

The Introduction from “Mark Twain and the Jews”
By Rabbi Jay Miller

1

Mark Twain’s article, “Concerning the Jews,” has been in print for some 100 years. The article was written in response to a letter which Twain received “from a lawyer,” portions of which are included in the article.

In conjunction with my research at the Mark Twain Papers at UC Berkeley, I discovered the name of the lawyer who wrote that letter, Grant I. Rosensweig, of Kansas City, Mo. The information operator in Kansas City provided a current listing with the last name Rosensweig, and I called. Grant I. had been a relative, I was told. I shared my discovery that Grant I. had written a letter which provided the core of an article written by Mark Twain about the Jews.

“*The* Mark Twain?!”

“Yes, the Mark Twain.”

I was not sure whether the exclamation/question reflected his surprise that a relative of his had corresponded with *the* Mark Twain, or that, Mark Twain had written about the Jews.

I have, for 30 years, had the same dual response from so many individuals when, in conversations or lectures, I related one of my latest Mark Twain adventures, literary as they might be.

“*The* Mark Twain?” they ask. “I didn’t know he wrote anything about Jews.”

Twain did indeed write about Jews, Judaism and Jewish life in America and abroad. He wrote over 20 stories, articles, letters and notebook references about Jews, many unpublished. What he wrote provides his perception of Jews and his analysis of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. An additional treasure within these writings is the key to Twain’s analysis of human relations between all people and his understanding of how human nature impacts the formation and perpetuation of prejudice and bigotry. Twain further offers a range of strategies as options in response.

Mark Twain’s Jewish writings find themselves in and out of favor among those who have read them, or portions of them. Only “Concerning the Jews” has received some public recognition through regular publication with assessments of Twain’s Jewish attitudes primarily limited to the content of that article. It is only by examining the sum of the extensive collection of Jewish materials in Twain’s stories, letters, and notebooks that we can learn what he truly had to say about Jews.

This collection is also significant as a source of what Twain had to say about other areas of concern: (1) The nature of the society in which the Jews lived; (2) the nature of relations between dominant cultures and minority cultures; and, (3) the relationship between minority cultures in a multicultural society.

Twain's analysis of the relationship between Jews and the dominant culture is a model for understanding the relationship between any minority culture and the dominant culture. Furthermore, as the dominance of one culture in America slips away, we reach the inevitable point when American cultural is a multi-culture. Twain's analysis provides us with insights into human relations in our developing multi-cultural society.

2

When I first read "Concerning the Jews" in the 1970's, I was taken by the depth of Twain's interest in Jewish matters. He lived in a world in which he could have ignored the Jewish question and certainly the Jewish questioner. I read with pride, motivated by the knowledge that someone of Mark Twain's stature chose to address Jewish issues.

I also read selectively, attributing certain uncomfortable passages to (1) Twain's satire, and (2) contemporary myths/stereotypes. After all, if in "Concerning the Jews," he categorized anti-Semites as "individuals handicapped in that way," what did it matter if, along the way, his stories and notebooks retained some current stereotypes.

I allowed myself to value what Twain had to say in "Concerning the Jews" and sought insights into his admiration and support for Jews. Discovery after discovery revealed writings that confirmed his position as an advocate for Jews and for all oppressed individuals and cultures. In his personal writings and in a series of stories, he challenged Jewish stereotypes and those who promoted them.

3

Among the dozens of documents, five form the core of Twain's writings on Jewish issues, complete with Twain's humor, satire, and insights:

An anecdote in Mark Twain's Autobiography, where he describes the first Jews he ever met, two Jewish classmates in his elementary school in Hannibal, MO;

A segment in Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven, when Stormfield has a brief, but significant, encounter with a Jew;

Two versions of a story entitled by later editors as "Randall's Jew Story" and "Newhouse's Jew Story," where a non-Jew rebukes his friends for demeaning Jews;

A letter to the Editor of The American Hebrew, a New York journal, in which he responded to their request for his observations about Jewish issues; and
The article, "Concerning the Jews."