

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

Isaac Jacob Reines

ISRAEL'S TREASURE

INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines was one of the great Jewish luminaries who stood on the threshold of the twentieth century, lighting the way into a new era of travail and hope for redemption for the Jewish people. Born in Russia in 1839, he received a comprehensive talmudic education. After ordination, he occupied several rabbinical posts, the last being in Lida, where he died in 1915. His writings on Halakhah and on the ideal of Zion have both the flavor of the modern spirit and the piety and wisdom of old Israel. They reflect, above all, a boundless love of Torah, the Jewish people, and the Land of Israel.

Though a renowned scholar, immersed in the study of the sacred Law, Rabbi Reines was nevertheless not removed from the vicissitudes and the struggles of Jewish life. He advocated secular studies in addition to Torah learning, and accordingly founded a Yeshiva based upon this approach. It met with such bitter opposition that the Yeshiva eventually closed. He was among the first of the religious leaders of stature to join the Zionist movement and to espouse courageously the cause of Zionism. With foresight and vision he founded the Mizrachi, thereby laying the foundation for modern religious Zionism.

It was Rabbi Reines' conviction that a knowledge of our great religious literature would evoke the loyalty of our people, especially the youth, to Israel, the Jewish faith, and our aspirations in Zion. The following excerpts, which I have translated from the original Hebrew, are part of the Introduction to his book, "A New Light Upon Zion," (*Or Chadash Al Zion*). The author states the object of his book to be two-fold: to draw religious Jews to the ideal of Zionism, and to bring secular Zionists closer to religious Judaism.

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He urged upon the Zionists of his day a more assiduous study of our holy books and the classic sources of Judaism.

In *A New Light Upon Zion* Rabbi Reines presents some of the multi-faceted jewels of Jewish thought culled from talmudic and midrashic literature, revealing them in a new and penetrating light. The bond of unity among Jews, he believed, is the bond of a common spiritual treasure and a common faith. His message is most timely today.

GERSION APPEL

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Spiritual wealth, quite like material wealth—man's earthly possession—is subject to three conditions with regard to the effect that it has upon its possessor, and the honor, the blessings, and the delights that it bestows upon him.

Material wealth can effect a great change in a man's entire station in life. It can brighten a life of darkness, shining forth upon him as the sun at noonday and endowing him with good fortune and renown at every turn. For material wealth to effect such a change, three conditions are required: that it really exist, that he have knowledge of it, and that he recognize its true value. The same is true of spiritual wealth, the portion bequeathed by God to man for his spiritual sustenance in the land of the living. There is no limit to the good that it can bring to man, the moral change it can effect in him, lighting his way along the road of life. But this spiritual transformation, too, can come over a man only if the same three conditions are met with respect to his spiritual wealth, namely, that it exist, that he have knowledge of it, and that he recognize its worth.

Literature, in all its forms, is the spiritual wealth of every people because it exerts a great influence upon all men. A nation whose literature is more extensive and more developed is spiritually richer than the rest of the nations, and it can look forward with greater hope to reach the highest goals in perfection and fulfillment. We do not claim undeserved glory if we permit ourselves to say that the literature which is most extensive and most developed and perfected is our sacred Hebraic literature, because its doctrine is the word of the living God. To this day it is the Book of Books. All civilized nations have recognized it as the fountain of divine wisdom.

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This literature has been greatly enlarged and enhanced by our Tradition. The Halakhah is a veritable treasure of wisdom, while the Aggadah is a beautiful diadem. It is a storehouse of precious learning, teaching man a knowledge of God. It guides him along the right way and toward proper conduct in life, so that he may develop his character and purify and ennoble himself. There is no cause to complain if the Halakhah seems to have become the exclusive province of the learned, since its objective is to teach our people the laws of God, and its subject matter is abstruse and often beyond the comprehension of a large portion of our people. Not so, however, with the Aggadah, whose object it is to cultivate in everyone a spirit of love for his people and faith, and for Torah and good deeds. This can be taught to the masses of our people, even to those who are totally illiterate. Hence, we certainly have good cause to complain if this general objective has not been attained. There is no doubt but that it would have been attained if the three conditions above were fulfilled. To our sorrow they have not. Indeed, in reality, we possess this great wealth, but there are many who are totally ignorant of it. There are others who, though they have knowledge of it, are still lacking in appreciation of the true worth of their wealth; they thus fail to illumine their lives and that of their people with its great light.

Those of our youth who turned their back upon their faith and their people, who were ashamed of their origin and therefore resorted to devious means to hide their Jewishness, did not really know their people. For had they truly known their people, they would have realized that not only does a Jew not have to be ashamed of his name and of his ancestry, but he has every reason to be proud that he is a son of a wondrous people which has ever excelled in its culture, in its marvellous talents, and in the strong ties that have bound it to its religion and faith.

Our youth have now begun to draw nearer to their people. No longer do they deny their Jewish origin. On the contrary, they strive to make their origin and descent known and they publicly proclaim their Jewishness. This is a good sign that they have begun to know themselves and are becoming aware of their own worth. However, there are degrees and levels of self-awareness. It is obvious that they have not yet reached a true understanding and recognition of the worth of their people. Such a recognition is fundamental in

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matters of religious and national concern, because the extent of a man's loyalty to his people and to his faith depends upon the degree of his recognition of their true worth. We must endeavor to broaden this awareness among our people, especially at a time such as this when every Jew's devotion to his people and to his faith is so desperately needed.

Some are persuaded that this can be achieved through a more widespread knowledge of our history. There is no doubt that every Jew who makes an intelligent study of our great past, and becomes aware of the ennobling and inspiring qualities of Israel that it reveals, will learn to honor and to treasure his people. However, this alone will not suffice. A true appreciation of Judaism will come to the Jew only through a knowledge and understanding of our religious literature which will reveal to him every facet of our religion and inspire him to uphold our faith.