



## 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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Moses - the Leader, 1920.



LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON  
"MOSES, THE LEADER," AT THE TEMPLE,  
EAST 55th AND CENTRAL AVENUE,  
CLEVELAND, OHIO, APRIL 4th, 1920.

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A personality, of course, is difficult to analyze. It is, in reality, a mystic entity which defies all definition or classification. It is a case where two known elements are combined, or many known elements are combined, and an unknown substance is the resultant. And yet there is one thing that we can predicate with certainty concerning personality, and that is that it grows.

Society seizes upon a personality and reads its own life into it, in harmony, of course, with the essential features of that personality. It grows. A great man is, in a two-fold sense, the product of society. Not only does society supply the environment and the conditions and the heritage of the great man, not only does society endow the great man during his life, but it endows him after his death by progressively developing the personality.

That is exactly what legend is. Legend is the effort of society to perpetuate a personality and to develop it. Lincoln, I venture to say, is infinitely more significant to our generation than he was to his own generation, tremendously significant though he was to his own generation. The millions of men whom he profited directly by emancipating are incomparable in number to the hundreds of millions



that will be inspired by the personality of the man Lincoln which grows and develops and assumes greater nobility as history recedes and truths comes ever nearer to the children of men.

And so, I venture to say, is it with Moses, the son of Amram. It took a thousand years to paint the portrait of Moses, and the people of Israel mirrored its soul, as it were, in this figure--Moses.

Some men say, some Bible critics maintain, that Moses never lived, that he is a mythical or legendary figure. I believe, I know, that Moses lived. And if Moses did not live we would be compelled to postulate a man who would correspond to the power and the effectiveness and the creative bigness of the man Moses.

I think democracy is prone to underestimate the greatness of the individual. Democracy hates to acknowledge its indebtedness to big men. And yet, while it is true that society determines a great man, it is even more true that a great man determines society. A great man is the impulse, the dynamic force that gives to society a new and a definite direction. The great man is like these mighty pen stocks that you see near a waterfall, that take in all the waters but concentrate them, and then drive them down into a definite direction so that they generate power and move the mighty engines of society. Of course, a great man absorbs all of the social consciousness that his day presents to him, but he concentrates it, intensifies it and



directs it at a definite objective, and thereby becomes a pathfinder, a revealer, a leader of society.

If Moses did not live we would be compelled to invent a Moses, even as the astronomer is sometimes compelled to posit a planet which his eyes have not yet beheld; or even as the scientist is frequently compelled to posit an ether, an unknown substance, in order to be able to explain certain inexplicable phenomena.

I believe it was Mark Twain who, during the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy, which raged some years ago, made the statement, I am sure, that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare, that it was another man by the name of Shakespeare.

Moses must be reckoned with as a very living reality. Now, how are we to characterize him? Men have characterized Moses as the founder of the faith, and in reality he was the founder of the faith. It was not Abraham that laid the foundations of the faith of Israel, but Moses. Abraham may have been the founder of the race or the people, but Moses first enunciated the fundamental truths of a religion that became the bases of the faith of Israel. The Bible knows of this fact, when the author of Exodus says, "I appeared unto Abraham and unto Isaac and unto Jacob by the name of \_\_\_\_\_, but the name Yavah was not known to them."

It was Moses who discovered this new name, which in reality means that he discovered the new truth that God is Yavah, the Creator, the Universal God. It was Moses



who first posited the ideal of monotheism in the world. And he did more than that. It was Moses who first identified God with morality. "The Lord, the Lord is a God of mercy and kindness!" The God who protects the weak against the strong, the God who champions the cause of justice and righteousness. Before his day the deities were utterly unrelated to the moral lives of those peoples. They had nothing to do with the relations of man to man.

It was Moses who first projected into the consciousness of society that God is an ethical or a moral being--the source of all morality, the guardian of all truth and justice in the world. And so Moses became the founder of ethical monotheism, which is the faith of Israel.

But he was the founder of yet another great truth, and that is of spiritual religion. During his moments of great doubt--and what great man does not have those moments of doubt, when he seems to be groping in the dark, and the light is hidden from him?--Moses called upon his God, saying, "Show me Thy glory. Let me behold Thee with mine eyes." The weakness of every one of us, who, in our moments of intense suffering or doubt, would like to receive some intimation, some revelation that God is some physical manifestation, as it were, of God. And the answer comes back to Moses: "No man can see Me and live." Faith must not go by sight and touch.

