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GIFT OF
AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

*Under His Own Vine
and Fig Tree*

A Passover Sermon

by

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WASHINGTON, D. C.

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UNDER THE VINE AND FIG TREE

(Micah, Chapter 4, Verses 1-5.)

ON THE FEAST OF PASSOVER, APRIL 18, 1916.

We meet again on the gladsome Feast of Passover. Nature, glorious in her emancipation, unites with our religion in stirring Spring thoughts of hope and freedom. Passover is our anniversary of birth. Israel is another year old. We look back today over a stretch of thirty-three centuries. Our cradle as a people was rocked along the banks of the Nile, and our first lullaby was pitched in the high key of liberty. No wonder Heine said: "Freedom speaks with a Hebrew accent." Israel's emancipation is the first recorded syllable of a people's struggle for liberty. Six hundred thousand men marched into independence without having drawn a sword or spilt a drop of blood. It was a miracle; but freedom ought always to be bloodless. It is an inherent right.

In that song of freedom our people pledged their loyalty, not to anarchy but to law, not to slavery but to service, not to nature but to nature's God. Through all checkered centuries, basking here in the sunlight of freedom, or crouching there in the cramped quarters of oppression, we are the only people who have not changed our religion, our God or our mission. This annual Feast is a renewal of the old consecration, and crowns us with the continued obligation to work in the cause of freedom and service for Israel and humanity in the centuries to come.

One fine Spring morning, while the oriental world was being shaken to its foundation by the menacing clashes of

Egypt and Assyria, of Israel and the rising power of Babylonia, a young Hebrew prophet was pridefully surveying the fields of his native Moresheth, clothed in its fruitful vines and purpled-colored figs. A new hope, a larger vision, a dream of universal peace burst refulgently upon his enraptured soul. As he turns his eye northward, he sees the hills of Zion flooded with the sunshine of a sublime distinction. He beholds Jerusalem transfigured in a new glory as the religious capital of the world. God had chosen neither mighty Egypt nor Babylonia nor Assyria, but the humble Jerusalem as the world's center, from which will radiate the universal teaching of peace, freedom and justice. The conversion of the world fills his eye. Nations are laying aside their gods and frivolities; a steady stream of peoples is moving up the sacred mountain, asking for instruction and inspiration, determined to be guided not by the lust of power but by the law of God and His righteousness. If God rules, to Him will kings bear allegiance. If Law comes from Sinai, war will no longer be known. The nations will become priests of the Most High, and will return to build and to plant, to dig and to plow, and thus to serve the higher life of a people's welfare and prosperity. This conversion of the heart will compel the conversion of swords into plow-shares, and the soil, no longer crimson with blood, will be golden with a peaceful and happy population. As the prophet sees the nations descending the hill-sides with their plow-shares and pruning hooks as their staff of support, a picture of idyllic beauty, surpassing the pastoral scenes of Horace and Virgil, fills his eye. He beholds everyone sitting under his own vine and fig tree, with no fear of foe or treachery to mar his peace. And this may be called Micah's vision of the universal Passover still to come.

How far, alas, is the vision from the reality? Our prophet, like his contemporary, Isaiah I, who lived twenty-

five hundred years ago, doubtless believed that in a few hundred years his dream would come true. You and I know how far into the unborn future the poet threw upon the canvassed walls of coming civilizations this entrancing picture to be the inspiration for the human race for millennia still to dawn. Dreams must have time-exposure; and while they help to push forward the car of progress in their own days, dreamers must with patience, enthusiasm and heroic loyalty to their ideals still cling to the hope that "in the latter days" the reality will eventually be humanity's privileged possession.

We, too, stand on this happy Spring morning in a world of restless and bleeding passion. Instead of an Egypt or a Babylonia, we have a dozen nations scorning and betraying the vision of Micah. Instead of nations mounting the hill, they are descending to the hell of unspeakable murder and rapine. Instead of their conversion to God, there is a reversion to the old savagery. All the world-struggles for freedom, all the high hopes for peace, all the world-dreams of swords melted into plow-shares, all the visions of nations living fearlessly under their own vines and fig trees, all the high promises of ascending righteousness and solemn pledges to the laws of equity and humanity, have for the present been dashed to the ground, laughed to scorn, to run riot in blood and greed!

