



Zionism Now and Then: Max Nordau's Call to Action

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Course Description:

In this session we will read Max Nordau's address to the First Zionist Congress (1897). The speech, delivered on the eve of Jewish national revival, is a seminal statement on the condition of European Jewry and a compelling political call to action. Yet it also speaks across the ages, touching on one of the deepest and most enduring problems of politics: the tension between universalism and particularism. In recent years that tension has resurfaced in the politics of the West, as social movements on the left and right advocating on behalf of identity groups have sought to challenge a fraying liberal consensus. The premise of this session is that Nordau's speech continues to hold relevance for Jews in Israel and the diaspora more than a century after it was given.

Guiding Questions:

1. Nordau's address highlights the suffering of Western Jewry and gives only limited attention to that of Eastern Jewry. Why might this be counterintuitive? What is the nature of the Western Jew's plight?
2. What is the character of modern anti-Semitism? What are the three (or four) major Jewish responses to it?
3. What is Nordau's evaluation of the ghetto and its contribution to Jewish character?
4. Nordau complains that Jews were emancipated "only for the sake of logic." What does he mean by this? What does his complaint imply about the relationship between reason and emotion? What do you make of Nordau's view of moral and political progress more generally?

“Address at the First Zionist Congress”

Max Nordau

29 August 1897

The special reporters for individual countries will depict for you the condition of their brethren in the different states. Some of their reports have been submitted to me; others not. But even of the countries about which I learnt nothing from my collaborators, I have, partly from personal observation, partly from other sources, obtained some knowledge, so that I may, without presumption, undertake the task of reporting on the general situation of the Jews at the end of the 19th century.

This picture can, on the whole, be painted only in one colour. Everywhere, where the Jews have settled in comparatively large numbers among the nations, Jewish misery prevails. It is not the ordinary misery which is probably the unalterable fate of mankind. It is a peculiar misery, which the Jews do not suffer as human beings, but as Jews, and from which they would be free, were they not Jews.

Jewish misery has two forms, the material and the moral. In Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia -- those regions which shelter the vast majority, probably nine-tenths of our race -- the misery of the Jews is understood literally. It is the daily distress of the body, anxiety for every following day, the painful fight for the maintenance of a bare existence. In Western Europe, the struggle for existence has been made somewhat lighter for the Jews, although of late the tendency has become visible even there to render it difficult for them again. The question of food and shelter, the question of the security of life, tortures them less; there the misery is moral.

The Western Jew has bread, but man does not live on bread alone. The life of the Western Jew is no longer endangered through the enmity of the mob; but bodily wounds are not the only wounds that cause pain, and from which one may bleed to death. The Western Jew meant emancipation to be real liberation, and hastened to draw the final conclusions therefrom. But the nations made him fear that he erred in being so heedlessly logical. The magnanimous laws, magnanimously lays down the theory of equality of rights. But governments and Society exercise the practice of equality of rights in a manner which renders it the same mockery as did the appointment of Sancho Panza to the splendid position of Viceroy of the Island of Barataria. The Jew says naively: "I am a human being, and I regard nothing human as alien," the answer he meets is: "Softly, your rights as a man must be enjoyed cautiously; you lack the right notion of honour, feeling for duty, morality, patriotism, idealism. You must, therefore, hold aloof from all vocations which make possession of these qualifications as conditions."

No-one has ever tried to justify these terrible accusations by facts. At most, now and then, an individual Jew, the scum of his race and of mankind, is triumphantly cited as an example, and contrary to all laws of logic, the example is made general. This tendency is psychologically correct. It is the practice of human intellect to invent for the prejudices, which sentiment has called forth, a cause seemingly reasonable. Probably wisdom has long been acquainted with this psychological law,

and puts it in fairly expressive words: "If you have to drown a dog," says the proverb, "you must first declare him to be mad." All kinds of vices are falsely attributed to the Jews, because one wishes to convince himself that he has a right to detest them. But the pre-existing sentiment is the detestation of the Jews.

