

Jewish Contributions to American Democracy

Address by
PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE



JEWISH WELFARE BOARD
220 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK CITY

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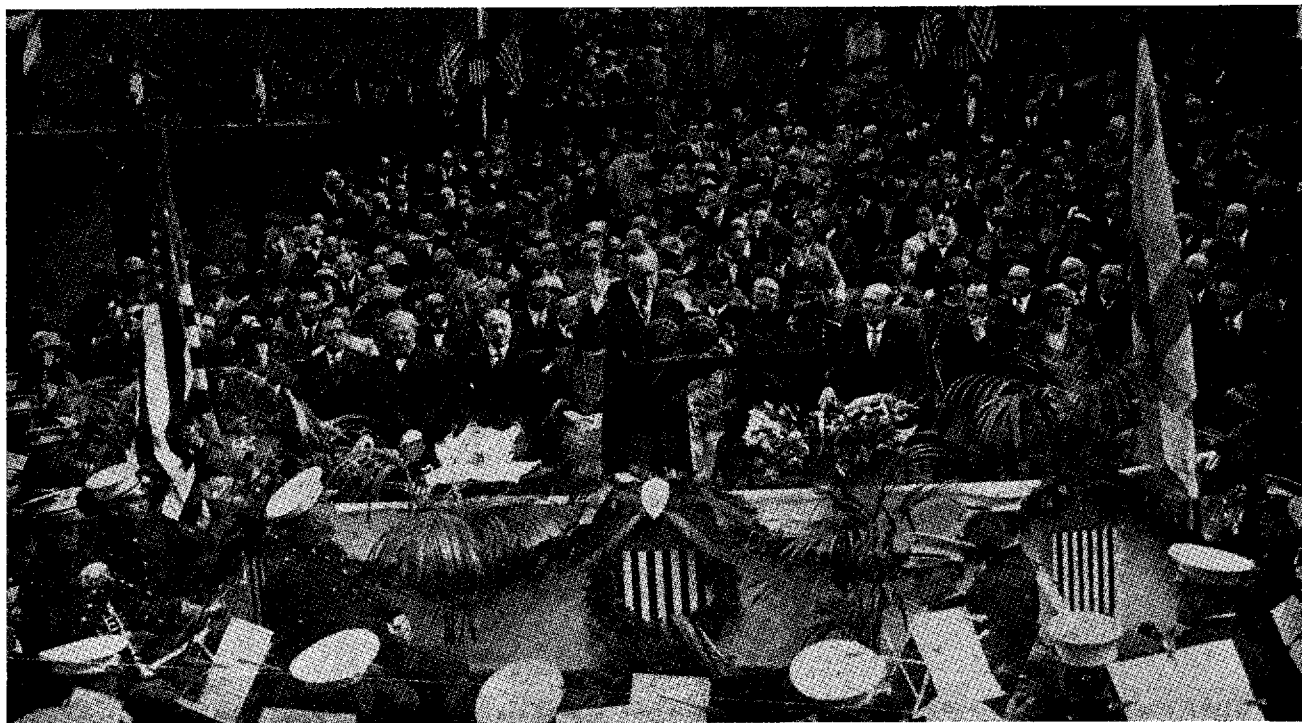
PRESIDENT CALVIN COOLIDGE

*At the Laying of the Cornerstone
of the Jewish Community Center
Building, Washington, D. C.,
• Sunday, May 3, 1925*



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President Coolidge Delivering Address at Cornerstone Exercises

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FOREWORD

IN many cities and towns throughout the country Jewish citizens have been building up Jewish Centers, not in a narrow spirit of sectarianism, but in the broadest spirit of American citizenship. They have realized that such Centers afford opportunity for the moral, mental and physical development of the Jewish youth; that in them the ideals and traditions which throughout the centuries have inspired Jewish contributions to civilization and the cause of humanity may be taught to the young Jews of today as an inspiration to similar service. Wherever a Jewish Center building has been erected it has been, at once, a pledge by the Jews to the community in which they live that the Jewish youth shall be taught the highest ideals of citizenship and service and an instrument through which those ideals may be given practical force.

The laying of the cornerstone of a building for a Jewish Center in the national capital on May 3, 1925, for the first time brought before the whole nation the purpose and the effect of such Centers. Mr. Louis Marshall spoke for the Jews of the nation, voicing for them their pride of citizenship, their devotion to their country, their loyalty to the great traditions of the Jewish past, their pledge that the young Jews and Jewesses shall prove themselves worthy of their Jewish traditions and of their American citizenship. In noble words the President of the United States set forth the services which the Jews have rendered to humanity. A listening nation has heard and approved the words of its chief.