But even today, how many of us crave for a religion that we can see and touch. I remember not long ago



I saw a very beautiful play--"John Ferguson." It was the story of an old man of great faith, who never lost his faith; a man who, with the declining years of his life, saw the whole structure of his world crumbling around his feet. And as I left the theater some woman, apparently belonging to one of the newer faiths that have become fashionable in our day, turned to her neighbor and said, "That cannot be. A man of such great faith to suffer so much. God would not permit it." And I realized then how little we have progressed beyond the men of yesterday who wanted to see the ideal, the representation of the Deity; who looked upon God as some of us today still look upon Him, as one who must listen to our prayers and answer our prayers--a sort of sublimated paying teller, turning out so much of happiness for every good deed that we turn in--a debit and credit religion.

That is not faith, nor is that religion. \* \* \* was the faith of Moses. He built in that tremendous simplicity--"I am that I am"--just a simple faith in the existence of God, in whom he trusts. But he who described the arc of human imperfection will also complete the circle of human perfection. A God whose evidence we see all about us so that we need not pry into the future and try with our tortured fingers to pull aside the veil that hides the future; a faith that does not need a tilted table or a flying harp or an invisible, loud-sounding bassoon to tell that God is in Heaven and all is well with the world, but a spiritual faith,--that, too, Moses bequeathed unto humanity.



Some characterize Moses as a legislator; and indeed he was a legislator. The Ten Commandments, in one form or another, must be traced back to the inspiring and creative genius of the man Moses. And let me say that the Ten Commandments held within them the seed of all moral and religious developments. I wonder whether you realize this or not, but new scientific truths may be discovered, but no new religious truths can be discovered. "The law of the Lord is perfect." And why? Because human nature is very much of a constant quality. The moderns can say little about human nature that the ancients did not know concerning it and did not say concerning it. The infinite mechanical and chemical inventions of our day have not touched very vitally the soul of man. A man can cheat over a telephone and can lie by wireless. The cheat and the lie are constant things. The battlefields of Flanders revealed the same facts concerning human nature as the battlefields of Troy and Carthage.

And so the religion of the prophets has not been much improved on by all the brilliant reformers of our days. I do not mean to discourage human progress. What I mean to say is that what we can do is merely to apply these ideals to find a new technique, to give them a local habitation and a name. But the truths are there.-

Some have characterized Moses as the great emancipator. And he was the first of the great emancipators. But he knew that ~~which~~ so many liberators and benefactors of



society do not know--that physical emancipation is, in itself, insufficient, that the act of breaking the physical shackles of slavery must be supplimented by breaking the spiritual chains of slavery; that because the masses disperse does not follow that the slave has ceased to be a slave. On the contrary, it is a very easy thing to be a slave; it is a very difficult thing to be a free man. When one is a slave someone else does his thinking for him and his planning for him; he is merely an automaton. When one is free, but has a sense of responsibility and duty, one must plan and think and take the consequences of his acts. And a slave who is suddenly free but whose soul still wallows in the mire of slavery, is a menace.

It was the Bible, I believe, that truly said, "The earth cannot abide when a slave begins to govern." Because the slave does not recognize the fundamental truths which Mr. so aptly expressed,--that the ideal society is a society of free men and women, at once ruling and being ruled.

Democracy is not merely a matter of governing but of being governed, and the highest type of democracy is the subjection of the individual privilege and right to the authority of the expert, to the authority of the man who knows.

I believe that we have made of our democracy a sort of a fetish; we have not drawn democracy as such, which is, after all, emancipation, from slavery to a certain



freedom, but unless democracy goes hand in hand with a spiritual emancipation and liberation of the finer instincts and impulses of men, then democracy is a menace and an abomination. Instead of one tyrant, to have one hundred bosses, and instead of the extortion of nobility, to have the graft of the politician, and in place of the tyranny of one man to have the tyranny of the mob,--that is not in itself an advance in progress. Between a corrupt nobility and a corrupt politicians, I, for one, would rather have the corrupt nobility. At least, they have good manners.

