Joseph CARLEBACH and his GENERATION

יוסף וכל אחיו וכל הדור ההוא...

Biography of the late Chief Rabbi of Altona and Hamburg

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Introduction

ET US BEGIN this work with a brief survey of the world into which Rabbi Joseph Carlebach was born toward the latter part of the nineteenth century. He was destined for a great future. The son of an illustrious father, he was to become a guiding light to his suffering people, a teacher to the erring, to those who, dazzled by the sunshine of good fortune and prosperity, had lost the ability to perceive the one Light that is pure and undimmed. And he was to bring new hope to the hearts of those for whom the sun had suddenly set at its zenith, as it were; to those whom seemingly endless and unbearable suffering had robbed of all faith in a better future.

Carlebach was born at a time which had little, if anything, in common with the present. Our own generation will have some difficulty in gaining a proper understanding of the world of those times and of the forces that governed it.

Until the end of World War I, Europe was a continent of nations ruled by kings and emperors, by dynasties that stretched back for centuries. Had anyone said in 1883, the year of Carlebach's birth, that a time would come when the world would be torn apart by war and

revolution, and that the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, the Romanovs and the Wittelsbachs would be no more, he would have been regarded by most as being slightly deranged. All through that period everyone, both great and small, enjoyed a remarkable sense of stability, order and security. The German empire, in particular, felt itself to be unique. Prosperity reigned supreme; economy, culture and civilization seemed to be in full bloom. In the empire of Kaiser Wilhelm, patriotism knew no bounds. In truth, the Germans of those days did have some reason for taking pride in their country. The virtues of peace and balance, order and honesty in all things, diligence and industry, were cultivated and cherished in the German Reich. Illiteracy was relatively rare. Most of the population, certainly the typical middle-class citizens, had an avid interest in the finer things of life. There was hardly a respectable bourgeois household in Germany that did not have prominently displayed in its library the works of classic authors such as Goethe and Schiller. And perhaps it was the high standard of culture and learning then prevailing in Germany that kept the moral conduct of the average citizen on a high plane. In those days, juvenile delinquency was unknown. There were gifted children, and those less gifted, but there were no youthful thieves, gangsters or murderers. One could walk through deserted woods and lonely highways without fear, and men still had reason to trust each other.

Children were taught to submit to discipline and to have a healthy respect for authority. Teachers, particularly those in the higher institutions of learning, had little trouble with their students. Education in those days was centered not so much upon the acquisition of prac-

tical skills, that were of a purely mercenary value, as upon the enrichment of the student's mind through a thorough grounding in the liberal arts. The student at a German *gymnasium* was well versed in the Greek and Latin classics and quite at home in problems regarding the philosophy in Goethe's *Faust* or Schiller's *Wallenstein*. He would look down with what almost amounted to disdain upon the young man who attended a *real-gymnasium*, the ordinary secondary school where the curriculum stressed the study of modern languages and the natural sciences.

The German theatre of Carlebach's youth was "a school for higher ethics," as Lessing expressed it. Instead of sensational spectacles and glorification of crime and horror, the theatre-going public was offered stories of heroes in the struggle for humanity and freedom of conscience. This may well have been one reason why the problem of juvenile delinquency was hardly known in Germany during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It can safely be said that almost every child, regardless of creed or social status, had been taught to respect his parents. Parents and children lived together as friends and comrades. Children were taught not only "Honor thy father and mother," but also to cherish their grandparents who had a secure place in the family, even when age and infirmity began to take their toll. It was rare indeed that an old and ailing parent was ever sent to a home for the aged.

As a rule, German families that were not actually poverty-stricken, could afford steady household help. Most of the cooks, maids and nurses of those days had a sense of dedication to their calling and were re-

garded as part of the family for which they worked. They shared the employer's joys and sorrows alike and often remained at one position for decades. Assisted by such reliable and loyal servants, parents could devote themselves to rearing their children with much more calm and patience than parents can today. The nervous breakdown, so fashionable in present-day society, was the exception rather than the norm in the land of Carlebach's childhood and adolescence.

The average citizen of the German Empire of the 1880's felt that wars were a thing of the past.

