

Berthold Auerbach
and the
Hilton-Seligman Affair

1877

On the last day of May, 1877, Judge Henry Hilton, the business administrator of the A. T. Stewart Estate, refused to admit Joseph Seligman to the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga, New York, because the latter was a Jew.

This act disturbed American Jews very much because of Seligman's importance as a great American banker, and as an evidence of growing anti-Jewish prejudice in this country.

In July of that year, Friedrich Kapp asked Berthold Auerbach to make a public statement denouncing this "monstrous" expression of bigotry.

Kapp (1824-1884) was a German liberal, journalist, and historian, who had spent twenty years in this country before returning to Germany, where he was very active in Prussian political life.

Auerbach (1812-1882), a Jew, was an outstanding German writer and patriot.

The following letter is Auerbach's answer. Though it appeared originally in the *Illinois Staatszeitung*, in Chicago, the copy, from which the following translation was made by Rabbi Albert H. Friedlander, is found in *Die Neuzeit*, 1877, pp. 294-95.

Tarasp, Engadin, Switzerland,
July 19, 1877.

Dear Kapp:

You send me an exhortation, all the way from the Riesengebirge to the Graubuendner Alps, to say something regarding the monstrous story that Hilton, the host of the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga, refused to admit the banker Joseph Seeligmann [Seligman] into his establishment —

because he is a Jew. And you enclose clippings from American newspapers that throw further light on the subject.

There first came to mind this question: "Is not this affair too small and insignificant?" Then I remembered a saying:

Should a rider see a mole (destructive to plant roots) cross his path, he is bound to dismount and destroy it.

And recently, when the Colorado beetle was introduced into Germany, the government employed all its administrative and scientific resources to root it out completely. The facts which you speak of are clearly similar.

You write me that I have a particular obligation to speak up in this affair. First, because I am a Jew; and furthermore, because I have so often emphasized in my writings the new, ideal, universally important future of the United States.

What shall I say as a Jew? That Jew-hatred still exists, that it is permitted to find expression, this pains the Jews and disgraces the Christians. Lord Beaconsfield D'Israeli [Benjamin Disraeli] writes Mr. Hilton:

Christian contemporary and confessor of the religion of love:

It was my intention to stay in your hotel during a visit to America. However, since you cannot perceive my belief by my nose — but quite possibly my ancestry — I must relinquish this desire. I expect your fellow citizens to recognize the disgrace which you have caused to the fatherland of Benjamin Franklin.

BENJAMIN D'ISRAELI BEACONSFIELD

Thus writes D'Israeli — or, rather, so he should write. And not only Christians of Jewish descent, but also born Christians, all, indeed, who recognize the dignity of men in themselves and in others, should exert all their energies to root out this first symptom of a new moral plague in the New World. Not Jews, but Christians — and Christians alone — should hold meetings to make known their indignation over this apparently so insignificant, yet in its shocking infamy truly monstrous, event.

No minister should ascend his pulpit without proclaiming:

The first sign of an abomination has dared to show itself in our midst in the light of day, turning into falsehood the religion of love which our faith proclaims itself to be. Who can still say, "Our Father who art in

heaven," while he denies our brotherhood in God or that all men of all colors and of all creeds are God's children?

That would be *religion*; and the text for it could be found in Matthew 25, verses 40 through 43.¹ We need not add what text would fit the *unbelievers* of all races.

Should none of these expectations be fulfilled, however, then I say to you that it may be the special mission of the Jews that for almost two thousand years, despite the distortions of a message of love reduced to empty phrases, they should never lose hope in the redemptive power of this one thought — and that they should wait for its fulfillment: There is no true religion in the world as long as a man of different belief or of different descent is regarded without love, not to mention, with hatred.

You tell me, dear friend, that Mr. Joseph Seeligmann is a respected man active in community affairs. But even if he were one of the least — the rest is written in Matthew 25:40.

And now, one more word. Certainly, it is beyond question that there is much to criticize in the Jews on both sides of the ocean. Above all, they often lack that quiet culture that finds fulfillment in the inward processes of ennoblement and growth. The reigning passion is for show and ostentation, particularly among the Jewish women. Much work must be done, much advice must be given, if simplicity and a modest sense of the citizen's duty are to be implanted and cultivated. But do we not find the same in the corresponding Christian classes who have come into wealth? In any event, a man like Mr. Hilton certainly has no call here to act as an educator. Should, however, his measure be indeed based upon a testamentary arrangement,² no state resting upon moral foundations would protect and execute a will which so clearly violates the eternal norms of the moral law.

One more word of advice might be given to the Jews of America. Let

¹ Matthew 25:40-43 reads as follows: And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat. I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink.

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

² This is a reference to the fact that Judge Henry Hilton had been empowered by the late A. T. Stewart to administer the business affairs of the huge Stewart estate.

not this attempt to mock everything meaningful in life keep them from sowing the seeds of good in their new fatherland, and from showing themselves worthy of being free citizens. Above all, however, they must not give up if their Christian fellow citizens, as is indeed possible, do not fulfill their obligation to oppose with all their might this first budding of a moral plague.

This, dear friend, written in haste, is my answer from the Alps to your call from the Riesengebirge.

With utmost constancy,
BERTHOLD AUERBACH

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