

WHY AM I A JEW?

BY RABBI B. A. ELZAS.

For every Jew that asks himself this question there are a hundred who do not, and of those who do, many are content to dismiss it unanswered. And yet everyone who shrinks from degrading religion to the level of mere superstition, must see that he asks this question and that he is answered. It is for us to seek a defensive answer, not a defiant one. We do not, at present, seek to convince those who are not of our faith; mere argument cannot convince such. It was the recognition of this fact (a fact not yet learned by Christianity) that kept Judaism from being a proselytising religion in the past. Is it not a notorious fact that converts, in spite of their profession, are almost invariably insincere? How wonderfully effective in emphasizing that truth, too, was the adage that all sincere believers, no matter what their creed, would be equal participators in future bliss. Why, then, give an incentive to the convert to perjure himself, if only mentally, seeing that religious conviction cannot, from its very nature, be the outcome of cold reasoning?

We seek for reasons, then, to satisfy ourselves. We recognize the good in all religions; these are but so many roads leading to our Father in Heaven.

What reasons, therefore, can we give for the faith that is in us? Why am I a Jew?

The first reason is what may be termed "the accident of the cradle." I was born of Jewish parents, and brought up in a Jewish household. I was taught the principles of my faith, so that they became imbedded in my mind, and mastered my life. I was brought up on a Jewish diet, both physical and mental, and so I became a Jew—primarily, if not entirely, by the accident of birth, and not by conviction. As Dr. Gottheil once humorously remarked: "Had my parents been Christians, I might have despised the Jews, while now I gladly own myself one of them. I might, as a Catholic priest, have called them 'perfidious' in the Easter Mass, or as a Protestant dominie have prayed for the softening of their flinty hearts, which I now know to be neither harder nor softer than other people's." I keep the way of my parents. But there is, in my case, something more than this. I am attached to my people by the bond of race as well as by the bond of religion. Our enemies can forgive us for everything but for this feeling. The sense of all we inherit from the past is calculated to strengthen it still more. Fellow-feeling, and especially community of suffering, has made us "wondrous kind," and what a thousand years of a history such as we have had has brought into existence a few decades of scepticism cannot neutralize. But this is mere sentiment; we must have something more than this if we are to remain living and active Jews. What more can be said?