

Dawn in the West



MARCUS

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By

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THIS ADDRESS was delivered in May, 1981, to the Jewish Communal Affairs Commission of the American Jewish Committee during that organization's 75th Anniversary Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. by Jacob Rader Marcus, Distinguished Service Professor of American Jewish History at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Mr. Chairman, and all other good friends here:

I am very happy to be with you this morning and to chat with you very informally about the greatest Jewry the world has ever known. Palestine in its palmiest days probably never had one-half or one-third as many Jews as there are today in the United States. The question that you might ask, particularly since I've said this is the greatest Jewry the world has ever known, is this: are we surviving? Numerically we are, apparently, despite the fact that we have declined to zero population growth. We're not going to be much larger than we are at the present time. We lost quite a number of people through intermarriage though not all who intermarry leave us; we win, we keep some of them. We collect records at the American Jewish Archives of the converts who join us. These show that we gain somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 neophytes a year, and I do think that for a generation or so we will hold our own. Then we will begin to decline.

The fact that we may decline numerically is not particularly serious because Judaism, Jewry, has never survived through numbers. We're never going to be able to catch up with the Chinese; there are a billion of them. As a matter of fact, in one of the most glorious periods of Jewish life, at a time when the Bible was written and was lived in the days of Elijah, there were only 7,000 "Jews" in all the land of Israel. The rest were pagans. During the Middle Ages we probably did not number more

than two or three million all told yet there was never an age in which Jews were more ardent. We have never lived through numbers but through those individuals who wanted to be Jewish. If we have survived down to the present it is because we have had the will to live. Today, here in the United States, we're living comfortably in two cultures and two civilizations -the Jewish civilization and the Christian; American culture is essentially Christian. I maintain not only that we are surviving but that this era is the greatest in all Jewish history; we here in this country are living in a Golden Age. Now what do I mean by a Golden Age? It is a time in our history when culture soars to great heights, when there is affluence and, above all, devotion to Judaism and World Jewry. The Golden Age community seeks to help Jews wherever they are found. It has a high degree of *Jewish* culture, and it is respected by Jews everywhere. It exercises control, spiritual, intellectual, cultural control, over all other Jewries. It is the hegemonic center of the Jewish world.

There was but one period in the past when a Jewish group exercised this cultural and spiritual hegemony. Some people believe that it was also true of Jewry in Alexandria, during the first century, but we know so little about that community. We're sure about the Jews during the Spanish period, when they were under the Arabs, from about 1000 to the year 1250. I think we can best understand this age if I were to tell you something about one Jew, one individual who exemplifies, reflects in his own life the culture of a great Jewish community. This man was Samuel the Prince, Shemuel ha-Nagid. He lived in Cordoba, in Spain, at a time when there were a number of independent Arab states. Because the city in which he lived was visited by a pogrom, he fled south, to the kingdom of Granada and there began life over again in the town of Malaga. He

opened a little grocery store, and because he wrote a beautiful Arabic script, he augmented his slender income by writing letters for the illiterates who turned to him.

One of his letters came to the attention of the prime minister of Granada. He made Samuel his secretary and when the minister died Samuel succeeded him as vizier of that country. He was a fine Arab scholar, an Arabic poet; he wrote Hebrew poems; he was a student of the Bible and the Talmud. For the rest of his life he served as prime minister and when his country was in danger he even led its armies to victory. Thus, in this one man we see the reflection of a Golden Age. He contributed liberally to other Jewries in other lands; the Jewish world knew and respected him.

In the last Washington administration we had a Jew by the name of Harold Brown, who was our Secretary of Defense. We have a man today, Caspar Weinberger, who is our present Secretary of Defense. (Weinberger by the way is of remote Jewish origin.) Now if Harold Brown and Caspar Weinberger could read the Bible in the original Hebrew and were members of the American Jewish Committee, then we would be positive that we were living in a Golden Age, and, perforce, you would have to say, Marcus is right.

I maintain that we here today in the United States are exercising world Jewish hegemony, certainly to a large degree. Some of you may ask, is it not true that at this moment Israel is the spiritual and cultural center of the Jewish world? Well, that I believe is moot. There is no question the Israelis have done a magnificent job. Just think of it! In thirty-three years they have taken a semi-arid country and have created a powerful, cultured state. Of course, and this is unfortunate, they are very small; Israel is one of the tiniest countries in the world. The entire State of Israel today is probably not much larger than two

or three American western counties! It is only one-fifth as large as the state of Ohio, and it is considerably less than one percent of the area of the United States. Economically the Israelis have problems because they have no natural resources. Some of the country is desert, as you well know. They do have the Dead Sea with its chemical riches, but on the whole their physical resources are exceedingly limited.

