



RHODE ISLAND
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American Jewish Tercentenary Issue

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OUR COMMON HERITAGE

Address by DR. JAMES P. ADAMS

THIS CAN BE a moment of exaltation for all whose interest has brought them to this place at this hour. It should be a heart-warming experience for all who join in this corporate act of respect and esteem with its overtones of understanding and goodwill. This is so much an expression of the spirit of America in her most sublime mood.

During these recent months, the Jewish people in this country have been commemorating the Tercentenary of the Coming of the First Jews to America in 1654. And their fellow citizens of all races and creeds have been helping them celebrate that important event. It is altogether fitting that we should pay a tribute of respect to that little band of sturdy souls who ventured across the seas to find their homes in a new wilderness. They must have had vividly in their memories the story of another wilderness and the vision of a promised land and the inspiring faith of Moses and Joshua, all of which are indelibly recorded in the ancient annals of their people.

They came in the early years of our American experience. They helped to lay the foundations of our way of life. Their very presence broadened its meaning. And their efforts helped to assure the fulfillment of its promise.

As we look back over this span of years, we can catch only a dim glimpse of that early setting. We know, however, that it was venture-some faith and courage which inspired them as it inspired the Pilgrim non-conformists before them and others who followed after them through the years. In some respects, however, the fortitude of these first Jewish settlers was of a special order. They knew that they would represent an identifiable minority. They were taking with them into a new community a religious heritage and family customs that were strange to the others with whom they would be in civic communication. This made immeasurably larger demands upon their faith and courage but it also enhanced the value of the respect which they would earn.

If they could now look back over all these years, they would marvel at what God has wrought and would say with William Bradford that "Out of small beginnings greater things have been produced by His hand that made all things of nothing and gives being to all things that are."

During this past year our fellow citizens have been commemorating those beginnings and we can join them in spirit and in truth because we realize that the faith and courage, and the industry and achievement which they celebrate are all a part of the patterned fabric which is America and, therefore, a part of our common heritage.

But when we focus our attention upon the Jews among us, we are thinking of them not only as fellow citizens within the body politic, as a part of the social structure, as participants in our economic endeavors, or as creative associates in the arts and sciences. They hold a respected place in all of these provinces of our group life. Nevertheless, we must think of them also with regard for another primary aspect of human experience. When they came they brought something more than their social, economic, intellectual and moral attributes and ambitions. They brought the religious faith of their Fathers with its age old tradition, its Holy Scriptures, its sacred symbolism, its moral sanctions and its spiritual influence upon the lives of their people. They transplanted an ancient religious heritage—from old lands in other parts of the world to a new environment where it could flourish within new horizons of hope.

This was their most distinctive contribution to our national culture. They too wanted to worship God in accordance with the dictates of their consciences. They had done so in other times and in many places down through the centuries but, in some circumstances, at awful cost to themselves and their children and, in some cases, without the benefits of security and without political peace of mind.

What a tribute to the dream that was to become America that they came. What a tribute to all that they found here that they remained and prospered. And what a tribute to the America which has come to be that their descendants in the citizenry of this country now look back with abiding appreciation upon this part of our noble experiment.

Where, may I ask, where on this continent, in what other part of the world, could a community more appropriately join in this celebration than in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, the land of Roger Williams, and in this city which he founded in the faith that men are ennobled by understanding and which he named Providence in gratitude to his Supreme Deliverer? Would that all the divers aspects of our community life were always and ever pursued in harmony with the spirit in which it was so nobly named.

Almost a score of years before these Jewish pioneers set their feet upon American soil, Roger Williams had planted here the seeds of a new civil

society and had nourished it with a new doctrine of religious liberty. This was his purpose from the beginning but it became the corporate purpose of the colony, safeguarded by the sanctions of law, when it was given expression in the petition for the Charter and in the Charter itself. It was written in accents bold to which we turn with pride and satisfaction even now—"To hold forth a lively experiment that a most flourishing civil state can stand and best be maintained with full liberty in religious concerns."

