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DISTRESS AND KNOWLEDGE

**A Dialogue on Vital
Jewish Questions**

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NATURE is hard, relentless, but does not punish immediately. First she warns us.

And when man neglects her warning—she cries out. What is intense pain but the ultimo ratio, but the alarm signal of Nature.

And, were it not for pain, the ever-busy, neglectful sinner against Nature would probably never become sufficiently concerned to consult a physician. . .

And, how much life would irretrievably be lost if not for this kind of warning? . . .

Such is the sorrowful and woe-begone lot, not only of the individual, but also of mankind as a whole.

What is it besides severe crises, grievous experiences, and painful defeats, that awakens in man his critical faculty? . . .

And this is likewise the fate of individual peoples.

Distress, both material and moral, deep **suffering** is the S.O.S. of history.

It is tragic, that clear understanding is acquired in such a painful manner; shocking, that chaos, powerlessness and faint-hearted pessimism, should be the answer to the voice of distress which is indeed a call to active knowledge, and will to salvation.

I.

OUR ECONOMIC REHABILITATION AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

We were walking back from the second "Seder" continuing our conversation. The few questions and remarks my friend had made were sufficient to show that he belonged to that (not unpleasant) type of Jewish intellectual, who will take up as passionately the part of the prosecutor in Jewish society as that of the Jewish defender in non-Jewish society.

The basic idea underlying our conver-

sation seemed to revolve in a magic circle.

You say,—argued my friend, that one of the fundamental hypotheses for normalising relations between non-Jew and Jew is a radical change in the economic functions of the Jews. By this, you understand, the entry of Jews into industrial and agricultural work, in proportion to their numbers in the general population. Right. But how can such a change take place? Even you yourself have admitted that without the active co-operation of the State, this means, of the non-Jewish world, such a basic change in the Jewish economic structure, is impossible.

—Certainly, I rejoined, but in order that the active assistance from without should come forth to the required extent, the Jewish population itself must first manifest its will for economic rehabilitation through practical self-help and planned constructive efforts. Such efforts on the part of the Jews would likewise influence indirectly non-Jewish circles and Governments. ORT activities in connection with the running of trade schools, farms and co-operative factories, as well as encouraging private initiative in the same direction, are still even to-day of a pioneering nature.

The value of these activities does not end with the benefits derived by the tens of thousands that have been helped. Beyond these limits the path is paved along which the Jewish population with the ever increasing help of the governments will tread.

Do not forget, it took more than a century for the world to get accustomed

even to the formal political emancipation of the Ghetto inmates. The **economic** equalisation of the Jew cannot be achieved more easily. Yet this cause of the economic emancipation is greatly impeded by difficulties within the Jewish camp and prejudices from without. This road must needs, however, be chosen both by the Jews themselves as well as the sober non-Jewish political economists.

'—Yes, but the political emancipation of the Jews was much facilitated by the effective example of the great French Revolution and public opinion throughout the world. Where do you see similar factors to-day in favour of **economic** Jewish rehabilitation?

—Of course, our dire need in itself is a great factor. But this alone will not do it. Our purposeful practical intervention is requisite to bring about such factors. Here and there they are already making their appearance to a greater or lesser degree. Why do you think that the example of the gigantic upheaval in Jewish economic life in Soviet-Russia with its consequent beneficial effects on the country as a whole will not influence to an ever greater extent public opinion abroad?

More than ever before we feel of late the need for a radical turning point in the relations of the outside world to the Jewish question. Eventually the old Case of "Goy versus Jew" will have to be reviewed in its entirety, and the Countercharge of "Jew versus Goy," be made with all frankness and openness.

Both we and the outside world are interested that this Case shall be candidly

and openheartedly argued by both sides.

H'm, muttered my friend to himself, may be. . . . But I would not care to take on the job of representing the Jewish side in such a Case.

Many old and new arguments rush up to my mind.

1.—"Yeshno am echad" . . . ("There is a certain people . . . and their laws are diverse from all people") you Jews are not assimilable. 2. You treat us worse than we treat you . . . There are poor among you, but one only sees your successes and achievements. 3. You eat bread you do not produce. You wear clothes you do not weave. You dwell in houses you do not build. 4. You are not content with little. You always seek and attain the highest position. You are always on top, on the highest rungs, etc., etc.

