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What Would Lincoln Say to Wilson?, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"WHAT WOULD LINCOLN SAY TO WILSON,"
AT THE TEMPLE, EAST 55th STREET AND
CENTRAL AVENUE, SUNDAY MORNING, FEB-
RUARY 8, 1920, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

Historically, said a writer in a recent issue of a national magazine, Wilson will be a member of the group of three--Washington, the father, Lincoln, the emancipator, and Wilson, the pacificator. It is perhaps too early to begin to classify. We are too near the events, the conflict and confluence of incidents, to have already gained an historical perspective to justify us in classifying any of the great dramatic figures of this war.

There is, of course, much in common between Wilson and Lincoln, but not so much as regards the qualities and attributes of their characters, but as regards the incidents and acceptance of their administrations and their careers. Both Lincoln and Wilson were sucked into a war by the circumstances--a whirlpool of incidents and conditions. Both became the leaders of a great people and both led this great people to victory. Both Lincoln and Wilson wrestled with fundamental ideas--Lincoln with the idea that a nation cannot permanently remain one-half free and one-half slave, and Wilson with the idea that the world cannot permanently remain one-half democratic and one-half

autocratic.

Both were subjected to the onslaughts of abuse, contumely and criticism. No man in public life, and especially no man in American public life, can escape this avalanche of abuse, of malicious criticism, of unjustified attack. It is no wonder that so many of the public men of our land hesitate to accept public office, because they are not tempted to wallow through the mire in order to achieve fame or greatness.

I have sometimes said that we are determined to make our great men as miserable during their lives and kill them off as fast as we know how so that we may hold them up after death as exemplars of greatness for the edification of our children. Our heroes must be shot before they are canonized. A democracy does not tolerate greatness, anyhow. "The average man," said Ingersoll, "is afraid of a genius."

So much Wilson had in common with Lincoln; but there was much that Wilson did not have in common with Lincoln. I am afraid that Wilson lacked that fine, superb humanity of the emancipator. Lincoln loved his fellowmen, not as a result of an intellectual or academic training, not as a result of philosophic speculation--he loved the common man--the average man, the plain citizen, because he was one of them; he knew them. Lincoln held his cheek close to the soil of America. Lincoln felt the sap of American life rising from the roots and climb-

ing through his soul. He had met his fellowmen; he had rubbed shoulders with them; he had come into close, intimate contact with their ideas, and their ideals, and their prejudices, and their passions, and their loves, and their hates; he understood their humor; he knew them. And so he gained an all-embracing compassion for them, because he loved them.

President Wilson's appreciation and sympathy for the common man is more or less of an intellectual affair. Somehow he impresses one with the idea that he never really understood the common man. Wilson did not possess the sense of humor that Lincoln possessed, that tided him over some of the greatest crises in his life. A man who lacks a sense of humor is frequently driven to absurdities. Lincoln was saved that. Wilson somehow was not saved that. Both Lincoln and Wilson were lonely men; but it was a different kind of loneliness. Mr. Wilson, in speaking of Lincoln dwells at length upon the loneliness of Mr. Lincoln, and yet Mr. Lincoln was lonely not because he refused to meet his fellowmen, to counsel with them, to gain their ideas, but because on the height and the pinnacle of greatness, he, ^{with} as all great men, must stand alone and commune with his own soul and his own Maker.

Wilson's loneliness was a self-imposed loneliness-- a prejudice against great men, and an aversion to counsel and advise. a certain ego-centric, self-centered motive

which interfered so essentially with the success of his mission in Europe.

Wilson does not have in common with Lincoln that moral grandeur. No one will ever speak of Wilson as "Father Wilson," but people will speak of Lincoln as "Father Lincoln." Lincoln, the compassionate, Lincoln, the merciful, that touched all humanity, which makes the whole world kin, which draws one soul to another in bands of love. That, unfortunately, Wilson does not possess. Lincoln possessed it to a supreme and magnificent degree.

