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Rabbinic Judaism, 1919.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON "RABBINIC
JUDAISM", AT THE TEMPLE, EAST 55th STREET AND
CENTRAL AVENUE, SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 18, 1919.

In our discussion of prophetic Judaism last week you will recall there were two chief contributions of prophetism in religion--the one, monotheism, and the other the identification of religion with ethics. I might have spoken of still a third, and that is the development of the idea of the mission of Israel, a unique idea among peoples and of tremendous importance and significance to the world. In the Babylonian exile the Jew became aware of a great truth. He came to look upon, his misfortune, his exile, his suffering, as pain and atonement for the sins not of himself only but of the world, and he came to look upon himself as upon a servant of the Lord, a witness of the Lord, the spokesman of the Lord. In the disillusionment which followed the destruction of the temple and the great suffering which attended it, the Jew found a new soul and a new conviction, which was this: Not only is the people of Israel a people of prophets, a people that can produce the great prophets, but that the people of Israel itself is a prophetic people, that Israel itself is a prophet unto the peoples of the world.

The function of the prophet was to be the spokesman of the living God and the function of Israel therefore became this: to be "the light unto the nations," a

covenant among the peoples. Now, the idea of a mission has been much deprecated and much abused in recent years. It has been abused principally by another people that claim for itself the prerogative of being the chosen people of the world, to impose its Kulture upon all peoples. I maintain that there is a radical difference between the Prussian concept of a mission and the Jewish concept of a mission. The Prussian, too, regarded his Kulture as of supreme validity and importance to the world, and he set about imposing it upon the world. The Jew likewise regarded his truth as supreme and he, too, has for thousands of years endeavored to make it prevail in the world. But the differences are vast and radical. The Prussian set as the goal mastery; his aim was to master the world and impose his Kulture upon the world. The idea of the Jew was to be the servant of the world,--"the servant of the Lord." The Prussian endeavored to impose his Kulture by force; the Jew endeavored to convince the world of his truth by love. You cannot preach civilization and culture through the mouth of a cannon, and you cannot thrust idealism into mankind with the point of a bayonet.

The Jewish concept of the mission of the people went hand in hand with the thought of the tremendous responsibility, of the all-inspired responsibility which it entailed; it brought with it a sense of humility, of humbleness; the Prussian idea came in a spirit of arrogance and pride and boastfulness. The test, the proof of the truth of the

Prussian mission was to be victory, dominion, control, subjection of other peoples. The truth of the Jewish ideal and the stamp and testimony of his missionary appointment was to be suffering. If a man would claim for himself the title of leader of humanity he must prove it by his readiness and his willingness to suffer for the sake of humanity; he must pay for it in blood and flesh.

The Jew has justly earned his title of "The witness of the Lord," "The servant of the Lord," "The light unto the peoples," because of his two thousand year old martyrdom. I maintain that the ideal of the mission is one not to be scoffed at even by those who are intense nationalists. I maintain that the Jew must have a reason for remaining separate and distinct in the world-- a protestant minority. I maintain that the Jew, unless he is at all times conscious of a peculiar destiny which he must serve, of a telling, an invoking mission which he must follow in life,--unless there is a need and a call for his services in the world and for his suffering, there is no reason for his existence. Every people has a mission in life. The mission of the Jew, to my mind the most exalted because the most necessary in human life, is to preach God to man and humanity to man. Now, then, prophecy is, after all, only a program, a pronouncement; it has to be applied; it has to be made real and vital and telling in the lives of men. Prophecy is like seeds that have to be sowed and watered and

attended and weeded and prepared for human consumption. The prophets enunciated the great truths, but men had to come after them, to interpret them, to explain them, to expand them, to apply them, to incorporate them in laws and customs and practices and institutions, and that was the work of the scribes and the sages and, ultimately, of the rabbis.