—To be sure, I am also familiar with all these and other arguments. And just for this very reason do I say, we must meet the charge: evading things will not do and will bring harm to both sides. In this particular, the foolish ostrich policy of the Jewish wisecracks is as repellent to me as the insincere "cautiousness" of my best non-Jewish friends. The safest, healthiest and most efficacious tactic is the truth. When ill-feeling and false ideas are repressed they accumulate in the lower dark cellars of the human psyche. There they remain as undigested food and poison the organism slowly. . .

In order that the world take us seriously and have faith in our sincere desire for economic rehabilitation, we must speak openly with each other :

1. The truth is, in fact, that the Jews, 99% of them, come to every country animated by the one and only desire—that of making a living. 2. The striving for success, for the highest aim is again, let the truth come out, very natural and perfectly human. The difference lies only in what is achievable. This difference does not appear as a distinction between nations, races, etc. As a rule the limits of the potential material achievements are to be found in the economic function, in the particular kind of gainful employment. It depends, in every case on the economic rails upon which human occupations move. But who has set the Jewish economy on the rails of trading and finance? None other than a system of legal and social standards which were a mixture of meanness, folly and brutality. This system had functioned with the help of the Civil Law and Church for many centuries, tying the Jew externally and internally to two or three occupations.

Even as late as the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. in Babylonia and later in the Pyrenean Peninsula and in France, the Jews preferred agricultural work to all others. It was the Christian Clergy that drove the Jews from that occupation.

In later times similar restrictive conditions were imposed upon the Jews in western European countries, with regard to the practice of handicrafts. Whilst agriculture had been a prohibited occupation to Jews from earlier times, they could still engage to a considerable extent in the various arts and crafts. From the eleventh century onwards, however,

the organised Guilds made it impossible for Jews to engage in these callings and from the thirteenth century the position of Jewish artisans had become such that they could not exercise their trade, and were forced to deal in money and act as intermediaries in the business transactions of others. By its cruelty and injustice then, had the outside world gradually crippled the economic structure of the Jews and subsequently utilized the anomalous condition it had itself created as a justification for the infliction of still further injustices upon the Jews . . .

And even to-day, who can be so simple as to think that the petty life-worn Jewish trader would not have preferred the position of postman, railway official, etc. . . .

Truly, we have nothing to evade . . .

My friend was silent for a while and then apparently under the influence of the "Haggadah" he gave to the rest of his doubts the form of the "Four Questions" which I repeat here together with the answers he received.

II.

FOUR QUESTIONS AND A FIFTH.

Question 1.

Is Jewish poverty an exception in a world of tens of millions of workless?

—Certainly it **is** an exception! The proportion of Jewish poverty is five times as large as that of the general population and is of an entirely different kind. It is entrenched more deeply and more strongly. It is not rooted in the present world crisis and will, therefore, not end with the liquidation of the crisis.

Everywhere the army of the poor comprises ex-workers and impoverished peasants. Our poor, however, were never workers and were never peasants.

The peaceful, or unpeaceful, settlement of the crisis must restore the unemployed to the factory and must restore better pay for his toil, to the peasant. But, the shopkeeper whose place has been taken by a Government Monopoly, a Syndicate or a Co-operative will never again return to his previous position. Bear in mind: our needy are in much greater want than the unemployed. Not only have they not the means of subsistence to-day, but they also lack better prospects for the **morrow**.

The unemployed has a claim on the world, you may be at ease (or ill at ease), he will redeem his claim. **His** case is almost won. But, as far as our depressed, crushed and forlorn shopkeeper and petty trader is concerned, the world is closed on him. What case has he, and with whom can he plead it?

Question 2.

Yet, of what practical value is it to train skilled workmen and qualified artisans in a time of general crisis and unemployment?

—Well, the answer is, ORT activities are not a speculation for a boom, and are also no claim on "Moes chitim" which lapses after a certain date. . .

To straighten the back of a hunchback is at all times and under all circumstances a gain. For what exactly can he lose except his hump. The Jew, too, relieved of his econo-

mic affliction can gain a safe foothold for to-day, to-morrow and the **day after**, when work—so it seems obvious—will be the most important prerequisite for the right to live among humans. I say: a trade in hand is already to-day the best means of economic security. Proof: about 82% of the trainees of ORT schools and training factories are employed in Europe and the majority of the remainder have found work in Palestine and other countries.

Question 3.

Quite so, but . . . what about Hitler in Germany, anti-Semitic gangs in Poland and Nationalistic poison everywhere? . . .

