



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
146

Box
51

Folder
72

The Faults and Failures of Democracy, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE FAULTS AND FAILURES OF DEMOCRACY,"
AT THE TEMPLE, EAST 55th AND CENTRAL
AVENUE, CLEVELAND, OHIO, MARCH 21, 1920.

Some of the books that I have read lately have proved rather disconcerting. I pick up a book called "The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma," and I read statements such as the following: "Social war or massacre would seem to be the natural ending of the democratic philosophy. Democracy is the system of fools or of leveling downward. Democracy has insisted on degrading the public service to a common level of incapacity. Democracy has failed to justify itself."

I pick up another book called, "Modes and Morals," by , and I read an essay on the extirpation of culture, and I come across a statement such as this, "The first cause of the gradual extirpation of culture among us is this: the increased hold of the democratic fallacy on the public mind."

I read a book called, "Democracy after the War," by an Englishman, a Mr. Hopson, and I find this statement: "Effective democracy exists neither in the politics nor in the industry of any nation."

I turn to the religious leaders, who, as a rule, are more optimistic than economists and sociologists, and

I read a book called, "Outspoken Essays," by one of the leaders of the churchmen in England, and I find almost on every page a despairing tone, a hopeless tone, as regards democracy. And I ask myself the question, if democracy is that which these men take it to be, ought we not rather have fought to make the world unsafe for democracy?

The chief indictments of democracy, rather severe, but not entirely incorrect, seem to be these: first of all, democracy has not made for equality. There are privileged classes today. Of old there were privileged classes of birth and titled nobility. Today there are the privileged classes of wealth. In olden days there was an aristocracy of birth or of learning. Today there is an aristocracy of soap, or coal, or breweries.

Democracy has not done away with the slums. Democracy has not destroyed pauperism. A constitution is not always made against an empty stomach. On the contrary, it seems that democracy is constantly widening the gap between the fabulously rich and the wretchedly poor. In the days of Washington there was not one millionaire. Today there are hundreds. But in the days of Washington there were very few paupers. Today there are tens of thousands. Democracy apparently has failed in its supreme task of establishing equality among men.

The second charge laid at the door of democracy is that it has not made for popular government. It is a fallacy to think that the people govern. In olden times

there were privileged classes--the peers, and the nobles, and the junkers--who governed the land. Today we have legislative lackeys who do the bidding of moneyed interests. Today we have government by controlled newspapers. The choice that the average voter has between those is really more apparent than real. In the last resort he determines the policies neither of the one political organization or of the other. The boss, the lobbyist, the demagogue, the stump speaker, the Newberry, are the men in control of the American political institutions.

The third charge made against democracy is that it has not made for efficiency. No government is so palpably and so glaringly inefficient as a democracy. You and I know how true that is, how true that has proved during the days of the war. A democracy can spend one billion dollars for aeroplanes and not one is delivered in France. Think of the waste, the "pork barrels", the gross incompetence of the quacks and the amateurs in politics! Why, successful business men never think of entering politics. The lawyer who is short of clients goes into politics. Why, there is a stigma attached to the word "politician". Inefficiency is laid at the door of democracy.

And then democracy has not made for peace. We frequently lull ourselves into the notion that kings make wars but people make peace. But that, too, is a gross misstatement of realities. Why, democracies are just as greedy and just as imperialistic and just as grasping as monarchies

or oligarchies. The three greatest democracies in the world today--England, France and the United States--have the three largest navies in the world.

No, it has not made for peace, but it has made for a frightful mediocrity. Democracy has a tendency to level downward everything. In democracy there is a tendency to work down to the level of the feeblest and the weakest and the most incompetent; just as in a trade union the scale is determined not by the strength and the capacity of the strongest and the most able, but by the feeblest and the weakest and the tardiness of the least able and the weakest. And so in a democracy the man of genius, the talented few, is dragged down by the average of the horde and of the mass. There has been no general elevation of people. There has been a general degradation of the gifted and the talented few.

