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Medieval and Modern Judaism, 1919.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON "MEDIAEVAL
AND MODERN JUDAISM," AT THE TEMPLE, EAST 55th
STREET AND CENTRAL AVENUE, SUNDAY MORNING, MAY
25, 1919.

Mediaeval and modern Judaism must be studied from the point of view of the exile. The one dominant factor in the development of Judaism during the middle ages and in modern times was the diaspora, the dispersion, the exile. After the destruction of the temple in 70, and more especially after the failure of the rebellion of Bar-Cochba in 135, Israel was scattered over the face of the earth, many of them going to Babylonia which became for ten centuries the center of Jewish life, many more going to Egypt, northern Africa and Italy, later on to Spain, France, Germany, England and Poland. Israel thus scattered was faced with two problems: first, how to adjust itself to its new environment, and, secondly, how to preserve its integrity in the world. It solved both problems successfully, as is proved by the fact that it did adjust itself to its environment, and that it did succeed in preserving itself. Israel has at all times, and Judaism, the religion of Israel, has at all times, readily re-acted to their environments. Israel constantly culled and selected and appropriated that which was beneficial in the culture and the civilization of the peoples in whose midst it lived. It

re-acted also very readily and very sensitively to its physical and political environment. It was like a flower: when the sun shone the flower opened up its petals and bloomed; when night set in and darkness came, when discrimination and persecution and exile set in, then the flower shut its petals and drooped. When Israel enjoyed comparative freedom and religious tolerance, then Israel grew culturally, intellectually; when it was permitted to establish relationships with the outside world, then Israel developed its spiritual energy to scientific studies and philosophic studies and poetic pursuits. But when Israel was driven into a political and physical ghetto and deprived of the elemental rights of human beings, then it was thrown back upon itself and it became self-centered and narrowed and confined, and instead of producing great scientific, ethical, philosophic or poetical works, it devoted its time to legalism and ritual and casuistry; its horizon became limited. You must bear that in mind constantly when you study the history of Israel and Judaism in the Middle Ages.

Take, for example, the history of the Jews in Spain. Under Mohammedan control Israel rose to a position of pre-eminence in Spain. Recently, in reading the work of a great Spanish author, I came across his very real and vivid description of conditions in Spain under Mohammedan rule, and subsequently under Catholic or Christian rule, and I am going to read a paragraph or

two from this author (the book, I believe, is known to quite a number of you) to illustrate just what I mean when I say that Israel re-acted to its environment. The author is Vicente Blasco Ibanez, and the book is "The Shadow of the Cathedral." Speaking of the Mohammedan conquest of Spain the author says: "The Spain of those days gratefully welcomed the people from Africa and submitted without resistance. * * * It was a civilising expedition more than a conquest, and a continual current of immigration was established over the Straits. Over them came that young and vigorous culture, of such rapid and astonishing growth, which seemed to conquer though it was scarcely born: that civilisation created by the religious enthusiasm of the Prophet, Mohammed, who had assimilated all that was best in Judaism and in Byzantine civilization, carrying along with it also the great Indian traditions, fragments from Persia and much from mysterious China. It was the Orient entering into Europe, not as the Assyrian monarchs into Greece, which repelled them seeing her liberties in danger, but the exact opposite, into Spain, the slave of theological kings and warlike bishops, which received the invaders with open arms. In two years they became masters of what it took seven centuries to dispossess them. It was not an invasion contested by arms, but a youthful civilization that threw out roots in every part. The principle of religious liberty which cements all great nationalities came in with them, and in the conquered towns they accepted the

Church of the Christians and the synagogues of the Jews. The Mosque did not fear the temples it found in the country, it respected them, placing itself among them without jealousy or desire of domination. From the eighth to the fifteenth century the most elevated and opulent civilization of the Middle Ages in Europe was formed and flourished. While the people of the north were decimating each other in religious wars, and living in tribal barbarity, the population of Spain rose to thirty millions, gathering to herself all races and all beliefs in infinite variety, like the modern American people. Christians and Mussulmans, pure Arabs, Syrians, Egyptians, Jews of Spanish extraction, and Jews from the East all lived peaceably together. * * * In this prolific amalgamation of peoples and races all the habits, ideas, and discoveries known up to then in the world met; all the arts, sciences, industries, inventions and culture of the old civilizations budded out into fresh discoveries of creative energy."

And the author continues to elaborate that thought. Then he says: "But before their deaths the Catholic kings commenced the decadence by dismembering that strong and healthy Spain of the Arabs, the Christians and the Jews. * * * Dona Isabel with her feminine fanaticism established the Inquisition, so science extinguished her lamp in the mosques and synagogues, and hid her books in Christian convents. Seeing that the hour for praying, instead of reading, had come,

Spanish thought took refuge in darkness, trembling in cold and solitude, and ended by dying. * * * Science became a pathway that led to the bonfire; and then came a fresh calamity, the expulsion of the Spanish Jews, so saturated with the spirit of this country, loving it so dearly, that even today, after four centuries, scattered on the shores of the Danube or the Bosphorus there are Spanish Jews who weep, like old Castillians, for their lost country:

'We lost our lovely Sion;
We also lost our Spain,
That nest of consolation.'

