

The Task of the Jews in the United States—1851

ISIDORE BUSH

Prague-born Isidore Bush was only twenty-nine and had been in America scarcely two and a half years when he took it upon himself to pronounce — with consummate self-assurance — on “the task of the Jews in the United States.” What chutzpah! — the reader might exclaim — What could this young immigrant have known of American Jewish life? But, in fact, young Bush knew a great deal. Notwithstanding his youthfulness and inexperience, he was probably one of the best informed Jews in America. His family in Bohemia had been haut monde, and Bush had had contact with leading European Jewish scholars and writers like Leopold Zunz, Samuel David Luzzatto, Ludwig Philippson, and Leopold Kompert. During the 1840's, Bush had won an impressive reputation for himself at Vienna as editor of the scholarly Kalender und Jahrbuch für Israeliten and of the liberal Organ für Glaubensfreiheit. When the Revolution of 1848 proved abortive, Bush's liberal sympathies made it necessary for him to flee the Hapsburg monarchy, and he arrived at New York in January, 1849. Three months later he had begun publication of America's first Jewish weekly, the short-lived Israels Herold. The summer of 1849 found Bush settled at St. Louis, where he would remain for the rest of his life — he died there in 1898 — and would fashion for himself a varied career as banker, politician, communal leader, and viticulturist.

The remarks reproduced below were written in 1851 for the mid-summer Tisha B'Av — Ninth of Ab — fast, commemorating the destruction of the Temple in ancient Jerusalem. Isaac Leeser published them — with a number of additional comments of his own, omitted here — in The Occident and American Jewish Advocate of December, 1851.

The pioneers of this New World had to work, and a hard task it was, for the first introduction of civilization. They had to protect themselves against the inclemency of wild nature, and yet wilder men; they had to lay the foundation for our political and material existence; and they have done it bravely and more successfully than any progress human genius can boast of elsewhere.

Let us hope that on this prosperous foundation, under the best hitherto known form of government, corresponding more closely than any other of our days to the spirit of our own Holy Scriptures — let us hope that, from now and hereafter, the progress in the region of *spiritual knowledge*, of philosophy, and religion, and in the reforms of social life, will be equally great, rapid, and propitious; and let us also hope to find our Israelitish brethren in the foremost rank of those who strive and struggle for it.

That this is really our task — that we are to be the “champions of light” — a “blessing for all the people on earth,” we could easily prove by a hundred Bible texts and by history; but it would be far more difficult, and beyond the scope of this periodical, to discuss the ways *how* we shall execute it.

Let the following short rules, or rather hints, be sufficient, therefore, and I sincerely believe that every one who reflects upon them, and who has an earnest will to do his part, will find out the remainder by himself.

1st. Let us openly avow that we are “*Jews*,” never be ashamed of this long-persecuted name, and bear it with pride. It is a name that has lasted more centuries than any people’s name in history; for who can show us now the Romans, the Trojans, Spartans, etc.? It is a name that has to be respected by every one, and dare not be insulted in this country, even by its most powerful foes.

2d. Give honour to yourselves; when the rose graces herself, she is the ornament, too, of the garden, says a German poet. Make yourselves respected, beloved, and avow yourselves as Jews, and this very name will receive part of this respect and love, without taking any from you. Do this particularly by choosing *different* and honourable trades and pursuits. The clothing business and peddling, which the greatest part of you have adopted in some cities, are neither very profitable, nor calculated to give us the honourable position we should endeavour to possess among our fellow-citizens.

3d. Give to the Bible the full veneration that is due to these Holy Scriptures, and which the *wisest* of all nations and times, and our *great* philosophers, even sceptics, could not refuse to them. You live among a Bible-venerating people; let them never forget that you have been its bearers to mankind, and when their fathers

אמת ואמונה

REASON AND FAITH,

OR,

Philosophical Absurdities,

AND THE

NECESSITY OF REVELATION.

INTENDED

TO PROMOTE FAITH AMONG INFIDELS,

AND

THE UNBOUNDED EXERCISE OF HUMANITY AMONG ALL RELIGIOUS MEN.

By one of the SONS of ABRAHAM to his BRETHEREN.

דע מה שחשיב לאפיקורוס

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were heathens, that you knew the Bible in its originality and purity; and the gospel even does not contain any moral law, any doctrine of love, that is not already contained in the older and only Holy Scriptures. But do not act like the men who, repudiating the doctrines of those false priests, who have hypocritically or fanatically corrupted the pure idea of the sole God of the Universe, go in their hatred and criticism so far as to deny all, and build new systems, which, in the best case, are no less a perversion of that pure, simple, and eternal doctrine of our Eternal God and Father.

4th. Support as much as you can the public school system, and lend no help whatever to [Christian] sectarian institutions: *do not send your children*, neither your sons nor your daughters, to such, and don't complain about heavy [public] school taxes. Establish no Jewish school except only the one branch of your religion, history and Hebrew language.

5th. Employ the word of defence whenever requisite; but use it only after mature reflection. Jews have always been distinguished for soundness in criticism and encounters of wit, and solidity in debate. Oppose frankly, but with dignity and apparent scorn, those who strive to calumniate us, or to transplant hither the hatred and injurious legislation employed against us in the old countries.

6th. Be brothers to each other; preserve this good reputation which your deadliest enemies have never ventured to take from you — that you are, and act, brotherly to each other. Assist the brother in need above your means; form societies for this purpose; and, if you have such, do all in your power to procure for these societies the high esteem of all your neighbours. This tends not to any social exclusiveness, like some pretend, just as little [as] (and less perhaps than) a German emigrant society.

7th and lastly, Study and keep in your mind the principles of the Bible, as regards interests on money, the distribution of the country to the landless or real cultivator, the promotion of agriculture, and prevention of land usury. Thus you may go, hand in hand with our noblest social reformers, protected from the errors of the communist and others, sure to advocate an object that must at last be victorious, and a blessing to the world, that all may exclaim, "Indeed, a wise and intellectual people is this great people of the Jews."