Then men say that democracy has made for a decline in art. There is a good deal of truth in that. The masses of the people are interested in things material, and where the masses of the people set the fashions and determine the goal of life, as they do in democracy, art must of necessity perish.

Democracy, too, has not made for brotherhood. You will remember our declaration spoke of liberty and equality and fraternity. Well, democracy has not made for very much of fraternity. Democracy has not solved the negro problem. Twelve millions of human beings are this day undergoing the

vilest and foulest sort of racial discrimination. Brotherhood is unknown in certain sections of our land, in spite of a democratic tradition of over a century.

And democracy has made for a frightful and devastating imperialism in our land. There is something wrong with the values and standards which a democracy lives by. When a man can come into the possession of a strip of land, and by sinking a well may become a millionaire over night, and in that same land of democracy one hundred and forty-three thousand school teachers are compelled to leave their profession because of starvation salaries, I say there is something wrong in our standard of values, in our gauging of values.

Democracy has a tendency to vulgarize everything. A book is a good book when it is a "best seller." And a religion is a good religion when it cures a toothache. There is a material standard for the determination of the quality and the value of almost anything, any spiritual essence, any moral value in the land. We raise our children to be successful business men, but to inspire them with noble aspirations, to organize their lives into some harmonious unity, to ennoble them with fine sacrificial ideals,-- that is of little concern to us.

And, lastly, the charge is made that democracy frequently becomes "mobocracy." The ill-considered passions of the mob, in moments of great tension, become the dominant factors determining our local and our international policies.

The voice of the horde, the clamoring, strident, insistent voice of the horde, of the public term "mob," becomes the controlling factor in our national life. And the personality of the mob, that credulous, cruel, cowardly personality of the mob, takes hold of us in a democracy, and we become its errant servitors. No tyranny is as cruel, as vindictive, as destructive as the tyranny of the mob. And nothing is more loathsome and vile than when the respectable citizen becomes a lyncher, a cloying brute, and the cry resounds over the land, "Kill him; lynch him; deport him; shoot him."

I came across a very interesting stanza in the works of Kipling the other day. Kipling knew the mob. He knew the dangers of the mob.

Whether the people be led by the Lord, or
lured by the loudest throat,

If it be quicker to die by the sword, or
cheaper to die by vote,

These are the things we have dealt with once,
and they will not rise from the grave.

For holy people, however it runs, endeth
in holy slave.

Whatsoever for any cause seeketh to take or give
power above and beyond,

The law suffereth it not to live.

Holy state or holy kings or holy peoples, we will
have no truck with the senseless things.

Order the guns and kill.

Once there was the people. Terror gave it
birth.

Once there was the people, and it made a hell
of earth.

Earth arose and crushed it. Listen, oh ye slain.

Once there was the people and it shall never be again."

These, then are the charges against democracy. I believe that there is a great deal of truth in these accusations. I believe, furthermore, that democracy has not yet justified itself. I believe that democracy has not yet evolved higher standards of liberty or justice or beauty than has the oligarchies or the monarchies of yesterday. And I am not at all convinced as yet that the fine edifice of democratic civilization may not some day crumble into ruins, even like unto the civilizations of Babylon and Carthage.

But I believe in democracy in spite of all its faults and failures, because I believe in that blundering, wretched, faltering, groping animal called man. I believe in man, and in his most glaring failures I see the seeds of regeneration, and in his most wretched crimes I see the glorious intimations of ultimate victory.

Of course, one frequently becomes impatient, even as Moses of old lost his patience with that emancipated host of slaves that he brought out of the land of the Pharaohs. One loses his patience with the chauvinism, with the idolatry, with the harlotry of the press, with all the meanness and the groping and the competition of the common man.