Under Mohammedan rule in Spain the Jews enjoyed the golden age of the Middle Ages... They devoted their time to science, to the study of Hebrew grammar, to the study of philosophy, of ethics, to the study of medicine, to the noble pursuit of poetry. Among grammarians we have such authorities in Spain as Dunash Ibn Jabrat. In philosophy we have the great Jewish philosopher Halevi, who wrote the "Ha-Kusari"; Ibn Gabirol, who wrote the "Fountain of Life"; Babya, who wrote the "Duties of the Heart"; and finally, the greatest of them all Maimonides, who wrote the text book "The Guide to the Perplexed." In poetry we have perhaps one of the greatest poets in all literature,--Jehuda Halevi. We have Abraham Ibn Ezra, and Moses Ibn Ezra; we have Jews rising to pre-eminence in the courts of Spain,--Samuel Hanajid and many others.

It was an age that was prolific, creative, productive. The Jews of Spain translated an infinite number of Arab text-books on science, on medicine, on astronomy, on geography into Latin, into the language of intellectual Europe, and thereby paved the way for the revival of learning, for the Renaissance in Europe which was soon to come. That was all made possible because the Jews enjoyed freedom, but as soon as Spain was reconquered by Christian emperors, discriminations were again put in force; the Jew was again hounded and persecuted and a decadence set in, and after the thirteenth century we find no great scholars, no great thinkers, no great poets in Spain. That was the history of the Jew throughout the Middle Ages. That held true of Germany, and that held true of Poland. In Poland, up to the time of the cossack rebellion in 1648, the Jews enjoyed a most remarkable period of prosperity, of intellectual greatness; a wonderful system of public school education spread over the entire land of Poland. The Jews engaged in a thousand and one intellectual pursuits; but as soon as the terrible persecutions and massacres of the middle seventeenth century set in, it uprooted Jewish unity, destroyed ^{their} centers of learning, and the Jews of Poland degenerated into rabid legalists, they became self-centered, narrowed, stulted in growth.

I want to speak this morning of three things. It is very difficult in the brief moment of time to discuss Judaism of the Middle Ages and of Modern times,

but if I can leave with you these three things I think I will have succeeded a great deal. There are three distinct periods that we want to remember. First of all the period covered from the time that Christianity became the state religion of Europe until the time of the French Revolution, a period of perhaps fifteen hundred years; secondly, the period from the French Revolution until the end of the nineteenth century; and the third period, today, the modern period. Each epoch had its own problem, and each epoch solved its own problem. The conditions of Jewry in Europe became worse, infinitely worse when Christianity became, under Constantine, the state religion of Rome. As soon as ethical preferment was determined by one's religion then the lot of the Jew perforce became a barren one in Europe. Then from the fourth century until the eighteenth century his lot was one varied course, broken by certain periods of comparative peace. It was a lot of exile, of persecution, of inquisition, of ghetto life, of massacres, of black accusations, and similar persecutions; with the result that during this period one can trace two distinct lines of development in Judaism. One was the legalistic. The Jew had determined to live in spite of all the onslaughts of animosities and hates of men. He was not going to succumb to suppression, and he developed a strategy all his own, and that was the strategy that I spoke of

last week,-to build a fence around the Torah. He was going to surround his life with so many laws, customs, and practices so that nothing will be able to strike a death-blow at him. The bible and the Talmud became the center of authority of Jewish life, and all intellectual endeavor was devoted to the elaboration of laws of the bible and the Talmud, to the interpretation, to the qualification, to explanation, to commentary, to casuistry; but the law, that was the center, the controlling fact of the life of the Jew in the Middle Ages. You take men of the type of Rashi, the great commentator of the bible and of the Talmud, the Josephists of France, and the great rabbis of Poland and Germany, their concern was solely and entirely to make the law vital in the life of the Jew and apply it to a new condition.

Legalism, then, was the one course, and the second course was mysticism. Persecution makes people mystical. Life was so cruel, conditions were so unbearable that the Jew began to seek for some solace and some comfort in his Torah. He could not find it in the letter of the Torah so he sought beneath the letter into the spirit of it. He became a mystic, reading into the Torah some wonderful, mystical truths. He wanted God so much in his life that he saturated his being, he became possessed and enfolded by his divinity. That was his great consolation. He began to hope for the coming of the messiah, praying for it, longing for it,

because his life was so bitter and so full of misery. And so throughout the middle ages you have over and over again messiahs rising in Israel promising them a great redemption, and you have the story of that false messiah Sabbatai Zevi that revolutionized the life of the Jew during the seventeenth century.

