

# Rabbi Adolph Moses's Dream

*Jonathan D. Sarna*

**R**ABBI ADOLPH MOSES (1840–1902), born in Kletchevo, Poland of a rabbinic family, and educated in Polish *yeshivot*, at Breslau, and at the University of Vienna, came to America in 1870. After serving pulpits in Montgomery and Mobile, Alabama, he was called to Congregation Adath Israel of Louisville, Kentucky where he spent the last two decades of his life. Considered in his day a Radical Reformer, Moses preached a broad, universal faith, and even advocated changing the name Judaism to “Yahvism” in order to “conjure up the angel of mutual respect, of union, and universal love.” He became known, according to his biographer, as “the apostle of liberalism to Louisville.”

For a time, Moses helped to edit the *Zeitgeist*, also edited by his brother, Rabbi Isaac S. Moses (1847–1926) and by Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch. Later—“from religious motives, from an intense craving of my soul to obtain a direct answer to certain perplexing questions”—he studied medicine, earning his degree at age 53 from the University of Louisville. He never practiced professionally. Yet, notwithstanding his scientific training and powerful mind, Moses was remembered by his successor, the scholarly Rabbi Hyman G. Enelow, as “naturally possessed of an almost childlike naiveté,” “sensitive to an unusual degree,” and abounding in “self-depreciation” and “spiritual nervousness.” Some of these qualities display themselves in the following remarkable dream—timeless in meaning and message—which Moses related to his congregants in the course of an undated sermon (likely preached in the last

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decade of his life), entitled "What May Ministers and Laymen Accomplish in Half-an-Hour."<sup>1</sup>

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A week ago—last Friday night—I again drew my lecture to the length of three quarters of an hour. Immediately after service cruel conscience began to attack me with bitter taunts and reproaches. I slunk out of the house of God abashed like a ghost at cock-crow. I took a walk with self-contempt at my side. The very stars seemed to wear a contemptuous smile; they trembled so ironically! I seemed to hear them say, "Brevity is the soul of wit, aye brevity is the soul of wit!" It was late when my perturbed soul could find rest in sleep.

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I dreamed that I was dead and lay in a silver-mounted coffin ready for interment. I saw a vast amount of flowers in the room, and felt sorry to be no longer alive, that I might preach a strong sermon against such waste of money which could be spent to better purpose in aid of the poor. I regretted exceedingly to leave an intelligent and generous congregation. Still more did I grieve to part from my family. I was distressed that I should nevermore be able to read the books of many great minds, which, through idleness, I had in my life-time failed to read. It was, however, a great consolation to know for certain that the universal hope and belief of mankind in the immortality of man's soul was no mere dream, but a reality. Was not my spirit, while the body lay motionless and lifeless, thinking, meditating, and loving, even with greater energy and clearness than before? Soon a large number of good and tried friends, Jewish and Gentile, filed in and took of me a last look of infinite pity and tenderness. I heard my praises sounded on all sides from all lips in so extravagant a manner that my soul, which knew better, blushed for shame, although my bodily face continued pale and expressionless. All at once I heard one man say to a group of four or five other men in a low whisper, yet not low enough as not to be overheard by me: "All the good they say about him, now that he is gone, may be true; but Heaven forgive him his long sermons and his still longer lectures! At

times he was a great bore. How anxiously I watched many a Friday evening for the end of the lecture that seemed never to come. I pitied myself and the other hearers, but most of all the officers who are perched high in their seats of honor. The rest of the auditors could at least turn about and give vent to their impatience by sighs and expressive contortions of their features. But the poor officers from their high station, exposed on all sides to observation, had, by superhuman efforts, to hide their misery from the public eye and show a satisfied and serene countenance. I liked our lamented friend best during his annual vacation." The whole group looked and nodded assent. One of them, whose name I still remember, heaved a deep sigh and remarked: "Ah, poor soul, he is dead now, he meant it well!" And I who, while in the flesh, was so sensitive to criticism and prone to acknowledge any fault, being now wholly spiritual, felt neither indignation nor remorse nor compassion. Speak on, I said to myself, complain to your heart's content of the length of my sermons! God will surely reward me for having made a thorough use of the rare opportunities you offered me to see and address you in the house of God. When I happened to have you sinners before me, I was bound to give you two or three doses of moral medicine at once.

