

**MY RELIGION AND
THE WAR: A
DISCOURSE**

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My religion and the war: a discourse by Emil G. Hirsch

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A Discourse by Emil G. Hirsch

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Lev. XIX

"We know now that life and limb, time, talent and treasure belong to our nation, none of us will keep back."—Hirsch Reform Advocate, April 1917.

IN SOME very learned books on the art of preaching the advice is given the preacher to preface every sermon with a fervent appeal addressed to God for the gift of grace and such power of speech as will stir the minds and thrill the hearts of his congregation. In many parts of the older continent this custom is observed in both Jewish and non-Jewish pulpits, in our land and usually on this platform it has been honored more in the breach. Today I certainly have good cause for petitioning God for aid and guidance. More than ever before am I impressed with the wisdom of the Rabbi's caution bidding even wise men have a care of their words. The power of articulate language is the distinguishing faculty of man. The old translators gave to the Hebrew phrase *Nephesh 'hayah* by which Adam is dignified in the old Creation story the value of the speaking being. Their rendering witnesses forsooth to their fullness of insight into the distinguishing capacity of our manhood.

But this very qualification exposes men to risks which sometimes are by no means to be reckoned slight. Somebody has likened words to a stone which after leaving the hand of him who throws it can neither be recalled nor be controlled in its free flight. Psychologists know that the art of hearing is still more difficult and rare than that of speaking. In printed livery even words are not protected against the intrusion of the sympathies and antipathies, the prejudices and the partialities dormant in the mind and the heart of the reader. After all it is he who gives to the sentences of Emerson or Shaw their tone. The French worded deep wisdom when they said *c'est le ton qui fait la musique*. As one is predisposed so

will be welcome and interpret the message of the author who addresses him. Approval and disapproval depend largely upon factors of the personal equation. Scholars have to be on their guard against their intrusion. Interpretations of ancient writers and writings are apt to be colored by the personal, political and social and economic and religious leanings of their modern reader. The chosen minds are few who may see as Moses is said to have seen the Deity, that is Truth, face to face. The less gifted prophets have visions but these are dulled. They are reflected from blurred mirrors. The son of Amram looked thru a transparent, finely ground glass. (Leviticus Rabba section one, compare I. Cor. xiii., 12.) Of suggestive significance is the other observation credited to Rabbi Yehuda, the son of Il'ay, that Moses saw truth thru one and the same glass while other prophets had recourse to nine mirrors. In other words the man of genius is free from the shifting accidents of mood and atmosphere. His medium does not change from hour to hour. Less competent minds have great difficulty to maintain themselves free from the bondage to impressions which vary as their differing pre-occupations exact tribute from them.

This is the fate of the written word held in the straight jacket of pen and print. To use a Rabbinic idiom if the flame consumes the cedar tree what may the little hyssop bough expect? What about the reception accorded the fugitive spoken sound and syllable? Hearing is by far a more elusive art than seeing. Often one single expression alone lays hold of our memory so strongly that what preceded and followed is totally obliterated. May I venture to cite to the witness stand my own little grandson? Two of his great-grandfathers you know were Rabbis, I his grandfather also am of the profession, and his own

father in a fit of mental aberration I suppose had given his brilliant brain to the Jewish ministry, an active and very highly honored teacher now in one of our sister congregations. Yet with all these antecedents shall I say to his credit, the lad coming home from Sunday School one day reported upon inquiry that that morning he had been taught there is no God. Upon further searching it was found that at the service there had been read the passage, "There is no God besides Thee." This qualifying addition had escaped the attention of the young pupil. Men of maturer years than he have fallen into similar error. One broken phrase will stick in their memory and upon it they build the account of the preacher's declarations. Others and their number is not small unconsciously and unintentionally misconstrue the purport of whatever statement may be made in their hearing. Complained another Sunday School attendant that the teacher was terribly conceited for he had emphatically bidden his class know, "I am the Lord; thou shalt have no other God before my face." Yea c'est le ton qui fait la musique. Even the speaker's voice is an element of considerable consequence. The boy writing home for money to his father not initiated into the mysteries of the alphabet, was granted or was refused the stipend according as his request happened to be read to pater by his soft spoken sister at home or by the gruff voiced butcher boy in the shop.