Moses knew the secret of emancipation. "Send forth my people." Why? "That they may serve me--God." That their freedom may become a means whereby they may approach the throne of God. That is the ideal of emancipation and democracy.

Some have called Moses a prophet. Indeed, the Bible says, "There arose not a prophet in Israel like unto Moses." Moses had the real qualities of the prophet. In the first place, he had the courage of the prophet. When wrong was palpable and real and cried for correction, he, the prince in the land of Egypt, arose and slew the Egyptian. He had the courage when his own people sinned against a Holy Ghost, who, on their way to the promised land, when the prophet was gone, erected a golden calf and prostrated themselves before it. He, the enraged prophet, arose, and, summoning a few loyal ones, went through the camp of Israel and slew three thousand of the cringing slaves of his own brothers.



He had the courage to face the hate of his own people whom he loved. The people threatened more than once to stone him; the people who said, "Let us go back to Egypt. This man has brought us out of the land of Egypt from the flesh pots, so that we should perish in the wilderness." He had the courage to endure <sup>exile</sup> and suffering for his convictions. And a man that cannot suffer cannot be a prophet.

He had another quality of the true prophet. He struggled first with himself. Do not for a moment think that God just whimsily selects this man or that man to be a prophet; that one may receive the divine kiss of consecration. Man must prepare himself by years of struggling with one's own natures, with one's own passions, with one's own instincts, before one can be proved worthy of becoming a prophet.

There is a very beautiful legend told by the rabbis concerning Moses and which illustrates the struggle of the son of Amram before he became worthy of being a prophet. The kingdom of Arabia heard of the great repute of Moses and sent a court painter to paint his portrait, and the court painter did as he was commanded. When the portrait was brought to the kingdom of Arabia the king summoned his wise men and asked them what sort of a man this Moses was, as they could judge from that portrait, and the wise men arose, and after studying the painting of Moses, said, "We see in that portrait viciousness and ugliness and sensuality and wickedness." And the king was astounded and determined him-



self to go to Moses and see him and tell him of what these wise men had said concerning his face. When the king approached him Moses he asked him, "Tell me, are my wise men right or wrong in seeing in that portrait, that face of yours, the things which they claim to see?" And Moses said, "They are right. All these things were in me, but through the many years which I spent in the wilderness alone, with my Maker, I wrestled with them, I struggled with them, and I subdued them." That is true of every prophet.

Moses struggled with himself in yet another way. He struggled with his practical sense; with that part of him which said, "Do not go and prophesy." Oh, it is a mistake to think that a prophet wishes to prophesy or loves to prophesy. The prophet is fully aware of the fact that the road of prophesy is the road of sorrows which very frequently leads to the stake and the cross. The prophet knows full well that gratitude will not be his, that appreciation will never come to him, that his ideal never will be realized during his life. The prophet knows the mockery and the taunt that the world will hurl upon him. He does not want to prophesy. Moses said, "Send thou whomsoever thou desirest. Do not send me." God urged Moses to accept his mission, but Moses remained obdurate. He did not wish to be a prophet, but he had to. And that is the secret of prophesy.

They prophesy not because they want to, not because they love to or ought to, but because they must. Jeremiah beautifully expressed that thought. "I wanted to



close my mouth," he said, "not to prophesy, but the Word of God came within me like a burning, raging fire, and I could not hold it within me."

Suffering--that was the keynote of Moses' life. His whole life was practically spent in the desert. He saw God in the desert. He received the Torah in the desert; he wandered for forty years through the desert; he buried his own generation in the desert; and he himself found a nameless grave in the desert. But that is true of every prophet. They all live in a desert. For the present for them is a desert. They live neither in the past nor in the future. The present is the wilderness for them. It is suffering that urges them to prophesy; it is suffering that enriches their prophesy, and it is suffering that rewards prophesy.

