

The Challenge to the Christian Conscience

Address by the Honorable Robert H. Jackson, Solicitor General of the United States, delivered before the National Conference on Palestine, auspices United Palestine Appeal, at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D. C., Sunday, January 15, 1939

Friends of the United Palestine Appeal:

THE plight of the Jews in the world today is a challenge to the Christian conscience to make good the promise of a Jewish National Home in Palestine.

America contributed to the success of the Allies in the World War. She sought nothing for herself—she sought only to establish the conditions of a permanent peace and justice to disadvantaged peoples. Out of the peace came the Mandate by which Great Britain became an international trustee of Palestine. Recognized by America, this Mandate contemplated the establishment of the Jewish National Home, the development of self-governing institutions, and the safeguarding of civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race and religion.

The undertaking was defined by the British Government in 1922. It intended “the further development of the existing Jewish community, with the assistance of Jews in other parts of the world, in order that it may become a center in which the Jewish people as a whole may take, on grounds of religion and race, an interest and a pride. But in order that this community should have the best prospect of free development and provide a full opportunity for the Jewish people to display its capacities, it is essential that it should know that it is in Palestine as of right and not on sufferance. That is the reason why it is necessary that

the existence of a Jewish National Home in Palestine should be internationally guaranteed, and that it should be formally recognized to rest upon ancient historic connection."

The Jewish hopes in Palestine today rest not only upon "ancient historic connection" but also on very practical and modern considerations. The dispossessed Jew, driven from many nations of the earth, finds most doors closed to an immigration of such unprecedented character. Whether rightly or not, many nations fear that their own economy and polity might be disrupted by extending a right of sanctuary. There are few peoples left in the world who have that calm assurance in their own adequacy to meet their own problems which bids them dare accept the responsibilities of the refugees. And apart from the uncertainty which men of good will feel, also, in many of the countries, there are currents of racial hate and suspicion, milder perhaps than in the countries which have dispossessed and evicted the Jew, but still strong enough to deny him a refuge from his pursuers. Looking at the world realistically we cannot be blind to the fact that the days of free and easy emigration are past. There remain few frontiers that invite settlement and challenge men who do not fit in older communities to share the adventure of founding new ones. Even our own Statue of Liberty no longer beckons the oppressed of other lands to come and live beneath the warm sun of freedom. Other lands, like our own, have all but shut their doors or have rationed their hospitality on a quota basis.

But in Palestine today there is room for more refugees than in any other country in the world. The Jews there already number 450,000. They constitute a community which has successfully carried on one of the most difficult colonization projects in the history of mankind. They have reclaimed arid wastes, built new cities, drained swamps, established industries, and breathed new life into an old and neglected land. In decades they have made strides that elsewhere have taken centuries. They have established institutions capable of absorbing the refugees. Here a sober, industrious, and self-disciplined people may sympathetically accept

their kinsmen and resettle them in the land of their fathers. Here by great sacrifice and hard labor the Jew may of right escape oppression and bondage and renew an interrupted culture, and give to the world new evidence of an historic mission.

Those who profess Christianity cannot fail to see in this movement something of the fulfilment, to the people of the Bible, of the prophecies of the Bible, as declared by Isaiah, Ezekiel and Amos. In the Scriptures that are a part of Christian teachings we read promises to the Children of Israel such as these:

“As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.

“And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land and feed them upon the mountains of Israel. . . .

“And the tree of the field shall yield her fruit and the earth shall yield her increase and they shall be safe in their land. . . .

“And I will multiply upon you man and beast; and they shall increase and bring fruit and I will settle you after your old estates and will do better unto you than at your beginnings.”¹

“They shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations.”²

Thus the Jew may turn to Palestine with a double assurance; first, that of the Book itself and, again, of the leading governments of the world.

In what spirit will America make answer to the plight of the refugee Jew which is today's outstanding challenge to the Christian conscience? I cannot deny that racial ill-will and intolerance exist in America, but I

¹ Ezekiel (Chaps. 34 and 36).

