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Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Jeremiah - The Prophet, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"JEREMIAH, THE PROPHET," AT THE TEMPLE,
EAST 55th AND CENTRAL AVENUE,
CLEVELAND, OHIO, APRIL 11, 1920.

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I believe it was Emerson who said, "Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker upon the planet." There is great truth in this statement of Emerson. There is enough dynamite in a new idea to disrupt the whole world. It is fortunate, however, that no new idea is at once completely stated or at once completely realized.

The world hates to be disrupted. The world will sometimes wage wars not to be disrupted, and the world will turn its accumulated wrath against the bearer of new ideas that threaten to disrupt the world. The entire planet will turn upon the thinker that God lets loose upon it. It will destroy him, certainly, but the thought will survive; and where the thinker fell the world will some day rear a monument and pay him homage and tribute, and then turn against the next thinker to destroy him.

Now, the prophets were just such thinkers that God let loose upon the planet. They were the thunder bolts of Divinity--the fires from the altar of God cast upon the earth. The prophets announced vast and unfamiliar truths; they spoke of profound things simply and of simple things profoundly. They told men of God

and of love and of justice and of pity. They told men of the frailty of power and of the strength of the humble; they met pride with the fire of wrath, and suffering with the balm of love. They taught men how to find God in the stars and in the eyes of little children. They showed men the way to happiness, and they taught men how to pray, so that their prayers may become the incense rising heavenward out of the golden bowls of their soul,

And the greatest of these was Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, the priest of Anathoth. Jeremiah was the first of the prophets. He came more than a century and a half after the first great literary prophet, Amos, told men concerning God and concerning justice. And yet to my mind Jeremiah was the greatest of the prophets not only because he embodied within his life the fate and the tragic experiences of every prophet that ever lived, but also because he embodied within his faith the faith of every prophet who ever lived.

Jeremiah received the call when he was a young man. When the call came to him he exclaimed, "Ah, Lord God, I cannot speak. I am but a youth. I am but a child!" Knowledge and experience are not very essential to religion; certainly not very essential to the prophet of religion. The knowledge that a man gains from a long life, or that a people gains from a long experience, may help to regulate, to refine, to ripen; but religious truth comes intuitively. The ancients called it a revelation.

In the case of art and religion, which is after

all the highest form of art, age is of little consequence. Bryant wrote his profoundest poem when he was nineteen. He wrote many poems thereafter, but none that reached the heights and plumbed the depths of his Thanatopsis. Keats wrote his last sonnet when he was twenty-six. Chatterton was a suicide at eighteen. Raphael had completed his master pieces when he was thirty-six; and, if the story of the Gospel is historically true, the Prophet of Nazareth walked via dolorosusto his death at the age of thirty-four.

The man of genius is after all only the channel through which the vast ^oerities of life, that come from the great unknown, pass and pour into the social consciousness. He is, as it were, merely the mouthpiece that speaks because of the promptings of life or of God. The man of genius--the artist, the prophet--is after all but a fountain that rises from the vast and hidden seas below.

Jeremiah received a call; and every great man receives a call. When by temperament or disposition, or by soul discipline one is prepared for one's mission in life, then there comes a moment, a great event, a crisis, and these springs of inspiration are released and they rush forth like mighty tides, irresistible, filling the life of the man of genius, and from that moment on that man is the servant of ^{his} destiny and the master of life.

Moses received the call alone in the wilderness

in a burning bush. Isaiah received the call in the great temple, amidst the rolling clouds of glory, the chanting of the Levites, and, as it were, the songs of the Seraphims. Jeremiah received his call out in the field alone with his Maker. Francis of Assisi, we are told, received his call to go forth and become the founder of the poor men while he was in the midst of a wild orgy, sitting enthroned, holding in his hand the scepter of the king of misrule.

