



The Spirit and Purpose

of

Free Synagogue

Sermon by

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at

Dedication of

STEPHEN WISE FREE SYNAGOGUE

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IT WAS SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, but it seems like yesterday, that Albert Einstein came in from Princeton to visit Stephen Wise on the occasion of what proved to be the latter's last birthday on earth. Otto Nathan of Columbia University and I were present in Dr. Wise's apartment, and I remember that Dr. Wise's sister was there for a moment too. Two giants of kindred spirits and uncommon ideals were met and sparks rocketed from the anvil of their exchanges and understanding. Their conversation was marked by humor and humanity. It was intimate and inspiring.

I wondered then and have wondered since what it was that brought these two, so largely unlike, so closely together, and I believe that it may well be the concern of both with the idea and reality of unity. Einstein then was almost ready or had already completed for all I know his recently publicized Unified Field Theory. His entire life had been devoted to comprehending and laying bare the deep underlying unity of the universe, to unifying the laws of gravitation and the laws of electromagnetism within one superstructure of universal law, to revealing the relationships between matter and energy, space and time. His Unified Field Theory would seem to be the rational perception of the unity of the universe.

Stephen Wise throughout his life expressed the Jewish concept of unity as taught in the words: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." His life was a psalm devoted to the substance and poetry of this sublime perception of prophets and priests, of rabbis and poets and philosophers throughout the ages.

Einstein and Wise have said the same thing differently, but is not what they said essentially the same — one universe, one system of laws in which it is contained, one humanity, one God?

It was this concept of unity which animated the mind and enflamed the heart of Stephen Wise, and enabled him greatly to dream and greatly to achieve as a humanitarian, as a Jew, as an American. It was this aim of oneness of law, universalism of freedom, equality of justice and opportunity that enabled him to engage heroically in battle with the forces of evil, and inured him to the blows of fate and fortune he encountered in the course of his stormy career. His was the stature of a prophet of Israel. He was a profound interpreter of the all-embracing

nature of the Moral Law, a passionate champion of the brotherhood of men under the fatherhood of God. With all his might he fought the good fight, and he fought it with undiminished ardor regardless of the cost to himself to the very end of his days. For years he lived on borrowed time, and neither as Americans nor as Jews shall we ever be able to repay the debt we owe him. Jews and Christians were his brothers, the small and the great his friends. Peace was his passion, a free and freedom preserving America and Israel and world his dedication, the entire universe his concern. We need more of his like, with his greatness of heart, his unflinching moral bravery, his zeal for good, his zest for life, his love of God.

CONTINUES TO LIVE AMONG US

By his works and their pervading and permanent influence shall he continue to live among us, as well as in the hearts of the hosts who cherished him in his day from near and afar. It is a source of happiness to me as his successor as the President of the Jewish Institute of Religion which he founded, to be able to participate in the first Sabbath service of the new edifice of the Free Synagogue which he created. Here in this house of worship, the dreams of him, who layed the spiritual as well as the actual corner stone of its structure, shall continue, please God, to be translated into reality and bring light and life to countless souls.

We Jews know through the hard lessons of fate that no institution is enduring and no structure secure save it house an imperishable spirit, and keep burning the flame of its significance. Such an institution has been the Free Synagogue, created by Wise in 1907 and lit up with his spirit all his life long. The annals of history shall record that this synagogue was indeed devoted to freedom, to its concept and practice. The rabbi had the right of freedom of speech, and to no one was given the authority, when his message was uncomfortable to the complacency of some of his hearers or unpalatable for a multitude of reasons to others, to tell him to stay his tongue or bid him hie himself to the hill-country of obscurity and there speak forth to his heart's content. No, it was not the rabbi who departed from this pulpit when his interpretation of the word of God was not consonant with the requirements of those who attended or were alarmed by its services, but the Caesars who fled its precincts to be quit of the blows at their consciences.

