

ON HISTORY

Isaac Leib Peretz was born in Poland in 1852 and is famous for his Yiddish writing and Hasidic tales. He died in 1915 and his passing was mourned by thousands of Jews who loved his stories.

YL Peretz

A Jew of my acquaintance sat down near me in a Warsaw park and asked me why I was so sad.

"Graetz is dead," I answered.

"God's will!" said my acquaintance. "One of our townsfolk, I suppose?"

This question, which ninety per cent of the Jews would have asked in his place, is a measure of the abyss into which we have fallen.

When I informed my neighbor that Graetz was an historian who wrote the history of the Jewish people, he commented:

"Oh, history!"

His voice had the same ring as if he were told that somebody had eaten a dozen hard-boiled eggs at one time.

Just as I was about to get angry, he continued very naively:

"And what's the use of history?"

"You are a Jew?" I asked.

"I think so," he smiled as if he were thinking: "More so than you!"

"Do you like Jews?"

"What then, I hate them?"

"You know that Alexander the Great met on his victorious march an entire kingdom consisting only of women?"

"Of course I do! The story is to be found in En Yakov, I believe, or possibly my teacher told it to me at school."

"You also know when the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah became separated and the Jewish people were divided into two?"

"When? Why do I have to know when? The whole story is to be found somewhere in the Bible."

"And what happened to the Kingdom of Israel?"

"The Kingdom of Israel, we assume, is on the other side of the Samhation!"

'And what happened to the Jews who were expelled from Spain?"

"They fled in all directions."

"And how about those who were twice expelled from France?"

"Where should they be? Some must have gone elsewhere and the rest must have found their way back somehow. Is that so important?"

"You surely know what the Jews have suffered and are suffering to this day in Persia, Rumania, and "

"I don't know about Persia but about Rumania I often hear, in the synagogue, newspaper reports which make my hair stand on end!"

"Do you know anything about the Crusades?"

"Ask me something funnier!"

"It isn't funny at all. Don't you know that because of the Crusades thousands of Jews were killed, entire communities were wiped out?"

"You must mean the massacres of Chmelnitzky in 1648?"

"Do you know anything about the Jews of Morocco?"

"Morocco? Never heard of it!"

"Would you like to know?"

"Well! To know! What is there to know? Another variety of troubles? People behaving differently? Believe me, it's the same world everywhere. I thank God that I don't have to bother about the world's troubles. {Pause, Sighing:} But tell me, you read newspapers, is there anything new?"

"No," I turned to my neighbor, "no, you don't like Jews."

"How so? Because I don't give money? I haven't any to give! The rich Jews have, so they give."

"I don't mean money. You see, a normal human being wants to know everything about a good friend or relative. If you meet a relative, for example, whom you haven't seen for several years, you don't get tired asking questions, one after another: how he got along all the time, what he experienced, what his wife and children are doing. If you learn that somebody in the family was sick, you want to know what kind of sickness, how long did it last, did the patient suffer much, what doctor or what faith-healer cured him. If a doctor was called in, did he prescribe a red medicine-bottle, or a green one, or a plain white one? If a faith-healer was consulted, did he merely pray for the sick person or did he envelop him in smoke? Your curiosity, however, extends not only to matters of such great importance.

If you see an acquaintance of yours in a new suit, you want to know how much he paid for the cloth per yard and how much for the tailoring. You lift up the flap to see if he hasn't been fooled in the lining."

"True," smiled my Jewish acquaintance, "there is no denying all this."

"Yes," I interrupted triumphantly, "as far as your brothers all over the world are concerned, however, you don't care to know how they are getting along! Your brothers have been suffering for thousands of years and you are not interested in finding out what's been happening to them all this time. From this I gather that, when you usher in each month with a prayer which includes the words *All Jews are brothers,' you say these words with about as much faith as the words, 'Next year we'll be in Jerusalem. "

"But I still feel that I love Jews!"

"You are mistaken."

"Can you prove it?"

"Yes, if you'll answer a few questions honestly."

"All right!"

"Do you like all your relatives?"

"Not all."

"Why not all?"

"What a silly question! If a relative of mine opens up a store right next to me, if he becomes my competitor — as though there were no other business possibilities elsewhere, if he creeps into my insides and takes my customer — my bit of bread — from right under my nose, why shouldn't I hate him? Or, if I have, among my wife's relatives, a drunkard or a confirmed atheist, do you expect me to like such a person?"

"And besides these few?"

"Besides them? Yes! I like all the relatives I know!"

"How about those you don't know?"

"I can't tell. For example, I have a first cousin in America. I never saw him."

"Then you don't — "I tried to suggest the answer.

"I don't hate him but I can't say that I like him. After all, I can't even picture him to myself. Try to like the hole of a doughnut! I don't know him!"

"But Jews in general you do know?"

My neighbor looked like a mouse in a trap; he wriggled hither and thither but I did not let him escape:

"I take you at your word. You don't like Jews in general because you can't picture them to yourself. They are for you like the hole of a doughnut."

Pause.

