



Simon J. Finkelstein

Spiritual Autobiography of Simon J. Finkelstein

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Simon J. Finkelstein¹

America has been my adopted country for more than sixty years. Though I still pronounce the English language imperfectly and speak it with difficulty, I feel I am thoroughly American, loving my country with a passion possible only for one who has known autocracy. My heart swells with gratitude at the words, "I am an American." Among the many benefits which kind Providence has showered on me, none, it seems to me, outweighs that which guided me to the shores of this blessed land. I know of no merit on my part which can have justified this remarkable grace to me, denied to so many of my kindred; it was like God's gifts to man generally, an undeserved expression of love. Nothing that I can do in the service of God can begin to reflect the thankfulness and sense of obligation which comes over me, when I consider that He has redeemed me from the dungeon of Tsarism into which I was born and in which I was reared, and brought me to these shores.

I love America not primarily for its plenty, its high standard of living, its magnificent resources and power. The vast material improvement in my life which American has meant is secondary to the joy I derive from the spirit of the land. America's liberty and human equality, the friendship and sociability of its people, its comparative freedom from petty self-seeking, hostilities, and rivalries, are perhaps not easily recognizable by those who have known no other world. I hear my fellow citizens complain of the flaws in America's standards of social behavior. I recognize our imperfections in that regard, but the difference between America and the Lithuania in which I was reared, so far as arbitrary rule, class distinctions, irrational dislikes, group discrimination, sectarian and ethnic arrogance are concerned, is so vast as to be beyond compare. The feelings which overwhelmed me when I was admitted to American citizenship, when I first voted for an American president, when I watched my eldest child being registered in a public school, are ineffable. It was the breaking of a dawn after a long dark night. America represents for me a closer fulfillment of the Biblical doctrine of human equality and the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself than I had expected to see on earth, short of the coming of the Messiah himself. The very lilt of the word "America" gives me peace and comfort and hope. If the spirit which binds Americans to one another, which animates their passion for freedom and which makes them so devoted to peace, could be universalized, the world would take a long step toward the realization of the Prophetic teaching.

¹Early in 1947, I told my father, Simon J. Finkelstein, of this volume. He was moved to try a similar autobiography and completed the draft in Hebrew just before he died. It had a number of gaps and left unanswered a great number of questions. However, during his work on the sketch, my father discussed it with me often, and added considerable material, of which I made careful note, and which is included in this chapter. Therefore, this essay is an adaptation rather than a translation, but members of my family found it faithful to my father's self-portrait. Its inclusion in this volume was urged by several friends, and after considerable hesitation, I yielded to their persuasions.

The Editor

Yet throughout my life in America I have also felt a sense of loss. While in relationship between man and man America has risen to moral standards never before attained on so wide a scale, in the relationship of the individual to himself, my native village of Slobodka often seems to me to have had an advantage over the metropolis of New York. Despite unpleasant social organization, there was in Slobodka cheerfulness and delight in sheer living which is lacking in America. Americans have continually to seek new ways of amusement, to forget themselves and their troubles, if possible. Slobodka offered its people no picnics, movies, theaters, or concerts. We did not know the meaning of "vacations". But, curiously, we did not need them. We were happy in ourselves, in the environment which we created in the midst of physical squalor and governmental tyranny.

In the course of the years, I have often reflected that, while I would consider it a catastrophe to be returned to the Slobodka of my youth, and I could hardly survive in its atmosphere of absolutism now that I have tasted democracy and freedom, much of the joy of my life in America is a heritage deriving from Slobodka. My happiness in the basic fact of existence, irrespective of circumstances and conditions, of pains, of adversity, of calamity, originated in Slobodka. My faith in man's future, my belief that we are about to enter a new stage in the world's history, my conviction that the ideals of the Prophets and the Talmud for mankind will be fulfilled in the coming generation, derive from what I have seen in America.

When I try to communicate the delights of life in my native village to my neighbors here who have never experienced it, I am confused and inarticulate. I seem to be describing a joy, constant, profound, overwhelming, and transcendent, of which they have no inkling. They do not understand how one can be happy when one is hungry; yet I often have been. They seem to think that life in a crowded dwelling must make one miserable. but in Slobodka it did not. I have never known greater happiness than I witness daily in Slobodka; yet Slobodka was poorer than any settlement that I have ever seen in America.