The President's words are a rebuke to those who

might bear false witness against the Jews and must prove an inspiration to the Jews themselves to maintain their ancient ideals in all their beauty and strength and to bring them to the service of country and humanity. The Jewish Welfare Board, dedicated to the work of fostering Jewish Centers throughout this country, reprints them as a potent appeal to all Jews to join in this work as a duty to themselves, to their posterity, and to their country.

IRVING LEHMAN

President, Jewish Welfare Board.

Jewish Contributions to American Democracy

*An Address by Calvin Coolidge**

WE have gathered this afternoon to lay with appropriate ceremony and solemnity the cornerstone of a temple. The splendid structure which is to rise here will be the home of the Jewish Community Center of Washington. It will be at once a monument to the achievements of the past, and a help in the expansion of these achievements into a wider field of usefulness in the future. About this institution will be organized, and from it will be radiated, the influences of those civic works in which the genius of the Jewish people has always found such eloquent expression. Such an establishment, so noble in its physical proportions, so generous in its social purposes, is truly a part of the civic endowment of the nation's capital. Beyond that, its existence here at the seat of the

*Delivered at the laying of the cornerstone of the Jewish Community Center Building, Washington, D. C., May 3, 1925.

national government makes it in a peculiar way a testimony and an example before the entire country.

This year, 1925, is a year of national anniversaries. States, cities, and towns throughout all the older part of the country will be celebrating their varied parts in the historic events which a century and a half ago marked the beginning of the American Revolution. It will be a year of dedications and re-dedications. It will recall the heroic events from which emerged a great modern nation consecrated to liberty, equality, and human rights. It will remind us, as a nation, of how a common spiritual inspiration was potent to bring and mold and weld together into a national unity the many and scattered colonial communities that had been planted along the Atlantic seaboard. In a time when the need of that unification, understanding and tolerance which are necessary to a national spirit is so great, it will recall the fact that the fathers not only confronted these same problems in forms far more difficult than they are today, but also solved them.

Among the peoples of the 13 colonies there were few ties of acquaintance, of commercial or industrial interest. There were great differences in political sentiments, even within the local communities, while there were wide divergences among the several colonies, in origin, in religion, in social outlook.

If we would seek a fairly accurate impression of conditions at the beginning of the Revolution, we must attempt a really continental view of North America as it was in 1775. The group of new-born commonwealths which we commonly refer to as "the original 13 colonies," and which in our minds represent a considerable measure of nationality already achieved, did

not in fact even know that they would be 13 in number. No man, on the day of Lexington, could be altogether sure that the Revolution was more than a New England affair. It might or it might not draw the middle and southern colonies into its armed array of resistance. On the other hand, the 13 might have been joined by Canada, which was British in sovereignty, but chiefly French in population; by Florida and Louisiana, which were both mainly Spanish. In short, there might have been 14, 15 or 16 original colonies participating in the North American revolution against Europe, or there might have been less than a half dozen of them.

At that time, France had no territory within continental North America. But this condition had existed for only a short time since the end of the Seven Years' War. France had by no means become reconciled to this exclusion from a part in the North American empire; and only a little later, in the year 1800, under a new treaty with Spain, resumed the sovereignty of the Mississippi Valley. Three years after this, benefiting by the fortunes of the Napoleonic wars, President Jefferson confronted and promptly seized the opportunity to buy Louisiana from Napoleon. Even then, many years were yet to pass before the last claims of Spain should be extinguished from this continent.

I have recounted these scraps of territorial history, because unless we keep them in mind we shall not at all comprehend the task of unification, of nation building, that the Revolutionary fathers undertook when they not only dared the power of Great Britain, but set themselves against the tradition of the subordination to Europe of America. As we look back, we realize that even among the colonies of England there were

few and doubtful common concerns to bind them together. Their chief commercial interests were not among themselves, but with the mother country across the Atlantic. New England was predominantly Puritan, the southern colonies were basically cavalier. New York was in the main Dutch. Pennsylvania had been founded by the Quakers, while New Jersey needed to go back but a short distance to find its beginnings in a migration from Sweden.

There were well-nigh as many divergencies of religious faith as there were of origin, politics and geography. Yet, in the end, these religious differences proved rather unimportant. While the early dangers in some colonies made a unity in belief and all else a necessity to existence, at the bottom of the colonial character lay a stratum of religious liberalism which had animated most of the early comers. From its beginnings, the new continent had seemed destined to be the home of religious tolerance. Those who claimed the right of individual choice for themselves had to grant it to others. Beyond that—and this was one of the factors which I think weighed heaviest on the side of unity—the Bible was the one work of literature that was common to all of them. The Scriptures were read and studied everywhere. There are many testimonies that their teachings became the most important intellectual and spiritual force for unification. I remember to have read somewhere, I think in the writings of the historian Lecky, the observation that “Hebraic mortar cemented the foundations of American democracy.” Lecky had in mind this very influence of the Bible in drawing together the feelings and sympathies of the widely scattered communities. All the way from New Hampshire to Georgia, they found a

common ground of faith and reliance in the scriptural writings.