Yet it is a Spring morning. Shall we lose hope? Will truth crushed to earth never rise again? Will pruning-hooks no longer tickle the soil into the laughter of peace and smiling prosperity? Can we afford to wipe from our hearts this rejuvenating dream of Micah? No, a thousand times no! Hope springs eternal in the Jewish breast. The Jew feels that, if not this year, then next year, or the years after, the dream must come true. "L'shana habba" embodies the undying hope of Israel for the coming of the day to which God and His justice are compromised. Until that time arrives there is a task for everyone. If we cannot

solve the universal problem, let us labor for the national one; and if the national task seems beyond us, the local duty in the immediate vicinity is every man's field of operation, where he may labor in sobriety and in industry, so that under his own vine and fig tree, he need not be afraid. In the words of Voltaire, "Let us cultivate our own gardens."

Setting aside, then, Micah's dream of the conversion of nations and of the world's tribunal of peace, we will do well to consider the two aspects of the phrase "to sit under his own vine and fig tree." I call your attention to the economic interpretation of this sentence. As a matter of fact, Micah did not see every man sitting under his own vine and fig tree. On the contrary, the agricultural and moral conditions of Israel and of Judah presented a picture of utter spoliation and degradation. It was an age of rampant injustice and enervating extravagance. Vast estates were in the hands of the great nobles. Venal judges, corrupt priests and grasping magnates were responsible for the crying social evils. Oppressive taxation and extortion of the poor ate at the very core of the domestic security. Domesticity was shameless; "a man's enemies are the men of his own house." Micah tells us: "They build up Zion with blood-guiltiness; they covet fields and robbed them; they add house to house, and defraud the man and his heritage; they abhor justice, and they eat the flesh of my people." Man's little field, his home, his family lot, his little vine, his inheritance, have been taken from him by perjury. The sense of responsibility which would link a man to his soil, and give him the sense of proprietorship and the prideful independence of adding to the prosperity of a nation was ruthlessly snapped. He was no longer a master. He was a servant, a renter, a borrower. He was dwelling under some one else's vine and fig tree, always afraid. The masters had at last converted pruning-hooks into scorpions, and plowshares into leeches, which were sucking the very blood and virility of the soil. The soil, thus desecrated, reacted

on the soul, which lost its moral and spiritual fibre. So fearlessly did Micah inveigh against the social evils of his day that his heroism became a synonym for free speech in Jeremiah's day. So nobly did he separate the ceremonial morality from divine morality, that his sentiments "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God" have become the classic definition of the highest religious truth and obligation of man. Such was the actual picture of economic and ethical degradation out of which the inspired Micah drew the vision of universalism.

Were the time at my disposal, it would be worth while to trace the relation between the economic desecration of the soil and the moral degradation of the race from the time that Moses gave each man his family lot unto this very day where the joy "to have and to hold" no longer possesses the souls of untold thousands of farmers and workmen in every part of the earth; where instead of living and working under their own vine and fig tree, men are slaving under the trees of foreign masters, whom they do not know, and who in turn have no interest in or for them. The economic institutions of Moses were built on the conservative unit of the family lot. Man was God's steward. The Jubilee, every fifty years, with its loud Shofar note of freedom, was the hopeful return to the former economic status of independent yeomanry.

Within recent years and in most countries, it is possible for the Jew to dwell under his own vine and fig tree in an industrial sense. The Jew has an unusual opportunity to bring all the passionate enthusiasm for economic equity and social morality, which he ought to have caught from the prophets of old, to bear upon modern conditions. The Jew by instinct, training, and conviction ought to be the most forceful preacher of the new soil-morality and the practicer of the highest commercial ethics. The cry of

"Forward to the Soil" is a call to the Jew for the spread of economic freedom, and an opportunity of relieving those evils which congestion necessarily engenders, so that in an actual sense many thousands of our people may dwell under their own cultivated vines and fig trees. The National Farm School, the Baron De Hirsch Agricultural Society, and The Industrial Removal Society are doing most creditable work in this line. In this connection, it is a source of pride to mention the exceptional service of the Honorable David Lubin who, with the prophet's high acclaim and passion for equity, has conceived the creation of The International Institute of Agriculture, and whose dynamic advocacy of the National Marketing Bill, the Rural Credit Bill, and other propositions is his abiding conviction that local, national and international prosperity and peace are rooted in the independence of the farmer, and in the equitable distribution and exchange of his products. What confronted Micah is also our problem. The same evils in an infinite variety beset us.

