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A WAY IN THE SEA AND A PATH IN THE MIGHTY WATERS: Address by Dr. Solomon Solis Cohen

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## A WAY IN THE SEA AND A PATH IN THE MIGHTY WATERS

*Address by* DR. SOLOMON SOLIS COHEN

We are met to-night as American citizens to celebrate an incident in the history of our country, fraught with good promise for the common weal; a promise amply fulfilled by the event. We are also met as descendants of an ancient people and adherents of an ancient faith, to celebrate the same incident in its relation to our religion and our race.

Two hundred and fifty years, the fourth of a millennium, is a long period, if measured by the era of the independence of these United States—which has fulfilled little more than the half of that tale; but it is only a brief while in the history of Israel. In the Eternal Vision, as it regards men and nations and events, the time is neither brief nor long; for therein “a thousand years are even as a day while it passes, or as a watch in the night.” Centuries may come and go in dull monotony or in dark debasement, and a single moment shall flash with sudden brilliance as of Horeb’s bush, illuminating all time to come.

It is not, therefore, the mere passage of the years that we have assembled to commemorate. Nor have we gathered here only that we may felicitate ourselves upon the growth of our nation or of our church, upon the strength and wealth of the republic that we have helped to upbuild, or upon the rights and immunities, the material progress, the intellectual development, the moral expansion of the house of Israel in

America, during these two hundred and fifty sun-circlings of the earth. If antiquity were the only merit of our congregations and our homes, then though we had survived, like the fabled toad in the rock, through a thousand, nay, ten thousand, years of slothful uselessness, yet would silence be the better part; for in such case not pride were ours, but shame.

Happily, we are not condemned by shame to silence. We may take a just pride in the work done by those of our race and faith for God and for man upon this Western continent; a work that began longer ago than a quarter-millennium, and that shall, God willing, go on while man endures upon the earth. Jews had probably settled in North America before the *St. Catarina* brought her precious cargo of souls from Brazil to New Amsterdam; and whether or not it be true that the first white man to set foot upon West Indian soil was a secret Jew, Columbus's interpreter, it is now a commonplace of knowledge that Jews were among the crew of "the world-seeking Genoese"; that his vessels were equipped by the munificence, not of Queen Isabella, but of some of her Jewish subjects, and that the theories, predictions, charts, and instruments by which was inspired and guided that momentous voyage, were, in large, if not largest, part, the work of Jewish astronomers and Jewish navigators.

Thus there comes into the minds of all here assembled, the thought of those historic coincidences so often commented upon, and yet ever so full of new meanings. On the ninth day of Ab, 3174 (586 B.C.E.), Nebuchadrezzar, the Chaldean, the most powerful empire builder of the East, took Jerusalem

and destroyed its temple. On the ninth day of Ab, 3830 (70 C.E.), the second temple was destroyed by Titus, wielder of the Roman world-power. On the ninth day of Ab, 5262, Spain, soon to be chief among the nations of the West, thrust out from her gates 300,000 Jews who preferred exile to apostasy. That trebly sad *Tish'a b'Ab* was, in the Julian calendar, the second day of August, of the year 1492 of the Christian era. It brought to a close a watch in Israel's night, that had not been without its periods of splendid illumination by stars of wondrous brilliance. On the third day of August, 1492, Columbus set sail from Palos, in that same Spain, to open the gates of a new land wherein the "tribes of the wandering foot and weary breast" were to find freedom and peace—and the sustained light of day.

And yet another mournful historic parallel comes to mind. While the immigrants of the *St. Catarina* were struggling for and obtaining that recognition of their full right of manhood, their more than full obligation to the common weal and to their special community which is the most that Jews ask, the least that they ought to accept, in the countries of their dispersion—while in London, Cromwell and Manasseh ben Israel were holding the historic conference that led to the renewal of the right of Jews to reside openly in Great Britain—even then from the ground where tigerish bigotry had spilled it in a meteless flood, the voice of our brothers' blood called out to Heaven against the Russian Cain; and the singing and laughter that had filled the mouths of them delivered in the West, gave way to sobs and lamentation, re-

echoing the cries of them that had been overwhelmed by cruel hatred in the East. So to-day, at this season of national thanksgiving and of racial joy we are rudely awakened from our dream of universal brotherhood, and our cheers are hushed and our thoughts are sobered by the reflection that the day of persecution is not yet over; that the divine adventure of human history has not yet won to the extinction of the beast in man.