Special privilege was banished from the Free Synagogue, whether it was the privilege of not permitting the Rabbi to say what he pleased or of preempting a permanent and particular pew. No, before the eyes of God, there were, he taught, no rich or poor except in heart and spirit. Rabbi Wise would

permit no distinctions of wealth or position to prevail in the house of prayer where the equality of brotherhood and not the inequalities of fortune was the basis of belonging and the badge of distinction. And membership was within the reach of every purse. Not the pride of possession but the possession of pride in the wonder and nobility and promise of human beings as the children of God became the passkeys of entrance into the corridors and halls of the Free Synagogue. Through his insistence upon utter freedom and absolute equality in his synagogue, Stephen Wise played, in this as in many other respects, a salutary role in American Jewish life. This re-emphasis and reinterpretation of the approach of our fathers to the worship of God contributed immeasurably to preserving and enhancing the integrity and intensity and vitality of Judaism in America. Such is the tradition and such is the continuing challenge of the Free Synagogue of today.

And it was in this spirit that Stephen Wise established the Jewish Institute of Religion in 1922, in order to serve the entirety of Israel, *Kelal Yisrael*. All ye who are hungry, enter and eat. All ye who will accept upon yourselves the yoke of the Moral Law may study to become Rabbis in Israel to serve its various groups, as companions all in a common covenant with the God of our fathers, with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Jewish Institute of Religion was and will remain liberal in its religious and political orientation, open to all qualified students who care to devote themselves to the studying and teaching of the Torah, devoted to the religion and people and land of Israel, dedicated to the Biblical principles that alone will guarantee the growing greatness and survival of our homeland of America.

OFFERED CONSTRUCTIVE LEADERSHIP

More perhaps than any other Jew in America, Stephen Wise offered to the great masses of Jews settled, particularly during his lifetime, in such great numbers on the Eastern seaboard, a constructive leadership that was warm and liberal and Jewish and American. With this leadership, he was able to win the hearts of great numbers of the Jewish masses who otherwise might have been misled by the materialistic conception of history and life that was so strongly espoused by others.

And his appeal was all the stronger, because as a natural consequence of his kindling kind of Jewish enlightenment, Wise was a great American liberal, who fought corruption in politics, exploitation in industry, bigotry and reaction wherever they appeared. Here was a great American battling for the freedoms of a real democracy, who used the gifts with which he had been

endowed for the welfare of the people of America and of the world. Eloquent, fearless, formidable — he epitomized to myriads the spirit of America. Little wonder then that in the D. P. camps in Europe, the code word for this country was Stephania.

DEMOCRATIC VOICE OF MASSES

Yet another institution was created by this master builder, when one of them alone would have done credit to any man. It was the American Jewish Congress, which he brought into being in 1917 and established on a permanent basis in 1922. It was followed subsequently by its concomitant, the World Jewish Congress. The ideals of equality and unity which had motivated the establishment of the Free Synagogue and of the Jewish Institute of Religion impelled him to establish the American Jewish Congress as the democratic voice of the masses of American Jewry of so-called East European origin. He gave them thus a position of equality with other organizations, whose leaders and members had stemmed largely, originally, from American Jews of so-called Western or German Jewish background. And through this important and constructive organization, Wise has made it possible to effect a new unity in American Jewish life in the future on the basis of equality between partners.

A new, unified, American Jewry is in the process of being created, with the Jewish groups of the entire country being fused into a single, homogeneous, dynamic entity. The role that Isaac M. Wise played in an earlier day, Stephen S. Wise has played in our own. Each helped integrate an entire generation, in a spiritual sense, into the finest that Judaism and America had and have to offer. Isaac M. Wise gave practical leadership and inspired religious guidance to the German Jewish immigrant masses seeking integration into the American scene, and a re-interpretation of the eternal verities of Judaism in the idiom of America and in harmony with the American philosophy which had attracted them to these shores. Stephen Wise made much the same contribution for great numbers of East European Jews.

