

Strangers to a Strange Land

DAVID PHILIPSON

Spiritual leader of Cincinnati's Bene Israel (Rockdale Avenue) Temple for sixty years, David Philipson (1862-1948) was in his day the dean of the American Reform rabbinate. The Hoosier-born Philipson entered the Hebrew Union College at its opening in 1875 and was a member of its first graduating class in 1883. After a few years as rabbi of Baltimore's Har Sinai Congregation, he was elected to the Cincinnati pulpit in 1888 and remained there until his death in 1948. Coming from the German stock which dominated American Jewish life for the greatest part of the nineteenth century, Dr. Philipson — his alma mater conferred a Doctor of Divinity degree on him in 1886 — was always an exponent of what would be called today "Classical Reform," the universalistic, non-ethnocentric Reform Judaism of the Pittsburgh Platform. It was during his early years in the rabbinate that the American Jewish community began to undergo vast changes in composition and appearance. What had been, for the most part, a religiously liberal, socially and economically bourgeois community of German antecedents now faced virtual inundation by East European — "Russian" — newcomers of pre-capitalist socio-economic standards and medieval religious attachments. How the young rabbi reacted to the "oriental" drama being enacted before his — thoroughly occidental — eyes is the substance of the following pages, excerpted from his voluminous manuscript diaries in the collection of the American Jewish Archives.

Baltimore, January 2, 1888 . . .

Was visited today by J. I. Cohen and we spoke of the Jewish Russian problem, one of the great questions which we must solve in the near future. Here are these people in our communities by the hundreds and thousands. How can we Americanize them? Them themselves there is no hope of reaching, but their children —

yes. Send their children to the schools. But will they send their children to our schools? I had thought not. But tonight I was assured by Mr. Baron, an intelligent merchant who sees much of these people, that they do give their children the advantages of the public schools. If so, their mannerisms will soon disappear. No levellers[?] or educators like the public schools. These children will become thoroughly American and forget the terrible ordeals through which in a barbarous land they were compelled to pass. They will become self-respecting and not look to the benevolent societies for assistance.

Another piece of barbarism to be revived! My God, is it possible that in this late day such a custom should be revived? The Orthodox element here are soliciting money to build a mikveh [ritual bath]!!! In this age of bath-rooms public and private!! Oh! The shame of it. That even the most Orthodox man, if he were but a little enlightened, should permit this. Much, much have I thought them capable of doing in their fanatic and ignorant zeal, but this never.

[Cincinnati, September 15, 1890]

Charles Emory Smith, the American Ambassador to Russia, says that there is no truth in the reports that have been circulated that the edicts issued against the Jews in 1882 have been enforced. How this denial harmonizes with the statement Dr. Herman Adler made in a sermon at Hammersmith [London] the other day, to the effect that he had positive information that the decrees are being enforced does not appear. The persecuting spirit is without doubt again abroad in Russia, or how else could such reports be so industriously circulated? Raped[?] persecuted oppressed people! Today we prayed for you, but I fear their New Year's day [Rosh Hashanah] was spent in gloom and sorrow. Whatever may be said of the lack of culture, the ignorance, the superstition, the filth, the laziness of the Russian Jews, yet all this does not alter the pitiful aspect of the problem. Thousands of families torn up from their homes, root and branch, and sent forth as exiles, strangers to a strange land! ambitious young men forbidden to study at the universities; Jewish lawyers and doctors forbidden to practice; Jewish merchants limited

to a small number in any one place; Jewish families likewise limited in number. Can the spirit of persecution go further? We have a repetition of the legislation of barbarous ages against the Jews, and these things can happen now! There should go forth a raging protest from all the civilized nations of the earth, and perhaps Russia will be brought to her senses. But meanwhile we must receive the poor creatures and do for them what we can. The Trustees of the [Baron Maurice De] Hirsch fund have no slight task in hand now. May they have the wisdom and the strength to perform their duties to the best advantage of the poor homeless Russian immigrant whom, with all his faults, we welcome as man, as Jew, as sufferer, into our midst where he may prosper and find success beneath freedom's skies, in freedom's home.

October 29, 1891. Thursday.

It is a long time since I have written in my journal, over a year. Much has happened during the past year. My Culture Association was a great success; it reopens Monday next. My school for the Russian children was also productive of good things; it too will continue . . .

[Cincinnati] Sunday, November 1, 1891 . . .

