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The Role of Israel

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A Sermon Presented By

RABBI DR. HERBERT M. BAUMGARD

BETH AM

MIAMI, FLORIDA

The Role of Israel in the Past

Few students of ancient history would dispute the fact that the people Israel has played an important part in the development of mankind. Through the influence of the Bible, through the personal effort of Jews, and through the efforts of our daughter religions, Christianity and Islam, the basic ideas of Israel have permeated the Western world and much of the East. Wherever cultured people speak of "one world", of "one mankind", of "one God", they pay their tribute to the first teachers of this doctrine, the people Israel. Wherever men speak of justice, of charity and peace, they speak, in part, with inflections and nuances borrowed from the Hebrews. In recent years, many informed Christians have ceased to speak merely of the "Christian tradition". They, now, forthrightly recognize their debt to Israel, and we hear more frequently of the "Judaic-Christian tradition". We need not debate here today the question of whether in the past our people has given something of value to the world. What we need to ask ourselves is — what shall be our future contribution to the world?

The Role of Israel Today

The Wealth of the Nations

Short years ago the gifted French Poet Andre Gidé complained that the Jews of France were a drag on the development of a pure French literature. Said Gidé, "The Jews do not write as Frenchmen. They bring in ideas and expressions that are not French." The complaint of Mr. Gidé gives us an insight into the function of Jews. While we have always been good nationalists, we are better internationalists. Because of our wanderings throughout the world, we have been influenced by the ideas and cultures of many nations. The Jews in France, for example, represent an internationalist kernel, in the midst of a country becoming, under DeGaulle, increasingly self-centered and nationalistic.

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What is true of the Jews of France is true, also of the Jews of the Soviet Union. They have been the most difficult of peoples for the Communists to indoctrinate and to dominate. The ties of the Russian Jews to an internationalist tradition and their ties to Jews in other lands have made it impossible for them to believe that Communism contains all of the truth. So, the Jews have remained a thorn in the Russian side. In one way or another, they have opposed the idea of a total Soviet nationalism.

The State of Israel is so virile today, precisely because it pools the accrued culture of ideas of many diverse peoples. 82 languages are spoken in this tiny country today. The Democratic principles at work there were carefully sifted from many different kinds of societies. At the heart of the intense Israeli nationalism is the cultural and ideational wealth of many nations. When the late Eleanor Roosevelt spoke here in Beth Am a few years before her death, she told us of the great influence Israel was having among the new and smaller nations of Africa and Asia. To these infant nations, the Israelis are bringing democratic ideas and modern industrial techniques. The Israelis are not great in number, but their potential influence for good amongst the smaller nations is unlimited.

It is not entirely by accident that a Jew, Arthur Goldberg, should be the representative of the greatest nation in the world at the United Nations. Goldberg speaks not only as an American in search of peace. He speaks, also, as a descendent of the prophet Isaiah, whose words are engraved on the front facade of the United Nations Building. "Behold the time will come", saith the Lord, "when men shall beat their swords into ploughshares . . . and learn war no more." The United States representative to the U.N. would not have to be a Jew for Jewish sentiment to influence this internationalist assembly, but the presence of Goldberg there should be proof enough that the function of the Jewish people has not ceased. Goldberg, who was confirmed in a Reform congregation in Chicago by a truly great Rabbi, Jacob Weinstein, did not come to his views and inclinations by accident, but by study, and by conscious identification with the goals of the Jewish community. Goldberg is merely one of many Jews who were drawn into the labor movement in the days of the depression and earlier, because they wanted to help the working man to obtain his just share of what America has to offer. Goldberg is but one in a long line of statesmenlike labor leaders which includes names like Samuel Gompers, David Dubinsky, and Sidney Hillman. In the pursuit of international peace and justice, Jews still have an important role to play as they influence the views of the many nations in which they live.

The "Tempest Tossed"

It is not by accident that the words of a Jewess, Emma Lazarus, adorn the Statue of Liberty. It speaks well of the burning conscience of the Jews at the turn of the century that the words of Miss Lazarus should have been chosen as the voice of America speaking to the turbulent Europe of her day. The Statue of Liberty carries this message:

"Give me your tired and your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to be free.
Give these, your homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Just as Arthur Goldberg labors today at the U. N. to try to implement the prophecy of Isaiah, who lived 2700 years ago, so Miss Lazarus went to the Book of Isaiah for her phrase, "tempest tossed". For in these words, said Isaiah, did God speak of the exiled Jews, those who were despised and rejected, "the tempest tossed", the homeless. Emma Lazarus, who wrote many poems and stories concerning Judaism, was deeply immersed in her Jewish background. She was sensitive to the cause of those who suffered, because she belonged to a people long outcast and rejected.

