

**SOME THOUGHTS ON
JUDAISM: TWO LECTURES
DELIVERED MAY, 1879**

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Some Thoughts on Judaism: Two Lectures Delivered May, 1879 by Joseph R. Brandon

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—
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BEFORE THE Y. M. H. A., SAN FRANCISCO

BY

JOSEPH R. BRANDON.



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"SOME THOUGHTS ON JUDAISM."

TWO LECTURES

—BY—

J. R. BRANDON.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :—

THE subject which I have chosen for my remarks this evening, is one which should be interesting to most of you as Jews, and may perhaps as disturbing their prejudices, be somewhat so to any Christian and non-Jewish friends and fellow citizens who may be among my audience. And to these latter I would here take the opportunity of explaining, as I shall frequently have occasion to use the word Christianity, that in doing so I intend to refer to dogmatic Christianity, to the Christianity of the Church whether Protestant or Catholic, and not to that religion which it is the fashion now-a-days for many Christian clergymen to preach to their congregations and call Christianity. I do not refer, for instance, to that Christianity so called which the Rev. Mr. Beecher preaches, when he intimates that we Jews may be very good Christians, by fulfilling the teachings of Judaism; for that necessarily I conceive must be Judaism. My mind realizes what I think the world is beginning now fully to realize, and that is, what Auerbach in his

little novel of "Poet and Merchant" puts into the mouth of Lessing, whom he makes say: "The religion of Christ, and the Christian religion are two quite different things. The religion of Christ is that which he himself, as man, also recognized and practised, which every man can have in common with him, and that is love and humanity; the Christian religion is that which assumes it as true that he was more than man, and which makes him as such the object of its worship."

With so much of introduction and explanation then our subject is "JUDAISM," a word perhaps as much misunderstood as any word in our language. It will be my endeavor to-night to expose some of the misconceptions which have been formed concerning it, to clear it somewhat from the mist of prejudice which has surrounded it, and to place it in that clear light and favorable position, to which I believe its merits entitle it. It will be scarcely possible within the limits of two short lectures to do more than treat the subject in a somewhat general and discursive manner, and you will hardly expect from me, a mere layman, that learned, profound, and authoritative exposition that the subject would be apt to receive from some of our learned ministers, upon whose manor you may perhaps think I am trespassing in my selection of a theme. It may still however not be inappropriate to discuss it. The more simple mode of treatment may have its advantages, as being addressed to a class of minds not open to, or a frame of mind not prepared for the more elaborate and profound one; even as the light musketry of an army will often reach where its heavy artillery cannot operate, and I shall certainly not exhaust the subject, for the

misconceptions are numerous enough, and the prejudices deep seated, and wide extended enough to warrant and need the services of all the light musketry and heavy artillery, volunteers and regulars, that can be brought to bear for their eradication and removal.

I have often read in books of travel of a peculiarity of the residences of our co-religionists in those lands where religious persecution has not yet died out, and where the fear of the fanaticism of an ignorant multitude which ever and anon vents itself in the sacking of the Jewish quarter, yet haunts the minds of our brethren in faith. The peculiarity I allude to, is the striking contrast that exists between the exteriors and the interiors of the houses of Jewish families; the former frequently exhibiting a poverty and meanness utterly at variance with the wealth, the elegance, and the luxury disclosed within. Something very analogous to this will be experienced in our contemplation and examination of Judaism itself, which exhibits very different features as seen from without, and as seen from within. Different, if viewed even through a mental atmosphere clear of the mist and fog of prejudice; and how much greater must the contrast prove, when the exterior view is taken through the deceptive media of sectarian bigotry and hatred, through which it has been too frequently the custom of the world to regard it.

