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GLEANINGS FROM THE GASTER-MENDES CORRESPONDENCE (1900-1932)

Rabbi David de Sola Pool began his ministry as assistant rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel at the invitation of his relative and mentor, Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes. Dr. Mendes was an outstanding leader of American Orthodoxy, deeply involved in Jewish communal matters and humanitarian projects. Dr. Pool learned much from the example set by his distinguished predecessor.

Dr. Mendes (1851-1938) maintained a lively correspondence with Moses Gaster (1856-1939), Haham of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews in London. As the spiritual leaders of the two most prominent Sephardic congregations in London and New York, they found a mutuality of interest which is beautifully revealed in their correspondence. For a period of over 30 years, they corresponded and visited one another with regularity.

Their personalities and academic backgrounds complemented each other. Haham Gaster was the greater scholar and halakhic authority, while Dr. Mendes was the more effective leader and organizer. Their correspondence is maintained in the archives of University College London. We acknowledge the permission granted by the librarian of University College London to publish excerpts of this fascinating correspondence. (We have previously obtained permission from the late Abraham Piza Mendes, son of Dr. Mendes, to publish this material. We attempted without success to reach descendants of Haham Gaster.)

Dr. Gaster was born in Bucharest in 1856, receiving his early schooling there. He was ordained at the Theological Seminary at Breslau in 1881. He helped Heinrich Graetz in the preparation of his *History of the Jews* and gained worldwide fame in the field of Rumanian philology and folklore, areas in which he was awarded his Ph.D. He rose to the position of professor at the University of Bucharest and was elected to the Atheneu, the supreme scientific institution of Rumania.

In spite of his achievements, Haham Gaster was expelled from his

native land in 1885 for championing the rights of Rumanian Jews. He found refuge in England and was appointed lecturer in Greco-Slavonic literature at the University of Oxford. He was later elected to the office of Haham of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London.

Haham Gaster prepared a new edition of the Sephardic siddur and made scholarly contributions in the field of mythology and folklore.

His communal leadership was legendary. He was an ardent Zionist long before Herzl, and was involved in the establishment of the two earliest colonies in Palestine, Zichron Jacob and Rosh Pinah. Dr. Gaster introduced and championed the "cultural and religious approach" of the Zionist Movement at the Second Zionist Congress, thus being in a sense the forerunner of the Mizrachi Movement. He served as Vice President of the second, third, fourth and seventh Zionist Congress, and organized the English Zionist Federation in 1907. Preliminary negotiations for the Balfour Declaration in 1917 took place in his home in London.

In spite of the loss of his sight, he continued his literary activities for many years after his retirement in 1918. He had one of the largest private libraries in Europe and could converse fluently in twelve languages. A temperamental man of great energy, he was not easily given to compromises on matters where he held strong views.

Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, son of the Reverend Abraham P. Mendes, was born in Birmingham, England April 13, 1852. He received his Jewish education from his father, who was the founder of Northwick College—a boarding school in London where religious studies and secular education were combined. He was ordained by British rabbis and fully recognized by both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Chief Rabbis of Great Britain. He received his M.A. degree at University College London and earned his M.D. from New York University in 1885. In 1877 he left the service of the Sephardic congregation of Manchester to become Minister of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. He served in this position until 1923, after which he was Minister Emeritus until his death in 1937. All in all, his association with Shearith Israel spanned sixty years. During his long tenure at Shearith Israel, he was a tireless communal leader. Among the organizations which he helped to found were the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, the New York Board of Ministers, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Montefiore Hospital, and the Lexington School for the Deaf. He was a prolific writer, publishing numerous books and essays.

The following excerpts of letters are typical of the tone of intellectual integrity and the wide range of interests permeating their correspondence.

TRADITION

LETTER OF DR. MENDES TO HAHAM GASTER, JULY 21, 1903

. . . History is made rapidly today. Events which formerly took decades and centuries to mature, in our day take infinitely less time. The anti-Semitic sentiment in Spain took many years to become strong enough to eject us. Today, while we flatter ourselves that we shall never be ejected from England, France or America, nevertheless we are not at ease. Whether it is an aliens bill, a Dreyfus Affair or a Dewey incident, we are not at ease. But I maintain that our only safeguard is the respect of our neighbors of alien faith. While we have the respect of some of the better class and of the real thinkers, we are safe. That respect we can have only if we respect ourselves by respecting our religion. Here is true work for Zionists. To keep Hebrews true to Jewish life, Jewish law, Jewish sentiment. Every Zionist society should be a working influence in its own immediate community towards such ends. I would take away the charter of every Zionist society whose members by the lives they lead and by the work they do, accomplish nothing or attempt nothing in these directions.

Suppose we get the legally assured home tomorrow. Is it to be inhabited by Sabbath-breakers, by those who have intermarried, by those who have nothing Jewish in their lives?

Our policy as Zionists as I understand it, is to strengthen our hold on Palestine in every way. Jews who are citizens or subjects of other countries must enjoy the right to settle and colonize. Just as we have won from Russia the right for American Jews to enter Russia and travel freely, so we must influence the Sultan to permit our colonization in Palestine and insist upon the freedom of our colonists from pacha's cupidity. Surely this can be promoted by us through our respective governments.