Slobodka was a suburb of Kowno, destined later to become the capital of Lithuania, and already in my time an important city with many wealthy residents. As a child I reflected on the difference between the prosperity of Kowno and the poverty of its suburb; I wondered at the Divine Providence which never blessed any resident of Slobodka with the riches so common in Kowno. One day the truth dawned on me. When a citizen of Slobodka became rich, he moved to Kowno; when a citizen of Kowno was impoverished, he moved to Slobodka.

My own family was among the poorer ones in Slobodka. My father was a teacher of children: his were the advanced subjects of Bible and Talmud, but his income was far too meager for the adequate support of a family of eight: My parents, my grandmother, my three sisters, my brother, and myself. Our home consisted of a single chamber without a wooden floor. The earth was covered with sand every week. This room had to serve as kitchen, dining room, dormitory, and parlor. Our food was of the plainest, usually potatoes or barley. We often, but by no means always, had meat on Sabbaths and festivals. But

there were always two tiny loaves of white bread for such days; they were needed for the prescribed blessings. My father, in his devotion to his children, would usually give them his share of the meat: "They require it to grow" he would say. But he kept the white bread for himself and the children ate black bread even on the Sabbath. When my brother on one occasion complained of this, my father said simply, "When you are a father, you, too, will have white bread."

I was quite unaware of our grinding poverty, and indeed never associated want with my childhood home. Until one of my sons some time ago asked me to describe my childhood, I felt that it was not unusual for those days. Only in answering repeated questions was I made aware that the home in which I spent my childhood was one of continuous lack of many of life's necessities.

Yet my home and my childhood were extremely cheerful and gay. My father had a ready wit, and while he spoke only a little, his conversation was always enjoyable. He was very considerate of us and took much time to explain to us the meaning of the various details of Jewish observance, to regale us with stories and to transmit to us ingenious and interesting interpretations of Scripture and Talmud which he had received from his forebears. On the Sabbath day our table offered a foretaste of Paradise. My father, free from the anxieties of the weekdays, was no longer a poor teacher of children, but a prince of the Torah. My mother, decked in her finest habiliments, poor and simple, yet beautiful, was a princess. The angels, whom the ancient Rabbinic sages describe as accompanying one home from synagogue on the Sabbath eve, were visibly present. Our song of welcome to them was sincere and literal. When my father followed the hymn to the angels with that in praise of the woman of valor, we all knew whom he had in mind, even without the inevitable blush on my mother's face responding to this saintly courtship. To this day, whenever I sing the Sabbath table hymns to the melodies of my childhood home, I feel a singular thrill; I am suddenly transferred to the fields and meadows of long ago, to the presence of my mother and father, to a world in which nothing mattered save the fulfillment of the Divine Will as reflected in the Torah. The Sabbath ritual was virtually the same each week; but it never became monotonous. Its delights were always new. A visiting guest could only make them more stirring and more overwhelmingly pleasant. His new melodies, his stories, and his novel interpretations of Scripture and Talmud would make Paradise especially brilliant.

Occasionally a visiting preacher would speak at the synagogue on the Sabbath afternoon. The beauty and impressiveness of his message and learning would generally be increased for us by the quaint chant in which he spoke. He would literally sing his *derashah* or speech. When such a preacher had, as often happened, a fine voice, the Sabbath would be unforgettable.

Psychologists may be able to tell why, throughout my life, I have felt a peculiar peace with the world on the Sabbath day. Misfortune when it occurred did not disturb the serenity of the day. Its warmth was like that of the sun, bringing healing in its wings. This is not mere nostalgia. When, during my childhood years, I had to be away from home or a similar

environment on the Sabbath, I felt a bleakness, as though I had been driven out of the presence of God Himself. My father used to say, “We deserve no reward for our observance of this commandment (the Sabbath). It is the finest gift God could have bestowed on us, and is its own reward.”

The joys of this childhood environment have combined with my mature life in America to create a life-journey which seems to me to have been singularly fortunate and happy. Exposed like all other men to vicissitudes of fortune, to sickness, to bereavement, to disappointment, and now to the weariness of old age, I look back over my life and find it to have been a remarkably delightful experience. If, as seems likely, it is now drawing to its close, I have no regrets and no complaints. God has been overwhelmingly good to me, and from the bottom of my heart, so long as there is breath in me, I will thank Him for His mercies.