Presently a change came over the spirit of my dream. I was standing on the dismal shore of the river of death, and there came toward me an old man in a boat. His long beard was white with hoary age, his eyes were glowing and shining like orbs of fire. He beckoned to me, and winged desire wafted me from the river bank into the boat. It was a strange vessel! Some parts were beautiful, made of finest wood with artistically carved figures. Certain spots were covered with plates of gold and inlaid with precious gems. Other parts of the same boat, however, consisted of rotten wood with many holes in it, through which the dark waters were splashing. About the tenth portion of the sail was formed of purest white linen, but the rest was made up of dingy rags loosely held together. But the queerest and at the same time the most frightful feature were numerous tail-like appendages of immense length, which were grown out of the very body of the boat and trailing alongside of it in the water. They seemed endowed with life, for they were writhing and twisting themselves as if in great pain and fear. Around them

were swimming huge monsters, that eagerly swallowed them, but immediately cast them forth again. And I said to the ferryman: "Master, explain to me the mystery of this bark! Why is it so shabby and gorgeous at the same time? Have you no better material and no more skillful builders in your world?" And he answered: "Deluded mortal, this is the shadowy image of thy life on earth. The plates of gold mean—" "Stop!" I cried, "explain no more; I fully and sadly understand the structure of this boat. But tell me, what are these long appendages and the monsters following them?" Then the lank cheeks of Charon distorted themselves into a grim and deathly smile, as he replied: "Poor man, whom flatterers on earth, and especially those sons of Belial, the poetical reporters, called an eloquent speaker, these appendages are the excrescences of thy long sermons, the shadows of thy interminable lectures. Who are the monsters, thou askest? They are the ennui, the tedium, impatience, and despair of thy hearers. They had to swallow the intellectual food thou didst offer them, but they could not retain it." "Cruel demon!" I exclaimed, with tears of rage in my eyes, "wouldst thou even rob me of the good opinion I have of my work on earth?" He vouchsafed me no reply; his eyes only looked merciless scorn that thrilled me with anguish.

Soon I was brought before the dreaded Seat of Judgment, and found myself standing at the foot of the throne of the Ineffable Majesty. A flood of many-colored lights streamed forth from the mystery of Divine Presence. I could not look at the glory before me, for my eyes were dazzled as if by the rays of ten thousand suns. I closed my eyes and stood with my head bent downward. Then I heard a low voice of soul-bewitching sweetness. It spoke to me in tones thrilling with pity and love like that of a father gently chiding his erring child. "My son," He said, "I have called thee away from earth, and summoned thee to appear before My tribunal. The days of thy pilgrimage in the world of mortality are ended. Thou has made poor use of the precious gift of time while abiding on the star which mortals call Earth. I gave thee eyes to see with awe My manifold wonders, to behold with reverence the living revelations of My creative will. I vouchsafed unto thee eyes to become mirrors of creation's beauty, and with worshiping joy to gaze into the starry depth of the universe. Yet thou, My mortal child, didst close

them to the heavens above that declare My glory, and didst bend them earthward to seek gold and silver or to be affrighted by the shadows of thy passing sorrows. Though endowed by Me with wondrous vision, thou hast lived in the world, wherein I have planted the tree of knowledge, a life of blindness. Thou hast not plucked the delicious fruits of knowledge that were within thy reach. Thou has left the world of sense as ignorant of its harmony as when thou wast made to enter it. Thou has spent the best part of thy time in idleness and suffered half of it to be consumed in vanity. Child of My love, how grievously hast thou failed! Hadst thou given but half-an-hour every week to the contemplation of My works, and the understanding of My laws that bind suns to remotest suns, to catch a glimpse of My eternal will, as it liveth and stirreth in infinite forms and with expanding creative love ascends from plant and lowly worm through bird and beast to lordly man, hadst thou thus turned thyself but thirty minutes in seven days to learn and know My ways, thou wouldst have lived on with a life of joy as wide, as rich, as divine as My boundless revelation, which mortals call Nature! What hast thou done with thy time? My messengers I sent to mankind in all generations, My prophets, seers, and sweet singers, My high-priests of truth have bequeathed to thee treasures of wisdom, have revealed My ways, the ways of goodness and justice, love and mercy, have brought down the true, the beautiful, and the eternal from heaven to earth. They have laid quite bare the foundations of the earth and unveiled the mysteries of existence! Hadst thou devoted every day of thy life but half-an-hour to learn and understand what untold ages with toilsome labor have prepared for thee, thou wouldst have gained much of the wisdom of the noblest minds that lived in thy time and before thee, thou wouldst have fallen heir to the kingdom of the past and the present. Half-an-hour's time every day of thy life devoted to suffering humanity, would have dried many a tear, would have lifted many of My fallen children from the dust, might have rescued many a weak man or woman from utter ruin! Thirty minutes given day after day to thy needy and helpless fellow-men, would have lessened the evils of earth and increased its joys. Half-an-hour snatched daily from thy selfish pleasures and selfish griefs, would have built up some of the waste places of the earth and made it more habitable and beautiful.