The views entertained of Judaism will of course very much depend on the amount of intelligence possessed by the holders, but in all they will be found to be more or less warped and distorted by sectarian animosity. If I were asked to give a somewhat popular idea of Judaism as conceived

by one class of people, I should say it was supposed to consist of a horror of swine's flesh, the exaction of exorbitant rates of interest, with a grand religious festivity about the time of Easter, at which the shedding, and some mysterious use of Christian blood were indulged in. That would be certainly the lowest idea entertained by some Christian people in the old world; emigrants from whom however may even now be in process of assimilation among us in cosmopolitan America. We are all familiar with the supposed crucial test of Judaism that seems to suggest itself to the mind of the ordinary gentile, which takes form in the popular taunting rhymes that we hear frequently addressed to the Jew. It is not long ago that I replied to a communication in the Evening Bulletin of this city wherein was the following remark in reference to the Jews: "It will be remembered that in their dealings they are governed by the law of Moses, in which they are commanded to be usurious only with strangers and gentiles." * And within the last few months, aye, within the last month, I have read an account of a revival in some place in Europe of the blood accusation, and of the publication of two works in Russia by Christian priests, the one gravely making, the other as gravely refuting the charge.

A higher, and somewhat more flattering view is that charitably indulged in by a class, whereof the *Pacific Churchman*, a newspaper in this city would seem to be the spokesman. That accords to Judaism at least the recognition of its being a sect, although as thinks the writer of the article I refer to, we are not a people. "The Jew—thus proceeds the article—has no faith. He has neither altar, priesthood, nor sacrifice. He can perform

"scarce" the writer you will observe omits the *ly*—no, not omits, I should rather say misplaces, for I have found the syllable pretty generally distributed over the entire article from which I extract.—"He can perform scarce a single religious service which his own law requires, and without which that law tells him, there is no remission for his sins. His religion, as written in his law, passed out of existence, and all possibility of existence eighteen hundred years ago, and he has been living since on a bundle of dry and dusty Rabbinism." A flattering picture truly of our glorious religion, but painted by the hand of a churchman what can we expect?

A more favorable view yet, and perhaps the highest entertained by those stranger to us, and who have not carefully examined the subject, is, that it is a religion having some monotheistic views, but overlaid with a gross anthropomorphism; having very little spirituality, a rigid and tiresome ceremonial, and above all being the religion of a tribe or sect, particularly exclusive, and not a religion of humanity. To very much this effect wrote lately Professor Goldwin Smith in so enlightened a magazine as the *Cotemporary*. He says, "The monotheism of the Jew, like that of Islam is unreal;" even our monotheism would seem to be begrudged us.—"The Jewish God, though single, is not the father of all, but the Deity of His chosen race." As I speak the verse from *Isaiah, Ch. 54*, may perhaps suggest itself to your minds. "The God of *all* the earth shall He be called." The morality embodied in the Mosaic code though distinctly tribal, and sanctioning a difference of principle between the rule of dealing with a Hebrew and that of dealing with a

stranger, which the civilized conscience now condemns, was in its day a nearer approach to humanity than any other known tribal law. The noble part of the Jewish nation, the real heirs of David and the prophets"—the writer refers I suppose to the fishermen of Galilee and the motley crowd of communists who followed them—"heard the gospel, and became the founders of a human religion. The less noble part led by national pride and ceremonialism embodied in the Pharisee rejected humanity, and themselves fell back into a narrower and harder tribalism than before."

There is no exaggeration then I think in the statements I have made concerning the views entertained of Judaism. They are, if not true, certainly consistent with the ideas concerning Jews, prevalent at a time within my own memory, as may be illustrated by the following incidents.

My sisters when I was a boy attended a young ladies' seminary in the suburbs of London. It was an establishment situated in a location where one might expect that persons of some intelligence would reside. While there they made the acquaintance of a young lady who resided next door to the school. In a conversation had with the young lady in question one of my sisters informed her that she was a Jewess. The information seemed quite to surprise the young lady. "What," exclaimed she, "you a Jewess? why I thought all Jewesses had beards!" Another instance was that of a Jewish captain—yes *mirabile dictu* a Jewish sea captain—who was running a schooner between Jamaica and some of the neighbouring islands. I had the tale from himself. He had on one of his trips a passenger, to whom in the course of conversation