The cheerfulness and serenity of my particular childhood were augmented no doubt by some especially propitious circumstances. Everything about me combined to determine my destiny as a student of the Torah. There was first of all the family tradition. My father was descended from a long line of rabbinic scholars who had lived in Kaidan, a town noted in our district for rabbinic learning. I would have remained in complete ignorance of the distinction of his ancestry had I not early in life met a cousin, the daughter of my famous aunt, Chayya Etta of Kowno. My aunt was one of the few Jewish women of her country and generation who had broken through the conventions which barred her sex from public life, and had been graduated as nurse from a St. Petersburg school. She had received a medal from the Tsar for excellence in her studies, and in my time was known everywhere in Kowno not only for her eminence in her profession, but also for her wide influence in the community, where she was credited with having been the decisive factor in the selection of various rabbis. Her daughter, whom she reared in her own profession and who also attained unusual distinction, was my informant regarding family history. Despite my father’s reticence about his forebears, except when he quoted “their Torah”, he was aware, as I now understand, of his obligation to them, and very eager that his sons should measure up to their standards of learning.

My mother was even more eager for me to be a talmudic student, for she believed implicitly in the truth of the rabbinic apothegm, “Women acquire immortality primarily by bringing their sons to the house of learning, and waiting for their husbands to return from study.” My grandmother — i.e. my father’s mother — never wearied of talking to me of the greatness of learning and how God derived joy from the devotion of His children to the Law.

As I write, it seems to me that the splendor and glory which I associate with my childhood may be in part the glow which always associates itself with the past as one attains old age. For, together with the beautiful memories of our Sabbaths and our festivals, and the sweetness of our home life, there remains in my mind a discordant element, which still does not diminish my delight in the memories of my childhood home, although it seems inconsistent with them.

I know that there was a cloud over the brightness of our home, which however in a curious way also helped direct my steps toward Torah. My grandmother, who loved my father, her only child, with especial passion and my mother were almost always at odds. My grandmother thought my father was being neglected; she considered my mother selfish; perhaps she resented my mother's unusual beauty and my father's evident delight in it. I remember overhearing a conversation in which my grandmother complained to my father that he was given only one pillow, whereas my mother had two; and I can never forget the expression on my father's face when he replied quite innocently, but laughingly, "How can you possibly know for whom the pillows are prepared?"

Because of this friction, my grandmother decided that she would not sit at the family table on the Sabbath, but prepared her own. I was seven years old when this happened; while I loved my mother and silently sided with her in the controversy, I could not bear to watch my aged grandmother alone, deserted as it were, on the festive Sabbath eve. I asked my parents' permission to join her, and it was given. My grandmother, overjoyed, cried out, "My darling child, there is no one like you in the world. You will reach old age in the study of the Torah and in the practice of our faith."

My lifelong and passionate abhorrence of all controversy, to which I believe I may in large measure attribute my longevity and my peace of mind across the years, was certainly a reaction to the indelible impression made on me by the friction in our household. The quarrel between my mother and my grandmother seems both irrational and unworthy. In my devotion to them both, I suffered keenly by their mutual dislike and jealousy. Whenever a quarrel arises in my life, whether in my household or in public affairs, my mind almost immediately recalls the scene of my grandmother, sitting alone on the Sabbath, causing her only son, and all of us, endless anguish. My poor father, torn between love of his wife and his mother, sought refuge at times in laughter and jesting; at times, when humor and wit failed to quite the conflict, in study. He knew, in his simple way, I believe, that the conflict was an index to their love of him. He was all the more patient with both, and tried, by giving each woman as much affection and attention as he could, to lessen her resentment against the other. Thus in my early years I began to understand both the futility of strife and the human motivations which may cause it.

About this time I entered on the study of the Talmud, having already mastered the Hebrew Bible with the commentary of Rashi. (Writing at the age of eighty-five, it may perhaps not be improper to record youthful accomplishments as embellished in family legend.) Two years later I became a pupil of the celebrated Rabbi Mordechai, son-in-law of Rabbi Eisel the Dayyan; at twelve I delivered my first *hadran* (concluding discourse) on the treatise *Baba Metzia*, evoking high praise from a number of scholars present.

