

# JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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## A PLEA FOR ANGLO-JEWISH HISTORY,

INAUGURAL ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE FIRST MEETING OF THE SOCIETY,  
NOVEMBER 11TH, 1893,

By LUCIEN WOLF.

IN welcoming you to the first business meeting of our Society, it seems to me that my duty is to say something to you with regard to the scope of the work you have undertaken. This is the more necessary, since our proposal to take upon ourselves a corporate existence was at the outset met with certain criticisms which have not been sufficiently answered. We were told that Anglo-Jewish history was a very small affair, that it was not likely to add much to the general history of our race, and that it would throw no light on the annals of our country. I must say that I marvelled when I heard these positive statements, made without any appeal to actual research or any pretence to detailed knowledge; but when I discovered the test which had been used in arriving at them, my wonder disappeared. "Where are your great men?" we were asked; "Where is your Maimonides, your Jehuda Halevi, your Isaac Abarbanel?" The answer to these questions is, of course, simple. We have not produced any such men, and even if we had, it would be no proof that our history was more important than the histories of the French and German communities which, in this respect, are almost in the same case with ourselves. The truth is that this criticism belongs to a primitive order of historical science. Biography does not cover the whole domain of history. The true function of the historian is to reconstruct the lives, not of personalities but of communities and nations out of the largest possible accumulation of social facts and individual experiences. If you will only think

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for a moment you must see that the antiquated great-man-theory of history can only afford a very inadequate, if not a very misleading, clue to the general development of the social organism. It was by this method that the historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries succeeded in throwing a halo of romance over the Middle Ages, obscuring all the ignorance, ferocity and licentiousness which were the main characteristics of that period. What is really important to ascertain is the social state from which the great men sprung and the complex influences which produced both. And if there have been no great men, it does not follow that there is no history worth enquiring into. In Spain and in England, for example, we have had two contingents of one and the same race working out the destiny of Judaism under diverse conditions. Consequently, when you ask what have the English Jews done in philosophy to equal Maimonides or in statecraft to compare with Abarbanel, you do not so much discourage research as recognise its necessity. It is, indeed, of importance to us to ascertain why, in the one case, the conditions of life have proved favourable to the development of personal character and the free play of intellectual genius, and why, in the other, working with the same materials, they appear to have been sterile in these respects. Indeed, I am not sure that the latter investigation may not prove the more interesting of the two.

In dealing with Jewish post-Biblical history the biographic test is the less valuable because of the absence of a governing centre of national life. The Dispersion has subjected the Hebrew people, in detached sections, to a variety of influences which render the sociological method absolutely indispensable. It is, indeed, in its diversity of social environment, and not in any array of commanding personalities, that the peculiar interest of Jewish history consists. Alone among the races of the world the Jews appear at every epoch and in almost every land. There has been scarcely a civilisation in which they have not played a part, or a great intellectual or spiritual movement to which they have not contributed some impulse. At the same time their own character has been more or less modified by the varying historic and social influences with which they have come in contact. In every country they have assimilated something of the national spirit, and each epoch has submitted them to the modifying influence of some

great experience. Nor have these influences been permitted to remain altogether local. By a migratory movement, which has so far been one of the most constant phenomena in Jewish history, local peculiarities have been periodically gathered up and redistributed until the whole racial character has been more or less affected by them. Here, I think, you have the formula of the Jewish historical process, and it is a formula which, besides rendering us independent of the great-man-theory, vindicates the necessity of Societies such as this. Our history is essentially a congeries of local sociological histories, the totality of which can only be adequately comprehended by a very refined specialisation. There is not a part of this history which can be spared by the whole, not a part which can be sufficiently explained apart from the whole, or which can be understood apart from its environment. In these very onerous conditions lies the necessity of the local study of Jewish history, and of the utilisation in such study of a highly organised machinery.

