

THE LARGER TASK



MARCUS

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By

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Dedicated to the memory of
Joseph and Frieda S. Lefkowitz
and
Robert F. and Fannie L. Sycle
by
Sydney M. and Dorothy C. Lefkowitz

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American Jewry is the greatest adventure in world Jewish history. We are the most distinguished of all Jewries because we have numbers, culture, sympathy, the willingness to help and to lead. We are generous and wealthy. Noblesse oblige; because we are rich, we have the obligation to help others and because we are generous we are doing this. Every year we send hundreds of millions of dollars across the seas to aid Jews whom we have never seen and will never know. This is the most magnificent feat in all philanthropic history.

But money is not the sum of eminence. Our job is to make our Jewry the greatest Jewish cultural center of all times. We are called upon to consummate a golden age, one reminiscent of Spain.

In that golden age, in the eleventh century, there was a Spanish rabbi, Samuel the Prince, a man who was a statesman, rabbinic scholar, communal leader, intellectual, a Hebrew and Arabic poet, a prime minister, and a commander in chief of the victorious Muslim armies of the kingdom of Granada. He symbolizes a productive synthesis of Jewish and secular learning.

Actually we American Jews are already in the midst of a golden age, for we have responded to the challenge of a new situation, of fashioning a harmony of American culture and Jewish tradition. In all Jewish life there has never been a community that even approximated our secular cultural background: today virtually every American Jew goes to college and many do graduate work. The abundance of individuals of eminence is attested to in that the president of the National Academy of Sciences is a member of our faith, and there are over a dozen living American Jewish Nobel Prize winners in physics, medicine, and chemistry.

Though no segment of America surpasses American Jewry in its veneration for general education, we must ask where are we respecting the Jewish part of the desirable synthesis. Jewish studies in our country got off to a slow start. The young Christian seminarians who studied Hebrew at Harvard under the apostate Judah Monis in the early 1700's threw brickbats at his door, if not at him. Yet curiously some enthusiastic Americans after the revolution suggested that Hebrew be adopted as the American national language. What a boon that would have been for Hebrew Union College students! However, it was not until the 1880's that Cyrus Adler became the first American to receive a Ph.D. degree in Semitics at an American university.

Scattered and sporadic as were these American beginnings, only two decades later, in the early years of this century, here in the United States, there appeared the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the most monumental Jewish scientific work of modern times. It was the opening of a floodgate. Since that day American

Jewry can boast of its art museums, archives, publishing and historical societies, scientific academies, magazines of quality, and Hebrew-speaking camps for the youth of our people. Today there are at least five modern rabbinical seminaries, a half-dozen teachers colleges, numerous yeshivot, almost a hundred public schools teaching Hebrew, and over 300 colleges giving courses in Hebraic and Judaic studies. There is a constantly increasing flood of books, pamphlets, brochures, and monographs that reflect Jewish learning and stimulate Jewish identification. Best sellers on Jewish subjects sell in the hundreds of thousands of copies and at least fifty Jewish scholarly books are put to press every year. This adds up to 1,000 notable works in every generation. Lift up yourselves by your bootstraps and look about you. There is a tremendous interest in Jewish learning and problems; there has never been anything like this in all Jewish history. There is scarcely a Jew today who does not read a Jewish book. Hence my bald statement: we are already in the midst of a golden age.

Some may object that this literature is not in Hebrew but in the vernacular, in the language of the people. To them we reply that the books that made Jewry what it is today were written in the language of the masses. The Hebrew prophets, the Bible heroes, spoke to those who listened in the language of the day; the Talmud, the most important of all Jewish writings, was written in the vulgar tongue, and most Jewish philosophers chose the vernacular to effect a fusion of Hebraic and medieval studies. The twelfth century *Guide for the Perplexed* of Moses Maimonides was written in Arabic.

Some of you will cry out that relatively there are so few of us; we American Jews number but three per cent of the

population. Moreover, we suffer from indifference, defection, drifting, apostasy; every fourth marriage is an intermarriage. The Cassandras call out. "Our hope is lost. We have no future." This pessimism is a misreading of Jewish history, of our goals. When in the last 3,000 years were we ever numerous? There was a time in ancient Israel when there were only 7,000 Jews who had not bent the knees unto Baal. In the Middle Ages when your fathers died at the stake for a cause that was more precious to them than life itself there were but two or three million Jews in all the world, yet there was never a day when Jews exhibited more intense devotion and spiritual integrity or produced greater evidence of profound learning. Nineteenth-century German Jewry numbered but little over half a million souls, but it was the greatest Jewish cultural and scientific center of its day.

Are we few? Let us emulate that handful of Christians who landed on Plymouth rock in 1620. Sixteen years later, when there were only 20,000 men, women, and children in all of Massachusetts they established Harvard College that they might train a learned ministry. They brought a press over here, even some Hebrew type, and four years later, in 1640 they printed the first book in British North America. This was the *Bay Psalm Book*, a metrical translation from the original Hebrew. That is what a few did. Or, instead of the Christian pilgrims to those shores, emulate the harassed and scattered Jews of the Middle Ages. Few though they were, they were learned men. Leaf through the several solid volumes of George Sarton's *Introduction to the History of Science*; reread Joseph Jacobs and Cecil Roth on the contribution of medieval Jews to civilization and I promise you that every time you pass a mirror and see yourselves reflected there you will take off your hat to

yourself.

We, you, must be concerned not with our numbers which are adequate, but with quality, intelligence, dedication. You must be in the van of every effort to extend the influence and scope of this golden age that is now maturing. This is your real joy. Is it your role to be a fund raiser, an amateur architect, a social worker, a psychiatrist, a guitar player? Son of man, for this were you created? In these recondite disciplines there are other men more competent than you. Remember, a fad is ephemeral; the Torah is eternal. Your duty is to study, to know, to learn, to teach, to lead, to make every Jewish school a Zion and every child a messiah.

Every rabbi has 3,000 years of intelligent ancestors. If you do not become increasingly more and more a learned rabbi, you betray the heritage of those who gave you birth. Without learning there is no Judaism. Count that day lost in which you have not opened a Jewish book. If you do not learn, you cannot lead; if you do not study you are only a hireling.

Every one of you was born with a patent of nobility; be worthy of it. As Jews you wear the proudest badge in all history. I would ask of you that you conduct yourselves as if the congregation you will serve was the last hope of man and it was your sacred privilege to save it. The centrality of Jewry, of Judaism, lies in you and in your aspirations, nowhere else.

Consider yourselves men of destiny. You are our future. The eternity of our people and our faith is bound up in your soul. You must be the incarnation of Jewish learning and morality, carrying with you, wherever you go, our exalted tradition, our

spiritual homeland which is as wide as the world itself as high as the heavens, and as comforting as a mother's love. Thirty centuries of Hebraic, Israelite, and Judaic idealism and learning are challenging you to go forward.

Never succumb to doubt; constantly affirm that the Jew and Judaism will abide. We have already survived a dozen holocausts, bearing witness to the world that a people lives by the quality of its loyalties. The weapons that have saved us are not chariots, not horses, not tanks, not missiles, but our books, our learning, our Torah.

And what, I pray you, is Torah, in its ultimate essence, but love, justice, peace, compassion, tolerance, the relentless determination to save ourselves and our fellow man through the creation of a new universal moral society. That is our only salvation.

So now we turn to you the generation in whom lies our hope for a better world. "Ride on and prosper." And may the God of our fathers give you the courage, so to rise to ever greater spiritual and intellectual heights, that you and all of us may, cry out, triumphantly and exultantly, to all the ages yet to come: "I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord." And so may it be.

