

# America, Whither Are You Going? —A Centennial Sermon

DAVID EINHORN

*David Einhorn's name is not very well known today, though a hundred years ago he ranked as one of the foremost religious leaders of American Jewry. An immigrant from Central Europe and the possessor of a first-rate secular as well as rabbinical education, Einhorn (1809-1879) held pulpits in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. He deserves to be remembered as the spiritual and ideological pater ecclesiae of American Reform Judaism. He was a man of courage and moral indignation as well as of erudition and philosophy. If American Judaism contains within itself a significant proclivity for social justice and social action, it is in no small degree to Einhorn, the antislavery activist and Jewish humanist, that the credit belongs. Einhorn, on his arrival in America during the mid-1850's, found a country whose constitution offered no objection to Negro slavery and whose political life was no stranger to xenophobia and anti-immigrant hostility. Following the Civil War, the United States witnessed political and economic scandals at the topmost level of government, a rising tide of social anti-Semitism, and unrelenting efforts to obliterate the principle of church-state separation.*

*Einhorn was sharply aware of all these evils; his conception of Judaism would not allow him to pass over them in silence. When the country celebrated its centennial in 1876, Einhorn, speaking from his pulpit at the Beth-El Congregation in New York City on July 1, left no one in doubt as to what he saw as praiseworthy and what he regarded as blameworthy in contemporary America. Einhorn was not to survive the centennial by many years, but his great-grandson, Edward H. Levi, would be serving as Attorney General of the United States when the country*

*celebrated its bicentennial. Einhorn preached his untitled "Centennial-Predigt" in German. Dr. Abraham I. Shinedling's translation appears below. The original German address appeared in David Einhorn: Memorial Volume (New York, 1911), pp. 166 ff.*

"How is the faithful city become a harlot! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her, but now—murderers! . . . Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; every one loveth bribes, and followeth after rewards; they judge not the fatherless, neither does the cause of the widow come unto them. Therefore saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: . . . I will turn My hand upon thee, and purge away thy dross as with lye, and I will take away all thine alloy; and I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning; afterward thou shalt be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City. Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness." [Isaiah 1:21-28]

Our Republic is now celebrating its centennial birthday festival, the remembrance of that great day on which a hundred years ago that noteworthy document, the Declaration of Independence, came to light, whereby the Federal states gained their freedom and their independence. Assuredly, one hundred years in the life of a nation are hardly more than so many days in the life of an individual, and if the prophet, with masterful design, represents the youth in the Kingdom of the Messiah as not dying until his hundredth year, then a people of the same age is a youth who is first beginning to show forth his life potential.

In actuality, however, it is not the Republic's length of life that occasions our rejoicing, but, on the contrary, the power and the greatness which it has unfolded in such a short time and in so unprecedented a manner. Still so young in years, it has become a giant which stretches out its arms over two oceans, has transformed endless wildernesses into flourishing Edens, has made its industry compete with that of the most powerful and the oldest peoples, has increased the number of its children from three million to forty million, and still reserves measureless territories for further millions, for new streams of peoples.

What is the root of this excellence? Does the material wealth, perhaps, which God has showered upon our land, form the ex-

clusive attractive force of this country? No, indeed! History teaches that the most flourishing lands sink into ruin and become desolate when their inhabitants pine away under the yoke of servitude, of injustice. It is loftier possessions which have enabled the Republic to become so great and so powerful.

The Declaration of Independence made its appearance as a messenger of redemption. It promised corporeal and spiritual freedom; justice for all without distinction as to belief and origin; a self-government which knows no other king than God, no other fetters than a system of law regulated by an enlightened constitution. Here, on virgin soil, where there were as yet no decayed traditions to combat, great men—like Moses once in the wilderness—sought to found a people whose law should be its wisdom in the eyes of all peoples, at a time when thick darkness still prevailed in the Old World.

This it was which attracted ever new legions of people to the wonderland, where everything pressed forward and nothing pushed backwards, where the energy of the people still had to clear primitive forests, but where there were no old ruins still to be cleared away and where no crippling remembrances were able to attach themselves to the wings of their hopeful mood.