Soon after my twelfth birthday an accident contributed further to my concentration on my study and my dedication to the rabbinic calling. On the Sabbath of Repentance, i.e. the one preceding the Day of Atonement, I was on my way to the synagogue to hear the *derashah* (sermon) of the great Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor. Passing a building under

construction, I was hit by a falling log and fractured my leg. On the eve of Yom Kippur the venerable rabbi tore himself away from the urgent duties of his communal and world responsibilities and came to the hospital to visit the sick. Passing my bed and receiving an account of the accident, he placed his hand on my head and said, "You will live a long life and become a great rabbi in Israel."

After more than seventy years the scene in the hospital, the touch of the rabbi's hand, and the cadence of his voice are with me. With the blessing of my grandmother, I believe the rabbi's words were determining factors in my life. In later years, when I often had to go without food and without sleep for the sake of the Torah, there was the memory and faith of my grandmother and the encouragement of Rabbi Isaac Elhanan to uphold my flagging zeal. During my mature life, as rabbi in America, before the Jewish community had attained its present numbers and effectiveness, I had frequently to recall the words of my great mentor to hold fast to my chosen calling.

Indeed I was tried in an especially difficult manner almost immediately afterward. At thirteen I was admitted to the advanced *yeshibah* in Kowno, but the older students objected to the presence of a child among them. My life was for a time quite miserable; but one day the teacher ended the controversies. He posed an especially difficult problem to the class. The older students, on whom he called in the first instance, could not solve it, but I gave him a satisfactory answer. He then turned to them in my presence and said, "My boys, you should regard this child not as a fellow student but as a teacher; you are fortunate to be associated with him." I remained in the academy for about a year when my father decided to take me back to Slobodka. After an interruption of a year's study in Slobodka I returned to Kowno to attend the *yeshibah* of Rabbi Zalman Ha-Harif (the keen mind). There I remained for two years when my teachers decided that I no longer needed guidance but ought rather to study on my own.

During the next three years I devoted my whole day and much of the night to studies in Talmud and rabbinic Codes. One night, as I lay down to sleep near the great stove of the *yeshibah* for the few hours I granted myself for this purpose, one of the other students who lay near me, kicked my foot in his sleep so that it struck the stove. The burn prevented me from walking and I have to be taken home to Slobodka for recuperation. My poor mother, now in the first stages of her final illness, was of course grief-stricken for my pain, but most of her fears were for the interruption of my studies. One night my grandmother, with whom she had had such difficulties in life, appeared to her in a dream and advised her to get such and such a poultice for me. She obtained it, and in a day I was able to talk and return to the *yeshibah*.

Soon afterward my mother died at the age of thirty-nine, and then there occurred an incident which finally determined the course of my future. I returned to the *Bet Ha-Midrash* to pursue my studies of Talmud; one day Shalom Joseph Silberstein, who later emigrated to America and won recognition for his philosophical studies, approached me and engaging me in conversation subtly examined me. Silberstein was one of the group of

maskilim (enlightened ones) who believed that men of talent should have education outside Rabbinics and who decried the concentration of promising Jews on Talmud. Apparently satisfied with my capacities, he said to me, "This is no place for you. There is no future in what you are doing. You should leave your rabbinic studies and travel abroad. You will master foreign languages and become a man of real knowledge and usefulness."

When I repeated the conversation to my father, he, alarmed lest I be seduced from Torah said, "You must not return to Kowno." He sought out the disciples of the famous Lithuanian Jewish saint, Rabbi Israel Salanter Lipkin, informed them of my peril, and besought their help. They arranged to take me to the little town of Rumsheshok, about twenty miles from Kowno, where I would study, as younger colleague, with Rabbi Yozel, one of the most intimate disciples of Rabbi Israel Salanter and later known throughout Lithuania for his amazing piety and saintliness. This Rabbi Yozel had made it a rule not to engage in any conversation except as part of his studies. When he had to give me any secular information, he would write it. By arrangement I studied intensively by myself all day, and then, after a few hours sleep, he and I read Talmud together, covering half of a large treatise or the whole of a smaller one in the course of a night.