II

I must utter the painful word. The nations which emancipated the Jews have mistaken their own feelings. In order to produce its full effect, emancipation should first have been completed in sentiment before it was declared by law. But this was not the case. The history of Jewish emancipation is one of the most remarkable pages in the history of European thought. The emancipation of the Jews was not the consequence of the conviction that grave injury had been done to a race, that it had been treated most terribly, and that it was time to atone for the injustice of a thousand years; it was solely the result of the geometrical mode of thought of French rationalism of the 18th century. This rationalism was constructed by the aid of pure logic, without taking into account living sentiments and the principles of the certainty of mathematical action; and it insisted upon trying to introduce these creations of pure intellect into the world of reality. The emancipation of the Jews was an automatic application of the rationalistic method. The philosophy of Rousseau and the encyclopedists had led to the declaration of human rights. Out of this declaration, the strict logic of the men of the Great Revolution deduced Jewish emancipation. They formulated a regular equation: Every man is born with certain rights; the Jews are human beings, consequently the Jews are born to own the rights of man. In this manner, the emancipation of the Jews was pronounced, not through a fraternal feeling for the Jews, but because logic demanded it. Popular sentiment rebelled, but the philosophy of the Revolution decreed that principles must be placed higher than sentiment. Allow me then an expression which implies no ingratitude. The men of 1792 emancipated us only for the sake of principle.

As the French Revolution gave to the world the metric and the decimal systems, so it also created a kind of normal spiritual system which other countries, either willingly or unwillingly, accepted as the normal measure for their State of culture. A country which claimed to be at the height of culture had to possess several institutions created or developed by the Great Revolution; as, for instance, representation of the people, freedom of the press, Jury, division of powers, etc. Jewish emancipation was also one of these indispensable articles of a highly cultured state; just as a piano must not be absent from a drawing-room even if not a single member of the family can play it. In this manner Jews were emancipated in Europe not from an inner necessity, but in imitation of a political fashion; not because the people had decided from their hearts to stretch out a brotherly hand to the Jews, but because leading spirits had accepted a certain cultured idea which required that Jewish emancipation should figure also in the Statute book.

Only to one country does this not apply -- England. The English people does not allow its progress to be forced upon it from without; it develops progress from its inner self. In England emancipation is a truth. It is not alone written, it is living. It had already been completed in the heart before legislation expressly confirmed it. Out of respect to tradition, one hesitated in England to abolish the legal restrictions of the Nonconformists, at a time when the English had already for more than an age made no difference in Society between Christians and Jews. Because, a great nation, with a most

intense spiritual life, does not allow itself to be guided by any spiritual current or blunder of the time, in England anti-Semitism is only noticeable in a few instances, and then only it has the importance of an imitation of Continental fashion.

