



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
145

Box
51

Folder
29

The Promise of American Life, 1918.

621

sermon .021

"THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN LIFE"

At an hour when nations are being weighed in the balance, when institutions are being swept by cyclonic changes, when the destinies of peoples are being tried in the crucible of the great war, it might be well for America, facing the greatest ordeal of its history, to examine its life, to take stock of its spiritual resources, to define more clearly than ever before, the purpose of its life and the methods which we have adopted for the attainment of these purposes. Would that I could speak of all of these things, but I have chosen to speak this morning, upon one phase of American life, perhaps the most glorious of all, -- its promise, the promise of American life, for I believe that there is a promise to American life -- firstly -- because American life is democratic and because it is democratic, it believes in the perfectibility of the common man. It has identified its destiny with life itself. It is one with the rythm of the Universe. Democracy has faith in the crowd, it believes in the weltering masses of men. It has faith in the gathering forces, the justifying purpose, the clarifying vision, the growing intelligence and the evolving discipline of the rank and file. Democracy stakes its future upon the latent powers of the masses, the powers which but wait for the necessary stimulus of knowledge and experience, - Democracy is the most empirical philosophy of life and withal, the most idealistic. Its idealism is based on experience, on the records of the common man's past achievements. In democracy nothing is ultimate but the good. Democracy is not blind to the prevalent ignorance, the ungoverned prejudices, the

the uncontrolled passions, the absence of clear, disciplined thinking among the masses of mankind. Democracy knows the weaknesses, the vices, the stupidities and the deficiencies of the man ~~man~~, but democracy also maintains that these weaknesses are but promises of great potencies, that these deficiencies are but evidences of great excellencies, that these vices can be transformed with the magic wand of education and opportunity and experience, into resplendent virtues.

Democracy does not place a halo of glory around the head of the common man but it does place a halo of glory around the destiny of the common man. American life is full of promise because it is democratic and democracy is the great, vast project of social reclamation. It irrigates the desert lands of humanity. It turns the waste places of society, the myriads of lives that are blinded by ignorance, the myriads of lives that are barren of opportunity, into blooming gardens rich in the flowers and the fruitage of civilization ---- But democracy is even more than that: It is not only an extensive movement, a movement which aims to reach out and include all the children of men - that is its first work. But it is also aiming to create ever greater values, to refine and perfect them - it aims to distribute =====and justly, all the advantages and opportunities of life to all, it is qualitative as well as quantitative. It aims to enrich life, to create new values, to deepen life, to exalt it. When this is achieved democracy will enter upon the second phase of its activity. It will set higher standards and inspire x the concerted masses movement toward them. It will

#3.

marshall the forces of civilization for a still further advance.

American life is rich in promise because it is democratic because it believes in the perfected democracy of men, because it ~~is~~ believes in the extensive and intensive movements of democracy, but it is also rich in promise because it is rich in color. American life is a rainbow life - the rainbow of promise. The cultures of a hundred peoples are merged ~~here~~ ^{here} the civilization of all the races of the world. The myriads of men who come to our shores, poor, low-born, unlettered, are really, the gift-bearing emissaries of older civilizations coming ~~the~~ ^{to} America, the cultural treasure house of the world. Of course, they bring us problems too, grave, difficult problems. These millions of men coming from foreign shores bring us old lives to be made new, a soul-hunger to be satisfied, wounds to be healed, prejudices to be eradicated, ambitions to be fulfilled but it is the problems as well as the gifts which constitute the promise of American life. For the problems will stimulate our national thought and broaden our outlook. They will destroy our isolation and drive us into the arena of the world's life.

In our efforts to meet these great and difficult problems we shall discover heretofore unsuspected powers within ourselves. We are growing and we shall continue to grow because of these very great and difficult problems. Out of the gifts which these people bring unto us, we shall construct a civilization such as the world has never seen. We shall construct, thru years of patient planning and building, a temple of humanity, grounded in the soil of a hundred peoples and rising to the glory of all

their highest aspirations. American life is rich in promise because it is rich in color but it is also rich in promise perhaps principally because it is young. The weight of the centuries and the burden of petrified institutions do not hamper American life. It need not always tear down old structures before it can build up new ones. We have a keenness for adventure and a zest, a relish for experiments. American life has not yet become rutted. It has not yet become hopelessly stratified into classes. The forces of social capillarity are still at work in America. Its institutions are still red hot. They may be beaten by the hammer blows of new experiences into new shapes and forms. American life is rich in promise because it is a life in the making, because it is still growing. These are the reasons why I believe in the promise of American life.