True, the kingdom of Prussia had clearly expressed its militarism. During only one decade it had waged war three times, defeating Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870). It took away Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark, Upper-Silesia from Austria; annexed Hanover and the Dukedom of Hessen-Kassel after the battle of Sadowa, and the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from France. Thus, its ambition to expand its territory was satisfied. Now that Germany had achieved its confederation and the King of Prussia had become emperor of the great German Reich, a new blossoming era of peace and prosperity seemed to begin.

Although Germany maintained a disciplined army, prepared for emergency, war with all its horrors appeared far away. Throughout Europe, wars were viewed as still possible only in backward countries, such as the Balkans, Asia, and Africa.

The Jews, too, felt themselves an inherent part of the life and culture of this prosperous world. The Jews of Western Europe were convinced that war and persecution were ended forever and that they were

entering a period of permanent peace and general well-being. The Jews of Germany believed that they were indeed citizens of the land in which they lived, on equal terms with all the others who were part of the "Fatherland."

It seems strange that they could have forgotten so quickly and completely the shame and indignities to which they had been prey only a few short years before. To be sure, Napoleon, as early as the first decade of the century, had opened wide the gates of the ghetto. The triumphant progress of French troops spread the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity throughout all of Germany that came under domination, and this liberty included all subjects irrespective of religion.

Prussia's King Frederick William III had felt humiliated. When Napoleon's sun began to set in 1812, following loss of an army of 200,000 men in the Russian campaign, King Frederick thought of a better solution to the Jewish problem. He solemnly promised the Jews the same privileges that Napoleon had given them if they would do their utmost by serving in the Prussian army and driving Napoleon out of the lands he had conquered. In his edict, pertaining to the civil satus of the Jews in his kingdom, he declared emphatically that all the native-born Jews shall henceforth be recognized as full Prussian citizens. He promised the abolition of all previous restrictions on their rights. From then on they would be granted the right to hold academic and municipal office.[1]

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1 Jewish Encyclopedia, 1941, Vol. 4, Germany: The Struggle for Emancipation, p. 559 ff. See also Graetz, Leipzig, Verlag O. Leiner, 1888, Vol. III, 559 ff., *History of the Jews.*

Thousands of Jews fought under the German banner against the man who had actually been their benefactor. But, when the war was over and Napoleon had gone down in defeat, these same Jews were grievously disillusioned. They had sacrificed their possessions and shed their blood for the country in which they lived, but they received little gratitude in return. Emancipation suddenly became a thing of the past, and the Jews of Germany were forced back once more into the narrow confines of the ghetto. Other countries of Western Europe, such as France and Holland, had already granted the full privileges of equal citizenship to the Jews living within their borders; but Germany, in the early part of the 19th century, remained inflexible in its prejudice against the Children of Jacob. It seemed as if "Nathan the Wise" had been written in vain. Even Goethe, the greatest thinker of his day, who was Minister of State to the Duke of Weimar and who often displayed a very real sense of right and justice, did not lift a finger to intervene in behalf of the Jews. He who venerated the Bible and incorporated the lofty thoughts of the Holy Book in his plays seemed to have little concern for the people who had first given that Book to the rest of the world.

We would go too far afield if we recounted here in detail the history of the long struggle between the diehard opponents of emancipation and such brave, noble and unselfish minds as Gabriel Riesser, Moritz Veit, Eduard Lasker and Ludwig Bamberger, who fought valiantly for the honor and dignity of their people.[2] It was such men as they who finally turned the tide, so

2) Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. 2, pp. 59-60; Vol. 4, p. 562 ff. See also Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. III, p. 599 ff.

that, toward the middle of the 19th century, German Jews were at last able to enjoy the fruits of freedom and equality.

Jews rose quickly in the world that had opened its doors to them. They achieved eminence not merely in trade and commerce but also in the arts and sciences. Jews taught at German universities; they became outstanding leaders in the fields of literature, music and the other arts. They practiced law and medicine in cities great and small, where they enjoyed universal trust and respect. Jewish bankers were active in charitable endeavors on behalf of the underprivileged of all creeds; they were ready at any time to extend generous aid to their own brethren not only in Germany, but throughout the world.

