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Judaism in England

Congregation and Minister.

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Sermon

Delivered on Sabbath, the 2nd of Adar, 5667

(Feb. 16th, 1907),

At the Sunderland Synagogue

BY THE

Rev. Dr. Samuel Daiches, Ph.D.,

Minister,

Sunderland Hebrew Congregation.

Sunderland :

1907.

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W. R. Lion's greetings
S. L.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

The critical state of Judaism in England should be clear to every thinking member of our community. The evils are great and many. They must be remedied. What has to be done first is to lay open the wounds. In this sermon, which I gave last Sabbath in my Synagogue, I tried to do it to some extent, and I deem it my duty to make my remarks known to all those of our brethren who take an interest in our spiritual life. May they achieve their object, and rouse the conscience of congregations and ministers alike, and help to raise Judaism in this country.

I may add that this sermon was given on the occasion of a "Bar-mizvah." The address at the end is omitted.

Sunderland,

SAMUEL DAICHES.

Adar 4, 5667.

February 18, 1907.

JUDAISM IN ENGLAND

CONGREGATION AND MINISTER.

My friends. Whenever I see a Bar-mizvah coming up to the Law and proclaiming himself a Jew, an inner restlessness, an inner uneasiness takes hold of me. I feel sometimes: a trembling seizes me. My thoughts wander far, far away, and the question forces itself upon me: What will become of this young member of our race? What will his Judaism consist of? And the question assumes larger proportions, and I hear an inner voice asking: And what will become of the whole of Judaism in this country? How will English Jewry look in fifty years' time? And I feel: unspeakable grief fills me, and my life-nerves are as cut. The whole hopelessness and lifelessness of the present state of Judaism here is vividly brought before me, and nothing seems to be left but despair. A gloomy landscape. Devastated fields. Trees outrooted. A leaden sky. Thunder and lightning. A sweeping storm. No life. No sunshine. The end seems to be near. Thus English Judaism looks. Some see life in devastation, power in outrooting, light in the blackness. But they are false seers. They mistake darkness for light and light for darkness. There is no country where the Jews are so leaderless, so masterless as in England. Three hundred thousand Jews scattered among forty-five millions of other people, with little secular and still less Hebrew knowledge. Let us be candid. No self-deceit. Let us illumine our inner being and search after the truth.

Most of those of us who came to this country brought with them a very scanty education and not very high notions about life. Judaism as practised at home they soon learned to despise, and its deeper meaning they never grasped. They could not break away entirely from old customs, and they began to build houses of prayer. Those who in their native country gave to the house of prayer its importance, its meaning, who understood what prayer is and who studied our Law and our Literature remained where they were, and those to whom the house of prayer was merely a building with four walls came here. And they began to build the House of Israel. Instead of one house of prayer in a town, several houses came into existence. Instead of looking for a religious teacher and guide they strove after so-called personal honours. Instead of all supporting one house all tried to ruin all. They come to the house of prayer and do not pray. In the homes Judaism is scarcely known. And if it

is known a little, it is known in its most superficial form. The Jewish language, the Jewish literature, the Jewish history, all that is truly Jewish is a riddle, a sealed book. The Torah in the Ark is made an instrument for giving and withholding honour. The Synagogue has no foundation, and the whole Judaism no basis. It is all empty talk. There are no contents. The influence of the surroundings is not favourable. We come into contact mainly with the lower classes. We become materialistic. We lose our Judaism—that what was left to lose—and do not acquire true Anglicism. The division into “foreign” and “English” does its share to injure Judaism in this country. The “foreign” Jews do not understand their Rav, and the “English” Jews do not understand their Minister. All is in a state of anarchy. There are no true bonds which should bind together leader and people. Leader? No. The people would protest against this designation. Servant. Executing official. These are the right words. Could they not do without a Rav? Could they not do without a Minister? Certainly they could. They could do without the whole of Judaism. Those who led English Jewry for more than half a century could not fulfil the enormous task they took upon themselves. A man cannot sit in London and rule Judaism in Manchester or Edinburgh. Every Jewish community must have its own independent religious guide. Otherwise the general leadership is only used in order to make the individual heads of the congregations powerless. Ministry in English Jewry is now in a state that no self-respecting and intelligent man can join or remain in it. Slave-natures are wanted. And what for are they wanted altogether? They really are not. But what will our neighbour's say? We keep our Synagogues and the officials for the sake of the Gentiles. What good can come from this? And how will, how can the future be? And what is the outcome of all this? The life of him who happens to be in the position of a Minister is made bitter. An understanding for his learning, for his work, for his ideals, for his character, for his goodwill is not there. He is continually watched, continually suspected. There is not one who does not think himself fit to watch the Minister, to see whether he is doing his duty. His duty! Does there exist a real understanding for the duties of a Minister? How can this be, if there is no understanding and no love for Judaism? His duty is to sing the funeral hymns and to hallow the tombstone! For there a Gentile may stand not far away. And if the Minister happens accidentally to be absent from an occasion like that, the anger is boundless: That man, he is forgetful of his duty! And when he happens to go away an alarm is raised: He has gone again. As if the Minister himself would have no conscience and would have to be told by everybody and anybody

