

Ludwig Lewisohn: In Memoriam

December 31, 1965, marks the tenth Jahrzeit of one of the most tonic personalities ever to be produced by American Jewry. Ludwig Lewisohn's death at Miami Beach, Florida, ten years ago brought to a close an intellectual and spiritual odyssey that had begun with a disdain for Judaism as an "archaic Orientalism," but had progressed to the conviction that "no Jew, as Maimonides wrote to the Yemenite, 'escapes this Torah.' " Abandoning in middle age the assimilationist views of his youth and early manhood — and also, incidentally, a brilliant career in American letters — German-born, South Carolina-raised Lewisohn devoted his extraordinary literary gifts to the cause of the Jewish faith and people. During the late 1920's and the succeeding two decades, he became a leading spokesman for a tradition-oriented Judaism and for Zionism. His advocacy of what he called "the permanent and unique spirit of Judaism" was nothing less than exemplary.

On February 14, 1956, at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, where Lewisohn spent the last seven years of his life as Professor of Comparative Literature, Dr. Arthur J. Lelyveld, then National Director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations and now rabbi of Fairmount Temple in Cleveland, Ohio, delivered the memorial address published below.

Those of us who hold the memory of Ludwig Lewisohn in profound affection need not be disturbed by the fact that he was not always loved and not always understood. He would have rejected popularity as evidence of the shallowness that was the target of his unremitting attack, and he would have scorned being too easily understood as he scorned the imprecise word and the easy half-truth. The coherent and ultimately unitary message that he spoke and wrote in incisive and often fiery words was, though lucidly recorded, not a simple message. It was the creative end-product of a life of baffling complexity and incomparable richness of knowledge and experience. All this abundance was impressed into the service of his ultimate mission, to illuminate it and to support it. For Ludwig Lewisohn *was* a man with a mission — he was, in the best sense of an abused term, a preacher — exhorting, correcting, berating "the average intelligent American Jew," striving to awaken him to the

perplexities and crises of the times in a dimension equivalent to the intensity of his own commitment.

The personality of Ludwig Lewisohn resists easy classification — not because it was protean, but because it was sharply defined, distinctive to the point of uniqueness. His sensitive and responsive spirit was capable of deep tenderness and unmatched kindness, but he was as harsh as the *midat ha-din* — divine judgment — in his reactions to shoddiness, cheap rationalizations, and persistent error. His attachment to his people was so fiercely proud as to verge upon chauvinism, but his *ahavat yisrael*, his love of Israel, grew organically out of that universal vision of his youth — which he never abandoned — of a world in which man's capacity for beauty would be free to find full expression, in which distinctiveness would be cherished, in which the vulgar and the cruel would no longer throttle the incipient good. He made of his life a compelling insistence that only by being utterly and understandingly Jewish could the Jew contribute to the emergence of that kind of world, and Israel become the instrument for the redemption of mankind.

That such Jewish self-acceptance and self-knowledge could not be softly won, he knew out of his own pain. Even man's spiritual bread is earned in the sweat of his brow — and the easily understandable, glib, and popular word is worth no more than the minimum effort which it represents and the minimum effort which it elicits from those who hear it. He brushed aside what he called "cowardly considerateness." "We must master life or it will end by destroying us," he wrote in the prologue to *Upstream*. "We can master it only by understanding it and we can understand it only by telling each other the quite naked and, if need be, the devastating truth."

And the people to whom he carried his devastating truths? They wanted to be entertained, to "enjoy" their lecturers and writers, to listen with the tops of their heads instead of with their viscera. Ludwig Lewisohn took them by the ears and *made* them attend to his words; he shocked them and at times even outraged them — but they listened and grew excited about the deepest problems of their beings — about ideas! "*Werde der du bist*" he told them in the words of Nietzsche, "Become what you essentially are!" Appropriate the best meanings of your own self.

His greatest frustration may well have been the fact that the heights of his indignation were unequal to the enormity of the evil that this world, our world, had done to the Jewish people — that his abhorrence of the perpetrators of that unspeakable crime was, in the inescapable presence of 6,000,000 corpses, too frequently unechoed — indeed, it was not even understood. When he called the age in which we live “the foulest in human history,” he offended the facile Panglosses and the prissy souls, but his words were carefully chosen and supported by the ineradicable facts of twentieth-century degradation: the mass exterminations, the calculating disregard of sanctities, the ruthless destruction of inherited values. He spoke the cold truth in words that will live long after those whom they made uncomfortable will have been forgotten.

