

THE
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

BY

LOUIS MARSHALL



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BY LOUIS MARSHALL.

The creation of the American Jewish Committee was not the result of a deliberate purpose, or of anxiety on the part of those who participated in its formation, to assume the performance of the onerous duties which it has undertaken. It is a development growing out of the unique conditions of Jewry throughout the world. It is merely a phase in the evolution of Jewish consciousness and Jewish solidarity. The last word in that process has not been spoken, for Judaism will ever be subject to such varied influences, and to such a continuous shifting of dynamic forces, that crystalization is impossible.

Fifty years ago Jewish conditions were apparently in a state of equilibrium, both here and abroad. The Jews were divided into a number of homogeneous groups, each distinct from the others, and each, at least externally, different from the others. There was practically no intercommunication, and they regarded one another, if not with suspicion, apparently without much sympathy.

The Jews then in the United States were

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comparatively few. They had migrated from the same region in Central Europe, and naturally tended in the same direction, and were, to a large degree, susceptible to and swayed by the same ideas. Hence it was to be expected, that when they came to organize and to create institutions, as they eventually did, it would be along lines of least resistance, and in such manner that the group to which the great mass belong, should be in the ascendancy, and give form and color to the organizations which came into being.

So long as conditions remained practically unchanged, these organizations admirably fulfilled every requirement. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, with its Board of Delegates, represented the great majority of American Jews in the West, South and Middle West, and to a considerable, but lesser, extent, those of the East. In like manner, the Order of B'nai B'rith, included in its membership the flower of American Jewry, and its form, though that of a secret organization, was well adapted to meet the needs of the hour, and of that group of men, who recruited its ranks and to whom its ritual appealed. Both have exercised, and continue to exercise, a potent influence for good; and it is fair to say that if conditions here and abroad had remained unchanged, the creation of other Jewish organizations would in all probability have never become necessary.

During the past twenty-four years, however, tremendous changes have occurred. The status of the European Jew has been rendered most precarious. Persecution, of a character deemed impossible in this boasted era of civilization, has fallen with wild fury upon the Russian and Roumanian Jew, has made his very life a burden and has subjected him to unspeakable misery, both physical and spiritual. The Galician Jew has become the victim of economic problems, which have been productive of poverty well-nigh inconceivable. Morocco has witnessed a recrudescence of mediaevalism; while even in France and Germany, anti-Semitism, brutal and unreasoning, has raised its horrid front, and for a time has been triumphant.

As a natural consequence, the condition of the Jew in foreign lands has been characterized by unrest, terror, and untold suffering, and he has been compelled to look to his American brethren for aid, comfort and consolation. He has been forced to take up anew the staff of the wanderer, and to flee for refuge to the hospitable shores of America, there to seek that opportunity of living his own life, which has been denied to him in the land of his birth.

The Jewish population of the United States has thus been increased from two hundred thousand, or thereabouts, in 1880, to upwards of one and a half million at the present time,

two-thirds of which number represent the Jews dwelling in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston. This great influx of Jewish population, to an overwhelming extent, represents groups which, prior to 1880, were practically unknown in America. The infinitesimal percentage of those who belonged to these groups, who had previously come to this country, were, after short periods of storm and stress, absorbed and assimilated by the then existing groups. This process, however, became impossible, or at least became indefinitely deferred, when the new migration set in, representing as it did an alien civilization, and customs and traditions to which the earlier Jewish immigrant was almost a stranger.

It was but natural, therefore, that the newly arrived, viewing Judaism and life from another angle, formed their own congregations, their own social organizations, their own communities; that new movements were called into existence or stimulated by them; that unfamiliar institutions were transplanted by them; that there was little or no intermingling between them and the earlier comers of the Jewish faith; that the two bodies stood aloof from one another and regarded each other askance, and that suspicion and lack of confidence, which are the offspring of an absence of thorough information and understanding, were prevalent among both

groups, and unity of action, harmony, and the spirit of brotherhood, if not non-existent, were certainly but faintly perceptible.

In the meantime, conditions abroad retrograded from bad to worse. The pogroms of the Nineteenth Century, inhuman though they were, gave place to the diabolical massacres and the fiendish animosity of the Twentieth Century. The flaunting disregard by Russia of the American passport, which in 1880 was negligible, became a monumental insult in 1905. Conditions in Roumania, which at the earlier date were deplorable, gave rise to Secretary John Hay's memorable protest, based on his recognition of the effect of Roumanian barbarism upon our own country.

Even here, in this free land new problems presented themselves—religious, social, economic and civic—which called for concerted action, in order to prevent the violation of the equal rights of Jews as citizens, and to obviate repressive measures calculated to shut the door of opportunity in the faces of the harried refugees who sought that asylum which it had been the traditional policy of this government to extend to the oppressed of all the world.

It is to these causes, and to the need of constant intercommunication with European organizations, founded for like objects, and to the growth of a new diplomacy, that the American

Jewish Committee owes its origin. As its constitution declares, its purpose is "to prevent infringement of the civil and religious rights of Jews, and to alleviate the consequences of persecution."

