

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 31)

Columbus Day 1892 and the Jews of New York

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On Sunday, October 9, 1892, page 36 of *The New York Herald* featured the following banners.¹

AMERICAN HEBREWS HEARTILY JOIN IN PRAISE OF COLUMBUS

Patriotic Music, Bunting and Decorations

Throngs of Joyful Worshippers

And Appropriate Discourses in All the Synagogues

ALL ISRAEL REJOICES

Thankfulness for America Reconciles Jews to the Expulsion from Spain

From these headlines it is clear that the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus discovering the New World was cause for great celebration by New York Jewry. Indeed, the *Herald's* account of what occurred in the various synagogues is really quite remarkable given the description in the article of the sentiments and intensity of the patriotism displayed by the Jewish community in 1892. This is something which one simply does not see today.

In these dates, 1492 and 1892, how much significance is there for the Hebrew race! The quadrennial celebration of the New World ties with the woe of the Jews of the Old World. Superstition is almost vindicated when one considers that the day that Columbus set sail in quest of the New World was identical with the day that the Jews were expelled from Spain.

Those [the Jews] of this country are Americans. Though the proof was not needed, the outpouring in the synagogues yesterday [Shabbos] bore sounding evidence that they are not only Americans, but patriotic Americans.

One eloquent rabbi declared that they only wanted the opportunity to show their devotion to America by a call to her defense.

Four hundred years ago millionaires hobbled out of Spain – beggars. Today Hebrew millionaires negotiate loans (from their own pockets) with Spain.

It is estimated that there are two hundred thousand Hebrews in New York city. If the estimate is true, there was a full turnout at the anniversary services yesterday morning.

In every synagogue in the city the American flag was proudly displayed on the day before October 9th. In 1892, October 8th was Shabbos Chol Moed Succos. “On Thursday was the Succoth, or Harvest Feast. This feast is better known as the ‘hut feast,’ which is the commemoration of the forty years is wandering in the wilderness by the children of Israel.”

The article then gives some selections from the sermons delivered on this Shabbos at some of the synagogues. Below we present some of the remarks of Rabbi Dr. Alexander Kohut and Rav Yaakov Yosef (Jacob Joseph).

Dr. Alexander Kohut

Alexander Kohut (1842 - 1894) was a well-known rabbinical scholar. He began work on his famous “dictionary of the talmud” in about 1873. It took him 25 years of untiring work to complete the *Arukh Ha Shalem!* This monumental and ground breaking work eventually amounted to more than 4000 double-column pages. In 1885 Dr. Kohut became the spiritual leader of Congregation Ahavas Chesed in New York. “Dr. Kohut was renowned as a brilliant orator and a great Hebrew scholar, undoubtedly one of the greatest Talmudists who have ever been in America.”²

In his remarks about the 400th Anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America, Dr. Kohut said:

America was discovered because Columbus possessed a living faith in his ideal, in himself, and in his God. [This is] of utmost significance for us Israelites. In fact, between Columbus’ innate reverential piety and staunch adherence to faith and the firm, unflinching, unbeguiled confidence in our own conviction throughout these stormy centuries, most suggestive parallels could be drawn.

Faith is the incarnation of Israel’s glory, the inseparable watchword of Israel’s culture, historic progress and development.

A Strange Coincidence

Friends! What a thrilling thought darts through our minds at the strange coincidence which commends itself to our notice! What a whirl of conflicting emotions seizes our hearts at the startling truth, but recently unfolded, that the 12th of October, 1492, when the noted discoverer first spied the welcome dawn of feeble light, when Columbus first set foot upon the land, which was a momentous

event for us all, the advent of the Jewish New Year³ marked Israel's claim, pleaded Israel's plea for deliverance from tyranny. Thus, then, with the aid of unerring chronological research, can we demonstrate the importance of Columbus' discovery for wandering Israel. That New Year which witnessed the landing of a world's enlightened hero kissed the air of a new born freedom and breathed upon the virgin soil a spirit of innocent liberty, which to our own times has not departed from her cherished cradle, thus solemnly dubbed free by Israel's watchful God.

