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ALEXANDER KOHUT ¹

THE body of this book, from which it derives its name, is a series of fifteen discourses, based on the first chapter of the Pirke Aboth, which were preached by Dr. Alexander A. Kohut shortly after his arrival in America. These sermons constituted a first attempt on the part of the eminent scholar to give a popular exposition of his standpoint regarding the great controversy between orthodoxy and reform which was then raging.

The introductory material in this volume consists of a 'Memoir of Alexander Kohut' by Barnett A. Elzas, an essay on 'Alexander Kohut's Contribution to Jewish Scholarship' by Gotthard Deutsch, 'An Estimate of Dr. Alexander Kohut's Place in the History of American Judaism' by Maurice H. Harris, and 'Some Memoirs of Alexander Kohut' by Max Cohën.

With regard to the history, present form, and value of the discourses now collected under the title *Ethics of the Fathers*, the editor's preface has this to say: 'Heard by very large audiences, they were eagerly read and discussed throughout the length and breadth of the land when they appeared, week by week, in the columns of the *American Hebrew*, in hastily prepared translations by his friend Max Cohen, the Librarian of the then Maimonides Free Library. They were afterwards published in book form.'

'Though the utterances of a stranger, barely familiar with his new surroundings, his words have still a living message to American Jewry. This is the only reason for re-printing this little volume that has been out of print for twenty years. It has been practically rewritten by the editor, who has endeavoured to be as true as possible to the spirit of the original.'

¹ *The Ethics of the Fathers*. By DR. ALEXANDER KOHUT. Edited and Revised by BARNETT A. ELZAS, M.D., LL.D. with Memoir and Appreciations by Various Writers. Privately Printed New York: 1920, pp. cx + 127.

Though the editor's statement lessens the value of the work as a criterion by which to judge the author's homiletic style or diction, it does not obscure the aim or significance of the task therein undertaken or the wealth of Talmudic learning wherewith the author elaborates his theme. The editor is quite right in his belief that these sermons 'have still a living message to American Jewry', for though new issues have arisen which overshadow the old controversy and give it a new turn, it yet abides with us and it remains as difficult as of old to express and formulate the position held by those who are not prepared to surrender to either wing.

Dr. Kohut's opposition to the findings of the Pittsburg Conference, held in November 1885, moved him to ally himself with Sabata Morais and others to establish the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, but his general attitude is, I believe, fairly stated by Dr. Elzas as follows: 'He was in fact a conservative Reformer, "offering the old and the new in happily blended union . . ." To sum up his position in a word, he sought neither "the way of fire" nor "the way of snow", to walk in either of which, according to the parable of the ancients, meant death. He sought "the middle way", to walk in which meant life'.

Dr. Harris speaks of Dr. Kohut as 'the leading exponent in his day of Conservative Judaism' and makes this attempt to sketch the conservative trend versus Orthodoxy and Reform. 'How shall we define the place of Conservatism between these two main schools? We may say first that it accepts the old doctrines, but not quite in the old way. It grants a wider liberty in belief while urging conformity in practice; though even there it permits some modifications and abridgment in the elaborate ceremonial of the synagogue evolved in the process of ages' (p. lxxxi).

Dr. Harris finds a distinguishing characteristic of Kohut's point of view in that, though acknowledging the principle of development to a limited extent, it 'stoutly maintained that we must accept the orthodox view of the doctrine of Revelation' (p. lxxxv).

One cannot fail to note in a careful reading of *The Ethics* how the author was groping for a position which could not be adequately defined by the word 'conservative', because it has not the static or purely conciliatory implications of that word. Witness: 'A reform which seeks to progress without the Mosaic-rabbinical tradition is a deformity—a skeleton without flesh and sinew, without spirit and heart. It is a suicide; and suicide is not reform. We desire a Judaism full of life. We desire to worship the living God, in forms full of life and beauty; Jewish, yet breathing the modern spirit. Only a Judaism true to itself and its past, yet receptive of the ideas of the present, accepting the good and the beautiful from whatever source it may come, can command respect and recognition' (p. 7). The paragraph concluding the first sermon approaches more nearly to an attempt to find a suitable name for the author's position: 'I do not know whether it will be my good fortune to have your sympathy in my religious attitude—that of Mosaic-rabbinical Judaism, freshened with the spirit of progress, a Judaism of the healthy golden mean. I hope I shall. For such a Judaism I plead. Unfurl, then, your banner of reasonable progress. You must. I know you will' (p. 9). The words 'reasonable progress' are italicized in the text, and I believe they come nearer the heart of the matter than any other phrase used in the book or by later controversialists.

