

Contemporary Problems, 1855

BY ISAAC MAYER WISE

I. THEIR CAUSE

Every period of time has its problems, because each one produces new conditions and new occurrences. The conditions and occurrences of the present time are, however, so manifold, so complicated, and follow upon one another so rapidly, that our time has multiple, substantial, and very numerous problems to solve, which, partly through their direct touching upon life, and partly through their close contact with feelings or with understanding, demand quick solution.

The realm in which we are active, that is to say, the Jewish one, likewise has its contemporary problems, because conditions and occurrences have had such an effect upon the Israelites, whose standpoint in society, in religion, and in manner of observation has been of such kind that everything has shaped itself as new, as never perceived, and as unsuspected. Hence the struggling, the striving, and the contention among our coreligionists in old Europe.

Our American Israel is now especially agitated by important contemporary problems, because quite peculiar conditions and events have affected us very powerfully. We have hastened through remarkable metamorphoses with such lightning-like rapidity that we did not even have the time to recognize the various phases, and thus to comprehend our present standpoint correctly. We shall cite a few changes which have occurred among us.

At one time we moved in slow, deliberate, orderly, and pedantic Germany, where every human impulse, the physical and moral as well as the religious and intellectual, limped along slowly on the crutches of rules which were taken for granted. All of a sudden we were transplanted into the whirlpool of American life, which is youthful and fiery, unbridled, and in constant pursuit, in which hu-

man beings, animals, and plants shoot up more quickly; where the roses bloom and fade more rapidly; where wealth, honor, and respect are more quickly gained and lost; where the power of steam seems to be too sluggish; and where everyday life becomes rejuvenated. From the land of stability we have been transposed into the land of quick motion; out of old age we have been transposed into youth, almost as through a magic stroke.

We seize upon and utilize this revolution quite rapidly in our business activities, because the satisfaction of physical needs and the desire for possessions impel us forward. But in this very way there have arisen also important problems in the spiritual realm, problems which are not the less important because so few persons have the desire to solve them. Nonetheless, they must be solved if our spiritual life is in some manner to be harmonized with the lightning-like pursuit.

Formerly we were subjects of the kings, emperors, princes, or however the great lords in old Europe are called. Then [in addition] there were Jewish laws, Jewish taxes, Jewish police, Jewish quarters, Jewish registration, and a hundred other petty and offensive vexations. But then there were also a thousand considerations with regard to the state, the ruling church, the authorities, officials, police, priests, clerks, chancery servants, etc. And suddenly we stand here, free citizens of the freest country. Everything petty and irritating has been dashed to the ground. The compulsory and humiliating considerations are no longer in existence. We have entered upon a new existence. We quickly comprehend and utilize the republican attitude, because it is too glorious and offers too many advantages not to be comprehended. But the political change has also shaken all the foundation-pillars of the spirit; important and urgent problems have emerged in this area, problems whose solution is of the most pressing necessity.

Another, no less effective, change has taken place among us, and it is this: many of us were born and brought up in villages or little cities, and the law bound the Israelite to his village or to his little city, just as a tree is attached to the earth. There everything proceeds at its customary snail's pace, everything is slow, traditional, and old. Custom decides every problem of life. That's the way the

father did it, and that's the way the son does it, and the grandchildren do it no other way. But now, for the most part, we all live in large cities, where in four weeks palaces rise from the ground, where one invention replaces the other, where each day the entire history of a little German city unrolls, and where anyone who walks along slowly is run down. This has produced, in the manner of thinking and in the way of viewing things, a transformation which only a few persons are still able to comprehend. But this has also cast up contemporary problems which urgently demand solution.

No less important, again, is the following phenomenon. In Europe generally, and in Germany in particular, people stand too far removed from one another, separated by a thousand prejudices, abuses, laws, and regulations, and torn apart from one another by dialects, clothing, district authorities, priestly cunning, and implanted stupidity. But here we are in one country, where twenty-four million people speak one language and one idiom, have the same customs, usages, virtues, and vices, and the same laws and public institutions; where the food, the clothing, the names of the streets, and the architectural style of the houses are everywhere almost the same; where each one is bound to the interests of the common state, and to its institutions with the same force; where people are always traveling and wandering, hastening with the speed of the wind through the vast territories. Here people stand far closer together; they argue more freely; here the angular, rough points of prejudice are more easily repelled; here people listen more attentively to their neighbors, visit other institutions with less prejudice, admire the beautiful, respect what is true, and ridicule what is petty and replete with prejudice. But here they direct their judgment more easily to themselves and to their favorite institutions, and then more and more rid themselves of their prejudice, and with a smile lay aside their puffed-up egoism.

Now it is evident how this new relationship has affected the Israelites especially; indeed, it is obvious in our business life, in our domestic system, and in our public life, in our societies, in our speech, and in our usages, which are all thoroughly Americanized. It is evident in our intimate relations with non-Israelites, in political life, and in communal arrangements.

No rational person can possibly arrive at the belief that our manner of thinking and our point of view in spiritual and religious respects have not also similarly been strongly affected and revolutionized. We think quite differently about things, and we conceive of them in a totally different way. This change has forced upon us contemporary problems whose discussion and solution have become an urgent necessity.

Without entering further into their causes, we shall, in the next issue, discuss the importance of these contemporary problems.*

[*Deborah* (Cincinnati), August 31, 1855:
translated by Abraham I. Shinedling]

* Apparently, Wise never printed the second part of this article in the *Deborah*.

A NEW POSTER SERIES

In anticipation of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, the American Jewish Archives has issued six new multi-colored posters depicting important scenes and events involving Jews during the Revolutionary War.

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Inquiries should be addressed to the Director of the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220