

The Message of Amen

A NEW YEAR SERMON

(Specially Written for the New Year Number of the
"Zionist Record.")

By

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JEREMIAH XI, 5.

Then answered I, and said, Amen, O Lord.

*The day declines apace. The setting sun
Will vanish soon, yet for a little space
Keep open, Lord, the gate, for, well-nigh done,
The day declines apace.*

THUS exclaims an unknown poet of Israel, as the shadows of evening are cast upon his path, while the Day of Atonement is passing to its bourne.

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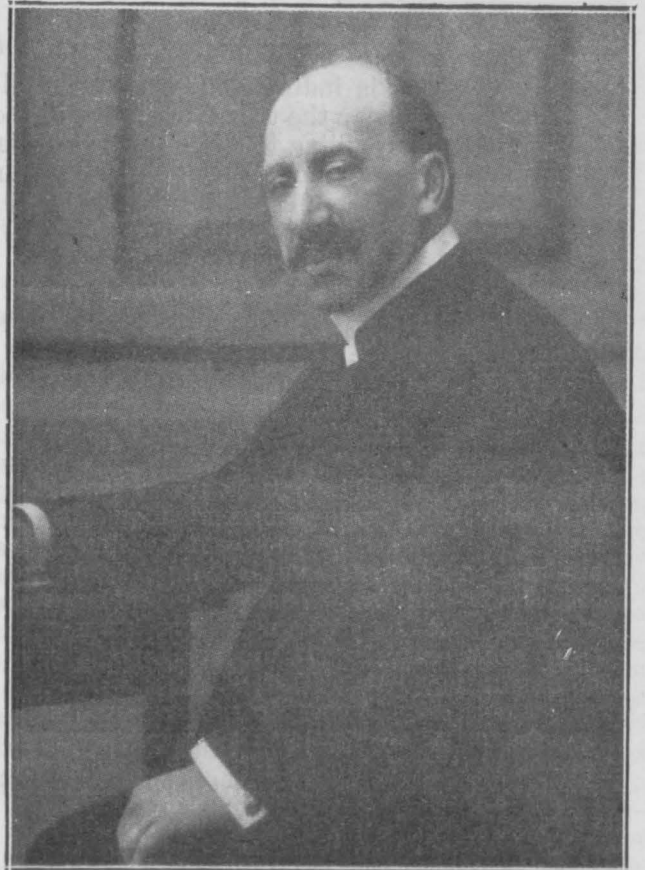
The last hour is invariably tinged with unutterable sadness—the sadness of farewell. The last hour before we take leave of someone with whose soul our own is bound up, and who is going forth on a long quest—the last hour before we pass out of the home of our childhood and our early youth—the last hour before we set out on a mission that may be pregnant with momentous issues for others besides ourself—the last hour before we quit the sacred scenes around which cluster the sweetest of our memories, representing the cumulative growth of all the years of our manhood and womanhood—the last hour of our earthly pilgrimage to the mysterious goal of our dreams, our aspirations, our yearnings and our hopes!

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THE Neelah hour is a prelude to and a premonition of the inevitable parting that awaits us all, in turn,—the severance from those whom we love and cherish above all that we value—the separation from the familiar folk who form the circle of our little world of every day and make it the dearest place to us on earth—the ultimate withdrawal from the sphere to which we came unwittingly and from which we have to depart without question. The Neelah hour—the supreme hour that closes, as with a divine clasp of benediction, the little volume that enfolds what we humbly and tenderly and gratefully call our life.

In the last hour of the Day of Atonement, what can we, frail and faltering and fleeting mortals, say before Him Whose years have no end—the Father and the Master of our life—to Whom we owe account and reckoning—what can we say save which untold generations of our ancestors have poured forth from contrite hearts in the culminating hour of this solemn season:—

*Lord of Hosts, Whom all adore,
Grant us pardon, we implore,
At the Ne'ilah once more.*



*O renew our days of old,
With Thy mercies manifold,
And our years, as heretofore,
At the Ne'ilah once more.*

IT is now Lighting-up time,—as people say in England—at the passing of a long Summer day. Our solemnities are approaching their end, and it is Lighting-up time in sooth,—the time to re-light within each of us the languishing lamp that was kindled in our responsive heart in the days of our childhood by the loving hand of a devoted father and mother. In this memorable hour, we recall how that ineffable light has survived all the years, to illumine to our eyes with a radiance all their own the time-hallowed features of those who taught and trained us to be steadfast to the sacred trust which they committed to our keeping. In this Neelah hour, once more there is vividly revealed to our mental vision the familiar happy home, rife in colour and romance, in which, as boys and girls, we chanted the old-world Hebrew melodies whose accents still reverberate in our hearing. We behold again undimmed the Sabbath candles which our mother lighted with reverent hands, the while in her radiant eyes—those homes of silent prayer—we fancied we beheld the refulgence of the Schechinah.