And yet one other quality of prophesy did Moses possess, and that was humility. Moses said to God, "I am difficult of speech. Do not send me." And the greatest tribute that the author of the Bible could pay to Moses is, "And the man Moses was the meekest of all the men upon the face of the earth." Humility, meekness--that is the characteristic of every great man. Oh, how stupid the children of men are who try to be proud and boastful and arrogant! "Remove the sandals of pride from off your feet, for the place where thou standeth is holy ground." With all the powers of our gifts and our talents, yea, even if we be men of genius, what are they all in comparison with the



might and the majesty and the eternity of God! We are puny and small. And how stupidly ridiculous it is for men to be proud and snobbish and arrogant, and boast of their learning, or boast of their wealth, or boast of their ancestry, or boast of their talents.

"It is only the meek who can ever inherit the earth." The proud cannot stand before God; the proud cannot find God. You cannot find God unless you seek him in a spirit of humbleness and humility, even as a little child seeks the love of its mother.

Some have characterized the son of Amram as a leader, and he was a leader. There are certain features in the life of Moses which take him out of the circle of the prophets. A prophet, as we shall see in our forthcoming lecture on Jeremiah, is one who must even prophesy doom, calamity, and misfortune. And yet Moses did not, as a rule, prophesy doom and destruction. A prophet, as a rule, was removed from the people. He was not a man of affairs; he was frequently an outcast. He was frequently killed. "The man of vision was mad." He was never a leader of men. Yet Moses was a leader. Moses governed, mastered, controlled the destiny of his people, and so perhaps the term "leader" would more adequately describe the man Moses.

And yet he was a leader in a certain sense. He led as a shepherd, as a shepherd leads. Whenever the people of Israel spoke of God in the intimacy of great love, they spoke of him as a shepherd. "The Lord is my shepherd, They



shall not want." "Oh thou, shepherd of Israel, hearken unto to us. We are like people, the sheep of thy flock." And when the people of Israel loved its great men, it called them shepherds. And so the name by which Moses is most often known in literature and in legends is, "The faithful shepherd." And Moses was a shepherd in the wilderness.

I sometimes think that Michael Angelo, in his wonderful statute of Moses, missed this point entirely. He has the majesty and the imperial grandeur and the power and firmness of the leader Moses. But where is the compassion and the love of the man who prayed to God--"Thy people have sinned; forgive them, and if not, erase my name from Thy book." Where is the man who wandered forty years through the wilderness with a rebellious people, with spies and threats and mutiny, but who yet never, never lost that love and that compassion for his people?

There is that beautiful legend of the rabbis which tells why God chose Moses to lead the people. A little lamb left the flock and was lost, and Moses went throughout the great wilderness searching for the little lamb, finding it near a pool of water, wearied, with a broken limb. And Moses lifted the lamb, set its limb and gave it water to drink, and, putting it close to his bosom, brought it back to the flock. And God said, "A man who is so faithful a shepherd of his flock can now become the shepherd of my people."

When Moses approached the burning bush, the rabbis



say, God beheld his face, and it was so distorted by grief and sorrow from suffering on account of his brother God that, said, "This man can become the shepherd of my people."

As shepherd, then, Moses led. As shepherd he continued to lead. Moses died, as prophets always die, a lonely death, on the top of the mountain, his dream unrealized. The hope that sustained him through all the long wanderings did not come true. And perhaps it is well that a prophet dies before his dream begins to be realized, because when the realization begins to set in there is such a frightful disillusionment; there is so much of compromise and so much of give and beg and barter that the heart of the prophet inevitably breaks. It is well that the prophet dies before his ideals begin to be corporealized.

And so Moses died on the top of the mountain. But a life such as his cannot pass away to silence. When the last note of the great symphony passes away into a distant echo, what remains of that sea of music that the soul of the master poured into space? What becomes of it? Why, the magic fingers of some invisible hands weave these sounds into new glories which adorn the spirits of the heaving multitudes. The sea of music now becomes a sea of flaming energy that courses through the souls of the men and the women who listened and heard. Just as the message of the voice survives the voice itself, so the poem outlives the poet, and the dream the dreamer.

Moses found a lonely sepulchre on the top of



the mountain, but the need and the message of his life  
no sepulchre could hold. They have since found a sanctuary  
in the holy of holies of his people's soul and they stir,  
and they move, and they speak potently whenever night falls  
upon the people and darkness sets in, and the sheep that  
are far from the fold begin to call for their shepherd--  
"A spirit that leads."

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