² Isaiah 61.

do deny that they are American. It is a strange paradox that our code of toleration compels us to tolerate even the intolerant. And the other side of the paradox is that if those who are teaching intolerance ever succeed in establishing it, they will be among those who will not long be tolerated.

Intolerance can arise only in a mind that is ignorant both of our institutions and of the composition of the American society in which he is allowed to live.

The program of oppression abroad begins by an appeal to the racial solidarity of a compact and conscious racial majority. In America that constituency is lacking. No race among us, no faith among us, and no class or party can safely call itself an assured majority. Nobody in America can obtain a majority except by making it up from time to time through a transient coalition of many minorities. The whole society which underlies American political institutions is a mosaic of minorities in which no one is so dominant as to be a threat to the liberties of any. We are a nation with no permanently dominating group in religion, in nationality, in interest, or in opinion. Our leaders can gain or keep power only so long as their doctrine and policy are just and acceptable in the eyes of many minorities. Any man who, in America, advocates oppression or disregard of the rights of any minority is entitled to the same intelligence rating as one who saws off the limb on which he is sitting.

While some minority groups in America may yield to the appeal of intolerance I do not believe that enough minorities will so forget their own need for freedom as to leave freedom undefended.

Racial persecutions are invariably the product of fear. In Europe, fear often rules both individual and collective thinking. Existence is precarious. Each nation is doubtful of its self-sufficiency. Real enemies are close at hand; war is always imminent. In such an atmosphere leaders easily conjure up fears and identify Jews with dreaded enemies.

But we in America are not easily scared for long. We are isolated and not surrounded by enemies. We are self-confident. We have had a

few temporary spasms of fear. We have had alien and sedition laws, and the anti-Masonic and "Know-Nothing" movements and the Ku Klux Klan, and periodic "Red" hunts. But we always wind up by laughing at ourselves and at each other for getting scared. And as long as Americans keep their traditional courage, there will be no persecutions of minorities.

America has also set its face to eradicate those economic insecurities and social injustices which are fruitful producers of fear and hate.

Nothing brings out racial differences or religious differences, or any old differences at all, like a shortage of food or shelter or jobs or opportunity. Fear that there may not be enough to go around arouses instincts and struggles that are elemental and uncompromising. One cannot overlook that the anti-Semitic tactics abroad are to appeal to the economic hopelessness of the masses. They are told that all of their hardships are caused by Jews. We can avoid such a danger by avoiding the hardships.

There is no excuse for a distress level of living in America. This country has the resources which, if properly utilized, will feed, clothe and shelter all of its people at an acceptable standard of living. And the utilization of those resources for that purpose would give jobs for everybody.

My confidence that America will not yield up its inheritance of good will and toleration of all races is due to my confidence that the efforts of President Roosevelt to strike down economic injustice, and to bring about social security, and to preserve democracy, will succeed.

Indeed, the rights of your people and their opportunity on these shores is inescapably bound up with the preservation of democracy.

President Roosevelt has said, "Democracy, the practice of self-government, is a covenant among free men to respect the rights and liberties of their fellows."

And Thomas Mann out of a bitter experience with other forms of government says, "We must define Democracy as that form of govern-

ment and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man.”

The task of liberal government in this day is to provide sanctions that will enforce our covenant to respect each other's rights, and to advance the measures that will support the dignity of man.

It is but just that democracy should afford a shelter to the Jew who early furnished the vision of democracy to the world. In Israel we find the first authentic evidence of a social consciousness among the leaders of organized society. It was here that the ethics of democracy were the warp and woof of the meditations of men. One can scarcely discuss modern problems of democracy without borrowing the language as well as the thought embodied in such precepts as “A man cannot serve two masters,” or in the question “Am I my brother's keeper?”

Democracy in America is under a heavy debt to individual Jews. There are those who think of the Jew only as a man of trade and who picture him as concerned only with the accumulation of wealth. That is a false picture in America, at least. Our great banking houses are guided by Yankee thrift and no Jew could better the commercial instruction of the Yankee. In the financial and industrial corporations there are relatively few Jewish directors.