But one who loves man never loses his faith in

man. One Lincoln, of the very soil of democracy, is worth a hundred dissolutionments. When I see one single soul, a man or a woman, the product and the off-spring of democratic sentiment, laboring lovingly in some settlement or in some slum, endeavoring to give of himself or of herself to the service of their kin, whenever I see the thousands of humanity, servants of the Lord, in the school rooms and in the universities, laboring unostentatiously to keep the fires of learning, of devotion, of idealism burning upon the altar of our land; or whenever in those rare moments I see the millions of my brothers swayed and thrilled and exalted by some one great motive, to the point of giving their lives, then do I regain completely my faith and my confidence in my fellow men.

So long as a man weeps for the sorrows of others, and smiles with them at their happiness, so long is there hope for the children of man. So long as a man sins and knows that he sins, so long is salvation near. So long as a man will fight the good fight and die unafraid, so long is the kingdom of man assured. So long as home ties are sacred, and womanhood revered, and manhood prized, and bravery honored, so long will man continue to grow from strength to strength. So long as a man will starve himself that another man might live, so long will humanity remain triumphant.

I believe in man because I believe in God; and the greater the sins of my fellow man appeared to be, the

surer I am that God is within me, and the surer I am that, God is within me, the more beautiful the sins of my fellowmen become.

I do not know, I do not care to know, what the destiny of man is. I do not know what the ultimate of civilization might be. It may be, as sciences predict, that the whole human race will some day perish and be lost in the oblivion of the eternal arctic snows. It may be that the vital processes will some day come to an end, and the world will be buried under the polar snows, and the sun will cease to dissipate its heat, and civilization will die slowly, like a clock that runs down.

It may be that all our toiling and achievements will come to naught, and the beautiful monuments of centuries and the glorious cities of London, Paris and Berlin, and Moscow, and Vienna, and Rome may someday lie entombed in the cold of the eternal snow. But if at that moment I was the last man of the last wretched race of men, driven by the encroaching ice caps of the north to the last shore of the last sea, I would at that moment raise my hands to the last sunset of a dying sun and exclaim, "The Lord, He is God." Other worlds will be evolved out of other nebulae, and other histories of other species will be written in other spheres, but the purpose of the Lord will endure forever.

I do not know what the destiny of man is, but I know that man lives, and I know that man can make a hell or a paradise out of his life; and I know that man can raise

himself or degrade himself into the deep-most depths of hell by his own will and by his own potency, and the strength of his own soul.

I know that man fails. I know that civilization does not move constantly in a climbing life upward. I know that frequently man, in order to pass from one peak to another, must first descend to the valley. But I know that as long as the will to lift nobly endures in his soul, so long will man climb the towering heights of achievement, so long will man grow in greatness and in glory.

I have faith in democracy because democracy increases the social asset, because democracy mines more of the precious ore of human personalities, because democracy brings every child of man into the sphere of opportunity, because democracy destroys every artificial type of slavery erected by the hands of men.

But I am afraid that we have placed too much faith in democracy as an institution. In fact, one of our supreme weaknesses has always been that we, as men and women, have had too much faith in organizations, in institutions, in laws, in external forms. When there is crime in our cities we clamor for a new administration; when there is social unrest we clamor for an alien and sedition law. When we do not know what to do, we call a meeting, and when we get excited we hold a parade.

We forget that it is not the institution that

matters--it is the character of the institution, the soul of it, the driving motive of it that counts. Democracy, in order that it may function beneficently in our lives, must be given a soul, a character, a purpose, or it will fail to serve.

It is not alone sufficient that we give men the vote, or, for that matter, the women the vote. When we give the vote to the uneducated man, and by that I mean a man who is not educated as to his civic duties and responsibilities, we place a stick of dynamite in the hands of a child. He may become a menace, for an unintelligent voting is destructive.

We must not pamper the voter. We must educate him and discipline him, and demand of him the duty of informing himself thoroughly and completely concerning the needs of his land. I would that the millions of women who have recently won their emancipation will now devote their splendid organization to the education of the millions of women who have won their franchise, or else they will be but cluttering our political machine and bringing nothing worth while to our body politic.

