



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series I: General Correspondence, 1914-1969, undated.

Sub-series A: Alphabetical, 1914-1965, undated.

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American Jewish Committee, 1947.

In the early fall of 1945, The Cleveland Chapter of the American Jewish Committee invited participation in a study and discussion group, in accordance with one of AJC's objectives; namely; "to serve as a cultural and intellectual center of American Jewry, thus making a contribution to the development in this country of well integrated Jews."

The group spent a period of approximately one year in discussion and study of the originally chosen subject. At the end of that time, many members of the group found that their studies had led them to certain dissatisfactions which they desired to attempt to embody into a program of action, and these members therefore formed a separate group, not under auspices of the American Jewish Committee. This later independent group was enlarged to some 200 members, whose interests were set forth in the letter addressed by their Steering Committee to the Rabbis and Boards of the Temple and the Euclid Avenue Temple.

The original group sponsored by the American Jewish Committee continues to function as a study and discussion group and is entirely independent of this group which ^{is} ~~are~~ responsible for the request for the present meeting.

The selection of the original subject "How can we help American Jewish Youth function more effectively as Americans and As Jews" is in itself very revealing as to the reason for the existence of our group. We found ourselves held together by a common interest in attempting to analyze why our Judaism was not as effective a part of our lives as we would like it to be. We asked Whether or not it was possible to have our religion and religious institutions better serve and help us and our children "live more effectively as Americans and as Jews."

Most of us had formal religious education in one or the other of Cleveland's two Reform Temples. Many of us have lost the close and satisfying relationship which we had with these religious institutions. We felt something was lacking or wrong in ourselves, in our education- in our homes- perhaps even in our Temples. Whatever it was, it had resulted in a common feeling that our religion was not serving us, we were not serving it, because it had lost touch with our every day lives as Americans. Yet we instinctively felt it should be more a part of our lives and could be for, both ourselves and our children.

We read Joshua Lieberman's pamphlet published by the Commission on New Approaches to American Jewish Education. It expressed our feelings and desires and so we proceeded to study and analyze and discuss it as an introduction to this entire subject.

We first recognized the vital importance of home environment in this problem and started by attempting to determine what positive Jewish characteristics the home environment should contain to enable our children to make the best adjustment to life. We studied the origin, significance, and development of Jewish Holidays and Ceremonials, trying to analyze the part they should play in our home environment. We found that most members agreed that what was essential was an atmosphere in which religious experiences were happy and pleasant and were commonly celebrated by the entire family group. Besides this, it was agreed that in order to make our Judaism a more vital part of our lives as Americans, Those Jewish experiences which emphasized the values that Prophetic Judaism has given and can yet give to American life must be stressed, and not those which tend to set us apart without adding meaning to or value to our lives as Americans Jews.

This belief meant to us neither assimilation nor robbing our religion of its substance, but on the contrary, it meant a determined effort to revitalize our Jewishness in a way that would make it a functioning and sincere part of our lives.

These things were established in our minds as standards for those positive Jewish characteristics which we felt should be emphasized in our homes to help our children make the best adjustment to life. Our study of this subject resulted in some members of our group starting to regularly observe the Sabbath Eve and other Ceremonials in our homes.

Some of us recognized however that our children's formal religious education and our own attitudes towards our religious institutions were an equally important part of the problem and that the two must be in harmony. We then attempted to analyze the formal religious training our children were being given in the light of the same standards we had discussed for our religious practices in our homes. None of our group was or pretended to be expert in the field of religious education but we were sincere in the desire not to reach conclusions without having made as complete a study of this subject as was possible by a group of untrained lay people in a short period of time.

We contacted the two Temples requesting for our group a presentation, by someone in authority, of the objectives and methods of the religious schools. We were addressed, on separate occasions, by the educational directors of each Temple, who outlined the objectives as well as the curriculum used.

These presentations were extremely informative. We were told that the religious schools were also concerned about the lack of interest of the children and the parents, and that there was ready recognition of the fact that as the children grew older it became increasingly difficult to hold their interest. The need for improvement in the calibre of instruction was admitted, as was the lack of texts utilizing modern ed-

ucational techniques.

