

THE JEWISH TRAGEDY

To-day, my friends, seems to be an appropriate occasion to consider our position as Jews in the world. Yom Kippur is the time when all Jews feel a closer bond of kinship to one another, and therefore should be in a better mood to consider their common fate and destiny. It would be commonplace to declare that as Jews, we face a tragic situation, in our world of to-day, which is full of tragedy for individuals and whole nations, it were foolhardy to expect that our condition could be any better. In fact we have already long ago been warned, that bad as general conditions might be, we must always expect ours to be much worse. In the words of the Talmud, "No matter what calamities befall the world, Israel is always sure to get a double share of them." And the truth of this, has only been too amply illustrated by history and experience. When a depression struck the world, the economic position of the Jew was affected in exactly the same way as was that of his neighbor. When a war broke out, the Jew made the same patriotic sacrifices, and the enemy's bombs and shrapnel did not discriminate in his favor. But while he thus shared in whatever misfortunes befell his country, he suffered such further misfortunes as his own countrymen heaped upon him in addition. For in times of trial and trouble, the unthinking masses must needs have some scapegoat on whom to blame their troubles and always are there the demagogues to give them the Jew as such a scapegoat. In times of depression, they begrudge and envy the Jew the little he has. In times of

war they belittle his sacrifices and even accuse him of being the cause of the war. So has it been in the wars and depressions of the past and the present war is no exception. It is this which puts the Jewish tragedy in a class by itself and makes it more desperate than that of the other peoples of the earth.

First there is the actual physical destruction that has been wrought on our Jewish people. You will say that in this they fared no worse than did the other nationals such as the Czechs and Poles, whose countries had become the actual arena of the war. That is true, but with this qualification; that the Jew was subjected to terror and torture, with the resultant destruction of life and property far in excess of the other nationals. Also does it so happen, that the theatre of the war, has been centred at the beginning, and now again in areas thickly populated by our Jewish people. First it was Poland that was over run by the barbarians, Poland, where millions of our people had their homes for centuries. To-day, those that are left of them are cooped up in dark, disease breeding ghettos, where they are exposed to a lingering death from famine and pestilence. And more recently came the onslaught on Russia; and immediately it hit the entire stretch of the Jewish settlement there. All summer, the war dispatches figured the familiar names of such distinctly Jewish cities as Wlono, Marien, Pol, Kovno, Smolensky, and Odessa. Many of our older generation know these cities well, have probably lived there, know the intense throbbing Jewish life that prevailed in them. And all of us know them to have been great Jewish

centers, with famous yeshivas; institutions of Jewish learning, presided over by men of light and leading. Indeed they were the reservoirs of Jewish life; from which Jewish communities the world over drew their life's blood. They were the cradle of our Judaism, from where came most of those who to-day constitute the Jewry on the American continents. And to-day those cities are razed to the ground, and because of the pall of silence that censorship has imposed on those areas, little is known, but much can be imagined of what happened to their Jewish populations. At one time those areas accounted for no less than two thirds of the Jewish population of the world. To-day they are no longer heard from; and are as if completely blotted out. Now it has happened many time before in our history that whole Jewish communities have disappeared. But when the Jewish centers in Babylon, for instance, became extinct, there followed the golden age of Jewry in Spain. After the expulsion from Spain, there sprung up the centres in Germany and Poland to carry forward the Jewish tradition. Always were there the powerful Jewish communities, to snatch up the torch of Jewish piety and learning that had been dropped, and to save it from extinction. Will American Jewry be strong and loyal enough, to do the same for our day? That remains to be seen. But in the meanwhile ours has been the misfortune to witness the collapse of what once was a proud and powerful European Jewry; steeped in the noblest Jewish tradition, and passionately devoted to its highest ideals.

But that, friends, is only part of the Jewish tragedy; paralleled if not equalled perhaps by other nationals who have

also seen their cities destroyed. But what heightens the Jewish tragedy, above all others, is the upsurge of anti-Jewish feeling, that always seems to be a by-product of all mass suffering and discontent. You would for instance have imagined that the valor with which the Jew helped to defend Poland would have been appreciated. Or that their common foe would have welded Jew and Pole solidly together. Instead, there are to-day those in Poland, and others who have found a refuge in England, who still clamor against equality of rights being given to the Jew in the Poland that is yet to be restored. Or take France. Could anyone ever have imagined that the patriotism of the Jew to France, would ever be questioned? Why the French-Jew was not satisfied with giving his own loyalty to his country, but in the early part of the last century, in solemn conclave assembled, he issued a call to Jews in every part of the world, that they should give precedence to France even over their own countries; to recognize it as their first fatherland; because it gave birth to the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, which would ultimately achieve the Jewish Emancipation everywhere. With what irony do these words to-day fall on our ears. In its day of calamity even France has been persuaded to turn against its most loyal citizens, the Jews. And what about countries that have not yet fallen under the heel of the oppressor? The troubled times through which they are passing also breeds in them the virus of anti-semitism. This summer, the libel case of Capt. Ramsay against the New York Times was aired in the English courts of justice. Its revelations