People from Rumsheshok, who remember me as a student in that little town, told me in later years of the joy the Jewish community took in having a tireless student among them. At the time I was unaware both of their high opinion and of any particular justification for it. It seemed to me as natural to study continually as to pray regularly or to eat my meals. It was therefore with some surprise that I heard from my father of his happiness at the nickname, "*illui* (prodigy) from Slobodka" used for me within the local circle.

It is now understandable that, despite my aversion to politics, as a minor celebrity I became deeply involved in the little town's affairs. There developed in Rumsheshok a controversy, in which I was destined to play a role, and which reminded me of my infant experiences at home, though it had to be dealt with quite differently. There had before this time been a rabbi in Rumsheshok, Rabbi Baer, who because of his quick temper, was called by the irreverent "*Berl Mazzik*" (Baer the slugger). His temper had in fact led to his removal from the rabbinate of the town and replacement by a much more gentle, though perhaps slightly less learned rabbi, Rabbi Elie. I admired the latter very much, and consequently was much chagrined when Rabbi Baer, who had not left the city, was heard speaking disparagingly of his learning. In his discomfiture, Rabbi Elie suggested that I pose a difficult talmudic question to rabbi Baer, so as to reveal his own deficiency. Accordingly, I once asked Rabbi Baer to explain a very difficult passage in the Tosafot (French medieval glosses on the Talmud) which cannot be reconciled with the statements in the Palestinian Talmud. Rabbi Baer struggled manfully with the difficulty, but I managed to refute each answer. Losing his temper as usual, he cried out, in the words of Balaam to his ass, "I would there were a sword in my hand, for now I had killed thee." To his amusement, as well as that of the others present, I replied, "But you are not Balaam, and I am not an ass!" His wrath was overcome and he and I became fast friends; but he never more was heard to complain of his successor's lack of learning or ingenuity.

My association with Rabbi Yozel reinforced a lesson which I had derived from my father, namely, the value of silence. Rabbi Yozel's unwillingness to engage in any worldly conversation whatever associated itself in my mind with my father's resort to silence as a means of escape from taking sides between my mother and my grandmother. I never resorted, except for limited periods before the Day of Atonement, to the practice of absolute silence which Rabbi Yozel followed. Nevertheless, I have often found that the only way to prevent controversy is to follow the dictates of simplicity and naïveté rather than what may appear at the time to be prudent and clever. Quick repartee may give one a sense of vindication but it sometimes loses a friend, and in the end is self-defeating.

My association with Rabbi Yozel was interrupted by a curious incident which reflects at once the mental climate of Lithuanian Jewry, at least in the *yeshivot* some sixty-five years ago, and interests me now as an indication of my own reaction at that time to certain phases of my native world. My colleague, Rabbi Yozel, in his devotion to me, had determined that I should marry his sister. Unbeknown to me, he visited his father, a very distinguished rabbi, and also my father, and arranged for a betrothal. On his return to Rumsheshok he congratulated me, and, to my infinite surprise, hailed me as his future brother-in-law. I asked him when I had become his brother-in-law, and he explained that he had settled everything in consultation with our fathers. I thereupon inquired, "How could you, three scholars, do such a thing, forgetting the talmudic precept, 'A man must not be betrothed to a woman whom he has not seen'! And furthermore, how could you be so impractical, knowing that I am now approaching the age of military service and may be required to interrupt my studies for some time?" Rabbi Yozel admitted his error on both counts, but I decided I ought to leave him and immediately moved to Kowno.

One day on the street there a policeman approached me and asked whether I had already presented myself for examination with a view to entering military service. As I had not, I was arrested and placed in jail. One of the leading Jews of the city, hearing what had happened, immediately called on the superintendent of the prison, telling him who I was and requesting special treatment for me. I was in fact shown many unusual courtesies and kindnesses, both by the Jewish community and the Christian jailkeepers. My father in his fear that in the army of the Tsars I might be torn away from Torah and even from Judaism, appealed to my old patron, Rabbi Isaac Elhanan for help. The famous rabbi, who remembered me, comforted my father with the words, "Your son will not be a soldier." And so it happened. When I was examined by the physician, he found nothing organically wrong with me, but looking over my frail, much underweight and underdeveloped body, called out "Unfit." "Unfit now or permanently?" asked the clerk. "Unfit now and unfit forever," replied the doctor.