The predominant contribution of the Jew to American life is intellectual. In the law it is doubtful if the contributions of any man of our times may be measured against those of Mr. Justice Brandeis or the late Mr. Justice Cardozo. Given to the nation, against an incredibly bitter opposition, by Woodrow Wilson, Mr. Justice Brandeis with his associate, Mr. Justice Holmes, almost alone sustained the spiritual courage and the intellectual integrity of liberal political thought in America during the dark and futile days from 1920 to 1932.

The other day I read a speech delivered some years ago by Justice Cardozo, which ranks among the many legacies he left to thoughtful men. “The submergence of self in the pursuit of an ideal,” he said, “the readiness to spend oneself without measure, prodigally, almost ecstatically, for

something intuitively apprehended as great and noble, spend oneself one knows not why—some of us like to believe that this is what religion means.”

The pledge that in Palestine your indestructible people would find a national home after eighteen centuries of exile, dispersion, and suffering is a challenge to the Christian conscience. What American would not rejoice to see the reunited Children of Israel resurrect the life and culture of the people of the Bible in that little land which has shaped our faith? Who can fail in sympathy with exiles who turn, as their fathers turned of old, to Palestine as a Promised Land where bondage will be broken, where they may find tranquillity of spirit. This masterful stock after its long Odyssey of dispersion and suffering has yet the astonishing tenacity of spirit that the Egyptian taskmasters found in the Children of Israel of whom Exodus tells us “the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew.”³

I can easily understand the anxiety and distress of Jews everywhere, as in land after land, your people are subjected to a policy of afflictions which we had supposed had long been renounced by all civilized governments.

Yet I believe that there should be a stirring of Christian anxiety even deeper than your own. A terrible debit is being written in the great book of history against the non-Jewish world, and those who have faith in ultimate justice fear that it is the Gentile rather than the Jew who should seek deliverance.

It is the non-Jewish world that is earning for itself a day of retribution and leaving its children a legacy of shame. To earnestly carry out the promise and help to fulfil the hope of a Jewish National Home in Palestine might be a powerful help on the Day of Atonement.

The Jew, as of old, is again on the rack of persecution. But the far-seeing know that persecution, like fire, purifies the spirit. Among a persecuted people, noble forces come to the top and bloom in a finer culture and a nobler life. They forgive old grudges; they forget the feuds of

³ Exodus 1, 12.

more prosperous days; they draw together and achieve a solidarity in sacrifice. Smarting under a sense of wrong, they hand on a legacy of nobility and courage and spiritual exaltation which comes only of suffering.

What a contrast does the camp of the persecutor present! Quarrels always arise over plunder; spoils call out only greed and snarls. Fear and suspicion take the place of trust of friends, for none knows who next will be proscribed. Recrimination, feuds, and spiritual degradation come of persecuting the helpless.

Perhaps only the seers and poets know how the laws of compensation will adjust the balances. Perhaps only the historian can bear witness to the exaltation of a people by suffering and to the spiritual disintegration of oppressors and wrongdoers. Perhaps only philosophers appreciate that to be innocent, long-suffering and poor may store up greater treasures than to be rich, hard and unbelieving.

But I am urging you as leaders of your people to summon the wisdom of the ages and lift up your hearts. Your race is again on the anvil, taking that terrible hammering which has made the toughness of character that has so influenced mankind.

It seems only yesterday that we thought mankind to be achieving a democratic society which would respect the personality of every individual and receive him upon his worth alone. To the Jewish people this world of hope and opportunity and good will must seem forever to have passed away. If they but keep their spiritual integrity, there will yet be help. As Kipling put it:

*“Our world has passed away
In wantonness o’erthrown.
There is nothing left today
But steel and fire and stone!”*

*“Though all we knew depart,
The old Commandments stand:—
‘In courage keep your heart,
In strength lift up your hand.’”*