Unfortunately, this happy turn of events also brought in its wake less desirable consequences. When the walls of the ghetto were broken down, many Jews felt it expedient to shed their religion even as they left the ghetto behind them. The Jews in Germany were eager to assimilate as quickly as possible and to become even more German than their Christian fellow citizens, if that were possible. They believed that assimilation would open many doors that had hitherto been sealed to Jews. It seemed that those who were willing to abandon the Sabbath and the Festivals could amass wealth more rapidly than those who clung to tradition. And wealthy men who could afford to make substantial financial contributions to the "Fatherland" could acquire honors and titles rarely given to those less fortunate. In short, the Jews of Germany were firmly convinced that the Mes-

sianic era had arrived, and that their religion in its traditional form was old and outworn.

This was the beginning of the Reform movement within Judaism. The reformers aimed to make the synagogue conform to the tastes and customs of the land in which they lived, rather than to the way of life that Jews throughout the world had followed through the ages. The interior of the synagogue was altered. For example, the *almemor* (reading place) was moved from the center, the midst of the congregation, to the front of the synagogue near the rabbi and the Holy Ark. This was a pure imitation of the non-Jewish custom of the Scripture being the property and privilege of a priestly caste near the altar.

The long, flowing *tallis* was replaced by the short, folded "prayer shawl." The Hebrew prayer service, a link which unites Jews the world over, was materially shortened and replaced by German hymns and readings. The *shechita* was abolished, the *mikvah* filled in, and study of the Talmud frowned upon.[2a]

When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the people of Israel refused "to sing the song of the Lord in a strange land" (Psalm 137). All instrumental music was banned from Jewish worship until such time as the Temple would be rebuilt once more. But Reform Jews, in their firm belief that exile had proved to be a blessing for their people and that it was folly for "Germans of the Mosaic faith" to mourn for a small land across the Mediterranean, instituted in their Temple the music of the organ, which they had admired in the Christian

2a) See Joseph Carlebach, *Das Gesetzestreue Judentum* (Verlag Schocken, 1936), p. 30 ff.

churches. Some of the leaders of Reformism displayed outright contempt and intolerance toward what they considered a backward form of religion. However, there were also outstanding liberal rabbis, who had an understanding of tradition and were ready at all times to defend Orthodox Judaism and its spiritual guides against malicious attacks.

Some groups within German Reform Judaism, in their zeal for what they believed to be progress, went to extremes that stagger the imagination. A number of congregations changed the age of *Bar-Mitzvah* from 13 to 14 because, according to Christian ideology, the number 13 was deemed unlucky. One Reform Temple in Berlin not only held its Sabbath service on Sunday, but also celebrated every Jewish holiday, with the exception of Yom Kippur, not on the prescribed date but on the preceding Sunday. They saw no reason to pray for the welfare and restoration of Zion and Eretz-Israel, nor for the redemption of the Jewish people. They, the Reform Jews of Germany, cherished the "Fatherland" as their "Palestine" and maintained that they were part of the kingdom of the Messiah by virtue of their citizenship in the German empire.

And yet, despite official emancipation, the position of the Jews in Germany was not nearly as rosy as it appeared to the casual observer. The German Parliament had a group of members who were outright anti-Semites such as Herman Ahlwardt. He and Adolf Stocker, the emperor's chaplain, repeatedly delivered tirades against what they called the Social Democrats, actually meaning none other than the Jews. Members of the learned class, such as Heinrich von Treitschke, the

historian; August Rohling, the theologian; Eugen Duehring, the philosopher, and subsequently Paul de Lagarde and Stewart Chamberlain (the British son-in-law of Richard Wagner), sowed the seeds of racism and racial anti-Semitism.[2b] The Jews had indeed been assured equal rights, but only on paper. A Jew in the German Reich might have attained fame as an eminent scholar, but he could never be named a full professor at a university, unless he would first undergo baptism and then divest himself of his Jewish-sounding name. A Jewish soldier might have displayed conspicuous bravery on the field of battle, but, with rare exceptions, he could never become an officer. Certain resorts and watering-places that were frequented by the nobility of the land were closed to Jews, or, as it was delicately put, to "Semites." A Jewish student might pass his state examinations with flying colors, but he could never obtain a position as instructor or professor at any German state institution of higher learning. Of course, there were outstanding cases where Jews received such posts and titles, but they were indeed few and far between.

The assimilationists, however, were not overly concerned with such "little details." These remaining anti-Jewish restrictions served only to spur them toward becoming still more Teutonic and to cast aside every vestige of a way of life that might make them different in any way from their non-Jewish neighbors.