Free from the threat of Tsarist military service and its attendant evils, I returned to my studies. It was at this time that I met the person who was to become the fourth significant spiritual influence in my life. When I was first introduced to my future wife she objected to me because of my emaciation and my youth. But her father insisted that she marry me despite these deficiencies. After our marriage I continued to devote all my time

to study, while we lived at my father-in-law's. My wife wanted to engage in business so as to support me while I remained a student, but I could not agree to this. Instead, recalling the conversation with Shalom Joseph Silberstein, I proposed that we go to Germany where I would study at the university. "It cannot be," my wife said. "You will emerge from the university a German while I will remain a Lithuanian Jewess. If you feel life here too restricted, let us go to America,"

I consulted Rabbi Isaac Elhanan who concurred in this advice; and so I arrived in New York in 1886. I have ministered to four congregations in the United States, serving in Baltimore from 1886 to 1890; in Cincinnati from 1890 to 1896; in Syracuse from 1896 to 1902; and in Brooklyn from 1902 until the present time (1947). The affection which I received from these communities has made bearable whatever difficulties I had to endure. From a shy, inarticulate Talmud student, who knew no better than to speak for four hours in his first Sabbath service in Baltimore, I became gradually trained to the problems and tasks of the American rabbinate. Fortunately, my congregations have uniformly been lenient in their demands on me, and always encouraged me to devote my major time to study.

While I was in Cincinnati, the famous Dr. Isaac M. Wise, founder and president of Hebrew Union College, invited me to become a member of the faculty of that school for Reform rabbis. I could not, however, reconcile my religious views with those taught at Hebrew Union College, and while I would have liked to be a student and teacher, was compelled to decline the invitation. Despite our differences, Dr. Wise and I remained fast friends during the years of my stay in Cincinnati. Once when I criticized an innovation he introduced at the college in violation of Jewish tradition, he remarked gently, "Rabbi Finkelstein, you will live to see the day when people will pray at my grave." His prediction has been fulfilled, for he has become the saint of a large segment of American Judaism. I recognized even at that time his remarkable generosity and greatness of spirit, particularly the assistance he gave visiting scholars from abroad, despite his awareness of their basic antagonism to his teaching and his activities.

While in Syracuse, I came to know and revere Louis Marshall, then a promising young lawyer. His family was of the Reform group but Marshall was very devout and from the beginning catholic in his respect for all forms of religious Judaism. My acquaintance with Wise and Marshall, the one destined to be the leading Reform rabbi, the other the leading Reform layman of American Jewry, convinced me of the sincerity and devotion of those men who so fundamentally disagreed with me. I could not accept their views even in slight measure. I developed a high respect for them as persons, though, and suspected that, while their therapy for the ailment of American Jewry was futile, they might be partially right in their criticism of some of our ways, as orthodox rabbis. The conviction grew in me that neither they nor we were able to establish an effective Jewish community in America in which the spiritual power of ancient Slobodka would be combined with the broad understanding characteristic of America. Despite their good intentions, the Reform Jews were too little aware of the remarkable joy and beauty of traditional Judaism; while some of us failed to appreciate sufficiently the extent to which America was a fulfillment of our moral teaching.

I wished that I could have consulted Rabbi Israel Salanter regarding this dilemma, feeling certain that he, with his remarkable spiritual insight and love of man, would have found some means for reclaiming these great men to traditional Judaism and yet preserve their outlooks, which could be so useful to our faith.