Thus it came about that, now after ten decades, we look upward to the new structure which rears itself aloft to the heavens. But our people will do well to consider here, too, the scriptural word, "Rejoice in trembling"; and to take to heart the maxim that the prouder the height, so much the greater is the danger of falling, and even on the occasion of its jubilee celebration, to ask itself the question, "Whence do you come, and whither are you going?"

*Whence do you come? Who were your fathers, the founders of this Republic? They were men of one character, as noble as gold, as strong as iron and steel, *anshe chayil*, men of valor, possessed of riches of the spirit and of the heart, *yire elohim*, God-fearing men, with a deep and profound inner reverence for the unfathomable Universal Spirit, in whose name they undertook their immortal great deeds, *anshe emeth*, men with a love of truth who, in the struggle against lies, did not shrink back from any sacrifice, from any danger, as well as *son'e betza*, men possessed of a hatred for gain, men who condemned as the*



David Einhorn



basest of crimes every manner of exploitation of public possessions for personal interests.

Such a one, first of all, was *Washington*. Who can think of him, the father of the Fatherland, without reverent love, the prince of war and of peace, the hero of God crowned with renown, unexcelled in moral majesty, and adorned with a wisdom which looked into the future with the eyes of a seer and penetrated the thickest labyrinths of conflicting folk interests, arranging them in order and adjusting them, filled with sacred zeal for the welfare of his people and of the whole of mankind, and at the same time possessed of a self-control which angrily rejected the royal crown which had been offered to him, crying out, like Gideon and Samuel, "God is your King!"

Then *Thomas Jefferson*, the glorious author of the Declaration of Independence, in which each word refutes and vitiates the dogma of the racial sanctity of certain classes of men and the doctrine of the divine right of kings, and eliminates the presumed right to harm anyone in his person and in his property because of his belief and of his origin. This is the seed of ideas which have been attacking the very roots of the social ills which have been perpetuated for millennia, a commentary on our doctrine: "God created man in His image; One right and One law for you and for the stranger," flesh of our flesh, spirit of our spirit, an elucidation of the very ancient divine decrees which tyranny and priestly rule shamelessly falsified, which cripple the children of God by means of the knout, and then prove the need for the knout on the ground of this crippling.

Finally, *Benjamin Franklin*, the man of radiant wisdom and civic virtue, who was able to chain the lightning of heaven and, at the same time, to direct the lightning flashes of his spirit to the chains of servitude and thus to destroy them, yes, indeed, to arm the hand of tyranny itself on behalf of the cause of freedom.

These men, and many others of their associates, bore this people through veritable multitudes of dangers, just as a nurse bears a suckling child. Their patriotism was a stout shield against storm, wind, and weather, and the nation looked up to them as to their guiding stars.

*Whither are you going?* Are these still today the guiding stars which determine our people's thoughts and feelings, our actions

and our failures to act? Does our people still today, now that it has become great and powerful, know no higher goal than that of protecting and guarding as its most intimate life the sacred inheritance of the fathers, which they achieved through unspeakable dangers?

The children of such fathers—so one would think—should, along with the development of their external power, have held ever higher and higher the spiritual possessions from which their proud blossoms sprouted, namely, freedom, equality, simplicity, and justice!

Is this now so in reality?

“Whither are you going?” You, a *helal ben shachar*, a son of the morning-star, risen up out of thick darkness, the hope of the world, the exultation of the nations, mounting ever higher and higher, constantly increasing in brilliance, so that it appeared that your victorious career would extend from one end of the world to the other—but how deep you have sunk down! Instead of forward and upward, you are going downward, and you are approaching decay with gigantic steps; you have waxed fat and become obese, and you have forgotten God, who created you and gave over to you for your loyal custody the most precious gem of mankind. You have become sick from your head to the soles of your feet!

Where is your freedom? A hypocritical bigotry may enslave you, a bigotry which lives in its proud palaces in riotous revelry, which is addicted to its lusts, and which forbids, to citizens who earn their livings honestly by the sweat of their countenances, every recreation on Sunday, even the sight of the world exposition.