It is difficult, despite the help which he himself has given us, to evoke the image of the child who was the “father” of this man — the tot in Germany who waited with trembling delight for the unveiling of his Christmas tree and found the synagogue which he had momentarily visited on Yom Kippur impressive, but alien and strange; the little boy trying desperately to feed his soul on the astringent Protestantism of a small town in South Carolina; the gifted young man suffering his first major rebuffs as a Jew and turning rebelliously to the German culture on which he had been nourished. (How justifiable was his sense of spiritual kinship to Theodor Herzl, of whose early blind love for the cultural greatness of Germany he wrote that it was “significant . . . of the tragically false position of a Jew repudiated by the Germans, acting as their defender”! He felt the dual irony of the picture: the fifteen-year-old Herzl in Budapest writing verses on the *deutscher Geist* before Lewisohn was born, and Lewisohn himself, during the First World War, suffering for his attachment to the beauties of literature and music that had come out of the land of his fathers’ sojourning.)

Out of his intimate personal struggle he was able to write accurately of the way in which “a whole generation of Jews forgot that their ways were conformable to their character and that their inherited wisdom might alone be redemptive for them” and of how “a self-induced blindness smote them.” He was himself a victim of that blindness, but one who with rare courage and by a mag-

nificent act of will began in his maturity the process of his own redemption, offering thereby his pre-eminent skills as a stylist and his penetrating brilliance as a gifted scholar and critic to the cause of his people's redemption. Then, how fortunate were his knowledge of and his love for the German language! For he found not only the pamphlets and speeches of early Zionism accessible to him; he found Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig and the great German translations of the Jewish classics — his German was a key that unlocked new treasure houses and, like Rosenzweig, he dug deeply for the treasures stored in them — and found *himself!*

Let no one underestimate the agony of the psychic struggle that conditioned and made possible the joy of that revelation or believe that his Jovian judgments were lightly come by. For, like Akiba, he was over forty when he began to acquire Hebrew and to master the Jewish heritage. Worlds of disciplined effort and unparalleled determination are compressed in the simple opening sentences of the last chapter of *Midchannel*: "The great study has been the chief intellectual experience of my recent years. I know as yet very little. One needs to begin that study in youth . . ." And, though he was to achieve a knowledge of Judaism rare in its range and profundity, in the remarkably perceptive description of the Jewish heritage which begins with those words, he wrote, in the warm morning light of new discovery, an unsurpassed love song to Judaism — one that will be read and reread, if our posterity is wise, for generations to come.

The line of development from that moment of discovery was straight and unflinchingly drawn, for here he found the path to integrity and to meaningful distinctiveness. Out of his new knowledge of his people's achievements and his increasing familiarity with his people's trials, he fortified his hatred of mediocrity, of the prophets of false humanitarianism, the pseudoscientific authoritarians, the "sordid dreamers of sordid Utopias," the peddlers of "rubber stamped verbiage." For now he came to understand the transcendent uniqueness of Israel's history and to look with clear eyes on the fact that he was the scion of a people whose lot and whose portion had been separated from the multitude, that the obliteration of the character and the quality of that people would be a tragedy for

mankind. So he took upon himself the lifelong duty "to defend and vindicate the Jewish people as the incarnation of the experience at the foot of Sinai" — for Israel and the faith of Israel and the Holy One, Blessed be He, were one.

Early in his writing career he expressed his yearning to surrender to an Absolute — if not God, then a "permanent system of values." Now he wanted, by affirmative acts, by his conduct in all its details, to express his place in an eternal community. "The Jew who has recovered his authenticity will spontaneously desire to practice the *mitzvot*," he declared. "He will seek to reincarnate the Torah by what he is." There was no falseness or self-deception in the fact that the *desire* to practice did not always lead to consistent practice. For "we are," he said, "imprisoned in a world of contingency. The absolute answer to an absolute command is wholly possible in the realm of the mind and of the spirit." Yet how yearningly he identified himself with that Jew whose education, formal and environmental, had placed him fully within the four ells of Israel's tradition! To him, "the earlocked Hasid on Avenue A dancing with holy joy on Simchat Torah" was a free man, while the Jew who was "just like everyone else" in his mimicry of a non-Jewish environment was a slave. Lewisohn could not be the "earlocked Hasid," but so deeply did he know the tradition that he must have drawn comfort from the talmudic dictum — "*Be-makom she-baalé teshuvah omedim, tsaddikim gemurim énam omedim*": those who have returned to Judaism find reserved for them a place higher than that of those who have been consistently faithful. More comforting must have been his knowledge that he had fulfilled in his life the injunction *Werde der du bist*. His own summation: "I am under no illusions as to what one man and his books can effect. None. But having given what one has to give one's duty is accomplished and one's mind is at rest."

We cannot mourn a life of such triumphant self-mastery, a life that had so great an impact on the hearts and minds of two generations of Jews. We can only offer a prayer of thankfulness that there walked among us a wise and whole man, a supremely gifted literary craftsman, a dedicated Jew, possessed of a burning purpose on which he lived and through which he has left an imperishable memorial.