So that as far as intellectual qualities are concerned, there is very little in common between our president and the great emancipator. I frequently ask myself at this moment, "What would Lincoln say to Wilson? What would be Lincoln's attitude towards Mr. Wilson? Would it be one of wholesale condemnation, such as has become the attitude of a few extreme radicals and many extreme reactionaries? Would Mr. Lincoln say that Mr. Wilson has failed completely and miserably in all his acts and in all the purposes of his life? Would Lincoln give Wilson a place in the history of the American people?" Of course, it is rather difficult to say, but were I to permit myself this fanciful indulgence, understanding him, as I believe that I do partially--for no one completely understands that titanic soul, that masterful personality, that unique magnificence of the man Lincoln,--under-

standing him partially, and understanding Mr. Wilson partially, I believe that Mr. Lincoln would say of Mr. Wilson this: "You have done much that will insure for you a place in the history of our people. I like that masterful way in which you sanctified the war by introducing into it a new motif, a new ideal."

Lincoln would not hesitate, because of politics, to compliment Mr. Wilson upon the superb manner in which Mr. Wilson rescued the great struggle which had become merely a cloying strife between imperial governments for influence and domination--in rescuing this struggle for humanity and consecrating it by the ideal of democracy. Mr. Wilson caught the definition of the war; Mr. Wilson projected the ideal of the war, which did not exist before America entered the struggle.

Mr. Lincoln would give Mr. Wilson credit for voicing in superb and compelling phrases that submerged and suppressed wish and prayerful longing of the masses of the world for the right of life, for self-determination, for a place in the sun. Of course, Mr. Lincoln would know, as we know, that that right was not completely established or vindicated. He would know that much of disillusionment has come into the hearts of his countrymen, because of the shortcoming of this great hope. But he would know, as those of who know history would know, that that hope, once expressed in burning words, would never again be utterly

lot. Mr. Wilson spoke to the masters of the world concerning self-determination, but the masses of the world were the ones that caught that phrase and are today treasuring it in the sanctuary of their souls. Nothing--no vicissitude, no oppression, no diplomacy, will ever completely stifle this passion that was inspired in the breasts of the races of Europe by the enflaming and inspiriting words of Mr. Wilson in his glorious days before the treaty of peace.

And Mr. Lincoln would compliment Mr. Wilson, I believe, upon his firm insistence upon the union of all the peoples of the earth, a league to compel peace and to make war humanely impossible. Lincoln would know, as we know, that the league is a very imperfect league, that it is tied up with a treaty that is even more imperfect; but Lincoln would know that perfection is impossible in this all too imperfect world. He would know that he, in endeavoring to emancipate the slave, did not succeed completely in emancipating him. While he did break the shackles of political slavery, Lincoln, the great, masterful Lincoln, did not succeed in emancipating the slave socially or intellectually. One can change laws more readily than one can change human nature. Lincoln knew failure, and Lincoln can sympathize with failure.

These things, I believe, Lincoln would say to Mr. Wilson. He would credit Mr. Wilson with sincerity. It is pitiful, it is shameful, that the closer we approach a national election, the more eagerly people begin to

indulge themselves in recriminations and in reflections upon the sincerity of a man who gave of himself wholeheartedly, completely, unstintingly to the service of his land. I may differ with Mr. Wilson in many things, but surely not as to his loyalty and devotion and sincerity. And Mr. Lincoln would sympathize with him today.

I can see the hand of the compassionate Lincoln laid upon the shoulder of the sick man in the White House today, saying, "Brother, I, too, have passed through the valley of the shadows. You remember what men said of me when I was president. They called me traitor, and they called me butcher, and they called me cruel. Bear up and carry on. History will vindicate you."

Mr. Lincoln would also say to Mr. Wilson, I believe, this: "Friend, you have perhaps compromised too much." I know he would say that compromise is inevitable. The constitution was a compromise with the declaration of independence. The declaration bravely and beautifully declared that all men were created equal. Another decade later the constitution declared that the black man was a slave. A declaration is robbed of its brilliancy when it is translated into laws and institutions. "And your fourteen principles, that have the prophetic sweep and vision, I knew that they would be confined and starved when they would be translated into laws and institutions. But perhaps you did sacrifice too much in your eagerness to save an idea. I was ready to tolerate slavery in order

to preserve a union that existed, hoping that the union ultimately would solve the problem of slavery by compensation. But you sacrificed the very ideals, the very heart of your fourteen principles, for the sake of preserving a league that was not yet existent, realities and facts for the sake of an idea which was not yet born. And the nations of the world will have to pay for it. America had to pay in its blood for the compromise which the framers of the constitution made, and the world will have to pay in blood for the compromises and concessions that you permitted the diplomats to wrest from you against your will."