Moved by such considerations, I have tried in the last four decades of my life to understand and appreciate the motives and actions of the dissidents in American Judaism. My friends today include the most orthodox as well as many unorthodox Jews. I tried to be tolerant of groups off my own congregation who decided they wanted to build a temple which would deviate markedly from our own house of worship. While I could not join with them in what seemed to me a heterodox synagogue, I felt that perhaps their work, too, is for the best. It is clear to me that we are entering a new world, and that to meet its challenge we rabbis must try to rise to the levels of magnanimity and patience, characteristic of those two master spirits of Lithuanian Jewry, Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor and Rabbi Israel Salanter Lipkin. I have spent many days pondering their habits as I witnessed them, and believe that at last I understand many of their actions which at the time puzzled both my colleagues and myself. Rabbi Isaac Elhanan's friendship with Jews who violated the Law, Rabbi Israel Salanter's bold and astonishing defiance of accepted practices in the fulfillment of moral principles of the Law, seem to me, today, significant as reflections of a profound understanding of a new world, rather than as eccentricities of genius. Rabbi Isaac Elhanan retained the friendship of Dr. Shapira, though the latter was known to be heterodox in his views on Judaism; and Rabbi Israel Salanter, as is well known, himself led a congregation in violating the fast of Yom Kippur during an epidemic of cholera, in his fear that abstinence from food might weaken the people and increase their susceptibility to the disease. The loftiness, the selflessness, and the daring of these spirits might, it seems to me, win back to a new respect for our Torah and tradition the young of our people who are at present wandering away from us.

In the effort to win back the erring through enhanced affection for them, my wife was a guide and a support to me. Through the forty-two years of our married life, she made our home a rendezvous for people of all kinds. She herself became a source of profound spiritual influence for many of the young people who frequented our home. When, as sometimes happened, she reprimanded them for their desertion of our faith, she did it with a motherly kindness which, far from alienating them, won them to her.

Among the great delights of my life in these days is to receive visits of people whose parents frequented our house, and to see how the spiritual influence of my wife, decades ago, is powerful with the young, who know of her only indirectly.

In various publications I have tried to indicate what seems to me might have been the attitude of my teachers to our life in America and at this time. Perhaps the form in which I presented my material, as homiletic comments on Biblical and Rabbinic literature may not have been the most effective I could have chosen. But it was natural for me, as a preacher, to write as I spoke. I find that these books have had a limited, but effective circulation;

they are widely used by rabbis and other preachers; and I hope if I live to carry out my lifelong plan for a commentary on the Prayer Book.

I am particularly interested in the Prayer Book, for it seems to me that its phraseology was carefully designed by our forefathers to stress certain aspects of our faith that they believed of especial significance and of enduring importance. Thus I cannot help but remark on the fact that the opening verse of the morning prayers is a quotation from a blessing to Israel by a man who was not of the faith — Balaam, “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel”; and that at each wedding we Jews to this day bless the bride with words first uttered by another Gentile, Laban, at the betrothal of Rebecca, “Our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of ten thousands.” Perhaps nothing can better express the relationship between Israel and the general population, which the founders of our faith sought to promote, than this use of the utterances of neighbors in Jewish prayer and blessing.

The rebuilding of Palestine is of course a central motif in the Jewish prayer book. The hope of our fathers, like our own, is that in the fullness of time, God with in His mercy bring about the resettlement of large numbers of the people of Israel in Palestine, and imbue them with renewed faith in Him, so that their community may again be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Ever since my youth, I have myself identified with the movement to restore Jews to Palestine, and I have spoken as energetically as I could on behalf of the efforts for this cause. I find the contemporary attitude of the world toward the problem of Eretz Yisrael baffling and confusing; but I cannot doubt that in the course of time, perhaps even in our generation, the hope of centuries will be fulfilled, and there will be an effective Jewish settlement in Palestine.

There is, of course, much in my life that I now wish might have been otherwise. But this must be true of all life. When I consider what my fate might have been without the stimulus of my grandmother, the care and devotion to the Torah of my parents, the example and teaching of Rabbi Israel Salanter, there is no room for anything but happiness and gratitude in my heart. I wish I might have been a more effective servant of God; but He knows that, effective or not, I have been a most willing one. In my old age I know that I am being kept here because there is work for me to do, and I try to do it to the best of my ability. People are kind and gracious to me, listen to my words, and heed my requests to further the public good. I know that whatever eloquence I once may have had has long since vanished, that whatever force I could exert has all but disappeared. But men respond to the appeal of white hair and advancing years; they are perhaps more generous because I speak to them, than if younger people did. The future holds no fears for me. I expect, when my time comes, to find myself in the company of my illustrious forebears and rather, to enjoy fully and completely the life of which I had so remarkable a foretaste when I was a child in my parents' home.