive forces of conscious unity.

§ 9. *Conservative Judaism and Emancipation.*—The continuance of Judaism, then, is dependent on the existence of an area with an aggregation of Jews living in a Jewish environment, breathing a Jewish atmosphere and fostering a Jewish culture, and these factors must predominate over all other influences.

Does this conclusion, then, mean that Judaism can only thrive under persecution, that Judaism cannot stand the sunshine of freedom, and that, if we really wish to preserve our faith, we should entirely abandon the advocacy and the promotion of the cause of liberty of conscience for the Jew in all countries of the globe? I do not think in the least that we are confronted

with such a dilemma. We are completely justified in asserting the claim of Jews to possess equal rights with their fellow-citizens in whatever country they may be, and it is the incontestable duty of Jews who enjoy the fruits of political freedom in any part of the world to help their brethren in less fortunate lands to obtain similar rights, and to aid in hastening the day when the Jew, wherever he may be, will become a free man in a free land.

None of us who have tasted freedom will ever be willing to sacrifice it without a keen struggle. At the same time we know that emancipation provides the best soil for the birth of Liberal Judaism, and that seemingly the invariable outcome of Liberal Judaism in a gentile environment is absorption.

We must also acknowledge the verdict of history that it is Conservative Judaism which is *the* Judaism, because it alone always survives. We must also face the fact that Conservative Judaism has been maintained in the aggregation of Jews in communities subject to oppression, yet none of us will be prepared to plead to be persecuted, if acquiescence in and submission to persecution are the only means for the preservation of our religion.

§ 10. *Nation or Religious Community?*—How shall we meet the undoubted difficulty to which attention has just been drawn? I think the difficulty has been grossly exaggerated through being stated in a wrong or misleading form. The problem is generally framed and summarised in the question, “Are we a nation or a religious community?” I do not regard this as an entirely fair or satisfactory statement of the point at issue, because it leads to a confusion in thought and an unnecessary antagonism between Conservative Judaism and Liberal Judaism.

Liberal Judaism would say, “Israel *among* the nations. We are a religious brotherhood in the midst of the nations. Our nationality is the land in which we live. Our religion is the religion of Judaism, adapted

to the peculiar conditions of the country in which we dwell, and we abandon all those elements in our religion which seek or imply a restoration of the Jewish people as a nation."

Conservative Judaism would say, "Israel *a* nation. Technically we are not a nation now. But although we object to persecution and claim freedom as strongly as Liberal Judaism, yet we mean what we pray, and we *do* look forward to the re-establishment of the Jews as a nation."

I therefore think the contrast is too sharply drawn when we are asked to decide, "Are we a nation or a religious community?" I object to the disjunctive "or," and would replace it by the conjunction "and." We form a religious brotherhood, and must maintain and try to realise the national hopes of Judaism.

§ 11. *The Re-creation of the Ghetto.*—I shall probably be told that the re-establishment of the Jews as a nation would mean the re-creation of the Ghetto. I am frankly prepared to admit the force of this criticism, but with an important qualification dependent on the interpretation of the word "ghetto."

If by a "ghetto" we mean the aggregation of individuals within a definite area, having similar traditions and practices, and pursuing similar aims, then, in this sense, every nation is a "ghetto" on a larger or smaller scale, and the smaller nations of Europe, with populations less than the total number of Jews in the world, are also "ghettoes."

But if by a "ghetto" we mean the concentration of Jews in an area, where, in the old sense of the term, the inhabitants of that area are subject to disabilities and restrictions and harassing persecution, then by the re-nationalisation of Jews, Zionists do not desire the re-creation of the ghetto. In such an interpretation of the word, Zionism no more than Liberal Judaism would seek the re-establishment of the ghetto. For what is the actual fact? Zionism sets itself the task of forming

a national centre of Judaism in the full enjoyment of political freedom, where the conditions will provide a complete Jewish environment, Jewish atmosphere, and Jewish culture.

In as far as the national centre will ensure the existence of this Jewish environment, Jewish atmosphere, and Jewish culture, there *will* be a re-creation of the ghetto. But in as far as the national centre will not reproduce the political restrictions and social ostracism of the ghetto, it will *not* be a ghetto, but a land of liberty like other countries of freedom.

