



## 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  
32

God, 1918.



Apr. 21, 1917

"GOD"

I was prompted to set aside the remaining sermons of the congregational year for a discussion of the faith of the Jew, of the fundamentals of our faith -- first -- because of the old Jewish axiom "Review it and review it over and over again for everything is in it". It is good to return to fundamentals, to refresh our souls at the springs of the spiritual values of our faith, to gain anew, the inspiration which comes from a true understanding of great principles, especially at this season of the year when tradition has decreed the study of the ethics of the farmers preparatory to the celebration of the Booth, of the revelation on Mt. Sinai.

Another thing which prompted this series of lectures was the appearance recently of that splendid \*\*\*\*\* my master and friend Dr. K\*\*\*\*\* a book which should find its way into the home of every Jew, a book whose profoundness of scholarship is equalled only by the profoundness of the author's enthusiasm and love for his faith and for his people and if imitation is sincere flattery, I have paid my master the compliment of using the three main divisions of his book "God" "Man" and "Israel" as the topic, the theme of my three lectures. Perhaps this thing also gave an impulse to my decision to speak of the faith of the Jew -- the war. For it is my earnest conviction that the war, which has most sadly established the irrelevancy of some of the most important doctrines of the church to the vital issues of the present day, will establish the soundness, the wholesomeness, the truth of some of the basic principles of Judaism.

In speaking of the faith of the Jew, I shall speak of the \*\*\*\*\* of Judaism and by \*\*\*\*\* I mean two things: First of all I shall speak of Judaism at its highest expression and secondly



I shall speak of the Judaism which is common ground to both Orthodox and Reformed.

I said I shall speak of Judaism at its highest expression. When one desires to judge the art of an artist fairly and honestly, he must take that artist at the point of the highest consummation of his art and not at the point of the insipient study of his art. To judge of the achievements of a great man, one must study him, not at the point of the development of his career - at a stage of evolution, one must take him at the highest point of expression. Equally so with a religion. If one desires to gain an honest and true appreciation of a religion, one must take it at its highest point, not at one of the lowest stages of development because the foundations of all religions are alike, they differ only as to the heights to which they attain, so, when speaking of Judaism, I shall speak of a kind of Judaism that was the expression of the highest achievements of the spiritual genius of the Jew -- the Judaism which was the faith of the noblest souls, the clearest minds of Israel. That is only fair. Some people - and especially Christian theologians, were interested more in apologetics than truth "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and holding that up for the sum and substance of Judaism. Now, that, of course, is unfair - just as unfair as taking a child for the representation of the man. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is Jewish inasmuch as it was an stage in the development of the Jewish ideal, the Jewish standard - just as the child is a step in the development of the man .....this retaliation found in one of the oldest codes of law in the bible can no more be held up as the representation of the faith of Israel than the child can be held up as the full expression of the matured man.

I shall speak of the Judaism that is common ground between



Orthodox and Reformed, the basic, the fundamental things are alike to both. Perhaps I should speak for a while on those things which differentiate Orthodox and Reformed. Men say the only difference between Orthodox and Reformed is the difference in their attitude ---- Orthodox hoping for a national \*\*\*\*\*and Reformed insist upon the universal mission of the Jew -- that, it is held is the main difference - so that many men of a radical turn of mind, have, strange to say, become zealous critics of Reformed Judaism and most enthusiastic over the Orthodox, therefore, presenting another \*\*\*\*\*of Jewish life.

I remember a few months ago there graced this pulpit at a Forum here. I had heard that the man's convictions were \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*the man did not speak of the "Philosophy of Conservative Judaism" as I had believed he would. The man merely said that Orthodox Judaism is true because it is nationalistic -- that Reformed Judaism is false because it is anti-nationalistic. The man proceeded to indulge himself in a most glowing eulogy of Orthodox Judaism. I merely thought that here was a man who loved Orthodox Judaism, believed it and practiced it. Immediately following his address, on Sabbath eve, this Orthodox Jew took a street car to his hotel, and indulged in the \*\*\*\*\*of the French Chef and prepared to leave at midnight for his home town so as to be ready to go to work the following day - Sabbath. And the strangest thing is, that that man was conscious of no inconsistency in his Orthodoxy. He was convinced that he \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*be an Orthodox Jew.

Now of all the things that differentiate Orthodox Judaism and Reformed -- nationalism is not one. It is stupid to use nationalism as the \*\*\*\*\* of Orthodox and Reformed. I have known of a



good number of Orthodox Jews and a good number of Reformed Jews who did not believe that the Jew must commit national suicide in order to be of use in the world. There are big things on which Orthodox and Reformed differ -- we differ on the matter of the plenary inspiration of the bible, we differ on the subject of the historical revelations, we differ on the binding force of tradition and of laws. For the Orthodox, the bible is the highest expression of Judaism -- therefore binding for all times. For Reformed, the bible represents the expression of the Jew for a period of a thousand years - which spirit did not cease its activity even unto the present day.