Yes, indeed, a lively experiment. This little commonwealth has not always been first in its adjustments to the evolving patterns of political experience through the years, but the historic pre-eminence of its place in this realm of human thought and feeling will outweigh much of what may have been tardiness in some other things. No one whose roots have found nourishment in the soil of Rhode Island, whether by birthright or by adoption, can fail to appreciate the benign significance of this heritage. But we need not rest our case entirely upon the words and deeds of Roger Williams. A hundred and fifty years later in those vibrant days when the founding fathers were forming a more perfect union within the framework of the Constitution, this colony again spoke out in language which could not be misconstrued. It called attention to the fact that the inalienable rights with which man was endowed by his Creator were not mentioned in the Constitution. The founding fathers had assumed their self-evident existence; but Rhode Island, destined to be the smallest state in the Union, and some of her sister commonwealths were unwilling to rest assured that they would be taken for granted. As a result, the Bill of Rights was written, by amendment, into the fundamental law of the land.

Moreover, when the new government came into being it was from Newport that there came the impulse which inspired one of the most sublime expressions of our faith in religious freedom that has ever been written in the English tongue. Moses Seixas, the Warden of the Synagogue, addressed to George Washington, President of the United States, an inquiry as to the disposition of the government in the matter of religious freedom. The Father of our Country wrote, in his own hand¹ and in the name of his fellow citizens, a memorable reply inspired by the substance of the inquiry itself and the language in which it was phrased. This Letter was truly a great declaration of intent. It is one of the documented definitions of our heritage. It must be made a part of this tribute. I shall read it.

¹In the handwriting of his secretary, Major William Jackson, signed by Washington. Ed.

"To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport
Rhode Island

Gentlemen.

While I receive with much satisfaction, your address replete with expressions of affection and esteem, I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington"

The ancient temple which has been for so long the religious household of that Congregation, the Touro Synagogue, is now a national shrine under the reverent guardianship of the American people. We are proud that it stands on a site within the confines of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

And is it not especially fitting that an exercise of commemoration in which the community pays its tribute to these three hundred years and all that they have meant to our Jewish friends and to Judaism in America should be conducted within the precincts of this First Baptist Meeting House? Itself an historic edifice, the oldest of its kind in the Nation, it continues to serve the fellowship of faith planted here at the head of Narragansett Bay more than three hundred years ago. On many occasions in the past this old Meeting House has witnessed the poignant expression of united civic thought and feeling toward great events in our history, on receipt of sad tidings and at times of rejoicing. It is serving worthily today in accordance with this honorable tradition.

I have not yet pictured the full significance of this Service. Not until I remind you of the auspices under which we are gathered here can I point the essential meaning of this event. It is inspired by the Rhode Island State Council of Churches and it is for this reason that it is something more than a mere civic function. It is something more than a friendly recognition of a particular group of our fellow citizens and their forebears and the place which they have made for themselves in the life of the community and of the Nation. It represents a soul inspiring participation by an association of Christian churches in the recognition of those who, adhering to another faith, conserved its heritage and maintained its vitality within an environment of freedom in America.

In the first place, it seems to me that this is a manifestation of brotherhood in action in its most meaningful connotation. As such, its social, moral and spiritual benefits are shared by those who pay their respects as well as by those who are respected. It is a part of our search for understanding among the people of many faiths who inhabit this great land of ours. Is it not appropriate here to recall that the great injunction "in all thy getting get understanding" comes down to us through the ancient Hebrew Scriptures? I venture to suggest that it is the moral and spiritual connotation of its Hebrew equivalent "BINAH" in this context which makes "understanding" one of the noblest words in the English language.