I think also that Lincoln would say, "Didn't you perhaps lack a bit of charity at the conclusion of the war? You remember that during the terrible struggle I spoke of 'with malice towards none and with charity for all.' At the conclusion of the war I spoke of a new reconstruction that would come as a healing, as a binding, as a benediction to this tortured and torn land. Where was the spirit of charity in Paris? Was it not rather the spirit of vae Victis -- woe unto the vanquished? Was it not the spirit of vengeance, of rapacity, of anger, of brutality, that dominated your councils against your will? For surely you are a descendant of free Americans who bear no grudges, who have no old scores to settle, who are not filled with the virus and poison of centuries. But why was not your soul so filled with

love and compassion that it would of necessity become infectious and touch and kindle the souls of other men about you? The lack of love in 1919 will mean a hell of hate in a generation."

"You spoke very frankly to Germany and Austria concerning their sins. You spoke as a prophet, and you thereby spoke as America would speak. But why did you not speak as frankly to your Allies,--to England and France and Italy? Why did you not say unto them, 'The world, your world, cannot remain half free and half slave. If it is a menace to civilization to have Germany dominate the world, it is equally a menace to civilization to have England dominate the world, or any other nation for that matter.' Why did you not speak in clear, frank, incisive, unhesitating terms concerning the suppressed and denied peoples that are groaning under the tyranny of your friends the Allies? Why did they not find a spokesman in you? Against your will, Mr. President, I know, but did you not sacrifice too much to save an idea?"

And I think Mr. Lincoln would say to Mr. Wilson also this: "You spoke so truthfully concerning a great nation, whose name is Russia. You said that Russia would be the test of the world's sincerity. You had a sound plan and we gloried in your plan. Help Russia; help it with food, by counsel, let it work out its own salvation. And why did you suddenly change your program? Why did you permit your policy, which was sound and which was ultimately

vindicated by the Allies as sound, to be changed? Why did you sacrifice it for the sake of compromise? It was not the spirit of America that spoke then."

If Lincoln at this moment were to have a spiritual communion with Mr. Wilson, he would, I believe, urge the following things upon him: first of all, he would say to him, "Insist with all the vigor of your soul upon your League of Nations. It is the only salvation of the world. You remember what I said in Springfield one memorable day, 'The central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy.' Now, we are not seceding from a league of nations, but in our desire to cut ourselves free of all responsibility to the world, to isolate ourselves, it is, in the very essence of things, a secession, and in the very essence secession is anarchy. It is to plunge the world today into a veritable morass of anarchy for America to confine itself into a shell of isolation and say, 'We will have nothing to do with you.'"

No nation today can be completely independent. The world today is interdependent. The destiny of one nation is, to a tremendous degree, determined by the destiny of another nation. The bullet of Sarajevo killed sixty thousand American lives, and a bullet in London or Paris or Berlin or Moscow may kill a half a million American lives sometime in the future. A pebble cast into the bosom of European political life will create ringlets of

influence and will touch our shores. We cannot, even if we would so wish, escape the inter-dependent, the intimacy which commerce and industry, and the shrinking of the world have created. There is no choice for the world today but anarchy or a league, a balance of power which means future wars, wars of extermination, wars which for cruelty and annihilation will be unparalleled in the annals of history, of brutal warfare among the children of men, or a league.

But Mr. Lincoln would also say to Mr. Wilson, "You must save the league, even by making concessions for it. You made concessions to France, why not make concessions to the United States? It is sometimes easier to go around the mountain than to tunnel through a mountain. The idea is indispensable to the future peace of the world. Accept the reservations that are being imposed upon you. Perhaps many of these reservations are valid and worthwhile. America cannot at this moment throw itself completely and wholeheartedly into a league when the nations of Europe are still dominated by a philosophy of bargaining and scheming and plotting. The world is not yet ripe for a lack of suspicion. Safeguard America; protect its initiative, its independence. But establish the framework, the institution of the league, so that future ages may perfect it and make it what your soul would like to have it."