We do not advocate the right to choose to be eclectic for we are true to the prophetic spirit of Judaism. Perhaps also we differ on the matter of a personal Messiah -- on the matter of resurrection, These are vital things. These are \*\*\*\*\*and we differ. But the basic things -- as to the Jewish conception of God and man and Israel -- I believe you will agree with me that both Orthodox and Reformed Judaism are at one.

I shall not dwell at length, or indulge in a metaphysical speculation on the subject of the acceptance of God. Apart from the fact that the \*\*\*\*\*

Faith is the sum total of a variety of psychological expressions, of which speculative reason is but one expression and that not the prime one -- but it can say that God is a metaphysical necessity, an apostolate philosophy. I believe it is. One can say that the moral order of the Universe, one can say that the upward search \*\*\*\*\*demands the acceptance of a primary creative impulse. One can say all that but after all, it is the inner soul of man that demands God and it is in the \*\*\*\*\*of men that demands a God. God is an \*\*\*\*\*



of the moral life of Man. It is in our experiences, in our hopes, our aspirations, in our readiness to sacrifice for ideals, in our strivings that we feel that compelling power that drives us on and comforts.

Israel came to God, not thru a process of reasoning, and it is the enthusiastic genius of the Jew, the moral passion of the Jew for truth and justice, that lead him inevitably to an \*\*\*\*\* if you will, of a God, who is a source \*\*\*\*\* The Jew did not reason it out. He felt it as soon as the ethical standards grew, as soon as his ethical ideals came to impress the whole of humanity -- his God became universal. As soon as the Jew realized \*\*\*\*\* he came to speak of his God as the God of the Universe, and so, when I speak of God I shall speak of the ethical attributes which my people and your people have associated with him. I shall not indulge in speculation and the \*\*\*\*\* thereto. I shall try to present to you the ethical ideals which Israel used with its deity because "What the God of a people is, that the people itself are". First of all - two mighty convictions reign supreme in Israel at all times. First of all "God is". and secondly "God is one". May I quote a sentence from \*\*\*\*\* "There can be no disputing the fact that the central idea of Judaism and its life purpose is the one only and holy God whose Kingdom of Truth and Justice and Peace is to be Universally established at the end of time". This is the main teaching\*\*\*\*\*.

Now belief in one God, my friends, has tremendous implication and it is of these implications that I would speak this morning. First of all - one God meant one mankind, the Fatherhood of God inevitably meant the brotherhood of man. This ideal of the oneness of God, drew a ring of living fire around all the children of men



destined ultimately to weld them into one brotherhood of love, and that is why, when prophets speak of that Golden Age when men will beat their swords into plowshares and their\*\*\*\*\* and they always precede that phrase by this "All the nations will stream unto the Lord \*\*\*\*\*the belief in one God is \*\*\*\*\* to the realm of Universal peace. The ideal of the one God must first become ingrained in the souls and the hearts of men before the truth of human brotherhood can be established, for when once men come to say "Hath not one God created us all" then must follow the thought "Why then should we deal treacherously with one another." That is the first implication and the second is this "God is one" and God is therefore the source of both good and evil. From earliest times people were troubled by this problem, -- God's omnipotence vs. the existence of evil. If God is All Powerful, why then does he permit evil to exist in the world? This query led ancient people to create a dualism. The power of good vs. the power of evil and life was the eternal conflict between these two powers. This dualism represented its highest expression in the Religion of the Persians. Now the Jew has maintained that God is one and there is no other power beside him. The Jew has maintained "I, the Lord, create the light and form the darkness \*\*\*\*\*I the Lord do all these things." God is the source of both good and evil -- evil is not an interpolation -- evil is of the very warp and woof of life. Evil makes life possible. Without evil there can be no good, without vice there can be no virtue, without the possibility of doing wrong, free will is meaningless and progress and evolution have no \*\*\*\*\*though the Jew has said "Do not both good and evil come forth out of the mouth of the Lord?" The Jew has said constantly "Behold I have set before thee this day life - good and death - evil". "Choose thou life". Judaism said that



life is a discipline -- that evil is in life to discipline us, to strengthen us, to urge us on to develop the finest that is in us. We have had philosophers among the people \*\*\*\*\* who said that evil does not exist really = that evil is negative just as darkness is merely the absence of light and poverty the absence of goods. Just as you have today that pseudo-science or mysticism that goes by the name of Christian Science\*\*\*\*\*that evil is \*\*\*\*\*that it is only an error of the human mind.