III

Emancipation has totally changed the nature of the Jew, and made him another being. The Jew without any rights did not love the prescribed yellow Jewish badge on his coat, because it was an official invitation to the mob to commit brutalities, and justified them in anticipation. But voluntarily he did much more to make his separate nature more distinct even than the yellow badge could do.' the authorities did not shut him up in a ghetto, he built one for himself. He would dwell with his own, and would have no other relations but those of business with Christians. The word "Ghetto" is today associated with feelings of shame and humiliation. But the Ghetto, whatever may have been the intentions of the people who have created it, was for the Jew of the past not a prison, but a refuge. It is only historical truth if we say that only the Ghetto gave Jews the possibility to survive the terrible persecutions of the Middle Ages. In the Ghetto, the Jew had his own world; it was to him the sure refuge which had for him the spiritual and moral value of a parental home. Here were associates by whom one wished to be valued, and also could be valued; here was the public opinion to be acknowledged by which was the aim of the Jew's ambition. To be held in low esteem by that public opinion was the punishment for unworthiness. Here all specific Jewish qualities were esteemed, and through their special development that admiration was to be obtained which is the sharpest spur to the human mind. What mattered it that outside the Ghetto was despised that which within it was praised? The opinion of the outside world had no influence, because it was the opinion of ignorant enemies. One tried to please one's co-religionists, and their applause was the worthy contentment of his life. So did the Ghetto Jews live, in a moral respect, I a real full life. Their external situation was insecure, often seriously endangered. But internally they achieved a complete development of their specific qualities. They were human beings in harmony, who were not in want of the elements of normal social life. They also felt instinctively the whole importance of the Ghetto for their inner life, and therefore, they had the one sole care: to make its existence secure through invisible walls which were much thicker and higher than the stone walls that visibly shut them in. All Jewish buildings and habits unconsciously pursued only one purpose: to keep up Judaism by separation from the other people and to make the individual Jew constantly aware of the fact that he was lost and would perish if he gave up his specific character. This impulse for separation gave him also most of the ritual laws, which for the everyday Jew is identical with his faith itself; and also other purely external, often accidental, marks of difference in attire and habits received a religious sanction only in order that they might be maintained the more surely. Kaftan, Peoth, Fur Cap and Jargon have apparently nothing to do with religion. But they feel that these ties alone offer them connection with the community without which an individual, morally, intellectually, and at last physically, cannot exist for any length of time.

That was the psychology of the Ghetto Jew. Now came Emancipation. The law assured the Jews that they were full citizens of their country. In its honeymoon it evoked also from Christians feelings which warmed and purified the heart. The Jews hastened in a species of intoxication, as it were, to burn their boats. They had now another home; they no longer needed a Ghetto; they had now other connections and were no longer forced to exist only with their co-religionists. Their instinct of self-

preservation fitted itself immediately and completely to the new conditions of existence. Formerly this instinct was only directed toward a sharp separation. Now they sought after the closest association and assimilation in place of the distinction, which was their salvation. There followed a true mimicry, and for one or two ages the Jew was allowed to believe that he was only German, French, Italian, and so forth.

All at once, twenty years ago, after a slumber of thirty to sixty years, anti-Semitism once more broke out from the innermost depths of the nations, and revealed to the highest of the mortified Jews his real situation, which he had no longer seen. He was still allowed to vote for members of parliament, but he was himself excluded from the clubs and the meetings of his Christian fellow-countrymen. He was allowed to go wherever he pleased, but everywhere he met with the inscription: "No Jews admitted." He had still the right of discharging all the duties of a citizen, but the nobler rights which are granted to talent and for achievements in those rights were absolutely denied to him.

Such is the existing liberation of the emancipated Jew in Western Europe. He has given up his specifically Jewish character; but the peoples let him feel that he has not acquired their special characteristics. He has lost the home of the Ghetto; but the land of his birth is denied to him as his home. His countrymen repel him when he wishes to associate with them. He has no ground under his feet and he has no community to which he belongs as a full member. With his Christian countrymen neither his character nor his intentions can reckon on justice, still less on kindly feeling. With his Jewish countrymen he has lost touch: necessarily he feels that the world hates him and he sees no place where he can find warmth when he seeks for it. This is the moral Jewish misery which is more bitter than the physical, because it befalls men who are differently situated, prouder and possess the finer feelings.

IV

Before the emancipation the Jew was a stranger among the peoples, but he did not for a moment think of making a stand against his fate. He felt himself as belonging to a race of his own, which had nothing in common with the other people of the country. The emancipated Jew is insecure in his relations with his fellow-beings, timid with strangers, suspicious even toward the secret feeling of his friends. His best powers are exhausted in the suppression, or at least in the difficult concealment of his own real character. For he fears that this character might be recognized as Jewish, and he has never the satisfaction of showing himself as he is in all his thoughts and sentiments. He becomes an inner cripple, and externally unreal, and thereby always ridiculous and hateful to all higher feeling men, as is everything that is unreal. All the better Jews in Western Europe groan under this, or seek for alleviation. They no longer possess the belief which gives the patience necessary to bear sufferings, because it sees in them the will of a punishing but nonetheless loving God.