Does not our sorrow, however, give new force to the meaning of our festival? The Guardian of Israel slumbereth not nor sleepeth! Though the darkness of Russia seem impenetrable, it shall give way as the darkness "in the beginning," before the creative word. *V'ha-aretz hay'tah tohu va-bohu*—truly in that land is there a seething confusion; but *ruah Elohim m'raḥefeth 'al p'ne ha-mayim*, the spirit of God is brooding over the face of the waters. How beautiful the imagery of the poet of old—divine love brooding! Brooding to bring forth light and life, order and law, and the knowledge of God that shall forever banish darkness and evil. Brooding over the waters! Is there not prophecy in the phrase? Over the waters passed the pillar of fire leading Moses and the hosts of God out of Egyptian darkness. Over the waters went Columbus to find a refuge for all that were oppressed and persecuted. Over the waters came the *St. Catarina* from the bigotry of New Portugal to the freedom of New Holland. Over the waters will He that hath made land and sea, who prepareth a way in the ocean and a path amid the billows, guide to a place of safe-abiding his faithful ones, out of the

land of Magog, yea, out of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal!

History is the working of the divine within man toward self-realization. Its parallels are significant, are inevitable, are complete. *Mene, Mene, Tekel Upharsin*. The doom of Babylon is fulfilled of all oppressors. From Latin, as from Chaldean, was empire torn; but all the countries and all the races that had acknowledged the sway of the conquerors, to-day build temples for the worship of Israel's unchanging God. The glory is departed from Spain, but in the lands spared or delivered from her grasp, the sons of her exiles still study the olden Law, still teach the everlasting truths. And now our eyes shall see the judgment of God, even as our ears have heard it. The end hath come of the mighty tyranny that rose up to do evil in the barbarian North. The oppressor shall be humbled, but the peoples redeemed from *Tsaroth*<sup>1</sup> shall rejoice!

We have not gathered to celebrate the passage of slothful years; neither have we assembled to vaunt the achievements of our fathers in this land. Some one has said that "the reward of well doing is the obligation to do better." But it was Abraham Lincoln who, in his immortal speech at Gettysburg, best phrased the thought that should be uppermost in our minds to-night. It is for us, the living, here to be dedicated to the unfinished work of the fathers of the republic, of the patriarchs of Israel. It is for us to

<sup>1</sup>The Biblical-Hebrew word צָר (*Tsar*) means cruel oppressor. Its identity with the title of the "Autocrat of all the Russias" is, philologically, merely a coincidence.

take from the memories of the occasion, increased devotion to the great cause for which so many of our race have given the last full measure of devotion. It is for us highly to resolve that our fathers' steadfastness in life, our brothers' faithfulness unto death, shall not have been in vain. Unworthy shall we prove of the blood of prophets and martyrs, unworthy of the kinship of state builders, if the future of our country and of our race shall not be the nobler and the brighter, if freedom shall not be more fully established and brotherhood more firmly welded throughout the world, because of our present-day work as Americans, because of our present-day lives as Jews.

Vain is the recounting of the great deeds and great thoughts and great strivings of the past, if it fail to impress us with the deep significance of human history as a divine adventure—an adventure whereof every human being is at once part and partaker.

Behold the thought of God take shape in energy and in matter, in elemental atoms, in nebulas, in worlds. Through the deep that covers earth as with a garment, see, with the psalmist, the hills, the continents arise and the waters go down into the ocean-valleys. Look upon the teeming life of the seas, the living mantle of the fields, the creeping and the flying things, infinitesimal cell and great leviathan, the fruiting trees, the nesting birds, the four-footed beasts, and—crown and consummation of all—man that goeth forth with the sun to his labor until the evening.

For if the majesty of the world about us impress the mind with wondering awe, how deep the sense of reverence and mystery when the soul turns its gaze

upon mankind! So little is man, and yet so great! His habitation, but a point in the immensity of space; his years, an unregarded moment in eternity; his power, as nothing in the face of the mighty forces of the universe. Yet from this point in space, he has sent his vision forth to search infinity; in these unregarded years he has grappled with the mysteries of existence; and though flood and earthquake and volcano have threatened to overwhelm man and all his works in indistinguishable destruction, his race persists and his civilization goes on.

Well may Israel's sweet singer exclaim:

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
The moon and the stars that thou hast ordained.  
What is man that thou regardest him?

And yet thou hast made him but a little less than God,  
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy  
hands!

Contemporary civilization glories chiefly in its conquest of external nature; but greatest of all human achievements is man's conquest of himself. This idea, elaborated variously in law and in legend, in poesy and in prophecy, is the Hebraic contribution to world-progress. Jacob, wrestling with the angel, becomes Israel. "Greater is he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."

