



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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"A Time and a Place"

"He was in the wrong place at the wrong time." We have all heard this phrase, and many of us have used it. It is especially apt when it is used to describe a person with many virtues and talents who just can't use them because of the social or physical circumstances in which he finds himself. That such

a person faces profound frustration is, to say the least, obvious.

Many Jewish immigrants came to the United States blessed with spiritual gifts and intellectual skills but found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. For you see, America was viewed in two very different ways by the Jews back in the *shtetl* of the old country. On the one hand, it was seen as the *goldene medina*, the golden country, the land of material opportunity. But on the other hand, it was also viewed as the *treifene medina*, the non-kosher country, the lands of insurmountable religious challenges.

The usual "success stories" of Jewish immigration to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are narratives of "making it" financially, but utterly "losing it" from the point of view of traditional Jewish culture. American Jewish fiction, and even American Jewish history, know these narratives well and relate them in graphic detail.

What is largely missing from this body of literature are the stories of those who came to these shores imbued with religious fervor, committed to traditional observance. Lacking are the stories of men and women who found it difficult, if not impossible, to live out their faith convictions in this new place and time.

Particularly lacking are the narratives of the struggles that rabbinic leaders had in coping with the *treif*, albeit golden, American environment. One such rabbinic leader was Rabbi Jacob Joseph, the first and only Chief Rabbi in the history of New York City, who died 108 years ago, and whose *yahrzeit* was last week,

Dedicated in loving memory of
our beloved mother, grandmother
and great-grandmother
so deeply missed

Hadassah Berger a"h

מרת הדסה בת

ר' אפרים ופרומא רחל ע"ה

on her second Yahrzeit

ה' מנחם אב

and our maternal grandmother

מרת פרומא רחל בת

ר' שלמה חיים הכהן ורבקה ע"ה

י"ג מנחם אב

and our paternal grandfather

ר' אלכסנדר ב"ר

עוזר הכהן ופייגא ז"ל

י"ג מנחם אב

May the Torah learning
in this issue of Torah Tidbits
be לעילוי נשמותיהם

The Berger Family

the 24th of *Tammuz*. How ironic it is that his *yahrzeit* fell only a few days after the ultimate American holiday, July 4th.

Rabbi Jacob Joseph, a disciple of the master moralist Israel Salanter, was a rising star in the Lithuanian rabbinic constellation, a gifted orator, a noted pedagogue, and an ardent proponent of meticulous ethical behavior. He accepted a call to the New York Chief Rabbinate, and he soon found himself "in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Rabbi Joseph was certainly not the first great man to find himself in a human context in which he was misunderstood, and in which he was beset by deep disappointment, nay disillusionment. I have long insisted that the first such individual was Moses himself, which brings us to this week's Torah portion, *Devarim*.

This week, we begin not only a new portion but an entirely new book, the book of Deuteronomy. This book, *Sefer Devarim*, can be read as a personal retrospective of Moses as he reviews the highlights of his life, and particularly of his relationship with the Jewish people. Time and again he expresses the frustrations he experienced in trying to bring his followers to the ideas and practices which he espoused.

There can be no greater frustration than that experienced by one who has encountered God face to face, but who cannot convey His message to his audience. And hence we have verses such as, "I cannot bear the burden of you by myself" (*Deuteronomy* 1:9). Or, and this the reader intones with the classic melody of lament, "How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!" (*Deuteronomy* 1:12)

Moses had a unique set of personal experiences, unprecedented visions of the divine,



natural tendencies toward all that is just and right, and above all, unparalleled humility. And he was predestined to live in a specific time and place. But how often he must have felt that this was the "wrong time at the wrong place," and certainly, "the wrong people."

Millennia after Moses came Rabbi Jacob Joseph. He was born in Eastern Europe, educated in its old-fashioned yet positively formative schools, and began a successful rabbinic career. He spoke widely and wrote prolifically. His themes were the importance of ethical behavior and the need to be considerate of other human beings. He was, by nature, meditative and would often take his young students into the fields and forests for their lessons. He was an expert in *halacha* and meticulous in its observance.

And then he was thrown into the American fray. He encountered fraud where he expected honesty, and violence when he was

In memory of

VICTOR LEVINSON ז"ל

אביגדור יצחק בן

ישעיהו ופייגא-פאני ז"ל

נפטר כ"ב תמוז

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland

The Family

accustomed to gentleness. He found a land where materialism and profit were primary values, and where spirituality and charity were scoffed at and mocked.

He suffered a stroke at an early age, and he died in anonymity and neglect. His funeral was attended by thousands, but it became the scene of a vicious anti-Semitic riot which made the front page of the newspapers of the time. He was indeed a great man in the "wrong place at the wrong time."

One can only speculate about what Rabbi Joseph's accomplishments would have been had he lived in a different place and a different time. For the United States of America is still a *goldene medina* for the Jewish people, a land of religious freedom unprecedented in our history. But it is no longer a *treifene medina*, for it has been transformed into a land of spiritual opportunity and religious accomplishment for our people.

Rabbi Jacob Joseph would have been proud of the "yeshiva constructed upon his grave." The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School was known as the mother of all yeshivot when it was situated on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and when I was a student there. It has since been transplanted to a new locale and continues to educate hundreds of Jewish children.

His writings have now been compiled and are available for all to see and study. And his

biography is incorporated into numerous anthologies of American Jewish history and into the history of the *Mussar* Movement, which tried so valiantly to emphasize the importance of ethical behavior in our religious tradition.

Like many others who experienced the frustration of being in "the wrong place at the wrong time," he left a lasting impact on our place and our time. And so did his predecessor, Moses our teacher, so very long ago.

Although in Moses' case we can only conjecture about his inner feelings, in the case of Rabbi Joseph, we know from records of his final sermons that he indeed believed he "was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Our tradition, however, teaches us a contrary lesson, namely that none of us are in the wrong place or wrong time. Each of us has a mission in life, and the Almighty Himself chooses the time in history and the place in the world where that mission is to be accomplished. Moses was the right man at the right time. That is apparent. And even Rabbi Joseph, although he could not realize it in his lifetime, served a specific purpose as a transitional figure in American Jewish history, helping to bridge the divide between the doomed *shtetls* of Eastern Europe and the *traif* but changing New World.

That we all ultimately are in the "right place at the right time" is the deeper meaning of teaching of our sages: "Despise no one and disdain nothing, for there is no one who does not have his hour, and there is nothing that does not have its place." (*Avot* 4:3) ■

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