



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Struggle Everlasting, 1919.



LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON  
"THE STRUGGLE EVERLASTING", AT THE TEMPLE,  
EAST 55th STREET AND CENTRAL AVENUE, SUNDAY  
DECEMBER 21, 1919.

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The festival of Chanukah commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over Antiochus, the illustrious, the ruler of Syria, 165 before the Common Era. The victory of the Maccabees meant the re-establishment of the Jewish commonwealth as an independent, self-determining body. It meant furthermore, the end of Greek influence to a large degree in Palestine, and the re-assertion of the old Hebraic spirit in the land.

It may be well to emphasize at this moment that Chanukah is essentially a religious festival; that the uprising of the Maccabees was inspired principally by a religious motive. It may be well to mention that every great uprising in Israel was inspired by a religious motive. The revolution of the Maccabees, the revolution against the Romans in 70 of the Common Era, the uprising of Bar-cochba, were all the direct outcome of the religious sentiment of the people struggling for freedom against the religious oppression of the foreigner.

The Jews were content to remain under Persian rule for two hundred years, under Greek rule for one hundred and fifty years, and under Roman rule for one hundred and twenty-five years without revolting, without any desire for



self-determination, so-called. But when the religion of the people was menaced then suddenly the flame of revolt broke out throughout the land and the struggle ensued. It is well to remember that every decisive event in the history of Israel was determined by his religion. The return from Babylon, the re-establishment of the Judean state to Zerubbabel by Ezra, by Nehemiah; the Maccabean War, the wars of 70 and 135, and all the manifold experiences of two thousand years in the diaspora were all molded and determined by the religious sentiment and convictions of the people of Israel, not because the Jew did not love freedom as such, but because he knew of a greater freedom, because perhaps he knew of the only real freedom--the freedom of the soul, the freedom of the truly religious people, the freedom that is possible even under foreign domination.

You can no more explain the Jew without reference to his religion than you can explain the flora of a country without reference to its climate. The religion swathed the life of the Jew; it was the dominant note, the controlling principle, the basis of his life. It was the color and the tone, and the texture, and the theme and the driving motive of his life. That is not true of other people. Religion among other peoples is an incident in their lives. It is one department of their lives; it is one fact among many. Though they be very pious and strictly observant, and build beautiful churches and have an elaborate religious organization and policy, religion for them is still an institution among many institutions--one phase of their lives.



But for the Jew it is not a department or an institution or an incident or a phase--it is the life and the theme of the life; it is orderly.

✓ This festival of Chanukah is frequently said to be a commemoration of the struggle between Hellenism and Hebraism, between the spirit of Athens and the spirit of Jerusalem. Matthew Arnold, in his famous essay on "Hellenism and Hebraism", defined<sup>a</sup> what to him seemed to be the difference between the spirit of the Greek and the spirit of the Jew. He said <sup>world</sup> ~~the~~ moves between two points of influence--that of the Jew and that of the Greek. The object of Hellenism and Hebraism was the same, namely, how to attain to human perfection. But they pursued totally different courses. Hebraism, says Matthew Arnold, emphasizes right acting; Hellenism emphasizes right thinking. Hebraism emphasizes conduct, Hellenism, thought. Hebraism dwells on strictness of conscience; Hellenism on the spontaneity of consciousness. Hebraism speaks of duty; Hellenism of clear intelligence; Hebraism means self-conquest; Hellenism means self-culture. Hebraism speaks of the duty; Hellenism of sweetness and ~~life~~ <sup>light</sup>.

Now, this contrast is more apparent than real. There is more in common between Hell<sup>a</sup>os and Zion than one would acknowledge at first blush. The Jew was never opposed to right thinking and clear intelligence and sweetness and life. Nowhere in the whole literature of the world do you find more beautiful eulogies of wisdom than you find in the Book of Proverbs in the bible. The mind of



the Jew was critical; he doubted and questioned. Witness the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes. He never made his intellect and his reason ancillary or subserviant to his creed or his faith.

No; the real difference between Hellenism and Hebraism, between the spirit of the religion of the Jew and that of other peoples, between the Jewish basis for ethics and that of other people, is not a difference between duty and life, between conduct and thought, but between that which is sacred and that which is secular, between the holy and the profane between the kodesh and the chol.