In this moral and spiritual setting, understanding is a deep and rewarding aspect of human relationship. It is compounded of sympathetic interest and the wisdom of insight and of respect for human dignity. It does not merely inhabit the surface of men's thoughts and feelings. It is rooted deep down in their inner consciousness. It cannot be confused with what is sometimes its superficial substitute, the manifestation of tolerance. It is something deeper and broader than that. Tolerance is

not enough if we are to reap the rich blessings of brotherhood. Tolerance is limitingly negative; it may be mere indifference. If freedom of worship in America were to become merely the political concept of non-interference by the State, it would be indeed a cold and diffusing influence on the social, moral and spiritual relationships of our people. But freedom of worship in this negative sense is not itself the basic ideal. It is but a derivative of something much more meaningful in our national life. Freedom of worship, if it is to be something more than merely a political definition, must be an expression of certain basic affirmations relating to human existence: that man is a creature of God; that he possesses a dignity of his own; that he is endowed with a mind and a will; that he must exercise his own choice in the way in which he will commune with his God; and that the respect for the integrity of his own religious impulses which he expects for himself, he must accord to others for theirs. But that fundamental requisite of freedom cannot find expression in mere tolerance. It can find expression only in an affirmative interest and in thoughtful understanding. Let us see to it that, in our own thoughts and actions, freedom of worship means all of this in America today and tomorrow and in the long future. We cannot share, nor is it essential that we even comprehend all of the tenets of faith of a religion not our own, or the forms of worship through which they are expressed. It is essential that we respect the sacred symbols of that faith and the significance of its inner meanings to those to whom it ministers. I am sure that the Rhode Island churchmen who have arranged this Service, hope and pray that it will be blessed because it was conceived in this spirit.

In the second place, it seems to me that this gathering commemorates another historic fact which has had a vital significance for almost two thousand years. Those of us who make our spiritual homes around the firesides of the Christian Gospel cannot be unmindful of the important place of the Hebraic tradition in the foundations of our own faith. I speak now not as a theologian nor as one learned in the fields of religious history or literature or in Biblical exegesis. I speak only as an impressionable layman who is deeply moved by the magnitude of the Christian's debt to the Law and the Prophets and the Writings of the Children of Israel.

That one of these great religious traditions should have its roots in the other is a fact of inestimable importance to all men who search for understanding. That the Old Testaments of the Christian Bibles are, in very large measure, coextensive in form and substance with the Holy

Scriptures of Judaism is a cultural identification of absorbing interest to all men who search for the common foundations of faith in God which underlie the distinctive superstructures of their several creeds. That these Scriptures are revered as inspired writings in both of these religious traditions is a basis for community of interest in their spiritual purpose.

What a treasure house are these Sacred Scriptures, a treasure house of truth and goodness and beauty. It is impossible to comprehend the sum total of their sustaining power through the ages for countless millions of the world's people, as supports to their faith and courage, as sources of comfort and solace, and as inspiration for labor and love. And these Scriptures are our common possessions.

Paul the Apostle and his successors turned their feet toward the west and the Christian religion spread over the Western world. This was one of the great watersheds of history. This faith brought with it in due time the sacred literature of the Christian church, including the Old Testament. Thus the ancient Scriptures of the Hebrew people became a part of the cultural heritage of Christendom.

The majestic sweep of their chronicles, the timeless impact of the commandments, the universal appeal of the wisdom literature, the tenderness and poetic beauty of the praise-songs, and the assuring comfort of the prophetic utterances have all become the precious possessions of a world which reaches far beyond the habitations of the Jews and far beyond the boundaries of Judaism.

Hear these words from the Hebrew Scriptures—edifying, exalting and reverent, and familiar to all of us:

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

“Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.”

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork.”

“Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.”

“I will lift up mine eyes into the mountains from whence shall my help come.”

“Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

“A soft answer turneth away wrath.”

“A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches.”

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

“Whoso loveth knowledge loveth correction.”

“Righteousness exalteth a nation.”

“If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small indeed.”

"It hath been told thee, O man, what is good,
And what the Lord doth require of thee:
Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with
thy God."