Education in that land is not as widespread as it should be. The majority of the people in Israel have never even gone through high school. When we speak and think in terms of religious and spiritual influence, we must bear in mind that 80 percent of the Israelis are not religionists. They practice what we would call a civil religion; they do not belong to a synagogue. Only 20 percent of its citizens belong to congregations. This 20 percent are Orthodox; they are an established church, that is to say they control the religious life of the country and deny important religious immunities to Reform and Conservative Jews. After the United States Constitution was written, the First Amendment was added. Its purpose was to reassure all Americans: this country will tolerate no established, privileged church. As a matter of fact, Israel is one of the few places in the world where non-Orthodox Jews suffer disabilities! Under the circumstances I question whether Israel today can exercise spiritual hegemony over an advanced cultured group like the massive American Jewish community.

To what extent then does the United States—which I maintain is exercising hegemony—to what extent is it fulfilling itself? To what extent is it indeed exerting a profound influence over Jews in other parts of the world? In the first place we are a large community, over 40 percent of all the Jews in the world live here. We are a great Jewry because of our American background, for the United States is still the most power-

ful country in the world, the most technically advanced of all lands. Culturally, not only do all Jews in the United States go through high school but practically every Jewish boy and girl who wishes can go to a college and actually does. We know too that as far as graduate studies are concerned more Jews engage in post-baccalaureate work than any other group in the United States. We are only 2.7 percent of the population, yet we win about 15 percent of all the Nobel Prizes in the sciences. We are a wealthy community. True, we have our poor -about 15 percent of American Jews are living on a bare subsistence level -nevertheless American Jewry is the most affluent group on this continent. I do not mean to say that we are the wealthiest Americans; we have no Jewish billionaires, as far as I know, yet there are many Jews who every now and then give a million dollars to charity, to the United Jewish Appeal. Our social welfare standards are high, very high.

We have a good idea as to the gross national product of the Jewish community. I do not mean to include the money that individual Jews make—forget about that—but to estimate how much money flows in and out of Jewish institutions. The gross national product of the American Jewish community today is about two billion dollars. We are not only wealthy, we are generous. In the last twelve months the Jews of the United States, out of their sacrificial savings, in order to help Jews whom they have never seen and never will see, have sent across the seas, in cash and in bonds, seven hundred million dollars. Relatively speaking this is the greatest philanthropic feat in all the history of Christianity and Judaism.

These American Jews, this small group—five and a half to six million at the most—are politically very powerful. We're powerful because we live in five important cities, and five important states, and we vote. The Blacks are five times as numer-

ous as we are but they do not vote in proportion to their numbers and that is why they do not exercise much more influence than we do. Our Jews are located in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago and Miami. Five “Golden Ghettos?” Actually we live in two huge ghettos where we are in a position to exercise political power. One ghetto begins in Baltimore and goes all the way to the north border of Massachusetts; the other starts at Tiajuana, Mexico, and goes north to the farther shore of San Francisco Bay. This power we exert to keep Israel alive. Because Israel is, in my opinion, a client state of the United States it is in effect a client state of American Jewry. Israel lives by the breath of the Jews in this land. This I believe. It is for this reason I maintain that in many areas we exercise hegemony over the Jewish world today.

But, if American Jewry is to be deemed important, if it is supposed to be a community of culture, it must have Jewish learning. It does have that learning. When I was confirmed in the little town of Wheeling, West Virginia, long before any of you were born, I suspect, there was at most one other boy beside myself who could read Hebrew. Today you would be amazed at the thousands and thousands of boys and girls who can read the sacred tongue. There are at least twenty or twenty-five Jewish colleges in this country, seminaries, too—and I am not speaking of universities—where Hebraic studies are pursued. Some of the greatest libraries in the world are in the United States, at the Hebrew Union College, the Library of Congress, the seminaries in New York, and, what is even more important, in every congregation of good size. Many synagogues have libraries with thousands of *Jewish* books on their shelves. There has been nothing like this in all of the history of Jewry. There are today 300 colleges at least where you can learn Hebrew, immerse yourself in Jewish subjects; you can get

your B.A. in Hebrew and in Jewish studies. There are Jewish programs of all types.

The Sunday schools today are doing a wonderful job, although people tend to say that Jewish education is a mile wide and an inch deep. The people who say that often lack historical perspective. The greatest Jew who lived in the Middle Ages was a man named Maimonides. He was a tremendous scholar, but today a boy or girl of twelve or thirteen years of age who reads a Jewish history—in English of course—a history of the Jews from biblical days to the time of Maimonides, will know much more about those centuries than Maimonides could ever have known because there was no critical, methodological assessment of the available sources in those days. We have an interesting phenomenon here in the United States, one that has developed since World War II. That is the “parochial” or all-day school. One out of every five Jewish boys and girls in the United States goes to such an institution, is taught Hebrew, and is given intensive Jewish training. We are making rapid strides in Jewish, Hebraic culture.