Of course all the communities in their geographical classification are not equally interesting, and it is possible that in the perspective of the œcumenical historian some of them may disappear. This, however, cannot be the fate of the Anglo-Jewish community, no matter how restricted the scale of the general survey, if only this Society does its duty. To illustrate how closely associated our history is with the larger history of our people on the one hand, and with the national history of our country on the other, I will take one event, the anniversary of which falls on this very day. It is just two hundred and thirty-eight years ago to-day that, at the instance of Cromwell, a special sub-Committee of the Council was charged to report on Menasseh ben Israel's petition for the legal readmission of the Jews to this country. The result of that reference you know. It is usually spoken of as the starting-point in the history of our community as it at present exists. This, however, is not its sole significance. This Anglo-Jewish event was largely a continental Jewish scheme, the outcome of a long series of continental events, the projected solution of a crisis in the continental Jewries and the attempted fulfilment of a Jewish national dream. The two great branches of persecuted Jewry, the Marranos in Spain and the hunted Polakim in Lithuania, looked forward to the success of Menasseh's mission as a cure for all their

woes, and Menasseh himself regarded it as a further step in that dispersion of Israel, on the completion of which—according to the mystics—the Millennium depended. On the one hand, its causes reached back to the massacres of Chmielnicki in Poland, and the Spanish persecutions of Ferdinand and Isabella, and on the other, it was inspired by an apocalypse which, in one form, had nearly transformed English life, and in another was destined to bring about the last unfurling of the banner of Israel by Sabbathai Zevi on the coast of Syria. Nor was this all. If the movement of the Jews towards England had behind it a long chain of important historic causes, the reciprocal movement of the English people to welcome them to their shores was also the outcome of a series of events which neither the English nor the Anglo-Jewish historian can afford to ignore. From this point of view, in fact, a very large part of English history may be said to belong to Jewish history. Matthew Arnold recognised this in one of the most suggestive chapters of his “Culture and Anarchy” when he sketched the struggle of Hellenism and Hebraism in England. That struggle, which I prefer to call a struggle between the Old and the New Testaments, is not only the key to English social and political progress, but it also affords the explanation of the reversal by the English people in 1655 of the banishment which they had decreed against the Jews three and a half centuries before. Compare the state of the public mind at the two epochs. In 1290 the Jews were regarded as the born enemies of a rigidly Christian society, the traditionally accursed anti-Christ, and nothing more. Ecclesiastics troubled themselves little about their identity with the people of the Bible, while the common people were absolutely ignorant of it. In 1655, however, the nation knew them essentially as the People of the Bible, walking in error perhaps, but still deserving of respect and kindly treatment. They were depositaries of divine truth—not of all of it, but of a great deal—and they were survivors of a polity which the leading spirits in England at the time were desirous of reviving. How had this change been operated? By means of the popularisation of the Old Testament. The Reformation had made the Old Testament a popular book and a political force. The history of Israel had not only profoundly modified the religious thought of the country, but it had inspired a great struggle for political freedom and a great scheme of

constitutional revision. Under the new conception of popular freedom which the Puritans had derived from the Hebrew Commonwealth, the Jews became eligible to resettle in the land. "The State," said Cromwell to Major-General Crawford, "in choosing men to serve it, takes no notice of their opinions; if they are willing faithfully to serve it, that satisfies." It was this liberal doctrine, accentuated by the Hebraic inspiration on which it rested, that made the readmission of the Jews practicable just two hundred and thirty-eight years ago.

It may be told, perhaps, that if these remote causes are to be taken into account by the Jewish historian the result may be that Jewish history will deal with everything except Jews. Of course these aspects must be subjected to proper limitations and to an artistic perspective, but they cannot be wholly ignored in any centre of Jewish life. Moreover, in this country the rôle played by the Old Testament has been peculiarly important, both in itself and in its influence on Jewish emancipation and Jewish religious thought. Hence it appeals more directly to the Anglo-Jewish historian than do similar movements abroad to their several local Jewish historians. While popular liberties in this country and in America have been developed very largely on Hebraic lines, on the Continent they owe almost everything to Rationalist inspirations. This, I believe, to be largely due to the fact that in one case translations of the Old Testament in the vernacular were available at an early period, and in the other this venerable book remained unknown until it was too late to be of any use. It was this want of a second line of religious defence and one of a practical and constructive character which hurried the French people into the arms of the philosophers in 1789. We have a curious illustration of this in the enthusiastic reception accorded to Salvador's "Institutions de Moïse" by the French Republican press in 1823. They hailed it as though it were a new revelation.