So that rabbinic Judaism, of which I shall speak this morning, is simply a continuation of prophetism in Israel. An essential, real continuation of prophetism in Israel. I emphasize the point because it has been repeated more than once that rabbinicism, so-called, marked ^{that} a decline in Judaism; ^{that} it was the beginning of that degeneration which culminated at the time of Christianity. At the time of Christianity Judaism was so degenerated, so lifeless, priest-ridden and law-ridden, so empty of spiritual content, so hackneyed that a new religion had to come into the world to save the ideals of Judaism for the world. And we maintain that it is not true. We maintain that the work of the rabbis was simply to preserve and to actualize the teaching of the prophets. The ideals of the prophets were never lost sight of in Israel. The function of the rabbis is well expressed in the sentence which I read this morning, attributed to the men of the great synagogues. It was a three-fold one. First, "Be deliberate in judgment," and, "Raise many disciples," and, "Make a fence around them ^{law} all." First of all be deliberate in judgment. Interpreted in a larger

sense it means this ; study the torah so carefully, so minutely, that you will be able to apply it justly to every new demand of every new date. The torah, being the inspired and the revealed word of God, became the center of the religious life of the people. That was the hub whence everything radiated; that was the constitution. But the torah was not rigid. It was not fixed, it was capable of being expanded and interpreted and elaborated, so as to take in the new conditions and new circumstances of life. It was fluid to a marked degree; it was flexible and pliable. Along with the torah was an oral tradition, along with the torah was a whole scheme of exegetic interpretation. Laws could be derived from the torah; laws could be read into the torah by divination, by implication, by comparison, by study. It is wrong to maintain that because of the fact that the bible became the great authority in Jewish life, that therefore the Jewish life was narrowed and stultified. The great struggle between the two sects in Israel, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, centered about this very point. The Sadducees believed in no resurrection and the Pharisees believed in resurrection. That is merely incidental. The real point in issue between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was this: the Sadducees claimed we received the torah from Ezra. We bound ourselves to observe it; we will observe everything that is in it but nothing more. No Rabbi, no school of rabbis has the right to derive new or additional laws from the torah.

The Pharisees said that if the torah is to remain a helpful thing in Jewish life, we must have the right to interpret it, to meet the new conditions of the day. The Pharisees were the party of progress, of development, of evolution, the party of the intelligent laity, of the scholars, and so the struggle was fierce and intense between the two parties. "To be deliberate in judgment" was a challenge to make the law vital in Jewish life, and that was the great work of the rabbis. And secondly, "Raise many disciples." Before the Babylonian exile, religion was very much a matter of ritual, it was in the hands of the priests, it was a matter of cult. In the Babylonian exile the cult lost its hold upon the people; religion became something more personal. The synagogue was founded in the Babylonian exile, and religion became more democratic. It became the concern of every man, and the bible was placed in the hands of the people, and from that day to this Israel became the people of the book, and the great passion, the great desire of the Jew from that day to this has been to raise many disciples, many pupils. "Let every man become a student of the law." Education--that was the second great work of the rabbis.

And thirdly, to make a "fence around the law." After the Babylonian exile the political unity and independence of Israel was gone, but for a brief period of time under the Maccabees. The Jew was never again an independent nation. There was but one thing to hold the people together, to unify them, to preserve the integrity and the continuity

of the religion of Israel, and that was the torah. But the torah was threatened first by Babylonian influence when the Jews were in Babylonia, and then by Persian influence when Persia conquered Babylonia, and then by Greek or Hellenic influence when Alexander the Great, in the middle of the fourth century conquered Babylonia, and then by Roman influence when the Romans conquered Babylonia, and, finally, Judaism was threatened by the rise of Christianity. To defend the truths of Judaism and hold them intact the rabbis had to throw a fence about it, to build a bulwark, as it were, by laws, and to prepare the people for the great war which was to come, the war of self-preservation, by organizing them almost on a military plane, by regulating their rabbis by means of a strict discipline. When a nation is endangered by a foreign enemy it organizes itself militarily and subjects its people to a rigid, compelling discipline. The rabbis knew the dangers that Judaism faced, and so they began to develop a discipline which would control the life, the ordinary daily life of every Jew.

Now, it has been said that the law as developed by the rabbis and as found in the talmud became a deadly affair; it stifled; it was a fearsome burden upon the people; it drove out the spirit; it exalted the letter and the observance; it was formal, it was external, there was little of piety in it and little of the spiritual, and little of the emotional, and the sentimental; it was purely artificial. Judaism was reduced to a system of laws

by the Babylonians. That, of course, has been the main Christian contention for centuries, and that, of course, is untrue. The law was never regarded as a burden by the people. They delighted in it. One rabbi said, "The great love was shown unto Israel, but they were given the torah by means of which the world was swayed." The giving of the law unto Israel was an act of love unto Israel. The torah, they said, gives life unto those who believe in it. It was life-giving; soul in spirit and not soul-deadly.

