

Joseph Fels on Class Prejudice

Joseph Fels was requested by an editor to state his views regarding anti-Jewish prejudice. His reply is one that applies to all other classes with grievances concerning prejudice, as well as to Jews. It follows: -

By way of reply to yours of the 2nd ultimo, and especially with reference to what you say of the aim of your magazine to break down the barriers of prejudice, &c., I would say that Charlotte Perkins Gilman shows how to deal with prejudice in one of her poems. Therein someone is represented as meeting a prejudice blocking his way. He argues with it, coaxes it, scolds it, threatens it -- all to no purpose. The prejudice remains undisturbed. He finally ignores it, and is surprised to find that he walks right through it as if it were not there.

The *American Citizen* is a magazine of protest against prejudice and injustice. To follow Mrs. Gilman's advice means that you confine your protests to injustice alone. When you get rid of that, you will find prejudice gone also.

Prejudice is due to class-feeling. Economic injustice everywhere divides the people into social classes. The greatest beneficiaries of injustice form an aristocracy even where, as in this country, aristocracy is not recognized by law. It is to the interests of aristocracy to encourage each one of the classes below it to look with contempt on whatever classes are below them. As long as they do this they will support the pretensions of aristocracy. Those who are too far down to have anyone financially below them may be encouraged to despise those who differ from them in creed, race, or nationality. People who are conceded with the privilege of looking down on someone may be depended upon to concede the superiority of someone else. Prejudice due to such conditions cannot be dispelled by arguments.

To destroy prejudice we must destroy privilege, the foundation of economic injustice and of aristocracy. Among those struggling to abolish it, it has been practically eliminated already. Those Jews who are opposing efforts to abolish privilege are doing more to perpetuate prejudice than all the anti-Semitic agitation in the world. Men like Jacob Schiff, Julius Rosenwald, August Belmont, Simon Guggenheim, and others, may be most estimable persons trying to do good according to their own lights, but as long as they decline to participate in the effort to remove the cause of economic injustice, they are helping to prolong anti-Semitism. The late August Lewis, who gave not only money but time and personal effort to help Henry George in his work, and to spread knowledge and understanding of the principles which George made clear, did more to eliminate prejudice than all the so-called philanthropists, supporters of charity, and preachers of abstract morality combined.

Knowing this to be the case, I can see the mistake you make in believing that you can affect prejudice by showing what Haym Salomon did or how patriotic other Jews were at different times, or how useful they were in financing the expedition of Columbus. No one will care to dispute those statements, not even the prejudiced ones.

If it were possible to bring forward proof of a claim that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson,

Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and every other possessor of a revered name in American history were Jews, and members in good standing of orthodox congregations, it would not affect anti-Jewish sentiment a particle. Every anti-Semite knows that Jesus was a Jew, but he feels none the less prejudiced on that account. It has nothing to do with the case. Prejudice is not a result of thought, and so cannot be argued away.