§ 12. *Zionism and Liberal Judaism.*—Liberal Judaism has therefore much to gain by throwing in its lot with Zionism, and for this reason. I began by saying that there are two tendencies in human nature, Conservatism and Liberalism. When the Zionist programme is realised, the national centre of Judaism will not be immune from the characteristics of human nature, and the two tendencies of Conservatism and Liberalism will spontaneously assert themselves in the development of the national life. There will then inevitably be one party devoted to Conservative Judaism and one party devoted to Liberal Judaism. For example, it was when the Jews were still a nation that the Rabbis and the Synagogues began to take the place of the Priests and the Temple, and it was when the Jews were still in their own land that, after the destruction of the Temple, prayer was substituted for sacrifice.

Thus, with the realisation of the hopes and aims of Zionism, Liberal Judaism in the Diaspora would find itself associated with and could co-operate with Liberal Judaism at the national centre. As Liberal Jews in every country now claim still to belong to the religious brotherhood of Israel, they cannot consistently be disinclined to be identified with Liberal Judaism at the national centre. The geographical boundaries of nations do not form the frontiers of human hearts, and territorial limits do not constitute barriers against the mutual aspirations of the

souls of a religious fraternity. Hence, Zionism from the very centre of Judaism would act as a guide and an inspiration to the safe and wise pursuit of Liberal Judaism in the Diaspora, and the cause of Liberal Judaism at the centre would be encouraged and strengthened by the adherence of and support from Liberal Judaism in the Diaspora.

At the centre of national life there would be a field for the free play of the two different forces of Conservative Judaism and Liberal Judaism. Liberal Judaism would exercise its due influence in the national life by virtue of the legitimate opportunities it would enjoy of endeavouring to persuade the whole nation to an acceptance of its views. Thus, for Liberal Judaism as well as for Conservative Judaism, the Law would again go forth out of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem, radiating their benign influence far and wide to the ends of the earth.

§ 13. *The Influence of Environment.*—There is an attractive account in the Talmud of an incident in the career of Rav Ashi, when King Manasseh appeared to him in a dream. In the course of their learned duologue, Rav Ashi exclaimed, "Since thou art indeed so wise, how comes it that thou didst worship idols?" Manasseh thereupon retorted, "Hadst thou lived in those days, even thou wouldst have lifted thy skirt to run quickly after me, and thou wouldst also have worshipped idols" (*Sanhedrin*, 102 b).

We have, therefore, even in the case of great and independent minds, frankly to recognise the subtle and powerful influence of environment, and the strength of the human inclination to follow the habits and customs and example of the majority. Now the Jews in the Diaspora must always be in a minority in the countries where they dwell, and will always be liable to the fate of minorities to be absorbed in the majority. Liberal Jews have to contend with the added disadvantage and danger of being the minority of a minority, with a

relaxed sense of the value and importance of ceremonial which makes for religious exclusiveness, and with an intensified bias in the direction of gentile culture which tends to fusion.

§ 14. *Conclusion.*—If Liberal Judaism is to remain keenly and proudly aware of its own separate existence, and to preserve the character which it claims of being the expression of a new spiritual recovery, it requires some energising force to arrest the process of decline and decay with which it is eternally and inevitably threatened. Liberal Judaism must therefore seek its sanction or justification and find its basis in the pursuit of a national Judaism. Zionism thus irresistibly emerges as the necessary premium Liberal Jews have to pay to insure them against complete assimilation with a gentile environment and consequent loss of religious identity. Zionism, from this point of view, is not to be rejected as a mere policy of despair, bred and nurtured in persecution, but it shines forth as a constructive policy of hope in response to the poignant needs created by the effects of freedom.

Hence, it appears to me that the international movement towards Liberal Judaism should in its own interest, and to advance its own cause, ally itself with the international movement towards Zionism, and so endeavour to provide a *milieu* for the free play of the forces of Conservative Judaism and Liberal Judaism, acting and re-acting upon each other, without any peril to the preservation of the wider Judaism which embraces them both.

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