Legalism and mysticism were the two notes of Jewish life during the middle ages, and that continued up to the time of the French Revolution. The coming of the Protestant Reformation paved the way for the improvement in the conditions of Jewry. The Protestant Reformation broke the unity of Christendom and ultimately made it possible for many religious beliefs to co-exist, and so Judaism was bound to find a better and more fortunate place for itself in Europe. The French Revolution, which definitely separated church and state, was the first radical movement in the improvement of the conditions of the Jew. In 1791 the French Jew was made a citizen of France. That was the beginning of his emancipation in Europe, the end of which came with the Russian Revolution.

The eighteenth century saw a great intellectual revival in Europe, and Jewry saw the coming of Mendelssohn into Jewish life. The physical and political ghetto was beginning to crumble, and so the Jew faced a new problem: how to adjust himself to the new civilization about him, how to adjust himself to the new privileges of citizenship, how to modernize his Judaism

so that he will be acceptable to the world without. It was an entirely new problem which he faced. No longer the problem of self-preservation in a hostile environment, but the problem of adaptation to a new environment. How to justify Judaism against the onslaughts of philosophy and science. That was the great concern of the Jew at the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, and the solution of it was reform Judaism in Western Europe and a high scholar movement in Eastern Europe. Reform Judaism began as an intellectual criticism of Judaism. Judaism had taken too much in the middle ages; it had swathed itself in too many superstitious practices and customs. That was good for the dark ages, but a new day had come with more knowledge, more truth, more science, greater freedom; let the Jew throw off the shackles of the past, let him become freer, so that he may move among the peoples about him, partake of their culture, of their languages, of their literature; let the Jew get out of this spiritual ghetto, now that the physical and political ghetto had disappeared; so that reform Judaism was the result.

First, it was a criticism of tradition. We have taken on too much of tradition; we have taken on too much that is not essential for the preservation of Judaism. Let us throw it off. Let us keep that which is eternal and lasting and worthwhile in Judaism, and let us discard that which is only temporary and of value

for the moment only. Then came a revision of the life of the Jew, of its liturgy, to make it a bit more ascetic and refined, so that the Jew who partook of the culture of Europe would not be driven out by the crudeness, the lack of appeal that was in the ritual, the ceremony, the liturgy of the Jew.

That was a great contribution of reform Judaism. It was an honest attempt to grapple with new conditions. It was not an altogether successful attempt, but it was an honest attempt to make Judaism vital in a new world. In Eastern Europe this reform movement came a half a century later because political improvement came half a century later. In Eastern Europe the reform movement took very much the same course, but it was a little more--shall I say Hebraic in spirit? The reform Jew in Germany wrote his appeals for reform in German; the reform Jew in Russia wrote his appeals in Hebrew. As a result of the reform movement in Germany Hebrew literature almost completely disappeared in Germany. As a result of the reform movement in Eastern Europe a great revival of Hebrew literature, and even of speaking of Hebrew, set in. As such it was, in a sense, more Hebraic, more Jewish, but the problems which both of them faced were the same.

Now, the third epoch, that of today, has a problem all its own. Judaism today is no longer faced with the problem of adjusting itself to a new environment. We have done that. There is no one today

who need feel that his Judaism deprives him of his opportunity to partake of the culture and the civilization of the world about him. The Jew can move and does move freely everywhere. Our problem today is the problem of self-preservation just as the problem of the mediaeval Jew was self-preservation. His problem was to preserve himself under inimical, hostile conditions. Our problem is to preserve ourselves under the most friendly conditions, and I believe our problem is a much more serious one, the danger much greater. The Jew has shown the capacity to resist suppression, but he has not shown capacity to resist freedom. The Jew is like a coiled spring--the more he is pressed down the more he is able to resist; but the Jew has shown a dangerous weakness when emancipation and freedom and opportunity are his; and our problem today is how to live in freedom. The German Jew did not solve that problem. Reform Judaism in Germany did not solve the problem. Of all the Jews that lived in Berlin in the days of Mendelssohn, there is not one Jewish descendant alive today. They have all disappeared in the great majority of Christian Germany. Modern Judaism is the great experiment. Will the Jew survive the disintegrating and dissolving forces of progress, of freedom? If Judaism contained any elements that were opposed to freedom, to knowledge, to truth, to science, then it must disintegrate and dissolve, because nothing can withstand the corrosive influence of truth. But if, as we believe, it does not

contain any elements that we need dispense with, if Judaism can meet every progressive advance in science, in education, in discovery, if we believe that the essential facts of Judaism are as real today and will be as real and as vital to the world a thousand years from today as it was a thousand years ago, then the problem today is not to revise Judaism to meet the new conditions, not to reconstruct our faith, but to revive Israel and resurrect Israel.