Each of these men created three institutions to serve their purposes and perpetuate and strengthen for their times and the future the life-giving qualities of Judaism. Isaac M. Wise created the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Union College, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, making them potent and beneficent forces both in the Jewish and general life of America. Stephen S. Wise, in his turn, also established three institutions, the Free Synagogue, the Jewish In-

stitute of Religion and the American Jewish Congress, and they have served and are serving purposes similar in general to those Isaac M. Wise had in mind. The Free Synagogue is now a member of the great, more than 400-congregation-strong Union of American Hebrew Congregations, its Rabbis are members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Jewish Institute of Religion and the Hebrew Union College have now merged into one institution under one presidency. All these forces have been united, without being totalitarianized, to find together a greater strength for a common cause than might separately have been achieved. Wisdom and need, foresight and selflessness have combined to effect a merger "for the strengthening and advancement of Judaism in America and throughout the world."

In this joining together, in this seeking and achieving greater unity and augmented resources, we think we witness the coming of age of American Jewry. The confusions and controversies and lines of demarcation which have fragmentized our strength are giving way to an encompassing circle of related purposes and common goals. A new, homogeneous American Jewish entity is taking over ever more strongly and ever more creatively. The vast evils of the years gone by, the ugly iniquities and portents of the brittle present emphasize the urgency of living and teaching the Law of the Lord, in order to establish here and everywhere the blessings of a spiritual Zion.

JUDAISM—ADAPTABLE AND UNSHAKABLE

We believe in Judaism, adaptable, changeable, interpretable, unshakable. We are not concerned with adjectives as much as with the essence of Judaism, not so much with the parts and parties as with the entirety of Israel, not so much with the forms of approaching as with the facts of seeking and finding in company with our fellows of all faiths the blessed unity of the all-embracing love of one God, the God of Israel, the God of mankind, the God of the Universe.

To that unity this new Free Synagogue is devoted. Its goals and its affiliations, spell out, in common with other temples, of its like, the growing maturity of the American Jewish Community — a maturity which has been hastened by the somber events of yesteryear. In the shaping of our future as Jews and Americans, this synagogue with its magnificent traditions and its spirited and devoted rabbis and officers and members is bound to continue to play a significant role not only in matters which affect the individual congregant but which influence our community as a whole. There is much for us to do and to strive for as individuals, as citizens, as Jews.

Stephen S. Wise was a great American citizen in the best

sense of the word, and exercised thus a mighty political influence. A modern Jeffersonian, he exemplified the highest ideals of our Jewish heritage, with which the underlying fundamentals of our American democracy are in essential accord.

JEWISH APPROACH TO LIFE AND GOD

It must be emphasized that when we speak of the American philosophy of life, we do not speak of something apart from our own religious philosophy and orientation, something fixed and firm which we American Jews or any other group of American citizens must accept or reject. The American philosophy is one which we, in common with others, have helped form and are constantly helping shape, as did Stephen Wise his entire life long, and which we must be constantly on the guard to preserve and protect. The Jewish approach to life and God has always been characterized by an abiding concern for the welfare of humanity, which is indeed a basic principle of our American democracy.

It was to safeguard that kind of approach to life and liberty, to perpetuate the principles of the America of Washington and Jefferson and Lincoln that we Americans, Jews and Christians, have twice within the memory of most of us and with the participation of many of us gone to war. We have, with heart anguish, it is true, seen our children also go into battle, so that with their blood too they could help protect for themselves and their future the freedoms upon which our great democratic commonwealth is based.

We Americans, Jews and Gentiles, are partners in the noblest social experiment that has ever taken place on such a vast scale in the history of civilization, — an experiment based upon the Bill of Rights, even as that Bill of Rights is based in turn upon the ethical imperatives of the Bible. We have guaranteed the opportunities of freedom and the equality of opportunity to all the citizens of our country, and we must be on the watch and prepared to battle both in times of war and peace for both the spirit and letter of that guarantee. We must remember that there are dangers which confront us not only from abroad, but which threaten us also at home. And it is to the everlasting credit of the great founder of this Free Synagogue that he was ever in the vanguard of those alert to the evils that endanger American Democracy both inside and outside the borders of our country.

We must all help deepen understanding of the fact that the nature and future of our America depend upon full and fair consideration of each of its component parts, and that there can be no group in our commonwealth, white or black, Jewish or Christian outside the pale of its interest and protection. The day has

not yet come when we as Jews can take our position in America for granted, and that day may never come, anymore than freedom and justice can persist even if once more or less established, unless constantly supported through service and if necessary through sacrifice.