It was on this Jewish New Year that the loyal standard bearer of faith, with his now jubilant followers, all attired in raiments of royal splendor, sang with lifted eye and bended knee a devout Te Deum [a traditional Christian hymn of joy and thanksgiving] upon America's blessed shores.

Thus unconsciously our festival - a time of thanksgiving - was made a day of holy convocation by one who, though not within the pale of Judaism, was inspired by the Arch Explorer Himself to steer for America's newly gained harbor and there offer a contrast to history, a protest to bigotry, a remonstrance to oppression, and seal an alliance of freedom on Israel's festal day. Our hearts swell with conscious pride, our souls revel in the luxury of this sublime conception, and we, too, reverently lift the eye and humbly bend the knee on this day of jubilee, hallowed by recollections of that divine prophecy.

Rabbi Jacob Joseph

Rabbi Jacob Joseph (1840 – 1902) was the Chief Rabbi of New York. He was also the rov of Congregation Beis Medrash Hagodal on the Lower East Side. At the time this was the largest and most prestigious Orthodox synagogue in New York.

Rabbi Joseph spoke in Yiddish, so what *The Herald* attributes to him is undoubtedly a translation.

From all quarters of the east side the orthodox Hebrews flocked to Temple [sic] Beth Hamedrash Hagodal, No. 54 Norfolk street, yesterday morning. The synagogue was crowded and the great audience was rewarded by hearing a beautiful address by the Chief Rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Congregations, Rev. Dr. [sic] Jacob Joseph.

His [Columbus'] plans and his propositions aroused the ill pleasure of the Church, the distrust of the science of his age, and the ridicule of the masses. But all those turbulent elements were calmed in the course of time, taught to accommodate themselves to the truth and to be raised and enlightened by it.

The bright light of God's wisdom which has designed the great discovery, the rays of His spirit which guided the great discoverer and those who assisted him in his undertaking, the world could see and admire only at the lapse of centuries.

We can now appreciate the wisdom of the discovery of America in its bearings upon the social, moral and religious development of the human family, and bless the Author of Wisdom for His wondrous deeds and providential guidance of our destinies.

Holland, Sweden, England, [and] other countries dominated by Teutonic people sent their scions to the New World. Here at a distance from their seats of government, and from the Church which controlled them by the influence of religion, they could freely cope with the greater Powers which preceded them on this free soil. They coped with and contended against them in defense of their human rights and justice as they conceived it. And doing this they caused the manifestation of justice divine to be revealed.

At last the blessed constitution and government of the United States was enacted, and the wisdom divine in revealing the New World to man became apparent. Here the persecuted of all nations found the justice that was due them as human beings at the hands of their fellowmen; here the sufferers of the sons of Israel found a haven of rest, liberty to breath the free air of God, the right and the protection of the law in the development of their abilities and usefulness, and, above all, the freedom to follow the dictates of conscious, and to worship the God of their fathers without molestation.

The Chief Rabbi then read a special prayer in Hebrew composed by J. Buchhalter for this occasion. “After the recitation of this prayer in Hebrew the chief rabbi offered up a short prayer for the souls of Columbus and his Jewish followers. He commended to divine grace the souls of George Washington and the ‘Fathers of the Revolution,’ and finally he prayed for the peace and prosperity of the United States and for divine blessings in behalf of the President, Vice President and the judiciary and executive authorities of the nation.”

Acknowledgement: The author wishes to express his thanks to Ms. Roberta Saltzman, Dorot Jewish Division of the NY Public Library, for supplying him with the NY Herald article upon which this column is based.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from The New York Herald, Sunday, October 9, 1892, pages 36-37.

² **The Unfailing Light** by Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman, The Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, page 172.

³ Dr. Kohut was incorrect when he said that Rosh Hashanah fell on October 12, 1492. In 1492 Rosh Hashanah fell on October 1/2. It may well be that Dr. Kohut misread the date of Columbus’ landing in the New World and thought it was October 2nd and not October 12th.