shocked British Jewry out of its complacency; for in the evidence it was brought out that the British aristocracy was honey combed with anti-Semitism. Many of the so-called nobility were members of a club whose specific purpose was to purge Jews from English life, even as had been done in Germany. No doubt many of this misnamed nobility had enjoyed hospitality in Jewish homes; had perhaps even received benefactions from Jews; but in secret were planning to bite the hand that had fed them. It must have come as a shock to those Jewish families who thought they had accomplished some good by having themselves accepted in British aristocracy. But that is what so often has happened even in the best of countries, in times of panic and calamity. And is not the recent attack on the Jews by Lindberg but a symptom of the same disease? He too had been employed by Jews; had for years been receiving benefactions from the Guggenheim Foundation; but that did not prevent him from uttering his false charges, in approved Nazi fashion against his Jewish fellow-citizens. So might I quote you no end of similar episodes, in all countries and right here at home as well. And all this is possible despite the fact that this war has revealed the real character of anti-Semitism as it has never been done before. It has been definitely established to be the spear-head of Nazi aggression everywhere; it has been rightly called, "the universal fifth column of Hitlerism; the base instrument for corrupting countries, bewildering public sentiment, for creating dissent among the people and so making them ripe for fascist bondage and slavery." That has been the criminal role

of anti-Semitism in our day; as damaging to those who give it hospitality as to the Jews who are its victims. Nevertheless, is anti-Semitism to-day rampant everywhere, and even those fighting Nazism, are not immune against it and often fail to recognize its criminal character. All of which gives to the Jewish tragedy an added spiritual anguish, not possessed by the tragedy of any other nation.

But, my friends, if you think that the physical destruction on the one hand; and this spiritual anguish on the other, constitute the real tragedy of the Jew, then are you mistaken. The real tragedy is created by the Jew himself; by the manner in which he takes it. For after all, these aspects of Jewish tragedy I described, are nothing new. They have been experienced by the Jew in the past, over a period of many centuries. But the Jew of the past stood up to his trials with the result that instead of breaking him they benefited him; instead of crushing him they uplifted him; Thus Leopold Zunz even finds in the record of Jewish martyrdom, much that is exalting. "If there are ranks in suffering," says he, "Israel takes precedence of all the nations; if the duration of sorrows and the patience with which they are borne ennoble, the Jews can challenge the aristocracy of every land; if a literature is called rich in the possession of a few classic tragedies, what shall we say to a National Tragedy, lasting for 1500 years, in which the poets and the actors were also the heroes?"

You will note that suffering made the Jew strong.

sorrow ennobled him; tragedy made a hero of him. But will the record we are making to-day, be anything akin to this? What is persecution doing to us? Normally, it should beget a firmer resistance and give us a stronger loyalty and faith. But actually it has only begotten in many of us an inferiority complex; the ridiculous belief that the victim must be to blame and not the gangster who assailed him. What has been our reaction to national disaster and suffering? Among others it has been known to bring about religious revivals and spiritual rehabilitation. But I have not noticed that we Jews have become much more religious as the result of the tragedies of the war; and for many of us the Yom Kippur is still their only link with their people and their religion. What have we learned from the bankruptcy of assimilation, from the futility of trying to be other than our true Jewish selves, the policy that ended so dismally with the collapse of German Jewry. Even this obvious lesson has been lost on many of us. We have still the social climbers, who because they have acquired money, would crash the gates of the gentiles, to the abandonment of their own people. And what of the Jewish refugee situation and its implications, has that taught us anything? Nothing at all, as far as some are concerned. They still fail to see the need of a Jewish homeland; and still keep on dreaming that other nations will permit the Jews to permanently share their homes with them. Now it is here that the real Jewish tragedy lies, that we have failed to learn its lessons, and that we have lost the courage to stand up to it. The ruins of London, for instance, they are not the tragedy, they are the glory of England. Whereas the buildings of Paris, because they still stand up, intact,

they are the tragedy of France. So is the Jewish tragedy, not in the physical destruction or the spiritual humiliation we have suffered. But we make our own tragedy when we take it lying down, and in the spirit of surrender. Whereas if we stand up to it, then will we write a contemporary chapter in Jewish history, in which we will be the actors and the heroes; and which will be no less thrilling and inspiring than were those chapters of the past, to which Leopold Zanz has reference.

This then my friends, must we resolve to do. We have been born into a heroic age. Let not the future say, that we behaved like cowards. Great as is the Jewish tragedy, we must learn to cope with it. We must build anew, here, in Palestine and wherever we can, to offset the destruction of Jewish life over there. We must strengthen the spirit of Jewish loyalty everywhere, as an answer to the challenge of our enemies. Nothing can anymore happen to us that did not happen to us before, at one time or another in our history. Yet have we survived it all; while our enemies of old are long dead and forgotten. And so will it be again. But for it so to be we must behave like men. We must not lose our Jewish morale. We must retain our Jewish faith. We must not abandon our Jewish people. Jewish tragedy must discourage or dismay us. Into the very teeth of destiny must we fling our defiance, saying with the psalmist, "We shall not die, but live, to proclaim God's works!"

"For be torture and thraldom still our fate

Our strength shall never abate.

Whoever the foe, whatever the crime -

Israel is deathless as Time.

This is our answer to war, and wrath and rage,

To every Hitler of every age."