

The One Oasis

LUDWIG LEWISOHN

One of the tragedies of the Jewish intellectual scene in America is the fact that the *Menorah Journal* was unable to survive the death of its gifted founder-editor Henry Hurwitz in 1961. During the forty-six years of its existence, the magazine, which Hurwitz began publishing in January, 1915 — nine years after he established the Menorah Association — featured work by an astonishing number of the most outstanding personalities in American Jewish life and won for itself, as the distinguished literary critic George Hellman said, “a place second to none in the magazine world.” Ludwig Lewisohn did not always find himself in agreement with Hurwitz’ editorial policies, particularly where Zionism was concerned, for he adopted a far less critical view of Zionism than Hurwitz did. In 1929, however, when the *Menorah Journal* seemed on the verge of collapse, Lewisohn addressed an outspoken defense of the periodical to Elliot E. Cohen, who between 1925 and 1931 served as managing editor of the *Menorah Journal* and later gained great fame as the editor of *Commentary* magazine. The letter, reproduced below, is from the Menorah Association papers desposited in the American Jewish Archives.

Paris, December 22, 1929

Dear Mr. Cohen:

Your letter reached me last night. I hasten to answer it at once.

The possibility of the disappearance of the *Menorah Journal* shocks me profoundly. It is profoundly shocking. For if there is one thing that is a disgrace to American Jewry, that is its English language press. When I consider the German language press of a far smaller number of our people, then it becomes clear to me why the Jews of the world think of us solely in terms of the dollars we can furnish. One of the noblest minds of world Jewry, contemplating our press, except the *Menorah Journal*, said to me at my table here not long ago: “In Amerika verdummen wohl sogar die Juden!” [In America even the Jews are sinking into ignorance!] In this unbelievable desert the *Menorah Journal* is the one oasis — the one fact from which one can infer that American Jewry has such a thing as a mind. You asked me to be frank. I am being frank. As you can well imagine, I get dozens and hundreds of letters from young people in all parts of the

U.S.A. asking me: How can we *be* Jews? How can we establish contact with Jewish culture? And all, as a rule, that I can tell them is: Read the *Menorah Journal*. Not only should and must the *Journal* continue. Its price should be reduced; a national propaganda for it should be paid for; it should establish and publish a series of Jewish books on the essentials of our history and culture. Of what good are all our efforts if we lose the minds and souls of the new generations? If we have minds willing to be Jewish, anxious to be Jewish, and nothing Jewish with which to fill their minds except the news that Miss Sadie Gumpelstein gave a pink tea on Erev Chanukah at which angel cake was served or that — Enough! I honor the social-mindedness of the ladies and gentlemen who support the Menorah movement. But if they don't feed the minds and consciences of their Jews, they will one fine day have no Jews to be social-minded about. Those are the cold and pitiless facts, the practical facts which are often overlooked by your so-called practical men who are, in their omission of certain factors of life, often far more romantic than we so-called intellectuals.

You are free to use this statement in any way you like.

Very cordially yours,

LUDWIG LEWISOHN

Between you and me and Hurwitz and God: offer to cut out the "art"; promise to be a little less cute and clever and more informative, solid, fervid, Jewish; less detached, serene, above the battle; a little more two-fisted, without any sacrifice of either artistic form or intellectual honesty.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES announces with pleasure the completion of concordance-type indices to *Israel's Herald* (New York City, 1849), *Sinai* (Baltimore and Philadelphia, 1856-1863), *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (Philadelphia, 1843-1869), and *The Menorah* (a B'nai B'rith publication, 1886-1907).