

Jewish Messenger

THE LATE REV. PROF. ISAACS.*

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ANGELS and mortal men took hold of the Ark of the covenant, the angels conquered the mortals, and the Ark of the Covenant is vanished (from the Talmud, Ketuboth 104a). It is related that when the patriarch Rabbi Jehuda Hanassi, the compiler of the Mishna, was suffering from his last illness, all the inhabitants of the towns round about Zephoris assembled in order to be of assistance to him, to sympathise with him. That his disease would be fatal, no one thought possible. So excited was the multitude, that they threatened to slay anyone who brought the fatal news. All was over, and then one named Bar Kappara, with his head covered and his garments torn, uttered the words, which I have quoted, "angels and mortal men took hold of the Ark, the angels conquered, and the Ark is vanished." When the people heard these words, they cried out in a tone of despair, "His soul is at rest! He is dead!" Upon which Bar Kappara answered, "Ye have said it." You know why I have brought this before you to-day. The Jewish community of Manchester has sustained a severe loss. My respected friend and colleague, David Myer Isaacs, the preacher in our sister synagogue, has been taken away from us. The silver cord is loosened, the golden bowl is broken; and we who took hold of the Ark of the Covenant find that it has vanished away. We ask whither? whither? and the Scriptures answer us, "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit unto God who gave it." But not only is the soul immortal in heaven, the memory of the man will be immortal upon earth. The memory of the righteous is blessed. And he whom all Israelites in this city mourn, found consolation when he thought of the crisis, that his life had been spent unselfishly, that it had been full of interests which extended beyond himself, beyond the narrow family circle. No man is compelled to sit down idly while the sand-glass of life is emptying away, there is always work to do, work which must be done honestly and faithfully. But some men hold a position in life which enables them to do that which others not so situated are too weak to undertake. Such a position was held by our departed friend. Such a position is held by every teacher in Israel.

If any one performed his task in life conscien-

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tiously, it was David Isaacs. It is true that he thought that the results attained were not proportionate to the efforts he put forth. But then we must remember the extraordinary difficulty of the circumstances against which he had to contend. We must remember that there is no religious body at the present day which has less faith, which is less spiritual, which is less inclined to listen to the instruction of their religious teachers, than the Jewish. It is only with deep pain that I say this, but it is a truth which my experience in the ministry is confirming every day. Success in our calling is difficult to attain. But failure is sure if the Law of God is used as a spade to dig with. He who enters the Jewish ministry must make up his mind to meet with many disappointments, to renounce many of the enjoyments, many of the amanities of life. The departed cou'd truly say with Rabbi Jehuda, "My work was in the Law. I had no enjoyment, not even so much as could be measured with my little finger." But rays of sunshine passed sometimes through the black cloud. He told me, not very long before his death, that the happiest moment of his life was when one of his congregants, through his influence, closed his shop on the Sabbath and ceased to desecrate God's holy day. In a great measure, he was the reformer of English Judaism. For he was the first to deliver regular sermons in the vernacular. And a true and honest preacher he was. Never did he gloss over the faults of his congregation, never did he degrade his holy office by speaking with a smooth tongue and with lying lips, but he struck with the rod of his mouth, and fearlessly and continually did he tell Israel their sins, and the house of Jacob their iniquity.

He was brought up in an atmosphere of ultra-orthodoxy; but though deeply imbued with the love for our traditional religion, he was most liberal and charitable in his opinions. You will not forget that he once occupied this pulpit, and lent his own to one of my predecessors. In conversation with me he has often regretted the unfortunate schism which exists in the Jewish community, and looked forward anxiously to ultimate reunion between those who are separated by no difference in belief, and, as far as the moderate men of both sides are concerned, by no difference in practice. He was very, very far from being blessed with wealth. But he was for all that a most charitable man. He gave his money, as far as he could, but where he did

not do that he was never sparing of his time or his energy; and I daresay that his venerable figure as he came round making an earnest appeal in behalf of those who were in dire distress will be missed by many of you. He did not work for his poorer brethren in order to gain a cheap and vulgar notoriety. His charity was not a whim, it was not exercised for one particular hobby. It was enduring because it flowed from a sense of duty and a hope in God. But I do not speak to you to-day on a subject of which my heart is full from mere sentimentalism, because there is a certain amount of pleasure in dwelling on, in lingering over, our griefs. In the memory of our dead, there is often far too much frivolity. Many who observe the Jahrzeit, that beautiful custom which should remind us of the work of departed parents, observe it in such a way as to discredit not only the observance itself, but to degrade our whole religion. Earnest and pious men have tried to reform Judaism in numberless ways, but everywhere we turn we are met with a want of seriousness.—Play and frivolity, frivolity and play. It seems as if we did indeed believe that the world was a stage on which men and women have nothing else to do than encourage shams and make-believes. Men and women who proclaim themselves to be Jews and Jewesses make jest at their religion. Would to God that they would reform themselves or leave the camp altogether! Men and women sin up to the very door of the synagogue and deceive themselves with the belief that a few hours one day in the year will set them at peace with their Maker. And, in times like these, the righteous perish, the faithful are removed, and those who stand up in the breach are lost to us.

But regret felt for the death of a teacher in Israel must work within us a desire to strive after our own amendment. It is with persons as with things. Things easily attainable we think lightly of, when they are beyond our reach we deplore the want of them. Parents and teachers we thoughtlessly disobey, and disobey again. When they are gone from us we appreciate, at any rate for a short time, their value. David Isaacs was beloved by all who knew him, even by those who were not members of his own special flock. There was one thing he especially advocated—the instruction of the children. And recently in his own synagogue he established classes for religious instruction. He worked very hard, much too hard for a man of his years. He cared not for the

wise opposition of his friends, because it was a matter in which he considered his duty to be concerned. Would you erect a monument to him? Work, as he did, in the cause of education. Let the words, "And thou shalt tell thy son," be printed on your hearts, be written among your daily thoughts. And the wisdom of this let not only thy mind ponder on, let not only thy soul feel, but let thy hand do it, and do it with all its might. He is now happy. He is not really dead. There is nothing which dies, there is only something left behind which mourns. It is related in the beautiful imagery which the Talmud so often employs that when a righteous man departs from the world, three sets of angels go forth to meet him: one set says, "He has left the world in peace;" the second, "He hath walked uprightly;" and the third, "Let him enter here into peace." And let this thought console those who are left behind. "Let them rest quietly and without fear." And as surely as the divine messengers will bear up to our Father in Heaven the Ark of the Covenant which they have wrested from mortal man; so will they bring down mercy and consolation to the bereaved widow and children, as they bring consolation to all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem, to all God's sons and daughters. Amen!