

Judaism & Civilization

By Mrs. A. L. Frisbie

Read before the Des Moines Women's Club

January, 1891

We are heirs of all the ages. There is not a custom, a belief, a theory that enters into the social, political, artistic, literary or religious life of this favored nineteenth century, that has not its root and its partial development in the past.

We have a rich inheritance and it is well that, at times we should pause in our self gratulation and, in the midst of our pride of possessions, make grateful mention of those into whose labors we have entered,

As nations liveth to itself or dieth to itself, the final record of each political power that, in its turn, stands forth in the light of history, is written, not upon parchment or stone, but upon the heart of universal man. It tells not only of conquests and defeats upon the field of physical battle, but it marks, through them, the illustration and development of eternal principles. Therefore, the thoughtful student of history as he reads the long, sad story of the rise and fall of dynasties and kingdoms, earnestly asks concerning each, What was its legacy to humanity? What spirit lives, although the body is dead?

The local coloring is every where perfect, though evidently unstudied. The pictures of domestic life are unsurpassed in their simple naturalness

The characters of its heroes are so clearly delineated, their weaknesses as well as their strengths, their vices as well as their virtues are brought out in such strong relief, that they become real to us; they live; they appeal to our human sympathies; we cannot believe that they are myths.

This record is universally accepted by the Jews themselves as their national history and forms part of their sacred books. It takes us back four thousand years to the western migration of an Arab chief, and the story is briefly told by the Hebrew chronicles in these words: "And Abram took Sarah, his wife, and Lot, his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered and the souls they had gotten in Canaan; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Chanaan they came." The Jews are the only living people who can trace back their lineage and history to the very fountain head of their race. From that day to this, it has been the pride and boast of every Hebrew that he was a son of Abraham.

After the account of the migration, follow interesting and truthful pictures of patriarchal life in the Orient. Abraham means, "father of many people," and the name seems a prophecy for, after five hundred years, we find descendants a mighty host, but also, they are held in Egypt in bitter bondage. Then came Moses, a Hebrew by birth, an Egyptian by adoption and education, a man fitted by rare

intellect and a deep spirituality ripened by years of meditation, for the arduous task of leading his degraded brethren from servitude to freedom, and of guiding them wisely and patiently to the beginnings of a national life. He was a patriot whose unselfish devotion has never been surpassed; a statesman and a law giver, whose wisdom laid foundations upon which the formers of the highest civilizations have builded. During the centuries that followed, the young nation was passing through a formative period. Territory was won through years of bloody war. Lo, through all the ages, has the young, vigorous national life, simple, become fresh from contact with nature, daring because it has every thing to gain and nothing to lose--strong, because it has never known the enervation of luxury, driven before it the effete civilizations that stood in the way of its onward progress.

Thus, Babylon fell before Cyrus and his hardy mountaineers; thus Rome was broken in pieces beneath the tread of the victorious Goth.

Relations with surrounding nations were adjusted. Tribal jealousies and contentious gave place to a desire for national unity, until, at last, we find a kingdom and a king. Then, a brief session of increasing power under David, and forty years in which the glory of Solomon was the wonder of the Eastern world. This reign was the golden age of the Hebrew nation. Peace followed long years of war. "Every man shall dwelt safely under his own vine and fig tree." The arts of peace flourished. The magnificence of his public buildings and the splendors of his court were unsurpassed by those of any monarchs of his time. Commerce endured. His ships whitened all seas. The kings of Tarshish and the Isles brought presents; the kings of Sheba and Elba offered gifts." But, as, Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar (as Athens under Pericles, as Rome under Augustus) as Paris under Louis Fourteenth, so Jerusalem under Solomon reached the zenith of its power and turned toward its setting. After him came division and downfall. The decline was long and painful. Internal dissensions, foreign invasions (oppressions) captivities, fill up the dark picture, with only here and there a ray of light.

Occasionally a wise king checked for a little, the downward course, but at last, the end came. Roman arts were victorious even over the desperate resistance of an agonised people.

Jerusalem is fallen; we stand by the ruins; what do we read upon the fragments?

The body of Judaism is dead; what spirit lives? What truth has it brought into clearer light? What lasting principle has it emphasized? What has it contributed to the civilization of to-day? As we look for answer to these questions, we naturally turn first to the people who represent Judaism. An abstract system of religion or government is inert; there is nothing by which it can be judged; it is only when it becomes concrete, when it is brought into living union with the soul of humanity that it is revealed. And here we are immediately confronted by the astonishing fact that although eighteen centuries have passed since Rome took away their place and nation, the Jewish people have never ceased to be a power in the world. Dispersed throughout all nations yet identified with none, their history since their final overthrow must be painfully and laboriously sought in connection with that of manifested in their faith. They are the most skillful physicians, the ablest financiers and among the most profound philosophers; while they were only second to the Moors in the cultivation of natural science." (Rationalism in Europe p. 271)

