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## COLUMBUS DAY 1892 AND THE JEWS OF NEW YORK

Dr. Yitzchok Levine  
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On Sunday, October 9, 1892, page 36 of The New York Herald featured the following banners.<sup>[i]</sup>

**AMERICAN HEBREWS HEARTILY JOIN  
IN PRAISE OF COLUMBUS  
Patriotic Music, Bunting and Decorations  
Throngs of Joyful Worshipers And  
Appropriate Discourses in All the Synagogues  
ALL ISRAEL REJOICES  
Thankfulness for America Reconciles Jews  
to the Expulsion from Spain**

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From these headlines it is clear that the 400th 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 - the intensity of the patriotism displayed by the Jewish community in 1892 - is something one simply does not see today.

The Herald article continued,

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

In every synagogue in the city the American flag was proudly displayed on the day before October 9. In 1892, October 8 was *Shabbos Chol Hamoed Succos*. The Herald noted, 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 presented selections from sermons delivered at some of the synagogues. The remarks made by Rabbi Dr. Alexander Kohut and Rav Yaakov Yosef (Jacob Joseph) are of particular interest.

### Dr. Alexander Kohut

Alexander Kohut (1842-1894), a well-known rabbinical scholar, 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*, a monumental work amounting 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."<sup>[ii]</sup>

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

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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.

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 Year<sup>[iii]</sup> marked Israel's claim, pleaded Israel's plea for deliverance from tyranny.

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. 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), the chief rabbi of New York, was the *rav* of Congregation Beis Medrash Hagodal on the Lower East Side, the largest and most prestigious Orthodox synagogue in New York.

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

The Herald reported, "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."

In part Rav Joseph said:

His [Columbus's] 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. 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.

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 breathe 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 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."

*(The author wishes to express his thanks to Roberta Saltzman, Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, for supplying him with the New York Herald article on which this column is based.)*

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

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

[iii] 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's landing in the New World and thought it was October 2 rather than October 12.

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