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EGYPT DEAD—ISRAEL LIVING

Monumental Egypt and Modern Israel
"My strength and my song is the Eternal and He is become my salvation!" This outburst of song heard on the seventh day of Passover in all our synagogues, transports us in fancy to the banks of the Red Sea where stood the freed bondsmen of Israel, "and saw the Egyptians dead at the Red Sea."

Egypt dead, Israel living! The oppressor dead, the oppressed set free! What wonder the poet breaks forth in rapturous song at this contrast.

But that was in a very ancient day. Has it any force with us? Indeed this same startling contrast is brought vividly home to us by such a sensational discovery as that which took place on the 26th of January, 1907, as reported in the "Jewish Chronicle" of London. Mr. Davis and Mr. Ayrton on that day succeeded after long and continued excavations in entering the tomb and discovering the mummy of Queen Teie, of Egypt. Sons of Israel (as I understand them to be), they looked upon Egypt dead. A queen ante-dating Moses, her remains intact in mummified form, the necklace still about her neck, golden bracelets upon her wrists, a royal crown upon her brow! Surely here was a vivid presentation of Egypt dead and Israel alive.

Obedient the mandate of the Haggadah for Passover, each one is to look upon himself as having personally gone out of Egypt. How keen then is the sentiment of wonder and what mingled emotions well forth in our hearts as we mark that contrast renewed today between dead Egypt and living Egypt.

The artist has set forth this contrast in the title page of the new "Union Haggadah," under the caption "Monumental Egypt and Modern Israel."

He depicts the gateway of an ancient Egyptian temple in ruins. Above it is the beetle with outspread wings, representing the sun, the universal emblem of the Egyptian religion. On the lintels of the gateway are carved scenes depicting the Hebrew slaves at work under the lash of the Egyptian taskmasters. Across the threshold the broken and overthrown image of Rameses, the Pharaoh of the Oppression, lies prostrate. Types of modern Israel, oriental and occidental, surmount the fallen image and look out upon the great Egyptian desert in whose sands Sphinx and Pyramids are embedded.

The contrast thus vividly depicted at once raised the question "Why did weak and helpless Israel survive while mighty Egypt is but a monumental memory?" The answer is indicated in the picture. Looking through the gateway of the ancient temple one sees everywhere in Egypt nothing but tombs. The Pyramids are tombs for the Pharaohs. The grottos and ruins of Sarcophagi fill the land. The whole country is a Necropolis or city of the dead. The Egyptians brooded over death. Their temples were the open gateways to the sepulchre. Their Bible was the "Book of the Dead." The pomp and ceremony of their imposing rituals mounted to the fullest grandeur in the funeral cortege. The dead were swathed in costly bands and the cunning art of the embalmer, among them reached its fullest development.

Israel on the other hand was devoted to life. Our religion centers not about the grave but about the home. Our Bible is a book of life, devoted to the guidance of every act, from childhood to old age, so as to make this world more heavenly. Its purpose, "Holy shall ye be, for I the Lord thy God am holy!" laid the emphasis on purity of life here, satisfied that thus the life hereafter would best take care of itself.

Egypt dead, Israel living! A further explanation of this astonishing contrast is offered by the observations of a friend while traveling in Egypt and writing most interesting letters to the Jewish press. He noted that to the Egyptian fellaheen—the common laborers and peasants who are descendants of the ancient Egyptians—these great monuments which have withstood the storms of centuries, mean nothing. They can not read the inscriptions, or if they can, no message is thereby conveyed to their minds. In them the historic consciousness is dead. But Israel lives. He, whose sires were once bondsmen to the ancestors of these lowly Egyptians, still hears a voice calling to him down the centuries. That voice has never been hushed through the ages. Its message has grown in power and significance as it passed from Patriarch to Sages. Never has there been a lapse of memory. The historic consciousness has kept alert through all the darkness of the trying ages and quickens with unwonted brilliancy in this era of emancipation. Therefore Israel lives.