Emma Lazarus spoke for the Jews of the turn of the century, for Jews who had just gotten off the boat, for an immigrant people. Saul Bellows, novelist and Jew, speaks for the intellectual of today who is confused and uprooted. Bellow's book, "Hertzog", has been on the best-seller lists for months. Some critics have wondered why. It is a crazy-quilt of a book. It seems to go nowhere. Its hero is not a hero in many ways. Perhaps, the book is so popular because it makes clear the dilemma of all Americans who belong to the so-called "intellectuals". Hertzog, the central figure in the book, represents the well-educated American who cannot stand the constant competition and the commercialism of our society. He is bewildered by the infatuation of Americans with unbridled sex. He is caught in the trend of Americans to solve their problems by the use of force. And, through it all, Hertzog complains! He complains against the neglect of the poor and the weak. He complains against the neglect of the beauties of nature. He complains against the trampling of the higher spirit of man. Yet, in spite of this noble part of Hertzog, the man of heart, he is a tragic figure. He is tragic, because he does not bring his complaints to the active level. He thinks complaining thoughts, and he writes imaginary letters of complaint, but he does nothing in an active or organized way to right the wrongs he sees about him. The Jewish author of Hertzog is, perhaps, telling America that it is time for our intellectuals to stand up and be counted. It is time for us to bring our higher vision into the governmental and political level where it will influence events around us. Saul Bellows gives us some idea of what the Jew can say to modern America.

A few years ago Herman Wouk, an Orthodox Jew, wrote a book called, "Marjorie Morningstar". The book was a commercial success and favorably received by most critics. It became a movie. The book had many shortcomings, but it was still another example of the Jewish conscience at work in America. I didn't like the book at the time, because it spoke boldly about Jews who were involved in the petty striving and sexual complexities common to modern America. At the time, I thought that Mr. Wouk was exaggerating. Surely, Jews didn't really do what he said, I thought, but I have discovered that he was accurately describing the increasing involvement of some Jews in the pleasure-seeking circles of our country. "Marjorie Morningstar" is a protest against a drastic shift in the values of the Jewish community. It also is important as a protest against the new preoccupations of a large segment of American youth who pay honor to no scale of values. In this sense, Mr. Wouk, speaks with the traditional Jewish voice on the modern scene.

A recent essay in Time magazine entitled, "The New American Jew", takes note of the increasing influence of the Jewish voice in America. Poet

Robert Lowell, of the Boston Lowells, is quoted in this article as saying that, "Jewishness is the theme of today's literature as the Middle West was the theme in Veblen's times and the South was the theme in the 1930's". It is no overstatement to say that most of the major novels coming off the press in America today are written by Jews. Such names as J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Irwin Shaw, and Leon Uris are well known to the Christians as well as to Jews. Says the author of the Time Magazine article, "Gentile readers seem to be finding themselves in Jewish fictional characters". The Jew is, apparently, performing an important function in articulating for all Americans the problems of our complex society.

New Wood to the Old Tree

It is not difficult to confirm the opinion of the essayist in Time magazine that many Christians in America are becoming Judophiles. They flock to see "Fiddler On The Roof" on Broadway, and they are turning to the study of the Old Testament with new vigor. One of the outstanding Christian existentialist theologians, Karl Barth, has paid this tribute to the Jews, "The Jews have the promise of God", he wrote, "and if we Christians from among the Gentiles have it too, then, it is only as those chosen with them, as guests in their house, as new wood grafted to the old tree". There was a time when Christian theologians wanted to cut down and throw out the Jewish tree. Apparently, there is a change in important Christian circles in this sense.

When Martin Buber, the famed Jewish exponent of Hasidism in modern times, died recently, an outstanding Christian (Reinhold Niebuhr), wrote in "The Saturday Review of Literature", that, as a religious philosopher, Buber was superior to Kierkegaard and to other Christian existentialists, because Buber emphasized the *social character* of human selfhood. That is to say, while the Christian teachers of modern existentialism emphasized the importance of the self, Buber, the Jew in their midst, taught that *the self could have no meaning except as it related to other selves*, to other human beings. Buber, through his religious philosophy, has shown us a way in which the modern Jew can still teach something to the world.

In taking note of the moving of Christians towards Jewish thought, the Time Magazine essayist makes a strange point. "While the United States is growing more Jewish", he writes, "the United States Jews may be growing less so." Let us consider this amazing observation, which, I am afraid to admit, is partially true. As some of you know, I have written a book by invitation of our national movement called, "Judaism and Prayer". The Moderne Book Store here in South Miami has made an effort to push the sale of this book. Mr. Ragovis, proprietor of the store, reports that more Christians are buying the book than Jews! The book is entitled, "Judaism and Prayer", and more Christians are buying it! I submit that this is so for two reasons. There are an increasing number of Christians interested in learning about Judaism, and many Christians are interested in prayer. Many who are Jews by birth are interested neither in Judaism nor in prayer, however liberally interpreted.