In days like these when hysteria is epidemic public speaker is exposed more than ever to misunderstandings. Who of us may claim exemption from the psychosis brought on by this terrible strain which is upon nation and individual? Indeed if ever there was need for you and me of prayerful thought there is now. Humbly I ask that such words only be laid this morn-

ing on my lips as shall not blur my intended meaning, and that to you be given such charity and clarity as will forefend your misconstruing my views or your drawing from them erroneous conclusions. Were it not presumptuous I should petition that unto me be granted the diction of the prophets who, say the Rabbis, spoke in "holy language, in pure language, in clear language, yea in the tongue in which the angels sing God's sanctity." (Midrash Wayikra Rabba, i., 14.) Wekara zeh el zeh such strains as will call forth responsive, joyful assent.

Last Sunday at the first session of the Conference on Religion and Synagog held in this auditorium a young and brilliant colleague of mine inspired and instructed those of us who sat at his feet in words of heartening wisdom. He convinced us that the lamp of religion will not be quenched by the torrents of blood and tears poured out at the shrine of hideous as well as holy War. He was sure that it was even now rising to new influence among men. Needless for me to say that I did not in all details share his confidence and construction. Perhaps his understanding of the meaning of religion and its function and mine lie in different planes. But it was his masterful exposition that suggested to me the theme for our study this morning. Without trying to lift the curtain from off the days and doings to come after the paroxysm of passion now gripping men shall be stilled, I would search for signposts along humanity's present Golgotha from the tell-tale inscriptions of which the religionist may draw some comfort.

Of course, the devotee of true religion feels keenly the sad disappointment that as yet Isaiah's forevision of God-guarded Peace has not been fulfilled. Yet awful War has taught the world anew the tremendous meaning of Duty. In so far it has lent tremendous

emphasis to Judaism's sacramental syllables. Mitzwah and the verb from which the noun is derived abound and stand forth solemnly in Judaism's vocabulary. 'Hobh, sacred obligation, too, rings with a sonorously Jewish appeal. Duty more than rights, responsibility more than privilege, are the keys in which Judaism modulates and melodies life's rhythms. In this crisis Jew found himself confronted by no necessity to acquire a new alphabet in which to write out his convictions. Duty called him and he answered with a glad Hinneneni, Here I am. That call for him was God's voice. In every land he rose with the determination Na'aseh we nishma' to do and only later reason. Certainly the Jew who had voluntarily or at birth been consecrated a citizen of our beloved and free land never hesitated for never so brief a moment. When the decision had been taken which sent our armies into the trenches, the Jew at once knew where his duty lay, and he did it. The aims of the conflict as specified by the President ring true to the deepest harmonies of our religion. Not conquest and not spoil but justice and freedom are set forth as the goal which it is ours to reach. Our way is across thorns and over stones. It urges us on into the valley of the shadow of death. Our boys donned the Khaki, a uniform more honorable and honored than which no general ever wore, an apparel worthy of the Melekh ha-Kab-hod, the glorious ruler whose entrance into the joy-stirred capital the Hebrew song celebrates in jubilant acclaims. (Psalm xxiv.)

Many among us learned how to apply anew the old Jewish lesson of Duty. In the piping days of peace numerous were they who regarded the nation as a convenient device for their protection in the pursuit of private aims and even per-

haps while engaged in a refined and secret predatory raid upon the property of the less wary neighbors. Private interests, at the utmost, class ambition and benefits were in the foreground of what public solicitude they displayed. Their recurring refrain ran to the insistence that the administration had no other business than to do something for each and every one of their cotery. Politicians clamored for office, merchants for tariffs and schedules of railroad rates so devised as to confer advantages on them at the expense of others. The laboring men in their turn wanted legislation to further their cause. They had indeed greater justification for their demands and expectations than all other claimants for favors at the hands of Congress and the Executive branches of our government. Even the occasional outbursts of patriotism the skyrockets at national festivities invariably ran to statistics about commerce and industry, about the output of mills and mines, about the crops of corn and wheat, about bales of cotton and tons of iron. That fundamentally each of us was part of the government and, that not merely with his personal security and material success in view, only at rare intervals dimly glimmered upon our thinking. Yea we were impatient of the men who from platform and pulpit would presume to suggest the truer theory of the individual's relations to organised society and the deeper intent of patriotism. The grim hand of war gripping us has opened our eyes to a wider and nobler outlook. We are beginning to comprehend that nation spells priesthood and patriotism consecration. One is called to stand with all, and serve at the altar not of his petty and selfish needs and plans but at that high-altar of the common weal and wealth, the nation's destiny and design. Life, limb, are not ours in the sense in which we used so comfortably to construe