They speak of the six hundred and thirteen commandments and endeavor to show that every act of the Jew was swayed with legalism. Most of the six hundred thirteen commandments are laws of public justice, such as you find in modern codes of law,--laws relative to the acquisition of property, to marriage and divorce, civil laws, criminal laws, laws which exist today by the hundreds and the thousands, and which none of us regard as a burden upon ourselves. Many of these laws apply to individuals or to groups of individuals like the priests, the Levites. Many of these laws were purely ethical and moral laws--to be honest, love thy neighbor, to help the poor, to pray,--certainly not burdensome laws. The aim of the rabbis simply was to consecrate every act and every moment of human life. Nothing that a man did but that he can receive that halo of sanctity if done in the proper spirit. It was a sanctification of the whole of human life. If a man ate he was not to eat like a beast of the field, but

as if God were present there. His table was an altar and he prepared himself as if he were about to offer a sacrifice. He was ordered by law to wash his hands and recite a prayer, and break bread and recite a prayer, and after the meal to recite another prayer. There was a halo of reverence, of glory, of divinity shed over the commonest and most ordinary acts of human life. If a man saw a beautiful scene, a wonderful sunset, a fine flower, he recited a prayer. It was bringing the man into constant, intimate touch with divinity. God was with him every moment of his day.

That is how saturated the Jew was with piety and with religion, and when you get into that state you do not feel it a burden, you feel it an exhilarating influence in your life. The Sabbath, for example, which has so many restrictions and so many commissions to the outsider, to the non-Jew,--he sees only the prohibitions and the restrictions not to do this, not to do that, not to travel, nor to walk too far, nor to do any work, nor to read, nor to write; the accumulation of all prohibitions startles and frightens him, and he sees how horribly incarcerated the people were by their laws. But the Jew who observe the Sabbath does not feel the restrictions at all, but he feels the holiness and the beauty of the Sabbath, how the Sabbath is the one day of the week when he finds himself. It is the one day when the rabbis said an additional soul is given to every man. The law was merely the fence around the life of the Jew.

a necessary fence. It did not imprison him, however. The Jew has lived for two thousand years unto the law and did not complain of its oppressiveness.

The rabbis did not forget the prophetic elements of Judaism at all--God and justice. You recall that famous phrase of the rabbi who said, "Better is the one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than all the days and all the eternities of the world to come." One hour of doing good in this world outweighs all the glories and all the beauty and all the happiness of all the eternity in the world to come. They did not forget the real essence of Judaism--God and justice. They faced new conditions, they faced a world inimical, a world that was threatening to absorb them, to destroy them, they did want to live because they knew that they had something worth while to live for, and they were going to subject themselves to an infinite number of self-imposed restrictions,--fences--just so they may deserve themselves. Do not get the impression that after the period of the prophets there was nothing in Jewish life worth while. After the Exile some of the choicest and most precious bits of literature were fashioned. Some of the prophecies of Haggi, Zechariah, and Malachi come from the period after the exile. Portions of the torah itself, the book of Job, that profound bit, that masterful summing-up of human doubts and human gropings in this world come from this period. The entire wisdom, the literature contained in the

apocalypse; the wisdom of *Isaiah*, the wisdom of Solomon, the vast literature that was not included in the bible but ultimately came to be called the hidden books of the apocalypse, the book of the Psalms, which some have said was but another type of prophesy. In prophesy God speaks to man, in the Psalms man speaks to God. Nowhere in the literature of the world do you find such a kinship, a nearness, a closeness to man with his neighbor as you find in the Psalms. And when people tell you about legalism, and formalism, and straight-laced rabbinicism, point to the Psalms, which was a product of an age when rabbinicism began to come in existence, and tell them that is not true. You recall those few lines of Psalm 73, concerning which said that we of this generation are not even worthy to read: "Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou holdest my right hand. Thou wilt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me with glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And beside thee I desire none upon earth. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, lo, they that go far from thee shall perish, thou dost destroy all of them that go astray from thee. But as for me the nearness of God is my good. I have made the Lord my God my refuge, that I may tell people thy works." And in the talmud itself. The talmud is not a book but a literature. It covers in Jewish history the same period of time that is covered in English literature from

Chaucer to the present day. The Talmud is not a literature composed solely of law. It has two main divisions,-- the Halaka which is God, and the Hagada, which is lore, a story, a fable, a legend, a philosophy, a theosophy. The Talmud and the Mishnah are full of those sentiments of real piety and devotion, a sentiment, a mysticism that every religion contains.