Over the works of His hands, God has indeed given man dominion, but he that is "but a little less than God" must achieve dominion over his own character and destiny. Thus does the breath of God which transformed the creature of dust into a living soul—

a soul that could become "even as God, to distinguish between good and evil"—realize itself ever more and more fully. To this end do men think and strive and suffer. To this end do nations clash and ideas contend. To this end is Israel's world-wide, age-long martyrdom. In dim apprehension of the truth have men won and cherished freedom. In knowledge of the truth must we seek ever to enlarge the freedom of nations and of individuals. So that the individual may find free scope to develop to the utmost his God-like faculties, so that all and each may preserve an equal freedom, nations must be governed by just laws. Two hundred and fifty years ago men had begun in Europe and in America to learn this lesson from the Jews' Bible. It was written large in the Declaration of Independence, and the history of the United States is the history of its modern development. In this development Jews have aided, and Jews must continue to aid.

Two conflicting views of the duty of man in upholding the truth are found in Hebrew history, in prophecy and in psalmody. Both have profoundly influenced American history to the establishment of justice. One inspired the Puritan; the other is the guide of the Quaker. Cromwell's maxim, "Trust in God and keep your powder dry," echoes the Psalmist's description of the saints militant, the Maccabean heroes with "God's high praises in their mouths, and a two-edged sword in their hands." But Penn, true follower of Fox, quoted rather from Micah and Isaiah and hoped to hasten the time when men "shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into

pruning hooks." Despite recent sad events, that time is measurably nearer.

Man's conquest of himself, the true Jewish ideal, necessitates peace as the foundation of moral progress. This thought came into concrete political expression in the commonwealth of the Friends, and Jews early found within its borders a congenial home. They were also sympathetically attracted to the settlements of the German sectarians in Pennsylvania, whom Whittier, indeed, calls German Quakers, and some of whom, going still further than the Society of Friends in the return to Biblical teachings, observed the seventh-day Sabbath and abstained from forbidden food. The reciprocal influences of Pennsylvania's German communities upon the Jews, and of the Jews upon the German Christian sects, and the work of both together in giving to Pennsylvania her leadership among the colonies and States, offer to the historical student a fascinating field for original research.

There were Jews in the Valley of the Delaware, however, a generation before Penn arrived; probably before 1655, although 1657 seems the earliest date established by distinct records, and the names of the pioneers have been lost. The first name of a Jewish settler in Pennsylvania to be preserved is that of Jonas Aaron, who flourished about 1703; after that we find many names recorded; some among them being those of founders of settlements that are now flourishing towns; and some being still borne by honored citizens of the commonwealth. It is unnecessary, however, now and here to enter into particulars con-

cerning the personal and public activities of the Jewish citizens of Pennsylvania. The monographs of Rosenbach and of Morais, the publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, various articles in the "Jewish Encyclopedia," and many recent papers in the daily journals have treated these subjects as fully as the data permit. They give a goodly list of Jews who took part in building up the colony and in achieving the liberty of the State and of the United States; who worthily and loyally filled responsible judicial and administrative positions as subjects of the British Crown, and who aided by voice, by pen, by sword, and by purse, to wrest from that Crown the power it had abused, when, in the course of human events, the time for independence had arrived.

It is not, however, upon the work of a few leaders in any day or generation that the welfare of the community depends, nor can we estimate by this alone the value of the contribution that any section of the community makes to the general weal. It is by the labors of the unnoted hundreds and thousands that mankind achieves its large results. Bone of the republic's bone, flesh of its flesh, are we. Not only in colonial and revolutionary times, not only in periods of stress and strife, but at every moment of the national life, we have shared, we shall continue to share to the full, in all the high endeavors of citizenship and of civilization. Men and women of our race and our religion have contributed to our country's art, its letters, and its science, its works of education and of benevolence, its commerce, its industry and its finance, its jurisprudence and its statesmanship. They have labored to

strengthen its faith in itself and in humanity, and to enlarge its realization that God's hand is over the nations. They have helped to keep alive its simple reverence for the moral law and the homely virtues. They have striven to make enduring the virtue, the liberty, and the independence of the city, the commonwealth, and the Union; to preserve for future generations the Hebraic, the American ideals of freedom, justice, and equality; to establish as the aim of all Americans, in all life's relations, the Jew's, the Friend's, ideal of peace.

But if the Jews have given much to America, America has also given much to the Jews. It is not only that to us, as to all other citizens, belong freedom and opportunity, and whoso chooses may live in peace as a member of the ancient church, that the community may establish its houses of worship and of study by right and not by toleration. It is not only that the moral and political power of the Federal Government has more than once been brought to bear in behalf of our oppressed brethren in the East. Apart from all this, the United States has exerted a tremendous and benevolent influence upon the history of Jews and Judaism. Shalmaneser and Sennacherib, Nebuchadrezzar and Titus, scattered the tribes of Israel; Columbus and Penn, Williams and Jefferson, have reunited them.