—The answer is: There is no other alternative. History is a witness that pogroms are invariably followed by revolutions and that blind reaction cannot last. The nationalistic craze is not only an ethical crime, but bad business as well. It cripples the economy of a country, and he who has ears to hear can already perceive the question asked in the leading international political circles: perhaps the truth is the "best fraud" after all?

The lighted mountain tops are already visible. We shall not remain for too long in the valley. And Hitler is free and undisturbed as long as he sits at home and does not venture out. . . . Soon it will be necessary to come to the Conference Table, to the **Large** Conference Table, round which will be assembled not only the neighbours of the West, but those of all parts of the world. . . .

According to the Versailles Treaty members of the League of Nations must

not tolerate traffic in slaves. The new Covenant of Nations will contain an addendum that it is also forbidden to degrade a section of the citizens of a country (a nation, a "race" or members of a certain religious denomination) to the Status of slaves without any rights. Will this take place on grounds of sacred morality? I do not know; in any event on grounds of selfish, mundane interests. For, a Government plan to enforce the emigration of a larger part of its own citizens, is no more merely an internal affair, but an international one, since thrusting **out** from one country involves a taking **in** on the part of another country. . .

In brief, I am confident our political emancipation will still receive, wherever necessary, international safeguards; but prescriptive rights on commerce, you may be sure no Government or League of Nations will safeguard for us. . .

There is no such political emancipation which, being genuine, shall not be based on factual economic equalisation with the rest of the population. This means that in an agrarian country there must be a Jewish peasant class, and in an industrial country there must be a Jewish working class, etc.

No, my dear friend. There is no other alternative.

Question 4.

Alright. But how can one preach husbandry and farming at a time when it is in a state of utter depression? And, further : is it normal to call people to the rural

life when the movement we see round us is a contrary one, namely, from the rural to the urban life? And above all, is a Jew really fit for work on the land?

—To this question, which includes several, the following answers demand a hearing.

The wave of the agricultural crisis has already spent itself. The downward movement of a few years ago has now changed into an upward movement. And it is no idle fantasy to imagine the time, when the national economy of a country will dispense with private dealers pense with the basic branches of the national economy. For instance, it will never do away with the agricultural producer, etc.

True, the crisis is there. Still, if you take the agricultural co-operative of ORT in Poland and Bessarabia (not to speak of those in Russia) they have, of course, not "coined money," but they have managed to provide themselves with bread, potatoes, a little butter, and an egg (rarities in the small town).

As regards the "well-known theory" concerning the movement from country to town, first of all this tendency is not an iron law. And, secondly, as is well known, "necessity will break iron." We have all heard of the natural law that a stone should tend to fall downwards, but, put on a scale and counterpoised by a heavier mass our stone would go up.

The plight of the Jewish masses is such that for a large number of our people the transition to work on the land is not a climb down, but a positive economic rise;

indeed, the line of lesser resistance. It is here that it is well worth pointing out that in the life of the Jews living in towns and villages, certain elements of agricultural work have always played a part. Almost every Jewish housewife had her own cow, at least a goat and poultry. What Jewish woman did not have her own few fowls?

To the question whether Jews are adapted to agriculture I have more than 500,000 living answers: namely, the number of Jewish land workers in Europe. In addition there are of course the excellent colonists in 'Palestine,' and middlemen. But it will never dis-
→ Argentine, the Jewish farmers of Canada, Northern America and . . . where not?

Here a smile lit up my friend's face. Was he satisfied with my answers, or pleased with the opportunity of cavilling a little more? He caught hold of my last words "where not" repeated them and asked in the style of the "Haggadah," —"Who knows one"? Who knows one Jewish community which has not gone as far yet; the individual makes, thank heaven, a good living, and the community as a whole does not think of the morrow, does not stop to look at the "suspicious" signs of the times.

With your permission, I interrupted my friend, it seems to me that here you exchange roles since it is for **you** to give the answer, to this **my fifth** question, which I address to you as a South African Jew.

Truly, has not the time arrived yet, to begin at least with the recent immigrants in order to forestall the likelihood that

the German tragedy shall increase the local trouble. Why not see that as a result of the emergency, a class of skilled Jewish workers shall gradually arise here? Is it right that at the present time Jews shall watch the increase in the number of Jewish merchants and traders of all sorts, and leave things to take their own course?

Is it necessary that the call of distress should become still louder, the pain more intense for our consciousness to awaken?

I regret that one must still wait for an answer to my question.

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