Yes, and not only education of the voter, but democracy must impress upon each man and woman the sacred obligation of voting, and the sacred obligation of holding office when a community calls upon an individual to hold office. I think that the man who consistently refrains from exercising his franchise helps to undermine our free in-

stitutions, because the repeater always votes and the ward-heeler always votes, and the scoundrel always votes; but the man of integrity, of uprightness and intellect, when he refrains from voting, helps to throw the machinery of our government into the hands of the unscrupulous and the charlatans.

But to save democracy we must do even more than that. We must begin to lay emphasis in our education upon the purpose of democracy, the soul of democracy, the medium of democracy. Democracy does not aim ultimately to place the vote in every individual's hand; that is not its ultimate goal and purpose. Democracy aims to enlarge the estate of man, to destroy privilege and to increase opportunity.

Democracy aims to substitute the ideal of service for the passion of selfishness, of honesty for the greed and rapacity and piracy. Democracy aims to increase human happiness, human opportunity. Democracy aims to establish upon this earth of ours the kingdom of God, as far as it is humanly possible. And unless we inspire each democrat with this holy conviction, that he is a disciple of a great and holy passion, that his voting is a ritual, that democracy is a religion, then democracy will just be a fast and furious path to the ruin of our civilization. We were near it two years ago! It is not without the realm of possibility that we shall not be near the brink of destruction within another generation. Put not

your faith in things, and in names, and in laws, and in institutions; put your faith in the human soul, in the refinement and the ennobling of the passions and the sentiments of men.

Oh, I sometimes think that we are on the wrong track entirely. I sometimes think that we put too much faith in education--the educating of the mind. Rome perished not because its intellect was enfeebled, but because its character was weakened. Greece perished not because its science degenerated, but because its soul was dead. And democracy will die at the very approach of our scientific triumph if our will and our character and our souls degenerate.

The soaring planes, and the speech that travels through space, and the increased speed and strength and organization of our industries cannot and will not save you from the general degradation, the general dissipation of yourselves, the general lowering and leveling of your soul's psychology, if the soul of man is not educated and refined.

You realize, and I know you do, that the big things you do in life are not prompted by logic or reason. You do not do things because you ought to but because you must, because there is a driving and propelling emotion, a plan-gent waste of sentiment, that forces you to the performance of an act. And then you call this servant "reason" into your counsel, and you ask reason to justify you in your act. Intellect is your servant and not your master. Your

masters are those instinctive, subconscious longings, passions, desires and hopes, and these are the things that democracy must reach.

It must reach the fountain head, the source, the mainspring of human activity, and it must purify them, crystalize them, so that they will express themselves in socially beneficent activities.

And so democracy must become a religion. And the schools must train not alone the intellect of the children but the souls of the children; and the home must train the souls of the children. It is much more important for your children, even, than to have the fine manners, to have fine sentiments and the right kind of smiles--to go out of your home into the world with a desire not to grasp and outreach and get beyond the other fellow, but to reach out his hand of helping to the other man, to serve him, to help, to love. Democracy wants you to send your children out as servants, servants of the Lord, servants of a holy cause. Then democracy will be triumphant.

That is my message to you men and women this morning. Let us not, I pray, because of the fine sounding phrase of democracy, forget the cruel realities of our life. Let us not blind ourselves to the inequalities and the inefficiencies and the mediocrities and the "nobilities" of our social organizations.

Let us not blind ourselves to the fact that the spirit of our land and the spirit that controls the actions

of a vast number of our people today is not a spirit of service, a spirit of brotherhood, a spirit of broad humanities, but a spirit of supreme selfishness and greed. And let us realize that selfishness and greed and competitive fervor have brought about the decay of past civilizations and may ultimately bring about the decay of our present civilization.

Let us make of democracy what the Fathers of this, ^{it} our land, wished, to be--a passion, a religion, a holy fervor, something that can serve as the goal of all the finest efforts of our lives. Democracy is divine when man strives to be divine.

