

Walther Rathenau, “Hear, O Israel!” (1897)

Abstract

Walter Rathenau (1867–1922), the son of the founder of the *Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft* [General Electric Company (AEG)], was one of the most important German Jews of his generation. With this article, published in 1897 in the journal *Die Zukunft*, Rathenau sought to encourage Jews to assimilate more actively into German society. Reacting to a new wave of antisemitism that arose during the economic hard times of the 1890s, Rathenau focused on the failure of Jews to integrate – despite what he perceived as the many similarities between enlightened Judaism and German Protestantism. Rathenau played a significant role in organizing the wartime economy during World War I, and in the Weimar Republic, he served first as minister for national rebuilding and subsequently as foreign minister. In 1922 he was assassinated by right-wing terrorists.

Source

I want to profess straight off that I am a Jew. Does it require justification if I write in a spirit other than that of defending the Jews? Many of my fellow tribesmen know themselves only as Germans, not as Jews. Some, especially those who, prompted by their profession or inclination, have less to do with their own kind than with ethnic Germans [*Stammesdeutsche*], from whom they may not differ much in outward appearance any more, are honest enough not to follow the banners of the philosemitic protectors any longer. I join them.

The philosemites are in the habit of proclaiming: “There is no Jewish question. If the Jews harm their country, that is done by the improper actions of individuals. You create laws against this or tighten the existing ones.” They are not wrong. Responding to the economic question is a matter for legislation. But I do not wish to speak of the economic question.

A more ominous question that arises is the social, the cultural one. Whoever wants to hear its language should walk through the Tiergartenstraße at noon on a Sunday in Berlin, or look into the foyer of a theater in the evening. Strange sight! In the midst of German life [there is] an isolated, strange human tribe [*Menschenstamm*], resplendently and conspicuously adorned, hot-blooded and animated in its behavior. An Asian horde on the soil of the March [of Brandenburg]. The forced cheerfulness of these people does not betray how much old, unquenched hatred rests on their shoulders. Little do they know that only an age that keeps all natural forces in check is able to protect them from what their fathers would have suffered. In close association with each other, strictly closed off from the outside – thus they live in a semi-voluntary, invisible ghetto, not a living member of the people [*Volk*], but a foreign organism in its body.

There is no use in investigating how this happened and which side is at fault for this. Life asks about what is; and history declares that the vanquished were in the wrong.

It is an incontestable truth that the best Germans nurse a deep antipathy toward Jewish nature and activities – and most of all those who don’t say much about it and who admit numerous exceptions as strange phenomena of nature, so to speak. And though the Jews try to deceive themselves about the breadth and depth of this current, they cannot shake the feeling of being hemmed in and abandoned. The old idea of glory is spent, and with more longing than they care to admit they are on the lookout for reconciliation. Yet the sea of separation will not part before any magic incantation.

I repeat: I will not deal with the economic question here, the real sphere of so-called anti-Semitism. For a long time yet, I fear, the lower classes of Jewry will be dependent on the profession of commerce and trade. It is natural and justified that, like any lopsided endeavor, commerce, too, and especially its typical participants, should arouse a counterforce and opposition. The meaning of this process is more mercantile than cultural. To me, the heart of the social question does not lie in the economic interests of individual circles, no matter how broad, but in the almost passionate antipathy of the disinterested majority. And this social question poses a danger in all corners of the Reich. It buzzes through the classrooms and lecture halls; it runs through the streets and scrutinizes the shop signs; it rumbles in the business offices and workshops; it gingerly walks up the front steps of the houses and chuckles its way down the back stairs; it nests in the cushions of the railroad compartment and presides at the tavern tables; it spreads out in the barracks square and knocks on the doors of the courtrooms.

