

Poetic Justice: Louis Brandeis's Epitaph

*Louis said from the grave, If I am
Remembered, don't make me a sham
Of a nice Jewish boy,
Or the life of a goy
(Not to shul [1], Christmas tree [2], and ate ham [3]).*

*False biography would be a flaw---
Don't recount what would stick in my craw
And thus bring me to grief.
For my spiritual brief
Was Democracy. Ideas. The law.*

*(It is clear to me that there's a God.
Justice comes from Him. But it's not odd
That divine dialogue
You find in synagogue
Or in church, not in a college quad.)*

*Apropos of particularistic
Concerns, I'm hardly a statistic
Of a Jewish lifestyle. [4]
But I claim, all the while,
That my choices were characteristic*

*Of decency, justice, diversity
Befitting of a University---
Progressive principle,
Paired with invincible
Legal redress from adversity.*

*It's true I did advocate Zion;
Denial would surely be lyin'.
Chaim Weizmann and I
Didn't see eye to eye,
And it wasn't for my lack of tryin'.*

The problem: the Yiddish mystique
I just didn't share, since the Greek
Roots of democracy
Was the key thing for me.
Chaim-Louie? No dance cheek to cheek.

Weizmann thought that I should quit the Court
For the Zionist cause [5]. My retort:
"Justice shall I pursue---
That's the way I'm a Jew,
And my reason why is no tort."

A resource of my ideas? Free speech.
To know right from wrong, I beseech
You, learn what "truth" has meant
Through much experiment.
Our freethinking's no thing to impeach.

(Freethinking's a gift that's divine,
And allows each of us to opine
As we wish. So don't stop
Scholarship, agitprop---
That includes "Voices of Palestine".)

Judge me as Hebraic, Hellenic [6]---
And deeply held, each---they're authentic.
Solon, Melech Shlomo,
Beside Ecce Homo [7]---
My loyalty's not schizophrenic.

University name? It's prestigious.
Don't bring up too much that's religious---
The truth you'd dishonor
(While snagging a donor?).
My calling was really litigious.

University watchword: “Emet”
(Hebrew: “truth”) That’s what we try to get.
With respect due to Jews
Re the truth, I ask: whose?
Nonsectarian’s a much better bet.

If at ethnic tropisms we’re winking,
My mission will surely start shrinking.
Stand with me and Cardozo [8],
Socrates and Spinoza [9],
Devoted to critical thinking.

Honor that which your namesake imparts;
Above all, please employ all your smarts.
Singing just “Louie, Louie” [10]
Is mindlessly screwy---
Our goal’s Truth, to its Innermost Parts.

--*Harry Mairson*

Notes:

[1] Brandeis set foot in a synagogue three times in his life: twice during a 1919 visit to Palestine, and once during a 1916 Zionist convention in Pittsburgh. (Philippa Strum, private communication.)

[2] Lewis Paper, *Brandeis* (Prentice-Hall, 1983), pp. 47--48.

[3] Paper, *ibid.*, and Jonathan Sarna, “‘The Greatest Jew in the World Since Jesus Christ’: The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis” *American Jewish History* 81/3-4 (1994).

[4] See “Study: Jewish students eschew religious values” *Brandeis Reporter*, March 2006 (<http://www.brandeis.edu/offices/communications/reporter/23.6.pdf>), p. 5. Says the article, “Jewish collegians consistently place more importance on being a good person and making the world a better place than they do on any particularistic Jewish concerns...”

[5] Philippa Strum, *Louis D. Brandeis* (Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 279--285.

[6] Sarna, *ibid.*

[7] Law, wisdom, mercy: Solon was the great Athenian lawgiver; Melech Shlomo an allusion to King Solomon; Ecce Homo ("behold the man") Pontius Pilate's addressing of Jesus (John 19:5) before the Crucifixion.

[8] Benjamin Cardozo (1870-1938): yet another (Sephardic-) Jewish Supreme Court justice---whose last name does in fact rhyme with Baruch Spinoza (written "Spinozo" in Spanish).

[9] See Rebecca Goldstein's new book, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (Jewish Encounters: Nextbook/Schocken, 2006).

[10] The Jamaican-style song famously recorded by The Kingsmen in 1963.