Where is your equality? Anyone who steals bread for the purpose of satisfying his hunger is severely punished; on the contrary, however, he who steals millions is entertained royally in what is apparently a prison and finds a hundred ways to escape the arm of justice.

Furthermore, while the Declaration of Independence knows of no religion and does not even mention the word “Christian” a single time; and while the civilized nations of Europe have rejected the Christian state as a superannuated fetter, there has for years resounded in your midst with ever greater intensity the ominous cry: “The United States is a Christian country,” and in

the public schools there is the desire to force the Christian Bible upon the Israelite children, and prejudice against Jews has increased so greatly that various hotels bar them from admittance. Yes, right in this Centennial Year and in the Centennial City that Know-Nothing Party, which wishes to take away from non-natives the right to hold state offices, is again enjoying a powerful upsurge, whereas in actuality America owes its prosperity to immigration and sends thousands of its young people to European academies in order to be educated.

Where is your republican simplicity? The most abominable mania for ostentation has become a general vice, the misfortune of families, the ruin of the country.

People are not valued for what they are, but for what they appear to be. The most brilliant culture and moral purity are of no value at all in comparison with brilliant clothing, in comparison with glitter and tinsel, and in comparison with riches—even if they are stolen! Hence the desperate complaints about poor business conditions, the dissolution of domestic life, the unconscionable mania for speculation, the utilization of state offices for robbing the state treasury, and, finally, the shocking and constantly increasing mania for suicide.

And where is patriotism? Where are morality and justice? Now—in the hundredth year since the formation of the Republic—the question in the Presidential elections is no longer, as it formerly was: “Who is the best man?”, but: “Who is the least bad man?” What a sad and deeply disgraceful spectacle is presented to us by the highest governmental circles! *Ech nafelu gibborim*, How deeply have they fallen, the great and the mighty, who were regarded as the ornaments of the nation! One after another is unmasked in his weakness, and each day brings us new information as to what an Augean stable our seat of government has become. Men bearing the scepter in their hands are stealing from the nation like the most common robbers! *Sarayich sorerim vechavre gannavim kullo ohev shochad verodef shalmonim*. “Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves. Every one loves bribes, and follows after rewards!”

How is the Faithful City become a harlot! She who was full of justice, and now murderers of the moral and material prosperity of the nation!

There would be some comfort therein if we at least owed this

unmasking to the patriotic zeal of a few individuals. But this, too, is only a product of the party system, of the attempt to get the rich share of the rulership into one's own hand.

So you are a youth in years, a giant in external might and greatness, but an old man in enervation, in moral enervation, and therefore, for as long as this enervation lasts, a giant on feet of clay; for *tzedakah teromem goy vechesed leummim chattat*, only justice exalts a people, but sin is the destruction of nations.

This is the irrefutable testimony of world history, which only fools can laugh away.

Should we, however, for this reason despair of a change and give ourselves over, comfortless, to the thought that the bells of Independence Hall, which rang freedom in a hundred years ago, will now let their knell be heard? That *Abraham Lincoln* made his sacrifices in vain? That the blood of the many thousands of patriots in the recent Civil War has been shed in vain? The light which, originating from here, began its circuit throughout the world in these very last decades—shall it now be extinguished in the very place in which it arose?

No! The same prophet who excoriated the vice of Jerusalem so fearfully nonetheless closes with the divine promise: that it will once again be called the Faithful City, and Zion will be redeemed through justice and righteousness, a promise which, it is true, was not fulfilled until after painful trials and revolutions, not until the period of the Second Temple, but which then did come to fulfillment.

Let us therefore hope, we, too, for a rebirth, for a return to the old faithfulness!

The strong self-reliance of the American people, its indestructible national pride even under the severest blows, its incomparable energy which does not shrink back from any obstacle, its unprecedented courage in the making of sacrifices in the late Civil War, its magnificent philanthropy, and, finally, its widely-shining ideals which kept watch at its cradle—all these will sooner or later permit it to break its moral fetters, so that, in its anger, it will drive away the ravens which would feed on its rottenness; just as the young eagle mounts ever higher and higher, and will at some time give shade with its pinions to the entire world of mankind! Amen.