

"Sir Oracle"

SELECTED LETTERS OF CYRUS ADLER.

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Reviewed by JONATHAN D. SARNA

WHEN Cyrus Adler graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, his classmates, who considered him a trifle arrogant, pictured him as a question mark. "I am Sir Oracle," the *Class Record* said in describing him, "when I ope my lips let no dog bark." Adler was surprised by the characterization (he included it in his memoirs); but those who knew him were not. The question mark and the charges of aloof arrogance have shrouded his image to this day.

Adler (1863-1940) was American Jewry's first great "scholar-doer." Born in Van Buren, Arkansas and raised in the aristocratic atmosphere of Philadelphia's venerable Sephardi synagogue, Mikveh Israel, he received as fine a Jewish and secular education as was available to an American Jew of his day, and revealed an early streak of brilliance. At the University of Pennsylvania he earned the sobriquet "Cyrus Aristotle Adler"; moving on to Johns Hopkins he became, he later boasted, the first American to earn a doctorate in Semitics at an American university. He subsequently taught at Hopkins, rising to the level of associate professor, and then resigned to work full-time at the Smithsonian Institution, where in 1905 he became Assistant Secretary—one of the highest appointive political offices occupied to that time by an American Jew.

In 1908 Adler left this position to assume the presidency of Dropsie College in Philadelphia, a then newly founded Jewish-sponsored postgraduate college for "Hebrew and Cognate Studies." Within a decade, he would also be presiding over the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Kehillah (the organized Jewish community) of Philadelphia, and the Jewish Welfare Board, and exercising considerable behind-the-scenes control over the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Jewish Committee, and the Jewish Publication Society.

Adler, as a contemporary put it, possessed "the air of being a scholar without being either reclusive or peculiar." He also had boundless energy, unusual administrative talents, and *yichus*, good family connections. He thus could shuttle easily among scholars and businessmen, Jews and non-Jews, Orthodox and Reform. When men like the great Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff needed something done, Adler was the man they knew they could rely on.

That Adler was a great administrator cannot be doubted. The question mark surrounding his name has to do with whether, in the end, he amounted to more than that. The Zionist leader Louis Lipsky, embittered by Adler's lifelong criticism of his movement, expressed doubts on that score:

He resisted innovation. He refused to lend himself to any form of action in which overemphasis or sharp distinction or controversy was an ingredient. He felt that in any change in Jewish forms basic principles would be disturbed and washed away in time. He believed in ceremony and the habitual and hesitated to acquire new habits and to direct his life into new paths for fear that he might lose his way. He was old when he was young . . . [h]e was a conservator, not a creator.

Herbert Parzen, a historian of Conservative Judaism, judges Adler even more severely. Conceding that he was "a pioneer who shared in the establishment and shaping of the decisive institutions in the Jewish community," Parzen nevertheless dismisses his leadership of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative movement as "less than beneficent, and hardly adequate." In recent years this has been very much the scholarly consensus.

WITH the publication of the long-awaited collection of Adler's letters, a reappraisal of these sharp judgments is in order. Professor Ira Robinson of Concordia University, rescuing the project from two decades of neglect, read through more than 10,000 letters scattered across twelve repositories or held in private hands. (This by no means exhausts Adler's correspondence, since hundreds of letters Robinson did not see are to be found in the recently opened papers of the Jewish Publication Society.) From these he has selected about 600, all of them by Adler rather than to Adler, and most of them letters of general interest that also shed light on "as many facets as possible of Cyrus Adler's varied career." Dreary routine letters, even if they would more accurately reflect Adler's day-to-day activities, have been omitted, as, less justifiably, have been letters reflecting Adler's darker side.

In his correspondence as in his general comportment, Adler displayed a greater degree of stiff formality than is immediately apparent here. Had salutations been printed along with texts, it would have become clear that he was on first-name terms with no more than a handful of people. The rest he addressed formally by title, and he expected them to address him by title in return—preferably as "Doctor Adler," with the "Doctor" spelled out in full. But whatever they do or do not show us of Adler the person, the letters in this revealing and historically invaluable collection do disclose a man of far greater depth, commitment, and insight than his critics have led us to expect. Indeed, one comes away from these volumes filled with new respect not just for Adler but for a whole generation of Jewish leaders, now forgotten or maligned, who whatever their foibles clearly gave far more of themselves than has been appreciated to create the communal institutions that today's American Jews take for granted.

but he was also right more often than has been acknowledged. In 1933, for example, he privately criticized both Jews and non-Jews for "underrating" Hitler. "My private advice to any Jew in America who has relatives in Germany," he wrote, "would be, if at all possible, for him to arrange to get them out. . . . I believe the best thing that can happen for the Jews of Germany if at all possible would be to take every last one of them out."

No BRIEF summary can do justice to the wide range of issues covered in these volumes. Robinson's selection includes letters dealing with everything from Jewish polygamy in Turkey (which Adler wanted to see stamped out) to Jewish scholarship in America (which he tried in every way to encourage); from intra-Jewish relations to Jewish-Christian relations; from academic freedom to religious freedom; from the problem of the Ethiopian Falashas to the anti-Semitism of Henry Ford. There is plenty of good old-fashioned American patriotism here, abundant concern for morality and religion, and a healthy fear of extremism (in all things, Adler preferred the "sane and conservative" way).

History has proved Adler wrong in some of his views, particularly in his opposition to a Jewish state,

It emerges from these letters that Adler's greatest and most enduring contribution was his continuous stress on the importance of Jewish learning at all levels: from the highest and most profound scholarship to widespread adult Jewish education to the education of Jewish children. He ranked this at the top of his own list of community priorities, devoting to it the bulk of his time, and he also insisted that other priorities should follow as offshoots from a common root. Naomi Cohen, in a characteristically perceptive introduction to these volumes, cites an address in which Adler argued specifically that "[upon] the organization of Jewish education and learning in this country . . . the religion and standing of our people rests, more than upon any other factor." Where others looked to defense organizations to guarantee American Jewry's survival, he believed that the community depended upon cultural creativity and the quality of Jewish life. He also saw in Jewish learning a platform on which all Jews, no matter how divided they may have been on other issues, could unite.

None of this was original with Adler, to be sure. As Murray Friedman and Maxwell Whiteman have pointed out in *Jewish Life in Philadelphia* (1984), Adler was part of a larger group of men known as the "Philadelphia Group" who played a formative role in shaping the great Jewish cultural institutions that arose in the United States during the decades immediately prior to World War I. It was Adler, however, who carried the Philadelphia Group's ideals the farthest. He, more than anyone else, was responsible for maintaining the institutions that they pioneered, and it was his

vision that inspired others to carry on where he left off. Had it not been for his tireless efforts, the Jewish cultural renaissance which he foresaw back in the 1890's, and which has been brought more fully to fruition in our own day, might have died aborning.

Much about Cyrus Adler still remains bafflingly enigmatic. He was a private man who rarely shared his intimate thoughts with correspondents. Public letters do not do justice to the complexity of his mind, much less to those innermost tensions that he grappled with alone in his study. They certainly do not substitute for the full-scale biography that he so richly deserves. Still, with the appearance of these volumes the question mark surrounding Adler's name begins to yield some of its mystery. Better than before, we now know why Adler's classmates dubbed him "Sir Oracle," and why to a very large extent they were right.

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