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THE SABBATH OF COMFORT

A Sermon

BY THE

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DELIVERED BEFORE THE DELEGATES TO THE

FOURTH ZIONIST CONGRESS,

AT THE

New Synagogue,

GREAT ST. HELEN'S, E.C.,

ON

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THE SABBATH OF COMFORT.

I TAKE my text from this morning's lesson from the prophets, Isaiah xl. 1 :—

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמֶר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם :

“Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God.”

Our liturgy is a reflection of human experience. It recognises that life is compounded of elements that make for tears as well as for smiles. It is but a few days ago that in the peculiar mournful dirge tune associated with its reading, we intoned the Book of Lamentations, with its plaintive cry of solitude and despair, אֵין מְנַחֵם לָהּ “There is none to comfort Israel.”* This morning, in accordance with ancient usage, we open the Book of Isaiah the prophet, and are at once deeply touched by its message of encouragement and consolation. There *is* one that can comfort Israel, none other than God Himself.

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמֶר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם :

“Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God.”

None can deny that we are in sore need of such sweet words of hope on this Sabbath of Comfort.

The air is vibrating with strong conflicts, and to us Jews the Jewish year now drawing to its close speaks in a voice through which there sighs the breath of tragedy. Menacing clouds darken the horizon and betoken impending danger. The future always offers a limitless field of conjecture, but the *immediate* future seems to cast its shadows upon us. Austria, France, and Germany do not sharpen the steel or light the torch to punish martyrs for loyalty to their faith; but, despite their vaunted civilization, they practise the refinement of

* Lamentations i. 17.

cruelty in distorting the legal religious equality of the Jew into actual social disability and professional ostracism. The old aching sorrow of Russian persecution is accentuated and aggravated by the famine in Bessarabia, and Roumania continues, unabashed and unchecked, flagrantly to violate solemn pledges made to the Great Powers of Europe. The Jewish outlook on the Continent is thus disheartening in the extreme, and we see no light piercing the gloom.

But out of the very depths of despondency there rises the voice of hope. When the Psalmist is brought low and exclaims,

מִמַּעֲמֻקִּים קָרָאתִיךָ ה' :

“Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord,”*

his saintly soul provides its own response :

יְחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵל ה' כִּי עִם ה' הַחֶסֶד וְהַרְבֵּה עִמּוֹ פְּדוּת :

“O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption.”†

What is this but an echo of our text ?

“Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God.”

This vein of optimism is characteristic of all Hebrew prophecy. In the prophetic writings there is no parade of melancholy. There is no settled gloom, much less absolute despair, brooding over the spirit of the divine message. The heart of our great teachers retained its generous warmth, even though their environment may have been cold. In the Bible we may indeed catch some plaintive tones and accents of despair, but hope is always the final message of the true prophet.

כָּל הַנְּבִיאִים פְּתָחוּ בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹכָחוֹת וְהִתְמּוּ בְּדַבְרֵי נְחֻמּוֹת :

“All the prophets,” say the Rabbis, “all the prophets begin with words of rebuke, but conclude with words of comfort.”‡

It was a happy thought which dictated that the Zionist

* Psalm cxxx. 1.

† Ibid. 7.

‡ Pesikta de Rav Kahana ed. Buber, 116a.

Congress should be held in the week immediately following the Sabbath of Comfort, and that the delegates should attend Divine Service on this same Sabbath of Comfort.

The Synagogue, with its sacred associations, may legitimately extend a sympathetic welcome to men met to consider an earnest attempt to solve the Jewish question. The walls of the House of God witness solemn moments in our careers, echo to the prayers of hearts charged with deep emotion, and hear the pronouncement of fond hopes which elevate the mind and heighten the spiritual elements of life. It is appropriate then, that prior to entering upon your deliberations, you should invoke the blessing of God upon your undertaking. To some whose souls are no longer thrilled by religion's sweet influences, it may sound cant to talk of praying for God's help, but surely the real cant is that which refuses to recognise that without Divine aid all earthly schemes are doomed to failure.

In the second place, the Synagogue cannot but watch with tender interest the enthusiastic pursuit of a lofty ideal. In an age in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to stem the onrush of cold-blooded commercialism, callous selfishness, spiritual lethargy and gross materialism, it is a healthy, refreshing and comforting sign to see sincere devotion in the furtherance of a great cause. We require the infusion of a large measure of idealism into our lives, and need encouragement to be undaunted by the necessarily fragmentary character of our best efforts.

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן הורין להבטל ממנה

"It may not be thy fate to complete the work, but neither art thou free to desist from it."*

The present Congress is probably the first real reunion of the scattered members of the House of Israel ever witnessed in this country. We may well rejoice in the freedom we enjoy

* Ethics of the Fathers, ii. 21.

in this fair land, the home of liberty, which enables the Jew from South America to confer frankly and openly with his brother Jew from Northern Russia. We may well be glad of the opportunity which renders it possible for the Jews of England to discuss personally with representatives of their brethren from abroad pressing problems of great moment for the welfare of Judaism, representatives who have close, intimate, and practical daily knowledge of the actual facts of the situation in the countries from which they hail.

And from a religious point of view it is a source of gratification that such an assembly is able to gather together men of varying shades of thought and culture, who, by honest interchange of views, help to remove prejudices begotten of want of knowledge, and to emphasize agreement on common essential principles of Judaism. Even the most literal interpretation of the words of the prophet assumes that the promised return to Zion is to be conditioned and preceded by a genuine return to Judaism.

כָּל בְּנֵי־מִיִּתָּה שֶׁהֵיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם סוֹפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם :

"Every assembly that is held in the name of Heaven shall in the end lead to some practical result."* And even if as only one result of the Congress, the faithful are confirmed in their faith, the waverers are brought once more under Jewish influences from which they are becoming estranged, and the indifferent are roused to a burning consciousness of their Judaism, the assembly will merit the blessing of God and realise the true message of the Sabbath, which, after a period devoted to the contemplation of sad memories, is so appositely and beautifully named the Sabbath of Comfort.

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יוֹמֵר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם :

Be "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God."

* Ethics of the Fathers, iv. 14.