Besides this the direct Jewish element is not wanting in the review of English national psychology which must be the framework of any Anglo-Jewish history. We know now that Jews frequently visited this country throughout the whole period of their legal exclusion between 1290 and 1655, and while some of them were actually concerned in public affairs all were affected by the gradual transformation of public opinion. One of the earliest tasks of this Society will

be to ascertain the exact rôle enacted by Jews both in England and abroad in the passage of this country from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism. Enough is already known to show that this rôle was by no means inconsiderable. Jews figured in the epoch-making controversies which raged round the divorce of Henry VIII., and Jews gave substantial assistance to Elizabeth when as the head of European Protestantism she waged a life and death struggle with Spain. Here, too, it will be found that Anglo-Jewish history and English political records throw fresh light on general Jewish history, and the great change which took place in the European equilibrium after the defeat of the great Armada. At this moment, I am only at liberty to say that our materials will enable us to trace the decadence of Spain in a very direct way to the expulsion of 1492. But it is not only in the middle period that Jews have played a part in English history. Before the Expulsion they were an economic factor of the first importance in the strangely constituted society of the time, and since the Readmission, they have made substantial contributions to the political, commercial, literary and scientific progress of the Empire. Nor is their internal communal history devoid of special interest. We need only take a cursory survey of our community to recognise characteristics in it which differentiate it strikingly from the Jewish communities of both the Eastern and Western Continents. It may be true that we have had no great Rabbis, but, at any rate, we have travelled further in solving the great problems of Jewish religious life than any other body of our brethren. We have constructed an enlightened and progressive orthodoxy, and have maintained the most strenuous attachment to the racial bond, without restricting our intellectual freedom or our activity as British citizens. I can conceive of no more interesting task than the investigation of this branch of our history. And here, again, I think you will find that the inquiry will touch upon other communities besides our own, and will not even be limited to the synagogue. We are the product of many converging migrations—of Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Marranos, Moriscos and Levantines; we have experienced successively the influences of Spinoza and Orobio de Castro, of Sabbathai Zevi and Chacham Zevi, of Mendelssohn and Israel Baalshem, of Holdheim and Samson Hirsch, and the whole has been harmonised and organised by that spirit of

progressive Conservatism, or perhaps I should call it cautious Liberalism, which so eminently characterises the intellectual atmosphere of this island. The importance of this complex movement will be apparent to you if you reflect that two generations hence the centre of gravity of Jewry will probably be transferred from Poland to the English-speaking communities.

I hope I have said enough now to show you that Anglo-Jewish history is not the small and negligible quantity it has been pictured to you, but that it is worthy of the energies of this Society and of the dignity and ambition of our community. I do not, however, base the claim of our Society to public support exclusively on these considerations. I cherish the hope that our new organisation will be a fruitful source of intellectual life and of virile Judaism to the great body of our English co-religionists. Our work will not be limited to dry-as-dust research, but will comprehend every means that our resources will afford of promoting a knowledge of and interest in the general past of our people. In this we shall be performing both a religious and a moral task. It will be a religious task, because Judaism can have no distinctive existence apart from its great historic sanctions. It will be a specifically moral task, because, besides cultivating historic knowledge, we shall cultivate historic spirit. There is nothing more essential to the moral well-being of a people than the historic spirit, for it stands in the same relation to a community that personal repute does to an individual. It is the sense of national honour, the consciousness of a high level of conduct to be maintained, a standing proscription of mean actions. Already it is exercising a marked conservative influence on the centripetal movement of our race, assuring our persistence through the new epoch of our long history opened by our emancipation. In the future, I believe, it is destined to make clear to the meanest of us the sacred mission of Judaism, and to fit us for its accomplishment.