It might be added here that a number of more moderate Jewish minds regarded these restrictions as "*gesunden rishus,*" ("healthy anti-Semitism"). For the life of the Jew was not in danger, and the law protected him from

2b) See Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. 4, p. 564.

public attack and insult. The average citizen was by no means hostile to the Jew. And, even if the Jew could not become a general or a full professor, the doors of commerce and learning were by no means closed to him. It was even felt by some that these very limitations on top positions in the state were a healthy safeguard against mass assimilation and baptism on the part of the Jews. In general, however, all factions strove to attain equality for the Jews in fact as well as in fiction, and the *Central Verein Deutscher Staatsbuerger Juedischen Glaubens* (Central Union of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith) fought tirelessly for this goal.

The majority of German Jews had joined Liberal or Reform synagogues. The ritual laws, they maintained, were of and for a more primitive society which had lacked the modern scientific safeguards for the health and well-being of its members. The rest, they held, were purely external rites and practices designed to create "atmosphere," so that there was no reason why it could not be replaced by pure ethics.

This was an open declaration against most of the commandments of the Torah. Jewish learning came into sad neglect. Hebrew, the study of the Bible and of the Talmud, our entire heritage, seemed about to sink into oblivion. Observance of the dietary laws, the Sabbath and the Festivals went into a decline. *Tisha b'Av,* the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, commemorating the destruction of the Temple, became a day of joy among the Reform Jews; they were convinced that exile allowed them to become part of a world of which they might have remained ignorant, had they stayed in their ancient homeland. It was idle,

they said, to mourn for the past when Jews had so much cause to rejoice, when—in their lifetime—the era of "peace and good will to all" had begun.

There comes to mind the incident of Napoleon's visit to Vienna in 1806 after the victory at Austerlitz. On that occasion, the French Emperor was anxious to see a Jewish house of worship. The day Napoleon chose to tour the synagogue happened to be *Tisha b'Av.* When he entered the synagogue he found the hall in darkness, except for tapers which the worshipers held in their hands as they sat on the floor and tearfully recited the Lamentations of the prophet: "How doth the city sit so solitary, she that was great among the nations and princess among the provinces." Surprised, Napoleon asked for the cause of this display of mourning. He received the reply, "The Jewish people mourns as it recalls its great past." And Napoleon said, "A nation that does not cease to remember its past is destined for a great future."

It is difficult to give a true portrayal of the spirit that moved men in those days, when defection from religion was rampant in Western Europe.

It might help to recount an anecdote narrated in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 102b.) The renegade King Manasseh once appeared to the learned Rav Ashi in a dream to answer a question which had troubled the latter for a long time. Rav Ashi, astounded by the reply, then asked the King, "If thou hadst indeed been so wise, how couldst thou ever worship idols?" The King replied, "Hadst thou lived in my time, o wise man, thou wouldst have raised up the hem of thy garment in order to run

all the faster and wouldst have followed me together with all the others."

The nineteenth century, too, was a time when the Jews were blinded by the dazzling rays of seemingly permanent security and prosperity, and they forgot the ways in which their fathers had trod.

And yet the heritage of our ancestors lived on in the hearts of thousands. German Jewry produced a number of great leaders who became the guides for the thousands who rallied 'round the banner of the Torah. These men were armed with a knowledge of both Biblical and Talmudic literature, as well as the secular arts and sciences. They were articulate men who could make an ever-increasing number of followers understand that the way of life which the eternal God gives us in His Torah does not depend on external circumstances. Poverty and shame might be changed to prosperity, freedom and security, but the eternal truths of the Torah remain the same throughout all the generations. Thus Chacham Bernays in Hamburg, Jacob Ettlinger in Altona, Samson Raphael Hirsch in Frankfort-on-Main, Azriel Hildesheimer and Michael Sachs in Berlin, Seligmann B. Bamberger in Wuerzburg, and many other like-minded rabbis created model Jewish communities which became firm buttresses for the three pillars upon which the Jewish world is based: Torah, the worship of God, and the love of one's fellow man.[2c] In this connection, we should mention the outstanding contribution of the historian, Marcus Lehmann, rabbi in Mainz. His studies of various epochs of Jewish life presented happenings of the past in vivid reality, while retaining a true traditional point of view. De-

2c) Joseph Carlebach, *Das Gesetzestreue Judentum*, p. 20 ff., p. 32 ff.