Hadst thou, since thou didst arrive at maturity, consecrated half-an-hour every day to gather together all the truth accessible to thee on any subject in the realm of nature or mind, and written day by day a passage of lucid and earnest truth, thou mightest have left behind thee a valuable book as a lasting memorial of thy earthly life. As it is, thou hast but written two wretched novels, that nobody reads, but thy friends, out of kindness for thee. But more grievously than in all these things, has thou sinned as a preacher. I took thee from behind the plow of poverty and delivered thee from the hand of oppressing care, and said unto thee: Be thou a teacher unto My children, to guide them in My ways and to lead them gently along My path, to strengthen the weak with the words of thy mouth, to infuse courage into the despairing. I destined thee to serve the spirit of My truth in the midst of My congregation, to lead the lost sheep of Israel to the mountain of My revelation, and enkindle the sacred fire of faith in the hearts of the young. But woe is thee, My son! how sadly hast thou failed in thy holy mission. Instead of drawing them toward their Maker, toward truth, righteousness, and love, by means of short, attractive sermons, full of sound doctrine and sound morality, thou hast kept my sons and daughters from My house through wearisome, long speeches and lectures. Thou has frightened away My people from the fount of truth, thou hast turned the Sabbath eve into hours of distress and of torture to their spirit. But for thee they would have crowded My sanctuary, listened eagerly to the words of admonition. The terror of thy endless lectures kept them at home, where they joined themselves together to indulge often in the games invented by Satan, the arch-enemy of the human race. Thou hast been weighed and found wanting, because thou has given little in too many words.”

When I had heard these dread words issuing from the mouth of Eternal Justice, I changed color, my knees knocked against each other with trembling, my whole frame shook with terror. Soon I fell on my face in agony of despair. Then an angel touched me lightly on the shoulder and whispered, “Rise and plead for mercy! for He is a merciful God.” I therefore rose to my feet, and raising my hands toward the seat of Divine Mercy, I said, weeping bitterly: “O pardon and forgive Thy erring servant! I sinned, but not in a spirit

of willfulness, I ever intended to make my sermons and lectures short, but they invariably turned out long. But I am not the only transgressor. My teachers, great leaders in Israel, used also to make exceedingly long speeches. I imitated their evil ways, as most all my contemporaries, Jewish and Christian, were noted for their desperately long sermons. Candor emboldens me to say, that compared with some of the most famous preachers, I am the very embodiment of brevity. Besides, I never preach longer than forty-five minutes." A voice of thunder rebuked me: "Speak no falsehood in the presence of thy Maker! Last Day of Atonement thou didst preach an hour and a half. The young of my temple therefore staid away from the evening service, and have not returned to this day." "Pardon and forgive my iniquity," I again pleaded, "let me but once more return to the earth! I will mend my ways. I will never preach longer than twenty minutes." "No, half-an-hour thou mayest consume, but no more; for once I will be gracious unto thee and restore thee to thy family, thy books, and thy congregation. But, beware! an angel will watch thee, invisible to thee. The very first instance thou exceedest the bound of time, off thou goest, never to return!" "Thanks and praise to Thee," I said, with overflowing gratitude, "for Thy lovingkindness. But suppose a subject should require more time?" "Then break it off in the middle!" Thereupon Divine Mercy commanded two angels to bring me back to earth. They bore me on their wings to my home, and, strange to say, thrust me in through the window into my dwelling-place. I found myself bathed in tears. I then vowed solemnly to keep forever the promise I hade made before the Seat of Judgment.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Adolph Moses, *Yahvism and Other Discourses*, edited with an introduction by H. G. Enelow (Louisville, KY, 1903), pp. 331-339.

# Nahshon b. Amminadab

(*Mechilta, Beshalach*)

*Cary Kozberg*

Recollections of redemptive moments  
Insist on discerning reflections:  
Caught between  
Servitude and swells,  
Fleshpots and fathoms,  
Did you leap  
Long faith-strides of certainty  
Or  
Sprint to the brink,  
Anxiously irresolute?

You—  
The Wonder-worker,  
The true “Show-stealer”—  
Were you sure  
Or  
Just sure-footed?

For us  
The sea transformed  
Into showers,  
Drained of water and hope.  
Still, we followed you,  
Jumping  
In awesome intent,  
Breathless trust  
In mid-air groundlessness.

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