Mr. Wilson, if he harkened to Mr. Lincoln, would

also immediately join hands with England and France in ceasing hostilities in Russia and in coming to a complete understanding with the elements in Russia. It is not for America to dictate the internal political policies of the Russian empire. It is not for America, the champion of freedom, to stamp out revolutions even if these revolutions are distasteful to it. The Russian people may be trusted to work out their own destiny. That is the fundamental idea of democracy. You must have confidence in the ultimate good sense of the average man and the average race of men, or democracy is a fallacy. To impose convictions on other men or upon other races is the supreme arrogance of aristocracy, however right you may happen to be. Lincoln would say, "Too many children have already perished as a result of your blundering with the Allies. Cease your private war and help."

And lastly the spirit of Lincoln would say to Mr. Wilson, "Turn your attention home. In your first inaugural address you spoke so beautifully and so powerfully of the duties of America to America. You said, and you said truthfully, "We have been proud of our industrial achievements, but we have not hitherto studied thoughtfully enough to count the human cost, the cost of lives snuffed out, of energies overtaxed and broken, the fearful physical and spiritual cost to the men and women and children upon whom the dead weight and burden of it all has fallen pitilessly the years through. There has

been something crude and hopeless and unfeeling in our haste to succeed and be great. Our thought has been that every man look out for himself, that every generation look out for itself, while we reared giant machinery which made it impossible that any but those who stood at the levers of control should have a chance to look out for themselves. We were very heedless and in a hurry to be great."

"We have come down now to the sober second thought, and this sober second thought, Mr. President, is the thought that you at this moment should hold before the minds of your citizens. There are millions of your people, the common people, who are struggling for a chance, who are struggling not to overthrow the government and institute radical fantasies, but who are struggling merely for a chance to rise, to have greater opportunities for pleasure and comfort and culture for themselves and their children. At this moment, flushed with the ideas of the great war, inspired with the great promises which you yourself and others hold before the eyes of the working men of the world, millions of the common men--the plowman, and the miner, and the skilled worker, and the laborer, and the farmer lad--are craving for a wee bit more of happiness.

It is your chance, Mr. President, at this moment to point the way. Do not permit your administration to sacrifice its wonderful possibilities in a blind and

stupid heresy hunt; do not permit them to befog and be-
clog the minds of citizens with stupid, imbecile notions
concerning men who threaten to overthrow our government.
You cannot stifle the unrest of a people that is seeking
a new heaven for themselves merely by pointing to a few
crazy fanatics. You will not satisfy the laboring ele-
ments of this land, who are the marrow and sinew and back-
bone of your republic, with injunctions. Help them to
find the way to greater happiness and greater comforts
and you will point the way to peace and mutual co-oper-
ation.

Mr. President, I believe the spirit of the com-
passionate, freedom-loving martyr of the great republic,
would say, "What is this spirit of intolerance that is
today sweeping over the land?--A spirit that would crush
every idea that does not seem for the moment to be pop-
ular, a spirit that would not tolerate free expression
of legitimate ideas. And what is it that you are
sanctioning by the aid of your attorney-generals in
this land? Why, the spirit of freedom was that for which
your forefathers and mine gave of their lives and their
precious blood to establish. That was our glory and that
was our grandeur in the days past. Why do you not speak,
Mr. President, the authoritative word that would restore
the minds of your nervous and enfevered citizens to their
sanity?

What would Lincoln say to Wilson? "You have

served faithfully in the past. You have not succeeded in all your undertakings, but neither have I, Mr. President, nor anyone. Your people will owe you a debt of gratitude for the things which you did achieve, for the path which you blazed through the jungles, for the new ideas which you projected in the world, which, though they be denied for the moment, must ultimately receive the sanction, the testimony and the acceptance of the world. Help them to reconstruct their lives so that America may continue to be in the vanguard of human freedom, social, political and economic. And above all, Mr. President, preserve the sacred, blood-purchased, hard-won privileges of liberty and freedom and free speech in this land of freedom.

It may be, who can tell?--that history tomorrow may yet say that Wilson will be in the group of three. It may be that history will not say it; but history will say that here was a man who lived honestly and worked faithfully, who made many mistakes, mistakes of the mind but not of the heart, and who was worthy of the faith and of the gratitude of his fellowmen.