But there is a third and highest explanation for the strange contrast which is suggested by the recital today of the "Song of Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea." That song is not a mere vindictive outburst of ecstatic glee at the discomfiture of the foe. Were it such it would not be worthy in us to praise its strains from year to year on our gladsome Passover.

It is a paean of praise on the triumph of freedom. It is a glorious song of thanksgiving that the ages of murderous, pitiless cruelty are done and the hope of the nobler days of equality and justice are come. The Midrash emphasizes this as the true interpretation of the ancient song by depicting in poetic fancy a scene on high. The heavenly hosts are gathered about the throne of the Almighty and at the very moment when Israel stands redeemed at the banks of the Red Sea, the angels above prepare to sing and praise the Creator.

But God rebukes His ministering angels and hushes their song. "What, will ye sing while my children lie dead on the banks of the sea!" The boastful, hard-headed Egyptians, these too are God's erring children. Can there be anything more exquisite, more delicate, more exalted in sentiment? We hear such sentiment praised in these days of the "Christian Spirit." The Jew is commonly denounced as harsh, cruel, revengeful, vindictive, yet ages before Christianity was, the sage of the book Proverbs admonished: "In the downfall of thine enemy thou shalt not rejoice!" Even the old Mosaic code, condemned as it is for its "lex talionis," the rigid requirement of eye for eye, tooth for tooth, declared that even "the beast of thy foe shalt thou not pass heedlessly by when thou seest him fallen under his burden, but shalt surely relieve him." The tender spirit of mercy and equity which runs through all Jewish law and practice is wantonly and willfully ignored and misinterpreted. One weariness of hearing everything humane, kindly and noble claimed as Christian, for that very spirit as contrasted with the brutality of the Egyptian best explains why Israel survived.

Whence sprang this great difference which resulted on the one hand in the devastation of Egypt and on the other in the perpetuation of Israel? Clearly enough from the difference in the underlying principles which inspired the motives and doings of either people. Egypt worshipped the sun, moon and stars. It set its mere creation in the place of the Creator. Egypt worshipped bulls, cats and lambs. It served the mere brutal. No people ever advanced higher than its ideals. Israel looked beyond nature to nature's God. Its religion was spiritual. It conceived of God as perfect. It aimed to be like God. This sublime idealism created its code of pure and perfect ethics, its saintlike characters, its sublime martyrs.

If all this be the true explanation of the contrast between Egypt dead, and Israel living, then this closing day of our Passover festival which recalls the contrast, places upon us three distinct obligations. Israel's religion being a religion of life which centers about the home, we must resolve to deepen the home ties and sanctify them in the spirit of the beautiful Seder service. Our religion must pass from the home into all our activities, touch life at all points, dignifying and exalting all our interests.

If Israel has survived because its historic consciousness has been sustained, then must we see to it that in this era the abysmal ignorance of Jewish matters which still prevails, be removed from among us. The inspirations of the noblest past must be made to stir our youth to loyalty and zeal. It is the ignorant Jew who is ashamed of being a Jew. The cowardly, weak and renegade Jew is he in whose soul has never awakened a responsive thrill to the grandeur of our heroic past.

Last and highest of all, let us dedicate ourselves to the beautiful and exalted ethics which Judaism has given the world and as the messenger of which it has, commissioned us to be "the priest-people" to mankind. If Jewish ethics are still decried as inferior to the Christian ethics; if we are charged with low standards and if "to Jew" means to cheat, then must we make that name a synonym for integrity. Let us remember that Israel struck the first telling blow for freedom because the people believed in freedom and they believed in the God of freedom. "The people feared the Eternal and they believed in Him." Ethics without religion are as a tree whose roots are torn from the soil whence it draws the sap of nourishment. You may have a reasoned ethics but it will not last. There must be life, warmth, deathless devotion for the right. You can not have morality without a passion for good. It is the love of God which frees the soul for morality. Let each one conquer within himself daily impulses to do evil, to be cruel, to do unkindness and to sin. Do this through the passion for righteousness and you will be able truthfully to sing "God is my strength. He is my song. He is become my salvation."—Henry Berkowitz, in American Israelite.

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