That there have been and exist infringements of the civil and religious rights of Jews, actual and threatened, and that there are consequences of persecution to be alleviated, is universally admitted. How best to prevent and to alleviate, is the question. If it had been practical for existing organizations to affiliate with themselves the six-fold greater mass of new-comers, and to have been recognized by them as their representative organization, the problem would have solved itself. It would never have arisen. But instead of affiliating with the older organizations, the new-comers, as has been seen, formed their own organizations, which in turn would not affiliate with the older bodies. And since the more recently arrived element of the Jewish population in America felt more keenly than the older element, the consequences of foreign persecution, and oft-threatened repressive measures, because they and theirs were directly affected, it was but natural that the former should have insisted upon the right to speak and to act, and to seek redress and relief from the grievances, which have weighed so heavily upon them.

Hence it became the purpose of the American

Jewish Committee to bring about co-operation among the various elements of American Jewry, by means of an organization which ignored geographical origins, useless controversies and polemics, accidental groups, artificial formulas, and social stratification; and which recognized no tests except those which its name implies—those of Americanism and Judaism.

This organization is actuated solely by feelings of friendship and sympathy toward every class of Jews, without regard to adjectives. It seeks no monopoly in the accomplishment of "Israel's work in America." Its members have striven to merge their identity, and to subordinate their personalities, for the attainment of results beneficial to all Jews alike. It has always been the desire of the Committee, to co-operate with other organizations seeking to reach the same goal, and to attain that millennial state, when all men alike throughout the world, shall be accorded equal civil and religious rights, and when persecution, with all its train of horrors, shall be no more.

It is believed that the motives of the members of the American Jewish Committee are now better understood than they were two years ago, when well-meaning men considered the new organization as an intruder, a trespasser, and a pretender, desirous of supplanting and destroying existing organizations. It was decried

as self-constituted, by those who forgot that all existing organizations were equally self-constituted. It was believed to be bent upon arrogating to itself power and glory. It was regarded with suspicion, and motives were attributed to it, which are now conceded to be baseless.

The American Jewish Committee has never seen fit to reply to these criticisms, except in so far as its acts have constituted a fitting answer. Though self-constituted, it has striven to democratize itself, and hopes for a speedy realization of its expectations in that regard. It has labored to accomplish the objects for which it has been formed, by quiet, persistent, untiring, and continuous work, and by means of constant and thorough interchange of views among the members of its Executive Committee. Membership in that body is not any empty honor; it involves strenuous exertion, daily activity, and uninterrupted study of conditions. It calls for and receives the unremitting attention of every member of the Executive Committee, each member being kept in complete touch with every activity, and being expected to participate and actually participating therein. Stated meetings are held with great regularity. There every topic is carefully investigated and thoroughly discussed. Special meetings take place whenever emergencies arise. At the central bureau of the

Committee, an efficient secretary and a trained staff of assistants are always in attendance. They collate and give information, gather statistics, and keep the entire Committee fully advised, and when necessary, as has frequently occurred, the several members of the Committee are called upon to render active service, to which calls ready and willing response has uniformly been given. The published reports give but a meagre idea of what the Committee has thus far actually done, the time not having arrived for adequate portrayal of the most important of its efforts. When the final account is rendered, it is confidently believed that neither the Committee, nor Judaism, nor our country, will have cause for regret.

The Committee has unquestionably encountered difficulties, but it has been gratified by the attainment of substantial results; and it indulges the hope, that the seed which it has sown will not prove fruitless.

There has never been a moment since it embarked upon its undertaking, that it has been unwilling to co-operate with others having the same objects in view. That was its declaration when it came into existence. That has been its official announcement on repeated occasions. It gave evidence of the sincerity of its asseverations, by electing to its membership representatives of the more important of the existing Jewish organ-

izations, and included them in its Executive Committee. The fact that some of these representatives saw fit to withdraw from the Committee, was the result of their own voluntary action, and was the source of sincere regret to those who continued to perform the functions of the Committee.

Disregarding all past occurrences, the Committee is today as willing as it has ever been, to co-operate with any existing organization which desires to labor in the same field of activity, if a practical and workable plan can be presented, which will make co-operative action possible. Such a plan must, however, be one which will not be paralyzing in its operation; otherwise it is not practical or workable, because it would not only destroy the usefulness of the American Jewish Committee, but would equally deprive the existing organizations of whatever utility they now possess.

It is not for me to suggest how the much desired result of unification of the Jewish forces, which really means their conservation and effective utilization, can be best accomplished. My sole object in presenting these views is, to comply with the request of the Philadelphia Committee of Arrangements, to present this paper, with the view of contributing to "a better mutual understanding and a clearer insight into our common aims."

Nothing that I have said must be construed as a criticism of any existing organization, or of any individual or class of individuals. Nothing is further removed from my mind, than the petty and undignified purpose of casting personal reflections. In the great work of Israel, there is enough for all to do. Every conscientious and consistent Jew is bound to contribute to it, the best that it is in him to give. The promotion of the cause of Judaism, is an aspiration looking to the ennoblement of the human race, and that cause will be best promoted, when all the brethren of the household of Israel shall "dwell together in unity."