Are we writing books, Jewish books? That is important. I have figured out that in the United States every year we produce in English, Hebrew and Yiddish 100 sound books dealing with the life and the story of our people. That means that every ten years we have a thousand volumes, many of scientific caliber. Well, you may say to me, very good, very nice, but they are in English, maybe a few in Hebrew and in Yiddish. After all you may say—and to a degree you are right—the great books that have influenced Jewish life have been in the Hebrew language; the Hebrew language is the tie that binds. Nevertheless, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the greatest book that the Jews have ever produced is one that was not written in Hebrew but in a vernacular. Of course I could say, if I

so wished, that the Bible, too, was written in a vernacular, in the language of a people, but I am not thinking in terms of the Bible. The Bible is not the most important book in Jewish life. If we have a religion today, a faith today, it is not built primarily upon Sacred Scriptures; it is built upon a series of books, a literature called the Talmud, and the Talmud was written in the vernacular. It was written in a language called Aramaic. It was a language that Jesus, 1900 years ago, spoke, that the Jewish masses used; it is a language that almost all of you still use today; it has survived in the Kaddish prayer, as you well know, for it is written in Aramaic. The best known philosophic work in all our literature is Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*. It was written in Arabic.

I have implied, as I have talked to you, that we are now experiencing a remarkable upsurge of Jewish culture here in the United States. The question of course is, how many of our people are affected? It is true that in all periods of past Jewish history, culture has been the province of but a small elite group. Jewish culture here is now beginning to penetrate in depth, to embrace thousands, and I believe it can continue to spread if the Jews of the United States become conscious of their cultural opportunities. I do not know how many members there are in the American Jewish Committee; I suspect there are about 40,000. Now if everyone of those adults, all 40,000, were to read five good books a year, believe me when I tell you that there would then be no question: this would be the most cultured Jewry in all the world.

Some of you may say to me—and with justice—there are so many great books rolling off the presses every year. Why should I read a Jewish book? Well, I think it might be helpful if you read a Jewish book to learn something about your own past and your own people. Curiosity is an instinct; pride bol-

sters us all. You would certainly augment your knowledge of a culture that gave birth to Judaism and profoundly influenced Christianity and Islam, over a billion and a half human souls. You might even occasionally be inspired. Some time ago I re-read a book that I like very much. It was by Cecil Roth, and it is called, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization*, and you know what happened after I read that book again? Every time I passed a mirror and saw my Jewish visage reflected there, I doffed my hat and I said to myself, Marcus, you Jews are just wonderful!

If you read Jewish books, you learn about Jews. I am very much interested in American Jews. In 1782 a Virginia delegate came to see a Jewish broker saying to him: "I have no money, I am being paid in Continental currency and 'it ain't worth a Continental.' And I must remain here in Philadelphia as a member of the Continental Congress." The Jew lent him money and helped him survive, and that man, that same decade, became the chief architect of a constitution that gave the Jews equality in this country. That man was James Madison; the Jew was Haym Salomon. In 1853 a refugee German named Abraham Jacobi landed in America. He became a founder of the world's science of pediatrics. Today we are meeting in Washington where we have a Supreme Court. I doubt if there has ever been a lawyer in all America who has tried so many cases before that august body as a man who is virtually unknown to most of you—Philip Phillips of Alabama. When he died the Supreme Court did not sit that day. During the Civil War a group of Jews came forward. They had been peddlers originally, then clothing manufacturers, and then bankers; they went to Europe and began to sell American bonds to keep the Union, the North, afloat. A distinguished American historian has maintained that the bonds which the Seligman brothers

sold were almost as important as the battle of Gettysburg. And here in the city of Washington, 100 years ago, there was a German immigrant who had little education but great genius as an inventor. As I address you this morning I am thankful to him because I am talking through a loudspeaker; I telephone frequently, and I look at the television and I hear a voice and I thank Emile Berliner because he discovered the microphone. And if there are any women here, and there seem to be some present, I know they are grateful to Gregory Pincus—he discovered “the Pill.”

I have said to you that one may even be inspired by a Jewish book. Some folk meet wonderful people in their dreams; I meet them between the covers of a book. One of the greatest Jews that I’ve ever met—and he lived in the 1500’s—was a man who was born in a province of what is today the Argentine. His name was Francisco Maldonado de Silva. He was a Christian, and one day, as he was reading a book that compared Judaism and Christianity, he turned to his father Diego and said, “Dad, I think the Jews have the best of the argument.” The father then confessed that he was a secret Jew. The son insisted upon becoming a Jew and he did. He was a physician; he circumcised himself; he observed the dietary laws; he tried to learn some Hebrew; he kept the Sabbath. He made one great mistake; he tried to convert a member of his family, a sister, and it was through her that he was betrayed to the Inquisition. He was imprisoned in Lima, Peru, in 1627. During the twelve years that he was jailed, after he fashioned a rope of maize stalks, he pulled himself up to an opening in his cell, reached other secret Jews, prisoners, and urged them to persevere in their loyalty to the faith of their fathers. Finally, on January 23, 1639, Dr. Maldonado De Silva was taken out and incinerated alive.

Sometime before he was executed, he was taunted with being a Jew and he answered in these immortal words, "If I had a thousand lives to live, I would gladly lose them in the service of the living God." And I can say to you who are here this morning, that if the words of this first great American Jew find an echo in your hearts, in the sense that you are willing to live according to the ethical and moral dictates of our tradition, then I can assure you that a thousand years from this morning, your descendants will gather together here on the free soil of free America and declare triumphantly and exultantly, "Hear O Israel, hear all humanity, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."