The purely agricultural aspect is but a phase of the larger ethico-cultural problem. All questions of production and manufacture, of labor and wage, of distribution and sale, cannot be viewed in a detached, mechanical or unmoral manner. They enter the problems of good and evil, of vice and value, of living and dying. Whatever concerns life concerns personality, and becomes impregnated with a moral issue. More ramified, more complex, more insidious than the evils against which Micah held forth, are the social and industrial ills which affect us. Where are the Micahs of the twentieth century? Cannot the Jew be the prophet of the modern Revival?

Turning from this purely economic aspect, there is a distinctively Jewish view of this text which comports well with our religious task and our Pesach loyalty, and to which I invite your attention. May it not be possible for

the Jew to sit under his own vine and fig tree in a wholly religious sense? Our prophets and psalmists found rich symbolism in the words "vine and fig," and dozens of quotations could be adduced to justify this statement. One especial instance is in the ninth verse of Psalm LXXX, "A Vine didst Thou remove out of Egypt; Thou drovest out nations, and plantedst it. It sent out its tendrils as far as the sea, unto the river its succers." This vine was first planted by Almighty God in Egypt; in course of time it was uprooted and transplanted to Canaan. There is not a country into whose soil it has not sunk its roots. It is a wondrous fact that this vine has been able to withstand the rigors of all climates and the vigors of all cultures. Israel is this noble vine; how firm is its trunk; how sturdy is its fibre; how wide-spreading its tendrils and boughs! They stretch from Egypt to America. Many an ax has been laid at its root; many a fire has been kindled to reduce it to ashes; many a storm has been stirred to shake it to the ground, and yet despite ax and fire and storm of human hatred, the curse of Church and State, Pogrom and persecution, this noble vine still grows and sends out new shoots. The aliveness of the plant, the ever-circulating sap of Israel's blood and virility is the moving marvel of human history.

The Jew in dispersion acts as if native to the soil of every country. This is his genius of adaptability. From the time of Abraham to this hour, he believed that he was chosen of God from among the nations to be among the nations. Nowhere does Israel believe that he has a merely Hebrew mission. With a pardonable pride, he has assumed the responsibility of taking unto himself the message of Abraham to be a blessing unto the nations. It is only as transplanted in every soil that he has been enabled to be the international blessing. The Jew flourishing everywhere and charging himself with the task of a blessed service is truly

an anomalous creature. With no physical dominion, he has dared to encompass a spiritual empire. For centuries denied his own vine and fig, he has worked in the vineyards of others. Longest on the earth's surface, he seems with every Spring to display a new virility and an intellectual emancipation.

Can Israel continue as a noble and fertile vine in every land, or must he be wholly uprooted to grow luxuriantly only in Palestine? Is the vigor of Israel as a people dissipated or vitiated because of his adaptability? Is it only on the physical hills of Palestine that Israel can strike root and spread his tendrils from sea to sea? Does not Zionism, from this angle, contradict the force of our adaptability and the course of our progress in the past years? After all, is it not the same vine, the same stock, the same vigor everywhere? That the vine has its competitors or, better still, its enemies, which feed on its strength, is at once admitted. Why shall we say that persecution in one country and freedom in another are the two most dangerous blights, which will shrivel the fibre, attenuate the toughness and reduce the stock to mere timber? Let us admit that modern conditions "have broken down its fences; the boar out of the forest doth gnaw at it, and what moveth on the field doth feed on it" as our Psalmist bitterly complained. Every age repeats the same pathetic story. Is there any guarantee that, were Israel transplanted into national unity, it would escape the boar out of the forest, or the bear that walketh like a man? In other words, so far as the physical vigor of Israel is concerned, so far as his ability to hold his own in a Western or in an Eastern culture or climate is concerned, the fear of the devastation of the vine is logically unthinkable. It is rational to hope that a little freedom in Russia will give a lively circulation to the sap of Israel's development. The unity of Israel as a people is an established and a solemn fact.

