

**WHAT IS JUDAISM? A
SURVEY OF
JEWISH LIFE, THOUGHT
AND ACHIEVEMENT**

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What is Judaism? A survey of Jewish Life, Thought and achievement by Abram S. Isaacs

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What is Judaism?

A Survey of Jewish Life, Thought
and Achievement

LIBRARY OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

By

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IN MEMORIAM

Patti Iq + Dave Iq + ...

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

INTRODUCTION

SO much interest continues to be felt in the story of Judaism, in literature, art, and the drama—a story that has not reached its final chapter—that it was thought helpful and timely to issue the present volume. Gathering in more permanent form a number of essays contributed within recent years to various periodicals, it presents along different lines the message and meaning of the Jew's religion and history, and in the general atmosphere of misunderstanding seeks to vindicate his character and services.

The Jew suffers, undoubtedly, from being regarded almost wholly as an antique. His work and mission are relegated exclusively to Bible times; his presence and claims to-day are considered curiously, if not offensively, out of place. Why, he is an extinct phenomenon—a Megatherium from Palestine, forsooth! And his religion? That is for the archæologist or the palæontologist

alone. His record in the world, in the face of odds which would have crushed any other race or turned them adrift like the wandering gypsy, is still largely unknown. The real nature of his religion is as practically a mystery as in the days of Juvenal and Tacitus. His history and his literature are foreign territory and excluded from approved systems of instruction in school or college, as if these subjects bore an hereditary taint of their own.

Now, many factors contribute to this widespread ignorance and detraction, and chief among them, perhaps, is the failure to produce a clear and forceful exposition from the Jewish point of view, which, while preserving a fair and sober estimate, shall tell dispassionately and convincingly what is to be said, without heat or prejudice. Such a work, broad, thorough, discriminating, will rapidly win its right of way and aid appreciably in curing the distemper which would for ever treat the Jew with disdainful silence or contumely. A more refined method, of course, than mediæval torture, or the degradation of Ghetto and gaberdine; but strongly out of touch with the modern cur-

rent and the pretensions of a newer age. Is there such a fact as atavism in civilisation—a reaction toward savagery and the heh-hep cry? And must the Jew swing perpetually, a victim, between the upper and the nether millstone of destiny?

What is the secret of the Jew's everlasting crucifixion in some form or another? Of course, other creeds and races have aroused antipathy and suffered the cruelest persecution; but almost from the Jew's first appearance in history, he seems to have been made the mark of attack. A puny folk in numbers and strength, for two thousand years without soil, army, or political power, why has it created such antagonism? Is it really such an exceptional class? Were its pretensions too lofty, its claims too excessive, its dreams too ideal? Has it protested too much and robed itself too proudly in the cloak of superior virtue and heaven's livery? Were Apion and other ancient authors of distinction justified in their characterisation of the Jewish religion as superstition and disease, a plague-spot to be exterminated remorselessly as the highest duty to man? And is the proposed solution of the Jewish

question in Russia the proper one—one third of the Jews to be exiled, one third to be converted, one third to be slain? Curious fate of a people—to survive the calumny of centuries, only to be subjected again to the olden slanders, a continuous process of vilification, whose end appears as remote as a thousand years ago.

To ever widening circles of cultured readers, of all creeds, and of none, it is hoped that this volume will be welcome. It lays no claim to the first or last word on the topics discussed, which are, perhaps, twice-told tales in more senses than one. The author, however, has tried to be candid and unprejudiced. While essays of this character have their defects and limitations, and many subjects deserve fuller and more careful development, it is possible that just such unpretentious treatment has its value as well, as a kind of modest introduction to more elaborate works. It is devoutly hoped that the book will serve to arouse more interest in its subject, doing its share to clear away the mist and usher in the light.

The essays, which have appeared chiefly in *The North American Review* and *The*

Atlantic Monthly, have been fully revised. Other papers are reprinted from the London *Jewish Quarterly Review*, *The Architectural Record*, *The Arena*, and *The Independent*, in the last several years before the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago.

A. S. I.