Religion has during the war passed through a crucible. It was tested and many of them have been found wanting, but I have maintained and I do maintain that Judaism has passed through the war and has come forth triumphant and victorious. The truths that your people and my people have for centuries proclaimed and preached to the world have received the test, the seal of blood, the seal of truth in this war. It is not, therefore, Judaism, with its doctrine of exalted manhood, of human brotherhood, of God in the world, that needs to be revised to meet the new day; it is simply the Jew who must be sufficiently inspired with his own faith to realize that he is not alone destroying his own usefulness in the world when he denies himself and his mission, but that he is contributing nothing to civilization and is depriving the world of its greatest boon when he sloughs off his providential mission and destiny. I have said more than once that when Israel was caught in the toils of a hard fate, when it suffered

disintegration, it sang out of joy, out of the consciousness of an everliving and present God in its life; it was happy in spite of its misery. It would seem, "How blessed are we, how good is our portion!" "How sweet is our lot!" "How beautiful is our heritage!" But Israel today, in prosperity, in freedom, in the enjoyment of every opportunity, because it feels the hollowness, the chill, the coldness, the emptiness of its life, complains bitterly because, forsooth, it is deprived of certain social reforms.

Reform Judaism, I said, began its career as an intellectual criticism, as a political experiment. It must now assume a new function in life, that of religious revivalism. We must begin to assert anew, uncompromisingly, unhesitatingly, unqualifiedly in this world, "I am the Lord," that "God is a living God." The God of Israel is not a mythical ghost who hovers in the background of a religion of ethical culture, of social justice; the God of Israel is not a nonentity, swathed in verbiage. The God of Israel always has been and is today ⁱⁿ a very real, a very near, a very intimate world. The God of Israel comes to the worshiper with an overpowering sense of nearness; He stands by your side, He goes singing with you, He whispers in your ears, He saturates your being with the light and the music of joy. The God of Israel touches with burning fingers every aspiring thought of you.

Now, if we can revive this God-consciousness in

our people, and if we can make the rising generation realize that the world needs just such a God and just such a morality based upon just such a God, then our problem for the new day will be solved. Then our young people will not keep bemoaning their sad fate; then our men and women will not keep grumbling all the time because they have imposed upon them a Jewishness which is proving a discomfort and a disqualification; then all this talk about prejudices and anti-semitism will become as naught, because they will have something to live for, something to strive and fight for, and when a man has something to live and fight for, he cares nothing for the opinions of other men. It is because we have lost the light which guided our forefather through the darkness and the gloom of the ages that we are confused, that we are troubled, that we are worried, that we are supersensitive about the opinions of other men. What cared our forefathers what other people thought of them?--Just so they knew that they were doing God's work in the world. But when you lose that consciousness and that conviction you become morbid and oversensitive to the thoughts and the sentiments of other people.

The problem of Judaism today is simply how to live when the world wants us to live, and, strange enough, it is a much more difficult problem than the problem of our forefathers which was how to live when the world did not want them to live. Reform Judaism has emphasized the ideals of Jewish life. We do not want

to lose sight of them, but we must also emphasize, as I did emphasize in my last lecture, the strategy of Jewish life, the discipline of Jewish life, that which our forefathers evolved through the urge and the press and the need of their experiences. We have tried to discover the soul of the Jew and we have hacked the body to pieces. Now, the soul becomes a nonentity in this world, at least outside of the body. We must begin to emphasize anew in our home, in our school and in our synagogue, and in our walks of life, the religious discipline of Jewish life. We must bring back to ourselves, and I cannot overemphasize this thought, -- we must bring back into our lives the faith of our forefathers, a faith that was redolent, laden with the perfume of emotion and mysticism and sentiment; a faith that was rich in the perfume of memories and associations of the ages; a faith that was capable of satisfying the hunger of human life; a faith that was capable of satisfying the thirst of the souls of men and women. You cannot give your children mere moral platitudes, mere ethical formalisms and expect that to be the food of their lives. Men and women want that emotional stimulus, that thrill, that comes from a sense of intimacy, nearness to the living God. They want a religion that is rich and not popularized; they want a religion that is formed of sentiments and associations and not starved and robbed of its poetry and its mysticism and its hallowed associations.

Then if you bring God back into your homes,
and bring the faith of your forefathers back into
your homes and reintroduce that which gives a holy
sweetness to the body of Jewish life in your homes,
then when your children grow up and go forth to seek
God and they want God in their lives, they will seek
for Him not in strange cults and foreign faiths, but,
returning to their own fold, and their own people, they
will say, "Verily, God is in this place, and I did not
know it."