what is right and what is wrong. It is not the constant presence of the Minister that is required, but his guiding and influencing spirit. And then people make it their business to complain who have not at all the interests of Judaism and the congregation at heart. Why not also throw a stone at the Minister? Do they not pay contribution? What an unfortunate thing this is! I will speak plainly. A man pays 2s. a week and he has got a Synagogue, a Preacher, a Chazan, a Shochet, teachers and minor officials, and still he thinks that he has not got the entire value for his money if he should not rule, if he should not do slave-driving. It would be a comedy if it would not be a tragedy.

At Jews' College in London they wonder why some of the best students leave college and give up Ministry. It is no wonder at all. English Jewry treats those who should be their spiritual heads most shamefully. The lack of confidence alone can make a decent man despair. You can crush the spirit in a king and demoralise angels. It is a most serious state of affairs. If the best men should be repelled, what will become of that body of Jews described as English Jews? How unhappy was Jeremiah that he had to say, and how happy was he that he could say: "O that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people and go from them!" And still he said it out of love for his people. And he went with them even to Egypt. The love of a lover of his people is too strong that it should be crushed by their backslidings.

But it cannot remain so for ever. A change must come. Judaism in this country must be saved. The notions of Synagogue, Minister, honorary office must become different from what they are now. The belief in the goodwill of the Minister and the fullest confidence in him must be established. All empty talking, grumbling, complaining must cease once for all. The idea must gain ground that the Minister is there for the purpose of spreading Jewish knowledge and creating an understanding and love for Judaism. It must be realised by all that he is not there only to perform ceremonies and to join his members at the card-tables and on the dancing-floors, but to do earnest, serious work. And when he thinks that he can do or not do this or that, so no one dares doubt the truthfulness of his motives. Do not watch, do not spy, do not guard. Do not talk of neglecting duties. What you call a duty may be the paltriest thing. The understanding for that what has to be the Minister's duty has to be created in you by those who cannot be satisfied with a slave's life. You will often hear people say: "What, he must do what we want, we keep him." What a miserable conception of Judaism and its leaders. You keep yourselves by



having a spiritual guide. Only you must regard him as such. And then the Council must descend from the pedestal which lack of knowledge of Judaism has erected in this country. It should know that its sphere is only the financial one. How ridiculous and how tragical is it that when, for instance, applications for the post of a teacher of the Congregational Hebrew School are considered the Minister and Headmaster is not asked, not consulted. The Council selects candidates, and the Headmaster knows about it as much as the man in the street. He does not even see the envelope of an application. School, teaching, Hebrew, the young generation, future Judaism, to all this the never-failing Council will see. The duty of the Minister is to sing funeral hymns and to set tombstones! If this should continue, English Judaism may want a tombstone.

But no. To this it shall not come. A new spirit must come over English Judaism. The gloom must disappear. Knowledge must increase. Understanding and love for Judaism must grow. The synagogues must become true houses of worship. The homes must be true Jewish homes. The Ministers must be for our inner wants and not for appearance sake, for the living and not for the dead. Judaism must live, and you must become better and nobler. The present state cannot continue. It is unbearable. It can make one fall under the burden of slavery. Every Jewish community in England will have to have its absolutely independent religious guide. And then men of talent, of knowledge will come to you. At present Ministry in English Jewry is a waste of time and talent. All this must be altered. And the members must not be under the impression that because they come to the Synagogue only once in three months or half a year or three times a year, because they are busy the whole week, Sabbath included, that therefore the Minister has to run to their houses Sunday after Sunday. Try to come to the Synagogue more often. Come to hear lectures outside the Synagogue. Try to appreciate more the knowledge of your Ministers. Try to see more your Ministers at their real work, and the mutual understanding and respect and social intercourse will follow. Judaism must be raised, and, therefore, Ministry must be raised. Our hope is the young generation. They can be brought up in the right way. Their character can be moulded. They can be made to know and to love Judaism. But we must work for it. The Hebrew schools must be as efficient as possible. And it must be the desire and aspiration of everyone to see the young brought up as good Jews. The darkness must disappear and light must reign. The clouds must vanish and the sun must shine forth. Judaism in England must flourish. We must only have the wish to work for its regeneration. And is there a higher, a nobler work imaginable?

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