Now apart from the perplexing problems of where this human mind came from -- apart from these metaphysical conceits do not specify human reason and certainly not the human soul. Poverty might be negative but there is nothing more real in life than poverty, the consciousness of lacking something that is necessary for your sustenance. And as far as you and me and your experiences and mine are concerned, there is nothing more real than poverty and disappointment and disillusionment. We know them to be real because they are part of our experiences. Of course, on the cosmic scheme of things we cannot say that there is evil in the world\*\*\*\*\*. Our minds are too limited, but while the evil might be ultimate (?) it is certainly real, it is certainly here, and Judaism has recognized the fact and Judaism says unto you ~~xxxxxx~~ son of man "Life is not perfect but it is perfectable. Judaism says unto you "I have given you, not a playground to play in but a world to work in. There is ignorance to be trained and taught. Gird down thy loins, like a man, for out of your struggles and suffering, you will grow bigger and finer and more akin unto God, - co-worker of God ~~in~~ because he works in a world that is not perfect but perfectable."

I have just concluded the reading of that epic of poverty\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*amidst privations and misery which continued in a cobbler shop, which passed thru years of most dire want in the city



of Copenhagen in which the man was racked, actually racked, with the most excruciating experiences that a human being can suffer, but is a the story of a man who spent years of his \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*it is the story of a man who rose from the very dregs of society unto the mountain heights of achievement and this \*\*\*\*\* who \*\*\*\*\* himself the Conqueror, at the conclusion of the work says "I did not know it, but in very truth I am the blessed child of God because of these things which I have endured. Misery and suffering have taught me sympathy. In prison alone, by myself I discovered God. In hunger and thirst \*\*\*\*\*a greater force for continuing my purposes, and when I read that, I reminded myself of that psalm "I Thank Thee O Lord that Thou hast afflicted me for now I have found my salvation." God is one and God is therefore also the source of justice and love. If you were at all acquainted with theological struggles and disputes you would know that one of the oldest charges hurled against Judaism was that its God was a tyrant, a God of vengeance - a blood thirsty Monarch, who exacted submission as the master exacted submission from his slaves. It is so easy, as Jefferson said\*\*\*\*\*. Of course, it is a \*\*\*\*\*  
 \*\*\*\*\*it is untrue. I can pick out three or four sentences from the new testament and I can construct from them a clay God -- an idea of the old testament. I can point to that sentence which says that "Those who do not believe in me will be cast into outer darkness where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. "Think not that I come to bring peace upon earth, etc." I can point to those things which fairly teem with brutality and fearfulness but I would be telling a lie, just as these theologians are telling a century old lie. Why anyone who reads the literature of the Jew will know better. One psalm says "The Lord is good unto all, his



tender mercies are unto all peoples. One psalm speaks:  
 "The Lord is my shepherd". One \*\*\*\*\*in deuteronomy speaks  
 of the Lord as "\*\*\*\*\*". When the prophet  
 Isaiah speaks of God as the stronghold of the poor --- the  
 stronghold of the needy in his affliction - his refuge from  
 the storm. The prophet Joel speaks of God "The Lord is merciful  
 and gracious, full of compassion and tenderest mercy." When you  
 read in the bible "You are children of God" one asks himself

Whence this lie? That the people of Israel have endured  
 torment and torture for a God of viciousness and brutality.  
 The truth of it is that Judaism, because it is a religion of  
 social justice, not a religion of individual selection, gave the  
 primary place in the order of things to justice. That is a  
 sound, a wholesome guide for society - justice. The Jew did  
 not say that humanity was steeped in sin and could not be redeemed  
 except by the sacrifice of one who loved them dearly. It did not  
 believe that man was stained by original sin. Judaism did not  
 say \*\*\*\*\*rises by slow stages unto the throne of God  
 and in all his \*\*\*\*\* that man climbs to the mountain heights  
 of truth and - secondly - Judaism did \*\*\*\*\*there is  
 a beautiful sentence which sums up the entire that "Justice and  
 righteousness are the foundation of God's throne." The world is  
 based upon it. "Love and mercy are the dwelling places of God's  
 glory." Love - that is the something added to life which makes  
 it sweet and beautiful, but the social structure must have as its  
 backbone the appearance of justice. May I say that Judaism combined  
 justice and love into this new principle which to my mind is the  
 highest expression of the deity. I shall close with that:  
 Judaism found a higher expression for God than a God of justice or



a God of love, and called it ="Holiness". "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts". Holiness which means the sum total of all virtues and perfections. Justice and love -- every ideal every beauty, every sanctity of live is contained in that expression of holiness.

Now these ethical ideals concerning God's oneness

\*\*\*\*\*

to them who worship him because as I said "What a God is, so will his people\*\*\*\*\*. The Jew, who worshipped one God became the great apostle of the ideal of the brotherhood of man. The Jew became the honest workman in God's workshop, the earnest toiler and co-worker of God. The Jew, whose God was a God of justice and love, preached justice for men and nations at all times and today - but love, love truly, love deeply, because he really loved his enemies, He sacrificed himself, his comforts for the sake of the men who persecuted him. I am bold to say that no one has yet practised the doctrine of the foundation of Christianity. No one has as yet practised it but the Jew because the Jew worshipped a God who was a God of Holiness. "Be ye holy for I, the Lord, your God, am Holy." Holiness, that is the ideal of Jewish ethics and that is the highest expression of the God idea in Israel.