We hear anew our father intoning the Kiddush with a voice of rapturous joy and thanksgiving, while we drank, each in turn, as we sat around an overflowing table, out of the cup of salvation. And then gradually dimmer and dimmer, alas, shine those first affections, those shadowy recollections which, be they what they may, were yet the fountain-light of all our seeing in the years that followed, and served to help us keep unto the end the whiteness of our soul, the faith of our youth, the feeling of kinship and comradeship which binds us in an irrefragable union with our brothers and sisters in Israel, however divergent our paths in life may run, however far we may wander from the tents of Jacob, however feintly we may trace with the eye of our soul in after days the events hallowed to us by the holiest associations of our boyhood

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and girlhood, the kinsfolk and the friends with whose lives our own life is indissolubly united for all time.

And then we hear the trembling notes of the Last Post, in the spirit-thrilling tones of the venerable Kad-dish, as occasion rings them out from time to time on our onward march, often chequered and halting, to the Neelah hour, with the consummation of our own life that resounds with an inevitable Amen.

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BUT the last hour—as we whisper its name—the Neelah hour—is not—cannot be—the end of all things—the hour which sets the seal, that cannot be broken, on the ideals that have animated and inspired and governed and sustained us throughout our pilgrimage. Surely, it cannot but be that,—in the words of our Liturgy for this Season—“God will give glory unto His people, praise to them that reverence Him, hope to them that seek Him, confidence to them that wait for Him.” Such is the blissful assurance which the final hour of the Day of Atonement brings with it year by year to a Congregation of the House of Israel, as it enfolds us all alike in its farewell benediction at the time of Neelah. And in the resurgent religious light which it spreads around and about us in this luminous hour, it enables us to discern in outline the gates of the life eternal, through which we shall pass, each, in turn, on the Supreme Sabbath of Sabbaths.

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It is related that an Emperor of China, hearing that Mount Fuji or Fuji-yama—the never-dying mountain—in Japan, yielded the elixir of life, collected about him a number of handsome youths and maidens and set sail for the Land of the Rising Sun. Hour after hour, the procession climbed the steep ascent and when nearing the journey's end, the old Emperor ran forward joyously, so as to be the first to drink of the elixir of life. And he was the first to taste of that Life that never grows old; but when the company found him, they saw their Emperor lying on his back with a smile upon his face. He had indeed found Life Eternal, but it was through the pathway of Death.

To all of us on earth, there falls the same thrilling experience. We long to draw the waters of salvation from that mystical fountain, the draught of which shall enable us to live for ever. But in our quest for the elixir of life, we are brought to realise with the Chinese Emperor in the story, that each of us, in his turn, before tasting of the water of Life Eternal for which we pant, must needs pass through the gateway of Death.

This solemn yet inspiring thought is brought home to us irresistibly at the close of our whole-day Service on the Day of Atonement. Perhaps in no hour, do we more earnestly and more intensively—in the words of a Roman poet—stretch out longing hands towards a further shore, than in the Neelah hour which recalls to us all those with whom our life has been intimately associated and who have been sundered from us by an inexorable fate, but who will, we fondly hope and devoutly pray, be restored to us on the Sabbath of Reunion in the Life Everlasting. Thus may we hopefully, ay, confidently imitate the prophet of old who answered, and said Amen, O Lord!

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JEREMIAH, the Hebrew seer, is relating one of his own spirit-searching experiences, such as come to each of us in the course of his career. Life implies a series of tests and trials, which entail personal suffering on every one of us, that sometimes makes our faith and our hope tremble in the balance. It is no doubt inspiring when some prophet of consolation whispers into our ear in the moment of grievous affliction that it is all for the best. But alas, few of us can give heed

to his well-intentioned message of solace. We crave for some oracle of eternity to satisfy our ardent aspiration to behold the vision of the Almighty and to acquire the knowledge of the Most High, which may preserve within us the overmastering and unfaltering conviction, that when the dust shall return to the earth as it was, the spirit will go back to Him Who gave it, and that when each of us, in turn, beholds those dearest to his heart vanishing, one by one, from his ken, he may look forward to, at least, a spiritual reunion with them in the distant by and by. But in the meantime, while we live and work, and pray and hope, and yearn and wait, there is only one attitude for us to assume in the face of all the variegated experiences which must fall to our portion; and it is that which is enshrined in the humble, but stately exclamation of the sweet Singer of Israel: “Blessed be the Lord for evermore. Amen, and Amen!”