Now what are the promises of American life?:

Firstly - In the realm of Economics America holds great promise. Our land has been blessed with abundance of natural resources. Its vast treasures, have not, as yet, been fully exploited. It still holds generous reward for the brave and the industrious and because of that we can hope, and we are justified in hoping that the standard of life and of living will slowly and gradually, but surely, rise, constantly rise, because there is enough of a social surplus to go around to satisfy the needs and supply comforts to every deserving human being, and not only that but the wealth of America is full of promise for a rich civilization and culture, for a starved land can never nurture a great culture. The Rabbis have long ago discerned this truth=====

There is no culture without bread.

Evidences are at hand that we shall not remain satisfied in the future with a formal democracy - a democracy which means but the right of suffrage. We can foretell from present tendencies, the mathematical curve which ~~wik~~ the future will describe, and the curve is ~~unmistakably~~ in the direction of socialized democracy, a democracy that will extend to all, not merely the right to partake in the political ~~xxx~~ goods but also in the Economic and Social goods of America, a democracy that will extend to ~~the~~ all the opportunities of elementary and higher education, a democracy that will insist upon an equitable distribution of the nation's wealth, for the ^{servation} conservation of the life and health of all men -- in a word, ~~for~~ that will make for a progressive improvement of the physical, intellectual, moral and aesthetic life of all. That is the promise of the political destiny of America, a socialized democracy in the fullest sense of the word..

The promise of American life lies in the possibility of destroying poverty in al its forms - actual ~~physical~~ poverty and the equally real mental poverty. American will not have fulfilled its destiny if one toiler remains dispossessed of life's goods, if one life is stifled by poverty, ~~if~~ one soul suffers from economic wrongs.

And in the social realm, the promise of American life is the ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ super-man and by super-man I do not mean the blond beast of German pseudo metaphysics, by super-man I do not mean that immoral concoction of arrogance, ~~conceit~~ conceit and cruelty, -I mean the higher man, the nobler man, the

freer man; the man, who released from the bondage of poverty and ignorance, will live a life more worthy of his station, richer in high impulses, more abundant in the blessings of the things beautiful in life - a life of greater confidence and courage, of greater hope and faith - a life more nearly divine. That is the social promise of American life. How are these promises to be redeemed or fulfilled. Surely not ^{by} ~~be~~ alms. This land is not the promised land. This land is sometimes called the land of promise but you and I must redeem those promises - you and I, the weavers of America's destiny, you and I will make or mar the destiny of America. If these promises are to be redeemed than it is up to you and me to do it.. Humanity has in the past, most tragically, most blindly destroyed many such wonderful promises. If we are to fulfill these wonderful promises, we must first set about systematically to =====every potentiality of American life. By concerted effort, guided by policy and governed by discipline, we must make ~~xx~~ every department of our national life thoroly efficient. Our industries, our schools, our press, our religious institutions, our political organizations, all must be deminated and controlled by the one great impulse of social democracy.

If these promises of American life are to be redeemed then we must destroy that spirit of social irresponsibility, and which that baneful individualism which is rampant among us, /is the heritage of our pioneer days. We must not sacrifice our freedom of action by remaining the slaves of ancient intellectual conceits. We must mold our lives and institutions, we must re-interpret our laws and conventions, we must re-construct our institutions as the pressing needs of the new day dictate. We must remain true

to the spirit of the man who founded this land of ~~his~~ ours, and who wrote the constitution of this land, but we must not insist upon remaining slaves to the letter of their law which was all in advance of their own day. We must remain progressive in the spirit of our promise which prompted men of old.

If we are to realize these promises of American life, we must do so now, for this generation, ^{will} /in my mind determine ~~when~~ the trend of American life for many a generation to come. American life today, due to the war, is so much more susceptible to influence. Our ~~thots~~, our institutions, are like molten metal which ~~=can=be=poured or=cast~~ into any mold we choose. It is for us of this generation - for you and for me, to determine the character, the shape and form of this mold which American life will be poured into.

If American life is to be privileged to announce the year of the Jubilee ~~for the year~~, if it will be American's sacred privilege to proclaim freedom in the land and to all the inhabitants thereof so that every man will return unto his possessions and every man unto his divine patrimony. If this is to be the glorious destiny of America, it is for us to begin the work, now at once.

The promise of American life is dazzling, it is glorious. Our life is unique, our institutions may become unique. The spirit which animates us is something novel. We have within us the wherewithall, the material, to fashion out of this land, which is a miniature universe, we have within us, the power to fashion a people, a nation, such as the world has not yet seen.

If this promise is to be realized, then you and I must prepare ourselves by a rigid, intellectual discipline, by a strong sense

#8.

a social sense which will prompt us to surrender our own, so-called natural rights for the sake of ^{the} greater freedom of that and action which comes from social co-operation. We must train ourselves by a new way of thinking. We must find ourselves by losing ourselves. We must be born into a new life by dying our old life. You men have the destiny of America in your hands, to make it or to mar it. Grow conscious of your great task, of your heavy responsibility and act as men fully conscious of it---Amen.