In the second of the discourses, dealing with 'The Fence around the Law', the author clarifies this standpoint as follows: "'Remember the days of old," said Moses, "and have regard to the changes of each generation" (Deut. 23. 7). The teaching of the ancients we must make our starting-point, but we must not lose sight of what is needed in every generation' (p. 15). 'And as these Elders did, so can—yes, so must—we, the later Epigoni, do in the exigencies of our own day. If the power to make changes was granted to the Elders, is not the power given equally to us? "But they were giants", we are told, "and we, compared with them, are mere pigmies." Perhaps so; let us not

forget, however, that a pigmy on a giant's shoulder can see farther than the giant himself' (p. 16).

In the same vein, note the following in the eleventh discourse: 'As long as man lives, he must be active, and only as he is active, does he live. Progress is the law of life. . . . The question for us is, What shall we call Progress in Religion and how can we best conserve our energies? If "Progress" is to be evidenced by destruction and not by construction; if it merely means the giving up of ancient and venerable customs, that have been honoured by long usage and which bring comfort to the soul, and offers nothing in their place, then every well-meaning Jew will call such "Progress" retrogression. . . . Only when the Rabbis of this country shall be moved by a common endeavour for wise moderation, unafrighted at the "Backwards" cry—which may, after all, be beneficent progress; only when Religion shall again have been restored to the home, where it now lies, sadly neglected; and, speaking generally, only when conservative progress, rather than ungovernable speed, shall characterize our religious movement, can the outlook for Judaism be hopeful' (pp. 88, 89, 92). The words 'conservative progress' in the last paragraph are evidently a companion phrase to the expression 'reasonable progress' quoted above.

It is true that Kohut, like Isaac M. Wise, who is often spoken of as the father of American Reform, confined the sphere of development in Jewish Law to the post-Biblical material, but it is not quite true that, in opposition to the subsequent attitude of reformed Judaism, he maintained the orthodox point of view with regard to Divine Revelation. 'We regard the Torah', he says, 'as that which is commanded in the teachings of Moses, looking, however, to its spirit and its significance for the culture of mankind' (p. 15). One cannot avoid the feeling that, when Revelation is evaluated according to its spirit and its cultural significance, it cannot be quite fitted to the old orthodox categories.

What Kohut says with regard to a Prayer Book finds an echo in modern Jewish controversy. There are still conservatives who,

for various reasons, are not reconciled to the Union Prayer Book, published subsequent to the date of these discourses, and who do not feel themselves spiritually at home in the orthodox ritual. To them these words of Dr. Kohut seem, not reminiscent, but prophetic: 'Opinions alter and manners change; we must take account of altered conditions . . . Let me illustrate this by the question of the Prayer Book that is now raging in our midst. The old Siddur no longer satisfies us. We need a new one and many are they who are ready to supply the demand. But how? One would remove all traces of Hebrew; another would allow some Hebrew, endeared to many, to remain—a זכר לחורבן; still another would improve the good old Biblical expressions, and so on to the end of the chapter.

'If we could arrange a Prayer Book in the language and on the lines of the old, that would appeal to modern taste, a Prayer Book that would be acceptable to and adopted by modern congregations, we might legitimately make concessions to the spirit of the times. . . . Words, after all, only express the feelings of the heart, and many passages could safely be omitted from the old Prayer Book, because they do not express devotional feeling. A uniform Prayer Book would at once put an end to one great source of strife and contention in our midst, and be a prelude to a lasting peace' (pp. 122-3).

The Ethics of the Fathers contains many thoughts not dealing directly with the central theme, but related to it. It constitutes a strong plea for positive Judaism, for increased Jewish observance in the home and in the synagogue, for greater learning and intelligence in and out of the pulpit and shows the scholar's scorn of shallow pseudo-science, pseudo-philosophy, and pseudo-progress.

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New York.