The vine is prized for its grapes. If the vine represents Israel, the grapes symbolize Judaism. Need I tell you how the fruit of religious truths has freighted down the boughs of our vine? Are not the Ten Commandments, the ethical teachings of Moses, the lyric and contrite beauty of the psalms, the lofty ethical sweep of the Prophets, the social teachings of Rabbis and philosophers, fragrant in Bible and Talmud, but the grapes which we have given to the world? Has not humanity fed on them? When you analyze the teachings of the dominant faiths, will you not find that they are grapes of our grapes, stalks of our vine? Nor shall we take time to tell what the world has given us in return for our religious contribution.

Our task is clear. If Israel, the vine, flourishes everywhere, he has no higher duty than to continue producing grapes of spiritual truth and moral heroism, of ethical service and of religious behavior. Only let us see to it that, instead of only boasting of the grapes of the past, we in our age try to develop a fruitage which will be fragrant with the joy of modern duty. Let us see to it that we in our day produce religious truths which, while redolent of the vigor of the ancient vine, shall be kissed and warmed and fertilized by the sunshine of modern freedom and modern loyalty.

At once we will be told that new grapes of the religious spirit cannot be grown save amid absolutely Jewish conditions. We will be told that only where the Jewish consciousness is home-made and home-grown is there any likelihood of Judaism producing a religious fruitage. If freedom in America is fatal to Judaism, we must perforce subscribe to the fatalism of Russian tyranny. If Judaism cannot flower in the sunshine of America, our joy in the emancipation of Israel to civic manhood has been an unforgivable tragedy and a mockery of us by the God of history. Why should not Judaism bear the stamp of a Western as well

as of an Oriental atmosphere? Why must Judaism, in order to be Judaism, possess only the taste and color of the Palestinian hillsides. The sunshine of Spain produced an efflorescence of the Jewish spirit, which need cause no blush to the cheek of any of the ancient or modern Zionists.

Reform Judaism is more than an aesthetic accommodation. It is a natural flowering of an emancipating enthusiasm for the Jehovah of Israel. That our fences need bolstering up, that the soil about our roots needs loosening, that noxious weeds call for uprooting is admittedly true of Reform and of Orthodox fields; but that these same untoward conditions may arise in Palestine is not conceded. The vine longs for the grape. The grape hugs the vine. Israel needs Judaism. Judaism needs Israel as her exponent; both need freedom in which to grow. Let us not sacrifice either the Jew or his Judaism for the sake of geography. History has a question-mark after every Adventist movement.

The grapes pressed in the vat give us the wine. Israel's poets sing of the wine that gladdens the heart of man. Israel's writers have long since warned us that, taken in excess, it maddens the mind and saddens the spirit of man. Wine, drunk sanely, is the elixir of hope, and the effervescent sparkle of joy. It is used by the Jew to consecrate every festive occasion. The rational appreciation of this Janus-faced privilege ought not call for any warning to the modern Jew. He has long since learnt how to take the pleasures of life sanely, and how to value the virtue of sobriety. Neither asceticism nor intoxication wins Jewish approval.

Symbolically the Passover wine expresses four phases of redemption. We believe in freedom under the God of Justice. The wine taken to excess represents license and anarchy. Israel is proud to drink the wine of freedom from the chalice held out by the Goddess of Liberty. We hope for freedom for others. Alas, how many of our brethren are celebrating their Feast by a fast? How many thou-

sands of them are eating the bread of affliction? How many thousands of them are making new trails through the Siberian deserts? How many of them, far from leaving one vacant chair for Elijah, see several yawning gaps, once filled by father and sons? Our prayers are fervent that, when this war is over there will not be a Jew of the vine of Israel, who will be robbed of his freedom in Russia or Roumania or anywhere. We pray that the same freedom may be granted everyone of God's children. We hope that, when the war will be over, and men will come to their senses, they will mount the hill of righteousness, sheathing their swords and spears, consecrating their pruning-hooks with the hallowing wine of freedom, so that men may return in peace and fearlessness to sit under their vine and fig trees.