. . . But besides strengthening our hold, by what you well term "vested interests" in Palestine, I respectfully maintain that we must strengthen our hold on respect of all nations. We can only do this by respecting our religion. Here, I repeat, is the immediate work for Zionists in all cities in all lands. Without the respect, the public sentiment of the world, we will never get Palestine.

LETTER FROM HAHAM GASTER TO DR. MENDES, NOVEMBER 20, 1904

. . . By the way, how do you stand to this new phase of Zionism (the Uganda Plan)? It is a terrible disappointment, though to be expected from men who have left Judaism long behind them and try now

to find their way back, if they really try to do so, by means which are boding ill for the future of our people. Aided by an unscrupulous press and by a band of renegades and atheists, we are now confronted with a split which no ingenuity will avert.

LETTER FROM DR. MENDES TO HAHAM GASTER, DECEMBER 9, 1904

. . . Mr. Zangwill has not made a favorable impression with some of us Zionists, on the contrary he has angered us by some of his utterances, especially those which palliate or permit intermarriage. I refused to go to a mass meeting last night at which he was to speak. His doctrine . . . appears to be an amalgamation of Hebrews and Christians, while from our standpoint, separation is essential in religious matters. In a word, his ideas of fusion to us mean confusion. . . . Why did not some other Zionists come out to America to speak for or against Uganda or any other theme that interests Zionism. Anybody coming to us from Europe should be a representative man, representative not by what he says, but by the life he leads.

LETTER FROM DR. MENDES TO HAHAM GASTER, MAY 18, 1910

. . . Would it possible to create a supreme religious authority for the Jews of English-speaking countries, say a council of three consisting of yourself, Dr. Adler and Rabbi Margolies or Dr. Klein of New York, assisted by a council of seventy ministers to be elected by a mass meeting of all ministers and to be chosen on the merits of personal character and scholarship. If seventy are too many let us have fewer. It would take months to work out such a plan. But it would create an organized, dignified and a strong historic Judaism to stand out against the excesses of Hirsch, Montefiore, Kohler or Wise.

LETTER FROM HAHAM GASTER TO DR. MENDES, FEBRUARY 21, 1927

. . . I do not know how adequately to thank you for all that you write. Your lofty words of consolation, your kind, and if I may add, over-rated appreciation of the services which, with the blessing of God I have been able to render to our people to the best of my abilities, your touching reference to my dear father, the blending of joy and sorrow which has overtaken us within the space of a few days; all these cause me to thank you most deeply. We have both striven for the realization of the ideal hopes of our people in prayer and in work, and I no less

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than you am thankful to remember the spiritual part which you have played in our Zionist movement, and that I brought you and Dr. Herzl together in the common endeavor to rouse and to raise our people. You are also looking back on many years of strenuous work, and the changing ways of men. You have also experienced friendship in the reverse and have been able to shed the dross of pettiness which surrounded you and take a calmer view of human passions and human frailty. I wish I could follow your example

LETTER FROM DR. MENDES TO HAHAM GASTER, JULY 18, 1932

. . . "*Olam*" means with us "the world," "eternity," and "that which is hidden" or "mystery." But where in the Bible do we find the actual expression which we use a hundred times a day in every blessing, "*melech haolam*." The Bible justifies this expression a thousand times, of course, but where is this expression actually found, and how came it to be introduced into our ritual?

. . . Another thought in connection with the word "*Baruch*" has also frequently been in my mind. "To bless" means to confer something that will be advantageous to the one whom we bless. What is there that a mortal can possibly give to God that can be of advantage or benefit to him? Should not therefore our expression "*Baruch*" be often translated as if coming from the root meaning "to kneel"? That is to say, should we not sometimes translate these phrases as "kneel ye before the Lord who is blessed, and let Him be most adored". . . .

LETTER FROM HAHAM GASTER TO DR. MENDES, JULY 29, 1932

I am sure you will be as much surprised when reading this letter as I was on reading yours. I cannot explain it nor do I try to do so. Here are the facts: It must have been precisely at the same time or a little earlier before you wrote your letter that the two problems which you mention, have been deeply agitating me. So much so that I intended inserting a note in my interleaved edition of my Prayer Book concerning in the first place the nature of the word "*Barukh*" in connection with the Divine Name. I felt the same incongruity in "blessing God" instead of being blessed by Him. I tried to get over the difficulty by interpreting the phrase as meaning "Thou who art a blessed God" just as we say "Thou who art a mighty God," a kind of inversion of the sequence, influenced by similar combinations of the word "*Barukh*" with God. Of course, the translation "blessed" is certainly not adequate, and here we

have again one of the many difficulties which the Hebrew presents when translated into a non-Semitic language.

. . . As to "King of the World": As you rightly remark, it does not occur in this form in the Bible, and as far as I believe, dates like the preceding formula from the same pre-Maccabean period. It has its origin in the desire of asserting the universal rule and the supreme kingdom of God worshipped by the Jews against the multifarious gods of the Greek mythology and other pagan cults.

And this appellation seems to form one whole with the "blessing." I see in it a variance of the above-mentioned formula for the Ineffable Name.