Moses and Joshua; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Elijah and Elisha; Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Job; David and Solomon and all the rest are religious forebears of both Jew and Christian despite the separate paths by which they have walked with God. And we, whose Bible includes also the New Testament, are reminded that the central figure in the Christian faith by which we worship God, Jesus of Nazareth, came to His ministry out of the cultural background of the Hebraic tradition.

We have gathered here, then, Jews and Christians, not as strangers but as friends, conscious of the fact that our American life has been enriched by the cultural streams of different races and creeds from many lands and by a multitude of persons, each with a human dignity of his own. What is it, now, that we see when, all together, we lift up our eyes unto the hills?

In God we trust is the central core of our existence. Loyalty to our country is our entitlement to all that we have inherited as citizens. Respect for our fellow men is a part of the social compact by which we live. Faith in freedom is the generating impulse by which we achieve. Devotion to justice is the guardian of our social conscience. Love of truth is the mainspring of our intellectual life. This is the master pattern of our American heritage. In keeping with its spirit and as an expression of its meaning, we salute, with respect and esteem, the little group of Jews who came to these shores three hundred years ago and all who have followed in their footsteps as their spiritual kindred through the years.

In the name of the Christian fellowship which offers this tribute of understanding, I speak words which have sacred meaning for our Jewish friends:

יְבָרֵךְ יי וַיִּשְׁמְרֵךְ
" אֱלֹהֵינוּ "

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee;

Hebrew script in handwriting of Rabbi Braude.

PARTICIPATING IN THE SERVICE

Dr. James P. Adams, Little Compton, Rhode Island
Rabbi William G. Braude, D.D., Congregation of the Sons of Israel
and David (Temple Beth-El) Providence
Reverend Lawrence L. Durgin, Minister, Central Congregational
Church, Providence
The Right Reverend John S. Higgins, D.D., Bishop of the Episcopal
Diocese of Rhode Island
Reverend Earl Hollier Tomlin, D.D., Executive Secretary, The Rhode
Island State Council of Churches

APPRECIATION

The Committee desires to thank Mrs. Archibald Silverman for her gracious assistance in the arrangements for the service. Mrs. Silverman served her own Jewish Community as Chairman of the Rhode Island Committee for the Tercentenary Observance. Her help and suggestions have been highly appreciated.

THE PROCESSIONAL

Besides those participating in the service as indicated in the Order of Worship a group of Rabbis and Jewish lay leaders of our State of Rhode Island were honored and marched in the Processional. Each Rabbi walked with a Minister and lay leaders with representative Council lay people. They were:

Lay Group: David C. Adelman, Alter Boyman, Arthur Einstein, Maurice Epso, Dr. Samuel Adelson, John J. Dannin, Ben Hazen, Benjamin Brier, Archibald Silverman, James N. Williams, George Katz, George Demopolous, Dr. Samuel Nathan, Walter Adler, William P. H. Freeman, Harold Shippee, Jr., Perry Lusk, William Richardson, Herbert Wells, Jr., Donald Dewing, Thomas B. Buffum, Jr., Reginald Perry, Prof. Emmanuel Ekstrom, Dr. Maurice Cochran, Harold Tanner, Judge Fred Perkins, Elmer C. Wilbur, Sidney Kullberg, Clarence Moyer, Mrs. Samuel Nathan, Edgar Docherty, Joseph Vanable, Anthony Psilopoulos, Donald Prescott.

Clergymen: Rabbi Reuven Siegel, Rabbi Eli Bohnen, Rabbi Aaron Goldin, Rev. Vernon Cooke, Rev. William Herman, Rev. Frederick L. Gardner, Rev. Lawrence Almond, Rev. John G. Koehler, Rev. Robert C. Schacht, Rev. Donald G. Wright, Rev. Harold C. Metzner, Rev. Henry H. Schooley, Rev. Thomas S. Roy, Rev. Chris E. Lawson, Rev. James H. Lightbourne, Rev. Albert D. Tyson, Rev. Jesse L. Connor.