They no longer hope in the advent of the Messiah, who will one day raise them to Glory. Many try to save themselves by flight from Judaism. But racial anti-Semitism denies the power of change by baptism, and this mode of salvation does not seem to have much prospect. It is but a slight recommendation for those concerned, who are mostly without belief (I am not speaking naturally of the minority of true believers) that they enter with a blasphemous lie into the Christian community. In this way there arises a new Marrano, who is worse than the old. The latter had an idealistic

direction -- a secret desire for truth or a heartbreaking distress of conscience, and they often sought for pardon and purification through Martyrdom.

The new Marranos leave Judaism with rage and bitterness, but in their innermost heart, although not acknowledged by themselves, they carry with them their own humiliation, their own dishonesty, and hatred also toward Christianity which has forced them to lie.

I think with horror of the future development of this race of new Marranos, who are normally sustained by no tradition and whose soul is poisoned by hostility toward their own and strange blood, and whose self-respect is destroyed through the ever present consciousness of a fundamental lie. Others hope for the salvation from Zionism, which is for them, not the fulfillment of a mystic promise of the Scripture, but the way to an existence wherein the Jew finds at last the simplest but most elementary conditions of life, that are a matter of course for every Jew of both hemispheres: viz, an assured social existence in a well meaning community, the possibility of employing all his powers for the developments of his real being instead of abusing them for the suppression and falsification of self. Yet others, who rebel against the lie of the Marranos, and who feel themselves too intimately connected with the land of their birth not to feel what Zionism means, throw themselves into the arms of the wildest revolution, with an indefinite *arriere pensee* that with the destruction of everything in existence and the construction of a new world Jew-hatred may not be one of the precious articles transferred from the debris of the old conditions into the new.

This is the history of Israel at the end of the 19th century. To sum it up in a word: The majority of the Jews are a race of accursed beggars. More industrious and more able than the average European, not to speak at all of the inert Asiatic and African, the Jew is condemned to the most extreme pauperism, because he is not allowed to use his powers freely. This poverty grinds down his character, and destroys his body. Fevered by the thirst for higher education, he sees himself repelled from the places where knowledge is attainable -- a real intellectual tantalus of our non-mythical times. He dashes his head against the thick ice crusts of hatred and contempt which are formed over his head. Like scarcely any other social being -- whom even his belief teaches that it is a meritorious and God-pleasing action for three to take meals together and for ten to pray together -- he is excluded from the society of his countrymen and is condemned to a tragic isolation. One complains of Jews intruding everywhere, but they only strive after superiority, because they are denied equality. They are accused of a feeling of solidarity with the Jews of the whole world; whereas, on the contrary, it is their misfortune that as soon as the first loving word of emancipation had been uttered, they tried to pluck from their hearts all Jewish solidarity up to the last trace. Stunned by the hailstorm of anti-Semitic accusations, they forget who they are and often imagine themselves in reality the bodily and spiritual miscreants whom their deadly enemies represent them to be. Not rarely the Jew is heard to murmur that he must learn from the enemy and try to remedy his feelings. He forgets, however, that the anti-Semitic accusations are valueless, because they are not based on criticism of real facts, but the effects of psychological law according to which children, wild men and malevolent fools make persons and things against which they have an aversion responsible for their sufferings.

To Jewish distress no-one can remain indifferent, neither Christian nor Jew. It is a great sin to let a race to whom even their worst enemies do not deny ability, degenerate in intellectual and physical distress. It is a sin against them and against the work of civilization, in the interest of which Jews have not been useless co-workers.

That Jewish distress cries for help. To find that help will be the great work of this Congress.