Several weeks ago I happened to be in a shop owned by Jews. I was purchasing some ritualistic objects to give to friends. A customer came in

and asked the proprietor to explain the symbols on a set of book-ends. The customer said that she knew that these symbols stood for the Tribes of Israel, as they were described by Jacob in the Book of Genesis, but she needed help in figuring out one or two of the symbols. The proprietor, a Jew, wasn't able to interpret the symbols at all, so he referred the customer to me. The customer was a Christian who simply was interested in the Old Testament. Of course, it is not extremely important to know the symbols of the Tribes of Israel, but this story is, I think, indicative of what is happening in America today. Many Christians are coming to Judaism to make Christianity relevant in modern times, while the Jew has little knowledge of his own faith and is busy pursuing the pleasures that were denied to his ghettoized fathers and to his fathers' fathers.

Several years ago in a Yom Kippur sermon, I described to you what I saw as a gradual movement of the Christian away from Christianity towards Judaism. I pointed out that more and more Christians no longer accept the deity of Jesus, and I suggested that it was entirely possible that the time would come when the Christian would approach the Jew and say, as prophesied, "*We have heard that God is with you. Let us come with you.*" On the occasion of that sermon, I posed the question, "When a Christian comes to you and asks you to tell him about Judaism, will you know what to teach?" That sermon was not written as a lark. There is such a trend in America. Christians want to know more and more about Judaism, since they increasingly suspect that some of their dogmas are invalid for the modern world. It is also, unfortunately true, that while Christians are moving towards Judaism, Jews are moving away from Judaism into the realm of those who want to lie back on the sands of life and let the waves lap at their toes. There's nothing wrong with that, in measure. We all need some relaxation and escape, but *a Jew on extended vacation soon forgets what it is to be a Jew.* A Jew detached from the problems of the community has lost his distinctiveness.

The Problem of Acceptance

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Jew in America is less and less a part of the "out" group. In all but a few situations, we have been accepted into the majority group. For the Jew as an individual, this has many good points. For the survival of the Jews as a distinctive group in America, this presents several real problems. The Jew, down through the ages, has been part of the "out" group. He has been, as Isaiah depicts him, the despised and the rejected, the "tempest tossed". It is with this in mind that Arthur Koestler has written that if there were a germ more exposed to the environment than any other germ, this germ might be called "the Jew germ." The comparison is valid if we think of the constantly uprooted Jews of Europe. The sensitivities of the Jew of the past, were, in part, the product of his religion, and, in part, the product of pogroms and discrimination. The Jews of as little as 30 years ago did not have to think hard to identify with the Biblical injunction, "Love the stranger, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." The problems of the Jews of Europe were how to get enough to eat, and how to keep from getting killed by anti-semites. In an alien world, the Jew found solace in his religion, and his concern for the underdog was sharpened by his own suffering.

The children of Jews who emigrated to America had things somewhat better than their fathers, but the memory of what their parents had experienced was still green, and the second generation American Jews were to be found in the vanguard of all liberal causes. Proudly this generation asserted its Jewishness and its identification with those denied equal rights. Now, however, the children and grandchildren of the impoverished immigrants have invaded the ramparts of the American middle-class, and the typical American Jew today identifies more closely with Col. Whitehead than he does with Moses! The typical American Jew knows more about martinis than he does about the Sabbath kiddush. The problem, dear friends, is how, as Jews, we can survive our acceptance and success within the main stream of American materialism. How can we maintain the sharp edge of the Jewish conscience, our insistence on community-salvation, in the midst of a society where it is possible for an individual to drown in the drinking-in of personal pleasures?

The Israel of 750 B. C. had a similar problem and survived. Then, as now, Jews had the benefit of material luxury, and then, as now, the traditionally sensitive Jewish conscience was dulled. Then, our people was fortunate in that the Prophets arose to startle them into remembering their special role in history. "Woe unto ye", cried Isaiah, "who lie upon your couches of luxury but who cannot see the affliction of the people . . . Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink, that tarry late into the night . . . but they regard not the work of the Lord!"

"*But they regard not the work of the Lord.*" We Jews, the exposed people of history, ought to have learned that everybody can't go fishing at the same time. Somebody must be concerned about the inequities and the inequities of society; somebody must mind the store of the community. There may come a time when the rights of all men will be so secure, that we Jews, too, can go fishing and can forget the problems that can potentially undermine the finest society. It is doubtful that that time has already come. Those who, "regard not the work of the Lord", those who are concerned merely with their own ease, are the unwitting allies of evil.

Do we not agree, dear friends, that a Jewish criminal is more tragic than any other criminal, for he is the descendent of a noble people? Do we not agree that a Jewish merchant who takes advantage of a customer is not only deceptive but also a traitor to a great tradition?

A few years ago, a relative of mine died, leaving most of his estate to his wife and almost nothing to the synagogue or to charity. Upon hearing the will, his brother commented, "He died like a dog!" A Jew cannot die without leaving a generous amount of money to charity. He also cannot live, as a Jew, without a sense of his unique destiny as part of the Jewish people. In the 12th century Jehudah Halevi called the Jews, "*The aching heart of the nations.*" Success, freedom, and prosperity have made the Jewish heart ache a great deal less. Only the future will tell whether we shall merge into the "goyim", into the "other peoples", and cease to be an "am sagulah, a treasured people" who have a special regard for "the work of the Lord."