Who today is seriously looking for an answer to it? To the ethnic German, the question is as repugnant as its subject. He is content if the swarthy people leave him alone. He has no reason to worry about its future. After all, assimilation hardly succeeds with Poles and Danes. And what is Israel doing to free itself from the curse? Less than nothing! Of course, you no longer consider yourselves as more chosen than other peoples – and barely still as smarter. But with whatever you are left with, you deem yourselves above all criticism. Do you think the old tribal God will send his Messiah King to help you? Alas, you have not noticed that he has not had anything to do with you for several thousand years! The Lord of Wrath took delight in a nation of warriors; he is not interested in a nation of grocers and brokers. He who is enthroned on Horeb and Zion does not relocate to Rosenthalerstraße or Heidereutergasse. You said that you are clever and skilled in worldly affairs: “He who has the wealth, has the power.” Now you have the wealth – and the rich among you are less esteemed than your poor. Your eloquence was vain and your agitation futile. You established associations – for defense, instead of introspection. You made life unpleasant for the best among you, so they turned their backs on you, and when they broke away, all you could do was curse them; that is they reason why they are doing well. Do not shout for the state and the government. The state made you citizens in order to educate you into Germans. You have remained strangers and demand that it should now grant full equality? You speak of obligations fulfilled: war service and taxes. But there was more to fulfil here than obligations: namely, trust. There is a lot of talk of the right of the weaker; that right exists, but you cannot compel it by defiance. No stone will be removed from your path; you will not be spared one step. But if, entrenched in your quarters, you wish to continue to parade with false martyrs' crowns – go right ahead, no one will stop you.

This I know, however: there are some among you who feel pain and disgrace at being aliens and half-citizens in the country, and who long to leave the sweltering ghetto for the air of German forests and mountains. I am speaking to them alone. Let the others, however few or many may hear me, remember their thousand-year right to persecute and mock those who wish to help them. But you, the few of you, have the difficult task of reconciling the rejection of your fellow Jews [*Landesgenossen*], you who are, after all – forgive me for saying this! – so little suited to making friends. And yet you will succeed; and the grandchildren of the indifferent of today will follow you.

You ask whether I intend to convert you to Christianity?

Certainly not.

“To the preacher in the desert,

As we read in the Gospels,

Soldiers, too, came running,

Repented and let themselves be baptized.”

When I recently laid hands on a register of the members of the Jewish community in Berlin, it gave me pleasure to leaf through the well-known names. Yes, the friends were still alive; the very orthodox zoology, mineralogy, and botany are all present. But I did not find any acquaintance of the younger generation. They were all baptized, not as soldiers but earlier, and all of them may now well be government officials [*Regierungsbeamte*] and lieutenants.

And why not? There is no difference between the Deism of a liberal, Protestant clergyman and that of an enlightened rabbi. Christian ethics are so self-evident to educated Jews today that they convince themselves that they can be derived from the Old Testament. In most cases, conversion is therefore no longer a matter of religion or conscience. Among some of the oldest and richest families of Jewish descent, it already happened decades ago. Often the only reminder of the faith of the fathers is a certain ironic atavism of external appearance; Abraham's spitefulness?

But baptism is not the end of the Jewish question. Even if the individual can create better conditions of existence by breaking away: the totality cannot. For if half of all of Israel converted, it would create nothing other than a passionate "anti-Semitism against the baptized," whose effect would be more unhealthy and immoral than the movement today by virtue of prying and suspicions on the one side, and hatred for the renegades and mendacity on the other. The remaining half, however, deprived of its leaders, would shrivel to an uneducable mass. During this kind of selection, a lot of good metal, perhaps the best, would end up in the slag, for those of the most refined sentiments have the hardest time deciding to take an ideal step, as long as a material advantage is often inseparably linked to it.

What, then, must happen? An event without historical precedent: the conscious self-education of a race to assimilate to outside demands. Assimilation not in the sense of Darwin's "mimicry," adopting the color of their surroundings, but assimilation in the sense that tribal qualities – regardless of whether they are good or bad – that are demonstrably hateful to fellow Germans [*Landesgenossen*] are cast off and replaced by more suitable ones. If it were possible for this metamorphosis to simultaneously improve the overall balance sheet of moral values, then that would be a happy accomplishment. The goal of the processes should not be imitation Germans, but Jews who are German by nature and education. At first, it is necessary for an intermediate condition to develop, which, recognized by both sides, represents a line of separation and connection between Germandom and typical Jewry [*Stockjudentum*]: a Jewish patriciate, not of property, but of intellectual and physical culture. Through its roots, this estate will continuously draw up new nourishment from below, and in time it will absorb all the material that is digestible and capable of transformation.

Source: Walther Rathenau, "Höre Israel!" in *Die Zukunft* 5 (1897), pp. 454-62; reprinted in Jürgen Schütte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 172–77.

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