Yesterday afternoon I reopened my school for the Russian children. Nearly all we had last year came back and some new ones with them. They are very grateful little subjects to work with. My Ella [my wife, Ella Hollander], God bless her, formed a bank of workers of the teachers of the school. This is the beginning of the Daughters in Israel movement here. There are some very earnest girls among them, and I believe they will do good work among these poor. The best of them, however, will gain from contact with Ella. She is so immeasurably superior to any woman here that all will improve by being with her. Her mind is so comprehensive and her ideas so practical that she is easily first and would be an acquisition and an ornament in any sphere . . .

Saturday, November 7, [1891]

On Thursday evening, in response to the call of the new Society for Ameliorating the Condition of Russian Immigrants, about fifty gentlemen assembled in the vestry rooms of my temple to discuss this matter. A motion to form an auxiliary society in this city was carried, and a permanent organization effected. The gist of the whole problem is to relieve New York and the seaboard towns of their surplus immigrant population to prevent the formation of the new ghettos which are springing up, for these people all flock and huddle together in the same quarters.

[Cincinnati] Friday, July 21, 1905 . . .

The same phenomenon that occurred among the German Jews in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, when the doors of the modern world were thrown open, is apparent now among the younger Russian Jews in the United States. Hundreds and thousands are leaving the old paths; the religion of their fathers is repugnant to them. In many instances, it is hated because it is synonymous with the old life of the ghetto and oppression. In their new freedom, they threw away all the accouterments of the old life including the religious; of all things unprogressive, they consider the synagogue the most so; and this is true of the synagogue as they know it. They have no conception or knowledge of the Reform Movement and of its program of squaring the interpretation of the faith with the demands of modern thought and modern life; hence, an irreligious, atheistic generation is growing up in the ghettos. The old Judaism they will not have, the new Judaism they know not.

Most significant is an article written by a young Russian Jew in a recent number of the [Denver, Colorado, *Jewish?*] *Outlook* entitled "Making Americans of Russian Jews." This title is a misnomer; it should really be termed "The Dereligionization of the Russian Jews." With the acquisition of American freedom, they are relinquishing their faith. Oh! what an opportunity is here for the bringing of the doctrines and teachings of Reform to these

bright intelligent wideawake young men and women of the Russian quarters! Oh, that our wealthy men were wise enough to see and grasp this opportunity and that thousands, nay millions, were placed at our disposal for "home missionary work" in this field, that we could send strong young enthusiastic preachers among them to bring them the religious message of the prophets and to make them feel that, although they cannot accept the religion as their fathers practised it, this does not necessitate a repudiation of Judaism and that their new freedom will mean much more if it is founded on the everlasting verities of prophetic Judaism. It makes my heart bleed to think of the force that is being allowed to go to waste here, and the future looks dark indeed if these myriads who are to sway that future (and indeed the future of Judaism in America will lie in the hands of the descendents of Russian Jews) are permitted to drift further and further away from Judaism . . .

[Cincinnati, September 25, 1905]

I had an amusing experience this morning which showed me that "muscular Judaism" is not non-existent. Several weeks ago I preached a sermon on Bible teaching in the public schools. This sermon called forth a vicious attack by a Presbyterian minister by the name of Macauley, who was reported to have said among other things that he did not blame the Russians for the manner in which they treated the Jews. This almost incredible statement on the part of a Christian minister aroused the keenest indignation on the part of the Jews. One of them, a teacher of athletics, Morris Isaacs by name, met me this morning and told me that he had written Macauley a letter which that gentleman would not readily publish to the world. In that letter, he had told him what he thought of him and had advised him to cease from troubling Dr. P[hilipson]. He, Isaacs, would be glad to meet him anywhere and at any time and would encounter him, as he might choose, "with or without gloves."

This incident is characteristic of the spirit now largely pervading Jewry. The apologetic attitude is giving way to an attitude of self-respect and even aggressiveness. The Russian Jews have organized the Bund for self-defense; they no longer stand passive and permit

themselves to be mowed[?] down by the mobs. The more there is of this spirit in Russia, the better; so also in other lands, notably in the United States. To use an expression of the streets, the Jews "are beginning to feel their oats." I do not believe in the bullying spirit, nor in undue assertiveness, but manly defense of their rights as men will do the Jews more good than the cringing, fawning sycophantic attitude. This latter was necessary in the days of the ghetto when the good will of the superiors had to be bought, but in these democratic days, when a man is a man for a' that, the more sturdy the Jews are in the insistence on their right to the same treatment as all other men receive, the more likely will they be to take their proper place in the world.

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