Amen! How softly and gently that tranquillizing word falls on our soul, as if it were, lulling our doubts to rest and quickening us afresh with the divine spirit, when the prayer of the hymn of our heart has reached the last note of its ascending scale, or when the Service, in which we have been taking part, has sounded its final strain of triumphant faith. It betokens our entire self-surrender to Him to Whom all our hidden thoughts are revealed, even before they find utterance, and it reminds us that surely there is a sequel to human life on earth, and that the hope of life everlasting implanted within us by Him in Whose hand is the charge of all spirits, shall not be cut off, but will receive its fitting fulfilment in the greeting to be wafted from the Father of all the children of men in the supreme moment when each is vouchsafed to behold a fugitive glimpse of His incomparable majesty and glory and love and goodness,—the sound of a grand Amen. “Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, Who only doeth wondrous things. Amen and Amen!”

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BUT, ere we leave the House of Prayer at the close of the Day of days, let us seriously resolve that our Atonement Service shall not represent the Amen of our religious devotions in the year which has been renewed unto us all for good. It would, indeed, be a travesty of worship to come into the Sanctuary of the Most High on this “once in a year,” for a brief hour or two, and join in a meaningless formality, which has its main-spring in conventional custom or craven superstition, and then say Amen to all active interest in Jewry and in Judaism until the Penitential Season comes round once more, heralded by the rousing trumpet-call of the Shouphar to contrition and amendment. As Sabbath succeeds Sabbath during the year, can we deny that most of us expend all our energies and resources on the promotion of our material prosperity and of our self-gratification and amusement, without lending an occasion thought to the solemn obligations and responsibilities devolving upon us as members of the House of Israel? Surely, the very fact that we stand side by side as fellow-penitents, on this Day of Grace, in the presence of the Maker of us all, should serve to bring home to us the undeniable truth that, in abstaining from attendance at Divine Service from week to week, and in holding ourselves aloof from all that contributes to the advancement of our Communal welfare and progress, we are not only failing to discharge our duty to ourselves individually, but likewise responsible for the callous indifference of others who are sensibly or insensibly influenced by our personal example.

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(Concluded on page 12.)

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MESSAGE OF AMEN

(Concluded from page 10.)

unsealed phial of Radium is suspended, become themselves radio-active, acquiring to a certain extent some of the properties of Radium. It is only an eloquent illustration from the realm of Nature of the experience to which we are all subject in our daily life. Those who manifest zeal and devotion in any noble cause always communicate their beneficent radio activity to their fellow workers, with the unflinching result that not only do they spread blessedness like a fragrance wheresoever they go themselves, but they also induce countless others to become likewise, each in turn, a blessing in the midst of the land. "Then let all the people say, Amen, praise ye the Lord!"

If such be the spirit,—the true Jewish spirit,—in which we solemnize not only this recurring Day of Atonement, but every day of our life which should be equally holy unto us, we may, like the faithful servant of the God of Israel, who answered every message of his divine Master from the depths of his soul in the historic declaration, "Amen, O Lord"; we may be emboldened to exclaim, at the termination of this Day of days and of each day of our life on earth, with all our heart and all our soul and all our might, in the typical Jewish sentiment of an English poet:

*To Him I yield my Spirit:
On Him I lay my load;
Fear ends with Death; beyond it
I nothing see but—God.
Thus moving towards the darkness,
I calmly wait His call,
Seeing—fearing—nothing:
Hoping—trusting—All.*

Our Father, Our King.

In the last hour, one word of heartfelt gratitude and thanksgiving to Thee for this renewed Day of Atonement which Thou has given us for pardon and forgiveness. May it help to purify our hearts to serve Thee in truth, that we may be saved unto life and health and peace everlasting. Lord, do Thou unite us all in a single band to worship Thee in Thy Sanctuary and to declare Thy praise in our lives and in our homes from day to day, as the years come round, so that in all our ways and works we may acknowledge Thee as the Eternal Source of all blessings.

Our Father, our King, do Thou be gracious unto us and answer us. Do it for Thy sake, if not for ours. Do it for Thy sake, O Lord, and save us together with all Thy children everywhere who love Thee and serve Thee earnestly, ardently, steadfastly in spirit and in truth. Do it in this Neelah hour!

Amen and Amen!