From Draper's Intellectual Development of Europe, I quote a few statements. "When the turmoil of Arabic conquest was over, we find the Jewish physicians becoming the advisors of crowned Lords, and exerting by reason of their advantageous position, their liberal education and their enlarged views, a most important influence on the intellectual progress of humanity." (p. 401, Vol. 1) In the eleventh century, nearly all the physicians in Europe were Jews." (p 122, Vol. 11) But they were not only physicians; they were "recognized as combining with their professional skill a profound knowledge of theology, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, music and law." (p. 123, Vol. 11) "Through the influence of the Jews in Africa, the Saracens became enthusiastic admirers of learning." (p. 383 Vol. 1)

When because of the wars in Spain between the Mohammedans and Christians, many learned Jews were driven into France, they imparted to that country by their presence, a new intellectual impulse. Doubtless the most perfect geographical knowledge existed among the Jews, who conducted mercantile transactions from the Azores to the interior of China, from the Baltic to the coast of Mozambique. Through them, the existence of the Cape of Good Hope was first made known in Europe. "When we read the statement of such facts as these from undoubted authority, we are not surprised that one of their own modern writers says of them, whole intermediaries between the Arabs and the Christians, because they alone speak the language of both, and because either commerce or persecution carries or casts them incessantly from one country to another, they are for three centuries the carriers of thought from the East to the West." (James Darmestater, Heb. Per.) And another sadly writes, "Knocking at many nations' doors, they identified themselves whenever a hospitable hand was extended to them, with the highest and noblest aspirations of the various people among whom they lived, to be repaid by being sent again and again into exile." (Hon. Ellinger. Heb. Per.)

But history is still making, and the Jew is yet an important factor. Seven million Hebrews live to-day to show in themselves the result of four thousand years of Judiastic training and inheritance. A race without a country, a flag or a king, without religious head or center, without a distinctive spoken language, they are found in all climes, speaking all languages, trading in all markets, pressing into all professions, and yet, separated by closely drawn lines from all other races of the world. "This race," says Br. B. H. Richardson: (inserted newsprint clipping)

"This race," says Richardson, "has not only endured the oppression of centuries, without being lost, but as it exists now, scattered here and there over the earth, in different countries and among the most varied social and natural conditions, it is of all civilized races the first in vitality. In the course of centuries the most powerful nations have died out, and empires of perfect physical beauty and chivalric fame have passed away. But through all these vicissitudes one race has held its irrepressible own, to remain a more numerous people, in its totality, than ever; a people still presenting a more tenacious life than its neighbors, and showing, as it is relieved of the cruel restraints long forced on it, the continuance also of mental force and of commanding genius, in art, in letters, in politics, in commerce, and in science.

But it is interesting to notice that there is not only unparalleled tenacity in the life of the race, but also, of the individual. Vital statistics show that in this respect they are far in advance of other nations as a whole.

In Frankfort, Germany the proportion of Jews reaching the age of seventy is about 27percent, while that of Gentiles is only 13%. The life of a Jew in London is, on an average, twice as long as that of a Gentile. In the White chapel district, the health officer reports that on the south side of High St. occupied by English and Irish, the death rate is forty three in a thousand while on the north side of the same street occupied by the Jews, it is but twenty eight in one thousand. In the life of Sir Moses Montefiore, whose own beneficent life sounded out one hundred years, it is stated that the researchers in vital statistics have proved that Jewish lives are on an average nearly fifty per cent more valuable than those of any other known people.

So much for the physical inheritance transmitted by Judaism. It's system of sanitation was the most elaborate, minute and successful, that has ever been carried into active operation by any people. Regulations concerning cleanliness, diet, clothing--for the enforcement of morality, and for the protection of woman, entered not only into their civil but their religious system. Statistics show that as they relax their observance of their peculiar physical laws, and conform more and more closely to the methods of life of those about them, their physical vitality and the ratio of longevity correspondingly decreases.

But the Jews of to-day not only live; they exercise a power more wide spread than in the days of David and Solomon. They are ministers of finance and of education, peers of the realm, mayors of cities, editors of leading papers, counsellors of kings. A large portion of the money of the world is in their hands. They appreciate the value of knowledge and in many countries of Europe, their children are being educated in greater proportion than those of Gentiles.