'What's your business?' I resumed.

"Foodstuff!" he answered gloomily.

"You've lived on this globe about fifty years?"

"Forty-five!"

"All right, forty-five! In your lifetime you've come to know close to two hundred Jews. Of these you reject about half: those who are lacking in piety, those who have a different brand of orthodoxy, and those, of course, who don't pray at all — atheists! To the flames with them! Of the remainder there is a considerable number you have no use for: one happens to be your opponent in a lawsuit, another is a competitor who takes your heart out, a third once spread gossip about you, a fourth is the fellow to whom you owe money, a fifth has a wife who quarreled with yours. The few that are left over, well, perhaps you do like them."

He was still thinking, deliberating what to answer, and I struck the iron while it was hot:

"Liking presupposes knowing! To like Jews in general means: to be attached not to twenty or thirty Jews but to the entire chain of generations and to the entire present generation which is scattered and dispersed throughout the world. A people is like a cone."

"How so?"

"Well, picture an ice-cream cone, upside-down. On the top point is our patriarchal father Abraham. The further down you go, the broader and wider the cone. Don't think of it as a perfect cone; mice have nibbled at it here and there, the cream has oozed through at one point or another, the wider the circumference the more cracks and holes and disfigurements. By the time you get down to the base of the cone, to our generation, seas, deserts, and lands divide us. To like Jews means to like the entire cone from top to bottom. To like Jews means to know them in their entirety, to understand them, to contain them in your heart, your brain, your blood."

My neighbor thought a while and then commented: "No doubt, history is interesting!"

"It is more than interesting," I told him, "it is a necessity. It is part of the foundation on which rests all Jewry, the entire cone."

"You see, we are an ancient people and yet, in this respect, all other peoples are much wiser than we are. Not only the European peoples, who write, read, and study history; not only the Romans and the Greeks, the cultured peoples of antiquity, who guarded their history most carefully; not only the more ancient Egyptians, Medes, and Persians, who scratched their history upon stones, walls, pyramids, but even the most primitive peoples, the savage tribes, appreciated the importance of history."

"There are wild tribes in Africa and America who still go about naked like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; they still wear as ornaments of beauty brass rings through their noses, seashells in their upper or lower lips, leather bracelets on their feet, horns or feathers on their heads; they grease and tattoo their naked bodies with coloured figures; and yet these wild savages already know that history is a necessity. Since their men are always busy with war-making, fishing, and hunting,

their women must keep in mind everything the tribe experienced and must relate it on every suitable occasion."

"Perhaps such is the custom among the idol-worshippers?"

"And how about our Torah, doesn't it start with history?"

"So says the Biblical commentary of Rashi!"

"But still, what's the good of history?"

"You have children, haven't you?" I answered his question with another.

"Yes, in accordance with God's command."

"Who is wiser, pray, you or your child who is just about to go out into the world?"

He became serious.

"The eggs always claim to be wiser than the chickens."

"But what do the chickens say? Will you trust your business or your capital to a boy of six or seven?"

"Of course not! Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Why won't you?"

I'd soon have to go begging."

"Why, can't a six-year-old conduct business?"

"Of course not! He has no experience."

"For the same reason, obviously, a newlywed couple aren't given their dowry immediately and in full, because business requires experience and the young man hasn't any."

"True."

"He is therefore given an older adviser or an experienced partner."

"Probably. Do you think ordinary Jews have no brains at all?"

"God forbid! I don't think so. I'm just asking. Please tell me: do children grow up and in time amount to something?"

"Of course! If they see the world, if they get experience, if they can distinguish between good and bad, then they have acquired maturity."

"You see, a philosopher said that yesterday is today's teacher."

"Do you have to be a philosopher to know that? Why, every school-boy will tell you that the world," — he heaved a sigh — "experience, is an expensive teacher."

"But experience means remembering, doesn't it?"

"Surely."

"If, God forbid, a person falls sick, as in typhoid fever, and forgets everything?"

"Then it's bad! He'll have to start all over again from scratch. This actually happened to Reb Sheshas."

"Supposing that a person, God forbid, has no memory whatsoever, supposing he is born without the power of memory?"

"Does that happen?"

"Let us suppose it does!"

"Then it's really bitter. Such a person cannot learn anything at all; he can't grow wiser even if he becomes as old as Methuselah.

Without memory experience is impossible.

"A boy of six with a memory can be wiser than such a person?"

"Of course!"

"Right. You must understand one thing more. Not only an individual but a people too must possess a memory. A people's memory is called history. What is true of an individual without memory is also true of a people without history: they cannot become wiser or better.

Where can a people derive in bad times experience, advice, and self-confidence, if each generation with its joys and sorrows, virtues and failings is cut off and cast away, or, as the proverb goes, out of sight out of mind?"

'You're right," said my neighbor, 'in bad times we lose our heads, we are like a herd of sheep; whoever wants to, whoever puts on a front, becomes our leader, our spokesman!"

'Listen to me, buy Graetz's Misery of the Jews!'

"But where will I get the money?"

That question I had to leave unanswered.