In those days books were few, and even those of a secular character were largely the product of a scholarship which used the Scriptures as the model and standard of social interpretation. It was to this, of course, that Lecky referred. He gauged correctly a force too often underestimated and his observation was profoundly wise. It suggests, in a way which none of us can fail to understand, the debt which the young American nation owed to the sacred writing that the Hebrew people gave to the world.

This biblical influence was strikingly impressive in all the New England colonies, and only less so in the others. In the Connecticut code of 1650, the Mosaic model is adopted. The magistrates were authorized to administer justice "according to the laws here established, and, for want of them, according to the word of God." In the New Haven code of 1655, there were 79 topical statutes for the Government, half of which contained references to the Old Testament. The founders of the New Haven colony, John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton, were expert Hebrew scholars. The extent to which they leaned upon the moral and administrative system, laid down by the Hebrew law-givers, was responsible for their conviction that the Hebrew language and literature ought to be made as familiar as possible to all the people. So it was that John Davenport arranged that in the first public school in New Haven the Hebrew language should be taught. The preachers of those days, saturated in the religion and literature of the Hebrew prophets, were leaders, teachers, moral mentors and even political philosophers for their flocks. A people raised under such leadership,

given to much study and contemplation of the Scriptures, inevitably became more familiar with the great figures of Hebrew history, with Joshua, Samuel, Moses, Joseph, David, Solomon, Gideon, Elisha—than they were with the stories of their own ancestors as recorded in the pages of profane history.

The sturdy old divines of those days found the Bible a chief source of illumination for their arguments in support of the patriot cause. They knew the Book. They were profoundly familiar with it, and eminently capable in the exposition of all its justifications for rebellion. To them, the record of the exodus from Egypt was indeed an inspired precedent. They knew what arguments from holy writ would most powerfully influence their people. It requires no great stretch of logical processes to demonstrate that the children of Israel, making bricks without straw in Egypt, had their modern counterpart in the people of the colonies, enduring the imposition of taxation without representation!

And the Jews themselves, of whom a considerable number were already scattered throughout the colonies, were true to the teachings of their own prophets. The Jewish faith is predominantly the faith of liberty. From the beginnings of the conflict between the colonies and the mother country, they were overwhelmingly on the side of the rising revolution. You will recognize them when I read the names of some among the merchants who unhesitatingly signed the non-importation resolution of 1765: Isaac Moses, Benjamin Levy, Samson Levy, David Franks, Joseph Jacobs, Hayman Levy, Jr., Matthias Bush, Michael Gratz, Bernard Gratz, Isaac Franks, Moses Mordecai, Ben-

jamin Jacobs, Samuel Lyon, and Manuel Mordecai Noah.

Not only did the colonial Jews join early and enthusiastically in the non-intercourse program, but when the time came for raising and sustaining an army, they were ready to serve wherever they could be most useful. There is a romance in the story of Haym Salomon, Polish Jew financier of the Revolution. Born in Poland, he was made prisoner by the British forces in New York, and when he escaped set up in business in Philadelphia. He negotiated for Robert Morris all the loans raised in France and Holland, pledged his personal faith and fortune for enormous amounts, and personally advanced large sums to such men as James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Baron Steuben, General St. Clair, and many other patriot leaders who testified that without his aid they could not have carried on in the cause.

A considerable number of Jews became officers in the continental forces. The records show at least four Jews as Lieutenant-Colonels, three as Majors and certainly six, probably more, as Captains. Major Benjamin Nones has been referred to as the Jewish Lafayette. He came from France in 1777, enlisted in the Continentals as a volunteer private, served on the staffs of both Washington and Lafayette, and later was attached to the command of Baron de Kalb, in which were a number of Jews. When de Kalb was fatally wounded in the thickest of the fighting at the Battle of Camden, the three officers who were at hand to bear him from the field were Major Nones, Captain de la Motta, and Captain Jacob de Leon, all of them Jews. It is interesting to know that at the time of the Revolution there was a larger Jewish element in the southern colonies

than would have been found there at most periods; and these Jews of the Carolinas and Georgia were ardent supporters of the Revolution. One corps of infantry raised in Charleston, South Carolina, was composed preponderantly of Jews, and they gave a splendid account of themselves in the fighting in that section.