We Jews have reason to be thankful for the role we have been able to play individually and through our various great national Jewish organizations, in helping human beings, thankful for the work we have thus far been privileged to do, for the souls that we have plucked literally from the burning, for the food that we have shared with the needy, for the aid we have rendered the oppressed, for the foundations that we have helped rear thereby for our neighbors' and our brethren's and our own security and freedom. But our tasks are nowhere near ended, either here or abroad.

WE CANNOT ABANDON ISRAEL NOW

We have but begun to provide the barest means to help build up the land and state of Israel. We have but begun to help fructify the barren stretches of the Holy Land, to harness its streams for power and irrigation, to provide tools and materials for factories and farms and homes for the multitudes whose settlement there we have helped make possible. Shall we abandon them now to deteriorate in idleness or despair, and allow our apathy to crush what the enemy could not conquer, or shall we surely stand by them and help support them till they have been able to establish a self-sustaining and productive economy, which will inevitably prove to be of incalculable benefit to the entire Near East and the peace of the world.

But above all, we must be actively aware of the fact that unless we preserve and deepen and make ever more real and effective our Jewish consciousness and Jewish life here at home, we shall ultimately fail in everything else we attempt. We have been so concerned with relief and defense, with the sufferings and persecutions and pathology of our people, that we are in grave danger of neglecting or at least of not emphasizing strongly enough the poetry and culture and religion of Israel, the spirit and purpose of Judaism — by means of which alone, in the final analysis, we have endured the hardships of the millennia and withstood the erosion of the ages. Herein, as I see it, lies the fundamental purpose of this Synagogue and the function of its rabbis.

There are literally tens of thousands of our fine and earnest young men and women who have never had even a smattering of Jewish education, and are growing up largely unacquainted with the glories of mind and spirit that have kept us alive as

Jews for more than 3000 years. There are within our midst whole hosts that have no sympathetic and intelligent guidance for their religious gropings. But if they would find the inner strength that every human being must acquire, the inner serenity that every soul must seek on the pilgrimage through life, then they must find roots in the healthy soil of our faith, in the abundantly good earth of the experience and inspiration of the ethics and lore and law of Israel.

SPIRITUAL FOOTING IN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

Ours is a generation grown up in war and grown weary of spiritual nomadism. Ours is a youth which was catapulted too early into the conflict of nations, compelled too soon to shoulder the burdens of carnage and catastrophes they have not occasioned, to pay with their lives and their psyches for blunders and savageries they have not committed, to meet aforesaid the rigorous responsibilities of shaping their own and their children's future in what we pray will be a fairer world than we have been able to provide for them. Ours is a generation seeking not only physical security, but, what is infinitely more important, and without which that physical security cannot possibly persist — seeking spiritual footing in this age of uncertainty.

Thirty centuries of history should have taught us that the sturdiest foundations of a healthy Jewish life are to be found above all in the synagogue and what the synagogue, what this kind of synagogue that we now dedicate anew, stands for. No, my friends, not by bread alone can we live, nor even by alms — and especially we, the descendants of the people of the book.

If our goal were only to keep Jews and Judaism alive we could well say, *dayyenu*, that in itself would be sufficient, provided that as Jews we live in accordance with the teachings of Judaism. But even more than that, we strive as Jews for the goal of an ideal society, and we can best be true to that goal by being true to ourselves and the spirit of our traditions.

We Jews are more than a people. That term is far too limited to describe us. Our forefathers always wanted the people of Israel to become — and we must strive, however far short we may fall of the ideal, to be — a prototype of universal brotherhood in the one world we yearn for. If that one world is ever to come to pass, we must remember that the salvation of humanity begins at home, with high moral and religious demands being imposed upon each of us. Being a Jew is a moral challenge and a moral opportunity. Let us meet that challenge and take advantage of that opportunity. It is well worth the struggle. For this purpose this Synagogue has been built. Upon it and all those connected with it, upon all of Israel, upon America and mankind, we invoke God's blessing.