Dispersed in many lands, among many races; now honored, now degraded; now free and prosperous, now enslaved and persecuted; now leading the van of philosophy and science, now shut out from the sources of knowledge—their development, physical, mental, and

moral, has too often been thwarted or perverted. It has been influenced by a changing environment of nature, men and events, now helpfully, now harmfully,—often in a manner alien to the genius of Judaism.

America has been a meeting place for Jews representative of all the countries and customs of the dispersion. Thus it has given opportunity for fusion and recasting of the Jewish character. Local prejudices and un-Jewish accretions are in process of removal by attrition; essentials are becoming clearer to perception; and from the mingling of various elements will emerge a type better than any one of its components—perhaps more nearly resembling the best in ancient Israel. To this type, each section of the house of Israel has made some worthy contribution.

The Sephardic congregations have, perhaps better than all others, realized in Jewish communal life that which the artist terms “values.” Less eager to exchange old lamps for new, they have jealously preserved in home and in synagogue the beautiful customs and rites of ancient worship, the lofty ideals of ancient culture. The German communities added strength and enterprise, a better ability to face the facts of life, and, on the intellectual side, a more accurate scholarship. The Russian brings a new stream of traditional knowledge; and the avid intellect, so long starved or forced to feed upon itself, exhibits a pathetic hunger for universal learning, an insatiate thirst for every betterment. Surely Israel in America will become stronger and wiser and more

faithful as the German vigor, breadth, learning, and practicality, the Russian idealism, enthusiasm, and capacity for spiritual development, are fused with the loyalty, steadfastness, Jewish pride, simple dignity, and intelligent regard for olden things, that have characterized the Sephardim.

Time will be needed for the complete accomplishment of this fusion, but its beginnings are visible. Meanwhile the Russian element in American Jewry is already the most numerous; soon it must become dominant. Does the new generation, do the sons and grandsons of the immigrants of twenty-five years past, realize the tremendous responsibility that this involves? Jewish ideals and traditions, the citizenship loyally and honorably fulfilled, the faith preserved amid trials and vicissitudes, the learning ever cherished, are theirs to maintain and to advance. May not the representatives of the elder days turn to the heirs of the future and say: All this we give into your keeping—see that ye keep it well!

But after all, the Jews of America will ever be only a fraction, a small fragment, of the Jews of the world. To-day, the great mass are living under oppressive and anxious conditions in Russia. The dawn of their country's freedom, so long hoped for, so loyally wrought for, has brought them but bitter disappointment and new misery; and who can say what the future of monarchy or of republic in that distressed land, my hold of good or evil? Present and future are alike filled with dread. For all the suffering tribes and nations and classes of Russia we may wish peace and liberty; but to the Jews of Russia we

owe a special duty. For these, our brethren, there must be found a place to live, an opportunity to develop their manhood. Surely upon this fertile earth, there is somewhere an undeveloped land that waits their coming; a land which they may subdue to agriculture and herding and commerce and civilization—and the divine right of man!

There, albeit through toil and suffering, let a new state arise, upbuilt by Jews; as by the pioneers of centuries ago, Puritan, Cavalier, Quaker, Mennonite, Jew, were upbuilt the American colonies, the United States. There shall they who go forth from oppression to-day, found settlements upon the synagogue and the Bible, even as New England and Pennsylvania were founded upon the Bible and the meetinghouse. There active brain and sturdy arm shall wrestle with and conquer nature, while patient, steadfast heart pursues its conquest over self. Nor shall there be a forgetting of Zion, but rather a loyal preparation for her days of renewed youth—days yet in the hidden future.

The world is older than when Columbus sailed from Palos; than when the *St. Catarina* entered Manhattan harbor; than when Penn sent forth his colony of Friends. Conditions have changed; the migration of thousands, the upbuilding of a new state in a new land, will need greater encouragement, more substantial assistance. Let us who have been blessed with birth in the United States or with admittance to its freedom and its opportunities, not fail our brothers in assistance or in good will. From our gathering to-night and from the gatherings that are to follow, let

a message of courage and of faith go forth to them that grieve in Meschech and lament in Kedar. Let it tell them that our aid shall not be the mere dole of money for passing needs; but that it shall be a persistent force seeking a permanent good. Let it tell them that our hands are indeed open to relieve their great distress, but that we shall not be content to salve our consciences with almsgiving; that we are earnestly uniting to work for them and with them unto the achievement of liberty and human rights, and that we shall not cease from our endeavors until a way shall be opened for their deliverance over the waters, into a new land of freedom and of hope.