There are among us Jews certain men who would deny this uniqueness of the Jew, a group of men who speak with a great deal of enthusiasm about the Hebrew race and the Hebrew culture, and the Hebrew language and the Hebrew people, but who speak sort of apologetically, as obiter dictum, of the religion of the Hebrew. These men would like to have the Jew be like unto other peoples, when the whole glory of Israel was in being--different from other peoples; different than only in race and culture and language, but more fundamentally different in his outlook on life--in his point of view on life and the universe.

Religion is found among all peoples, but nowhere do we find it as we do among the Jew. It is not the religion of, "And Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all they mind." It is not, "Thou shalt meditate day and night." It is not,



"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The chief feature of Hebraism is the sanctification of life. The chief feature of Hellenism is the secularization of life. The Greeks looked upon God as a national institution. When the people's faith in their dogmas began to decline, the philosophers of Greece had to find some basis for ethics, some foundation for morality, and so they evolved a science of ethics whose dominant note was not God, but the good. (4)

What is <sup>the</sup> good that a man should seek in life? What is the best way for a man to attain to complete enjoyment of life? How can a man utilize his own gifts and that of the state and society to gain the greatest happiness in the world? And so ethics for the Greek became a science like physics or metaphysics. It was light without heat; it was sound without music; it was a ship without a propeller; it was doctrine without faith; it was wisdom without the fear of God. (5)

Now, religion for the Jew was the all-embracing ideal, and the ethics of the Jew was grounded in God. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Why? Because "I am the Lord." "Ye shall be holy." Why? Because "I, the Lord your God, am holy." "Ye shall not oppress one another." Why? Because "I the Lord avenge the oppressed." (6)

And so God became the driving force, the impulse, the urge of the religious life. So that while Hellenism decayed, because it was a program without an impulse, (7)



ethics without faith, good without God, the religion of the Jew was destined to conquer western civilization and etch the impress of its personality upon two thousand years of European history.

The ideal of the Jew was to imitate the holiness of God, to make of everything that is profane, holy, to make of everything that is secular, sacred; to imitate holiness, to sanctify the humblest act of life. The Jew preached holiness, not the holiness of the ascetic, of the saint, of the monk, of the man who removes himself from the active world of life and living in order to attain salvation through reflection and meditation in order not to soil his robe by contact with the sinfulness of life; the holiness that is attained by difficulty, by self-castigation and self-denial, by the suppression of the natural instincts for life and love that is in man.

That was not the holiness that the Jew preached. It was the holiness that is easy of attainment, the holiness that is within the reach of everyone, the holiness that approaches every act and incident in life in a spirit of honesty, purity and sincerity, and performs each duty in a spirit of edification and consecration. And so in the eyes of the Jew marriage became a consecration, and the home became a dwelling place of God and every table became the altar of God.

The Jewish ideal is the sanctification of life by bringing God into it. The Greek ideal is the secularization of life by bringing knowledge into it. Now, it is



well for our civilization that it is influenced by Hebraic thought, but on the other hand it is not well for our civilization that it is fast losing the spirit of Hebraism. It is well for our civilization that it has separated church from state, that it has divorced religion from politics. We know it is not well for our civilization that it is bent upon a program of secularization, that it is bent upon a program of institutionalizing religion, that is confining it in one department and one institution of life, instead of permitting the revolutionary spirit of religion to sweep clean through every department of human life. It is well for civilization that it has made possible the advance of science by freeing itself from the chains of the church, from dogma, from creed, from the stultifying intellectual bonds of mediaevalism. But it is not well for civilization to think or to assume that the increase of science and knowledge and learning will bring of and by itself greater happiness in human life, unless science is a means towards the end, which is the hallowed life. Then science will mean little to human welfare and human happiness.