To sum up rabbinic Judaism, it was faced with a problem of how to confine Judaism in a world that was fast changing. Israel was driven out of Palestine, it was being scattered; the center of spiritual life had been transformed to Babylon, from Babylon it might move, as it did move, to all parts of the world. How was Israel and its faith to be preserved in the world? How was prophecy and the ideals of prophecy to be preserved? And they evolved two things--a law and a discipline for the preservation of Judaism and Jewish ideals. Let us not today underestimate not alone the importance of the work of the rabbis but the importance of that very same discipline which they established, for we are not yet safe in the world and our work is not yet done, and as long as our work is not yet done we are still on the firing line, and we must still maintain some form of discipline or our entire morale may disappear. I cannot emphasize the point too strongly. Reform Judaism has retrieved, to my mind, the ideals of the prophets by emphasizing them anew. That was the great contribution to Judaism in modern times. But it has lost sight of the

great contribution of the rabbi, namely, that in the diaspora a discipline is essential if Judaism is to be preserved. X

Judaism is more than a system of abstract truths, and ethical dicta essentially is that; but if we are to preach these things to the world we need truths and

. and, above all, we need to preserve ourselves, and these abstract ideals will not preserve us; we must preserve them, and in order to preserve them we must insist upon a certain minimum of religious discipline in our life. We cannot do away with one sweep all the laws and all the institutions and all the customs and all the practices, which ages of history and the need of life and the experiences of our people have built up. They never would have come into being unless life demanded them, and I maintain that life demands a great deal of them to this very day; for, mind you, does it not follow almost inevitably, and in almost every case that the man who says to himself, "I am a good Jew, even if I do not observe certain customs and practices, or attend services in the synagogue, or send my child to a religious school,--does it not in almost every case follow that his child drifts from Judaism and in the course of time drifts into Christianity? We are a minority, constantly threatened to be submerged, and unless there is a fence around us, a discipline to hold us together, to bind us, we are in danger of assimilation. Now, I am not exalting the discipline itself. No military man

will hold up the discipline as a model in and by itself, but it is of supreme importance in as much as it serves the ultimate goal, the ultimate objective, and we have an ultimate objective to gain in life. How much of that discipline we ought to retain is something we must determine in the course of time. We must select those customs, those laws, those practices that still have a meaning for us, and we must hold on to them. I tell you men and women that we must hold on to them; you cannot drive Judaism entirely out of your home. Every vestage, every remnant, every remembrance or influence Jewish--you cannot drive these things out of the life of your children--observances of holy days, which constantly bring new inspirations into their lives, which are constantly reminders of their meaning and their destiny in the world. You cannot drive these things utterly out of your lives and then expect Judaism and the Jew to remain in the world. You cannot be individualists, everyone of you, and think of retaining the morale of the people. If every soldier in the army were an officer in and by and for himself, the army would not make much headway. We have had too much of religious Bolshevism in Judaism; we have had too much of individualism in Jewish life. It is time that we reclaim a bit of community responsibility, of community discipline, of the subjection of individual sentiment and individual opinion to the accumulated opinion and experience of the people through twenty centuries. We cannot always feed our own convictions. We should not

prefer our own convictions and sentiments without study and without investigation against the accumulated experiences of our people through centuries.

The work of the rabbis was simply this: To be deliberate in applying the law to life, to raise many disciples. Education, study, the democracy of Jewish life,-that was the crown of its glory. Every Jew was a scholar and a student. The tendency today to relegate scholarship and knowledge concerning things Jewish to a few is not an act of progress but an act of retrogression. From the days of the first exile to this the Jew has endeavored to democratize Judaism, to put the torah in the hands of every Jew. The tendency of reform Judaism has been, unfortunately, and unconsciously, to relegate the torah and the study of the torah to the few professional men. Judaism must never become the possession of a group of professional men because as soon as it becomes that its progress is stopped definitely; it is institutionalized immediately. Raise many disciples and make a fence around them all. We have broken many fences in our eagerness to please the world. We have trampled over those beautiful gardens of the spirit of our people that have been watered with the tears of our people for centuries in our eagerness to be like unto other people, to show how little Jewish we can be. Let us recall a bit of the experiences of our people. Fences are needed, discipline is necessary, when a people faces a world and challenges it.