It is easy to understand why a people with the historic background of the Jews, should thus overwhelmingly and unhesitatingly have allied themselves with the cause of freedom. From earliest colonial times, America has been a new land of promise to this long-persecuted race.

The Jewish community of the United States is not only the second most numerous in the world, but in respect of its old world origins it is probably the most cosmopolitan. But whatever their origin as a people, they have always come to us, eager to adapt themselves to our institutions, to thrive under the influence of liberty, to take their full part as citizens in building and sustaining the nation, and to bear their part in its defense, in order to make a contribution to the national life, fully worthy of the traditions they had inherited.

The institution for which we are today dedicating this splendid home, is not a charity to minister to the body, but rather to the soul. The 14,000 Jews who live in this capital city have passed, under the favoring auspices of American institutions, beyond the need for any other benevolence. They are planting here a home for community service; fixing a center from which shall go forth the radiations of united effort for advancement in culture, in education, in social opportunity. Here will be the seat of organized influence for the preservation and dissemination of all

that is best and most useful, of all that is leading and enlightening, in the culture and philosophy of this "peculiar people" who have so greatly given to the advancement of humanity.

Our country has done much for the Jews who have come here to accept its citizenship and assume their share of its responsibilities in the world. But I think the greatest thing it has done for them has been to receive them and treat them precisely as it has received and treated all others who have come to it. If our experiment in free institutions has proved anything, it is that the greatest privilege that can be conferred upon people in the mass is to free them from the demoralizing influence of privilege enjoyed by the few. This is proved by the experience here, not alone of the Jews, but of all the other racial and national elements that have entered into the making of this Nation. We have found that when men and women are left free to find the places for which they are best fitted, some few of them will indeed attain less exalted stations than under a regime of privilege; but the vast multitude will rise to a higher level, to wider horizons, to worthier attainments.

To go forward on the same broadening lines that have marked the national development thus far must be our aim. It is an easy thing to say, but not so simple to do. There is no straight and smooth and posted highway into the vast, dim realm of the tomorrows. There are bogs and morasses, blind roads and bad detours. No philosophy of history has ever succeeded in charting accurately the day of the future. No science of social engineering has been able to build wide and easy roads by which to bring up the van of human progress in sure and easy marches. The race is always

pioneering. It always has been and always must be. It dare not tire of unending effort and repeated disappointments. It must not in any moment of weariness or inertia cease from pressing on. Least of all can we indulge the satisfactions of complacency, imagining that the sum of useful progress has been attained. The community or the civilization that ceases to progress begins that hour to recede.

The work of spiritual unification is not completed. Factional, sectional, social and political lines of conflict yet persist. Despite all experience, society continues to engender the hatreds and jealousies whereof are born domestic strife and international conflicts. But education and enlightenment are breaking their force. Reason is emerging. Every inheritance of the Jewish people, every teaching of their secular history and religious experience, draws them powerfully to the side of charity, liberty and progress. They have always been arrayed on this side, and we may be sure they will not desert it. Made up of so many diverse elements, our country must cling to those fundamentals that have been tried and proved as buttresses of national solidarity.

It must be our untiring effort to maintain, to improve, and, so far as may be humanly possible, to perfect those institutions which have proved capable of guaranteeing our unity, and strengthening us in advancing the estate of the common man. This edifice which you are rearing here is a fine example for other communities. It speaks a purpose to uphold an ancient and noble philosophy of life and living, and yet to assure that such philosophy shall always be adapted to the requirements of changing times, increasing

knowledge and developing institutions. It is a guarantee that you will keep step with liberty.

This capacity for adaptation in detail, without sacrifice of essentials, has been one of the special lessons which the marvelous history of the Jewish people has taught. It is a lesson which our country, and every country based on the principle of popular government, must learn and apply, generation by generation, year by year, yes, even day by day. You are raising here a testimonial to the capacity of the Jewish people to do this. In the advancing years, as those who come and go shall gaze upon this civic and social landmark, may it be a constant reminder of the inspiring service that has been rendered to civilization by men and women of the Jewish faith. May they recall the long array of those who have been eminent in statecraft, in science, in literature, in art, in the professions, in business, in finance, in philanthropy, and in the spiritual life of the world. May they pause long enough to contemplate that the patriots who laid the foundation of this Republic drew their faith from the Bible. May they give due credit to the people among whom the Holy Scriptures came into being. And as they ponder the assertion that "Hebraic mortar cemented the foundations of American democracy," they cannot escape the conclusion that if American democracy is to remain the greatest hope of humanity, it must continue abundantly in the faith of the Bible.

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