It is well that civilization adds invention upon invention, and discovery upon discovery, and widens the intellectual horizon, and discovers new lands for the human spirit, But it is not well if these things become ends in themselves; it is not well if the goal is lost sight of-- namely, holiness. I venture to say that there is frequently more happiness in the man who tills the field with the primitive spade than in the vast industrial plant where a hundred



of the newest inventions of science clatter and buzz, and the last trick of science is utilized to obtain the last ounce of production. It is not machinery that brings happiness; it is not mere invention and knowledge and learning. It is insofar as these things may serve the greater and higher needs of the human soul, insofar as they can liberate the human energy to attain higher things in the sanctification of life, in the preaching of the spirit of holiness and beauty and reverence into society that these things are of any value.

It is well that civilization has made possible education, common education, but it is not well if education serves merely to make men dissatisfied with themselves, with their surroundings, with their family, with their friends, with the jobs they have; it is not well if education merely whips the animal appetite of each of us, making us hunger for greater wealth and greater possessions, and higher positions and more influence in life. These things can make us only more miserable. But if education may help us to see our duties more clearly, if education may help us to apply greater intelligence to our tasks, then education becomes a blessing. Education then, too, must serve the end of sanctification. It is well that civilization has made possible the growth and the spread of art, but when art assumes to be a law unto itself then art turns upon the artist and destroys him, and art destroys the nation that fosters it. Art, too, must serve the need of life--the greater, the fuller, the richer life. Nothing



is an end in itself, but the goal to which life strives.

It is well that civilization has made possible greater economic justice, that it has destroyed serfdom and slavery and feudalism and industrial tyranny; but if economic justice means nothing more than higher wages and shorter hours of work it means very little, because higher wages may mean nothing more than more money to spend, and shorter hours may mean nothing more but more time to kill. But if economic justice becomes a means and not an end to enable man to set free those finer emotions and impulses of his soul, so that through education and self culture and self discipline he may improve his life, that he may cast the halo of holiness round his life, then economic justice becomes a prerequisite in human life.

It is well that civilization tends towards democracy, but if democracy means nothing more but the rule of a hundred fools instead of the rule of one tyrant, democracy means very little in its contribution to human happiness. Democracy, too, is not an end in itself; it is a means to serve the great ideal of life, the elevating of every child of God to the plane of self-sanctification, the development of the capacities, the gifts, the abilities of every man and woman, so that they may better serve the goal of human life.

I am convinced, in spite of all the pessimism that is in the world today, in spite of all the disillusionment that has taken hold of the minds of many thinking men and women, that civilization faces a golden era tomorrow;



that it is embarking today upon an adventure so promising, so rich in opportunity, that the world has not yet seen the like of it. But civilization will have to remain true to the spirit of the Hebrew genius--to Hebraism. Civilization will have to struggle against the invidious assertion of the spirit of the secularization in life. Civilization will have to remember that the goal of life is that man should walk with God in the land of the living. Then civilization will bring happiness, and not things in human life.

I sometimes think that all that civilization has done in the past one hundred years has been to increase things. It has been extensive but not intensive; it has been objective but not subjective; it has been material but not spiritual. It has touched the body of man and surrounded him with more comforts and luxuries, increased the power of his arm, increased the speed of his feet, widened the reach. But it has not increased the capacities of the soul; it has not discovered new realms of glory for the spirit of man, and because of that it has not brought greater happiness into society.

Now, civilization tomorrow will have to devote itself in a spirit of humility to the sacred task of bringing God into the world, the spirit of sanctity and the spirit of holiness in all its efforts, in its scientific, in its artistic, in its education, in its economic, in its political activities, the dominant impulse must be God.

When we <sup>to the</sup> ~~come~~ Chanukah lights, the words of our prayer come back to us,--"Blessed art Thou, oh Lord, our



God, King of the universe, Who hast sanctified us by Thy commandments." Sanctified by Thy commandments! Every commandment, and every duty, and every task in life is an opportunity for sanctification, or it is vanity and a vexation of the spirit. He commanded us to kindle the lights of Chanukah. Every light we kindle, the light of reason, and of science, and of art, and of justice, and of democracy, must contribute to the great illumination of the human soul, to the sanctification of life.

That, to my mind, is the struggle everlasting in human life--the struggle between the Kodesh and the chol, the holy and the profane, the sacred and the secular, the material and the spiritual, the struggle between a man-made universe and a God-made universe. Let us never forget that in this struggle everlasting, the Jew has been the eternal champion of the holy, the sacred, the kodesh of God.

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