Out of twelve hundred students of law in Berlin, six hundred are Jews. The Berlin council is ruled by a Jewish majority and therefore all offices are in the gift of Jews. In Germany and Holland many of the fine estates have been passed from the families whose patrimonial possessions they have been for generations, into Jewish hands. They do not enter largely into the field of general literature. Lord Beaconsfield was greater as a statesman than as a novelist. Heinrich Kline while a true Jew, was not a typical Jew. Grace Aguilar held, twenty years ago, an honored place among writers of natural and wholesome fiction, but to the next generation her name will hardly be known except among her own people. Emma Lazarus, on whose small sad face, even as it looks at you from the printed page, you seem to see mirrored the suffering of her people, gave great promise both in prose and poetry but her voice of song and stirring appeal was hushed just as its sweetness and power were becoming known. It is said that no great poet has ever been inspired save in his native tongue, but the Jew of to-day has no living language. He cannot adequately express in the dead Hebrew the emotions and passions of the nineteenth century.

In music there have been many artists, but few masters, but the name of Mendelssohn Bartholdy is destined to live.

In the historic art, Rachel stands queen among her people, and her humble grave in the Jewish quarter of the cemetery of Pere Lachaise is still sought by many who mourned the early passing away of the gifted life.

Thus far, we have been studying Judaism in the people which it developed. But some of its gifts could not be confined within the narrow limits of one nationality. They have blessed the world. Its early literature is our inheritance. From its history we gain the only dignified, worthy, satisfying account of the origin of the Cosmos: "In the beginning God created." Contrast the majesty of this statement with the fantastic. Puerile and utterly insufficient theories advanced by all other systems of philosophy or religion and these opening words of the Jewish sacred books will challenge anew the admiration and our gratitude that through all the changing years they have been preserved for our instruction upon whom the ends of the world are come.

Some of its poetry is purely national, but much of it appeals to the universal man. In all the range of poetry, ancient and modern, it will be impossible to find words that have been so often adopted by so many inmost, in all nations and in all ages, as are found in the Psalms of David. In suffering, in temptation, in weakness or in triumphant joy, in holy contemplation, in longing after God the sweet singer of Israel sings for the world. The Proverbs of Solomon gave us more extensive illustration of the aphoristic style so much affected by the sages of that day. We gain from any other literature. In the virtuous rhapsodies of its religious sect, we find some of the loftiest flights of poetic genius. The Hebrew literature is ours. To lose it would be irreparable loss.

Some of the civil and social institutions are ours. Judaism may not have instituted the Sabbath, but is certainly emphasized it, and for all influence that in any way has tended to preserve for mankind such a boon as a rest for toiling man, legally enjoyed and enforced, of one day in seven, let us be very thankful.

It gives the true theory of marriage, one husband for one wife. This institution of God written so clearly upon the physical and moral nature of man is also plainly taught in the sacred books of the Hebrews? I do not say that it was always obeyed by the Jews. In the earlier days, where all nations about them practiced polygamy, the influence was too strong for this institutional people to resist. In later days when spirituality had declined, and their kings rivaled the magnificence of other kings, the harem seemed to them a necessary part of their court. But later still, when the people had been chastened by sorrow, when as foreign captives they had reflected upon the causes of their downfall, they returned to the original appointment.

It is almost beyond question that Judaism gave to the world the first constitutional government. Their constitution was known to all the people. Over and over during their history it was proclaimed to them and as often, they adopted it as the government of their choice. It was written and could be appealed to. It fixed the rate of taxation. Bribery was forbidden. Fair trial of one accused was provided for; courts

of appeal were instituted; human life was sacredly guarded. The teachers of the people held fast to the principle, singular among political principles, that the greatness of a people depends upon obedience to the law of right. National unfaithfulness leads inevitably to national ruin, was the lesson which they sought to draw from every disaster. May we not, in our day and in our own beloved country, with the history of all the fallen nations, repeating the same solemn refrain, --pause and take warning?

Judaism also gave to the world a clear, concise, complete expression of the code of morals that, to this day, forms the basis of all advanced ethical systems of the world. It did not give the system: that was written long before, upon the heart of man; but so many fail to read aright what is written there; the record is sometimes so obscured by the cross lines written over it by self interest, the eyes are sometimes so dimmed by self indulgence that it is of priceless value that this law of God and man should be written in characters that are unmistakable.

Judaism gave to the world a more worthy conception of God than was held by any contemporaneous nature. It "revealed a Deity above all worlds, behind all time, with no history, no adventures, no earthly life": (J. F. Clarke) one to be served and worshipped with a pure heart and a clean life. The Hebrew people as a body did not fully receive this revelation. We see in their history many traces of the superstition that always accompanies the religious aspirations and kinship of the crude and undeveloped, but through it all, we recognize earnest hearts not only seeking after God, but finding Him.

Every system, as it is developed through human misapprehension and perversity is liable to fall below its ideal. Is not the true experiment of each system, religious or political, the greatest man developed under it? I point you then to the historic Christ, to Jesus of Nazareth. He fulfilled all law and all righteousness, he exemplified all humanities, he perceived, understood and interpreted to the world the spiritual God whom so many of brethren--according to the flesh had failed to see. He is the greatest gift of Judaism to the civilization of the world.