For us Jews in America, to whom the wine of liberty is an hourly beverage, there is a timely warning necessary. Let us not be guilty of idolizing freedom. We may show a tendency of weakness in our intoxication of emancipation which benumbs our religious responsibility. Freedom is no justification for laxity or supineness. Freedom in America should give every Jew a higher appreciation of his civic responsibility, without enervating his religious obligation. There is no reason why we may not lift up the cup of American salvation, and yet call upon the name of God. There is no reason why we may not drink from the cup of American salvation and yet call upon the name of every Jew for loyalty and unswerving fidelity. Freedom has its allurements, and we Jews in America shall learn such back-boned self-respect as to be able to look over our neighbors' fence without coveting their grapes or complaining of our own as sour. Our freedom here does not give us the license to stab our Jewish brethren. Every Jew in the country should be an anti-defamationist. There is nothing more despicable than, growing hot over the insults upon us of

non-Jews, that we Jews should be the creators of new prejudice against ourselves. Of all kinds of prejudice, Jewish Anti-Semitism is the most unforgiveable.

The New Freedom is not inconsistent with the old loyalty. A cowardly slinking of the Jew from his duty to his brethren or to his religion is in nowise to be attributable to the prized privilege of civic and religious freedom. At least in this respect Zionism is more than admirable; it has sounded a call in no uncertain tones to the right of Jewish self-assertion. The freedom in our country in no wise justifies a lessening but, on the other hand, it actually implies a strengthening of Jewish manhood, a deepening of Jewish fervor, a tightening of Jewish loyalty, and a heightening of Jewish self-respect. With no favors to ask, no special consideration to implore, no apologies to make, the Jew in freedom has every opportunity for the development of his culture in this country and in every country where he may drink the wine of liberty. Here, then, Jewishly speaking, he may actually sit under his vine and fig tree with none to make him afraid. If he is afraid, it is likely to be the fear which his own imagination has conjured up.

It is easy to plant a slip or a twig or a tendril of the vine, but there is an art in knowing how to tend and train it. These slips represent the children, who in course of time will become sturdy stalks. They represent the children, who, it is hoped, will produce grapes of their own. Israel has always boasted of his domestic purity and virility. He has laid emphasis on the consecration of childhood. He took seriously to heart the one hundred and twenty-eighth psalm which said: "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine in the recesses of thy house." Marital purity was our glory. We must not permit freedom to be an excuse for the weakening of the domestic fibre, nor for a cheap imitation of the vices of our neighbors. We have an absolute right to be distinctive in our domestic piety and in our family devotion. It is our parental duty because of the love we bear one

another, to concentrate the whole of our devotion upon the religious and ethical upbringing of our children. They will decide, even better than we, in how far the Jew can stand the allurements of emancipation in an industrial world. To the religious school and to the home must we look for the cultivation of the Jewish consciousness, and for the hope that the children will produce a fruitage of their own. Holidays like Passover have an unusual power of strengthening the roots of Jewish loyalty in a child. Our duty lies in the education of our children, to keep them staunch to their inheritance, to the love of the old family lot, to a soulful appreciation of the old grapes, without dulling their taste for the fruits grown on modern trees. If we fail in this, the twigs will decay, the grapes will sour, the trunk will shrivel, and no welcoming Pesach will greet a Spring morning of renewed hope and Jewish idealism.

This, then, is the message which gleams from the far-off pages of Holy Writ. Drinking in the new hope that the day of the ethical conversion of the world to God and equity, to peace and freedom may yet dawn, we consecrate ourselves to the four above-mentioned obligations, to Israel, to Judaism, to Freedom and to our Children. Let us lift up the cup and drink to the following sentiments. Here's to the noble vine, Israel; planted and transplanted in every soil; may its roots sink deeply, and may it grow and blossom in beauty and vigor everywhere! Here's to its grapes, the fruit of our religion; may they grow sweeter and more nourishing to us and to the world! Here's to the wine; may freedom gladden the heart of Israel, and fill to the full the cup of every member of the human family! Here's to our children, the little plantings of the vine; may they mature in usefulness and sobriety, in love and loyalty to be worthy of the past and worthier still of the future! May the time come when every Jew will live under his own spiritual vine and fig tree. May he nowhere be afraid!

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