We were also told that lack of parental cooperation was a major factor in causing the children's lack of or loss of interest in their religious education. In attempting to determine what effort was made to coordinate the children's religious education with their every day lives as Americans, at those meetings we questioned the status of the teaching of Jewish Nationalism and the teaching of Hebrew as a living language. We also inquired as to the efforts that were being made to help our children's adjustment to life as a minority group in a predominately non-Jewish country.

We were told that Hebrew was not taught as a living language except to those who wanted it, and this was then given in special Hebrew classes, apart from the regular Sunday school....The purpose in teaching Hebrew to all children was to give them only enough knowledge of the language to be able to follow the services and participate in the rituals and ceremonies. With this statement of purpose we could not disagree.

We were told that if our concern about Jewish nationalism referred to Zionism, that it was not taught in the schools, but was only referred to in acquainting the children with current Jewish history, and as it may have been a part of the lives of great Jews whose careers and contributions were studied. Further than this it was stated that no attempt was made to teach Zionism or Jewish Nationalism as a belief, and that if emphasis other than this was found it could be attributed only to the personal **interests** of the various instructors whose personal sympathies could obviously not always be restrained in their teaching.

In the matter of teaching our children inter-faith relationships as an aid to their adjustment, we were told that no effort was made in this direction as this subject could not be taught to young children. The curriculum in the Confirmation year included some acknowledgement of the existence and origins of Christianity, but lack of time precluded more

than a brief reference to the subject.

Following these two presentations, some of us visited Sunday School classes, read the texts and studied the curriculum. It was at this point that we learned that although the stated objectives of the schools were not too greatly different from our group's beliefs and purposes, the actual practice in the schools in some respects seemed not to follow.

We ~~also~~ learned that other groups elsewhere are also concerned about the lack of emphasis on American Judaism, and that we are not alone in our desire to help make our religion a more vital part of our lives by better understanding our relations to our non-Jewish neighbors, by stressing Judaism's contribution and responsibilities to the American scene, and by not attempting to make of our religion a nationality which makes us feel more set apart and less capable of functioning usefully as Americans.

The conclusions we have come to are few and simple, but they are sincere. We want our religion to have more meaning for us and our children. We want it to be a vital part of our lives. It must recognize that we want to be American Jews.

We are not experts and we do not have any blueprints to detail what we feel must be done, however, we know that the views expressed above are felt so strongly and shared so widely that the situation warrants a critical analysis of the problems presented and the adoption of a program to effect a satisfactory solution.

CLEVELAND CHAPTER
THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Cleveland, Ohio
February 5, 1947

Dear Friends and Members:

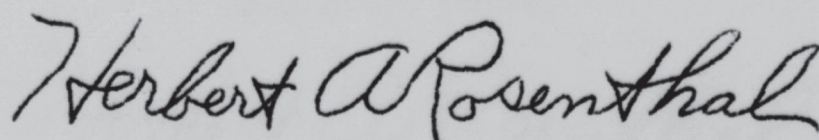
The third meeting in your Chapter's series on "Palestine" will be held on Monday, February 10th at 8:15 P.M. at Shaker High Auditorium. The speaker will be Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld of New York, Vice-Chairman of the Zionist Organization of America's Committee on Unity for Palestine.

This presentation represents a unique opportunity to gain real information regarding the Zionist position. Rabbi Lelyveld, now Assoc. National Director of B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations, was until recently the Executive Director of the ZOA's Committee on Unity for Palestine and is thoroughly familiar with the reasons underlying the Zionist viewpoint. He has a considerable knowledge of all the problems relating to Palestine and has expressed great interest in helping to provide us with facts to increase our understanding of this entire question.

Those who have attended the previous two meetings in this series heard the position of the AJC and the American Council for Judaism presented. They participated in question periods that proved to be challenging and stimulating in their search for facts. This last meeting will be particularly worthwhile as a chance to get authoritative information and to round out our knowledge of this complex and vital problem.

Remember the date -- Monday evening, February 10th, and plan to attend.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Herbert A. Rosenthal". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name "Chairman".

Chairman