The call comes to the man who is predisposed, as it were,--prepared by heritage, by soul discipline, to receive the message. Every one of us receives a call during our days. We are not all called to greatness. Wherever there are peaks there must be valleys. But every one at some period in his life receives a call that whispers of beautiful things and wide vistas and real happiness, but somehow most of us have the unfortunate faculty of stifling the promptings of our souls. We prefer to be calculating, and, as it were, cautious and prudent and practical. Before long the voice of the soul is silenced, and we go through life in a rather pedestrian way--just living, without zest, without relish, without romance, without enthusiasm.

I know of a young man that has shown marked ability as a writer, a man of talent. The promptings of his soul, the call that must have come to him, have been to dedicate himself to the art of literature. But, you see,

before a man in modest circumstances can become recognized and an acknowledged author, he must spend quite a number of years in drudgery; and so the prudence and the caution and the practicability of his parents and his friends have counselled him to turn to the practical things of life. And so undoubtedly my friend A will go through life selling shirtwaists or something else, and his soul will be ashes within him.

Another friend of mine, a young girl who has marked ability for business, who may become a very capable executive in some office and be of real service to her community, who has a longing and a prompting for that kind of life, will of course listen to the reasoned counsel of her parents and she will begin to dabble in five or six other things and go through life leading a scattered and a broken and an aimless life, because forsoothe she did not listen to the call within her.

Jehemiah received the call, and he hearkened and obeyed. And this is the call that he received: "Behold I have appointed thee this day over the peoples and over the kingdoms, to uproot, to destroy, to tear down and to break up; to build as He planned to build." I want you to notice carefully his call--"Behold, I have appointed thee this day over the peoples and over the kingdoms," -- not over Israel.

How often do you and I hear the charge that the religion of Israel is a tribal religion, a religion

limited to the confines of one people; that the world had to wait until the coming of Christianity before the idea of the universal religion came into prominence. I say that it is a misleading of history and a deliberate blinding of one's self to the facts; that the prophet was sent not to Israel only but to the peoples, to the nations and the kingdoms of the earth. "For the heavens are the dwelling place of God and the earth is His kingdom."

Pay heed also to the first part of the prophet's mission--to destroy, to uproot, to break down and tear down. It is sometimes necessary to amputate a limb to save the body, and it is sometimes necessary to kill the body to save the soul. And it is sometimes imperative to slay millions of men to save an idea. Prophecy was this uncompromising truth of life. Prophecy swept through the world like a storm wind, tearing away every falsehood of whatever nature. Prophecy does not know of tolerance, of compromise, of indulgence. The prophet does not pay any respect to tact, or good form, or manners; prophecy moves on like a mighty tide, swiftly and steadily, and the thing that is strong because it is true endures, and everything else becomes wreckage and flotsam.

Jeremiah sometimes has been charged with an excess of bitterness and gloom. He has been called the Prophet of Doom. Men have accused Jeremiah of overstating the sins and the crimes of his people. That is true. Every prophet has overstated, and every prophet was an extremest. That is why he was a prophet.

The words of Jeremiah were scorpion words, not because there was no room in his heart for love and pity and compassion; it was because his heart overflowed with pity and compassion that he spoke as he did speak. It is because he loved his people so much; it was because he saw that their acts and deeds were inevitably leading to a terrible catastrophe.

Mind you, Jeremiah lived but a few years before the great national tragedy in 586, when the temple and the land crumbled to ruins and Israel was exiled. It was because Jeremiah was conscious of the inevitable doom that his words became burning, scorching, bitter; and it was because of the great love that he had for his people that he stifled that love within him and sobbed alone amidst the shadows of his life.

But Jeremiah never forgot the second part of his mission--to build and to plan. He knew that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of his people would ultimately bring about their regeneration, and because of that he prophesied doom and destruction. When Jerusalem was destroyed, so history narrates, went and bought a tract of land from his cousin, , and took the deed and arranged for its safe-keeping for the future--a symbol, a token, that the land will some day be rebuilt, and that Israel will some day be restored, and that the truth he preached will some day come to be.

Every prophet is accused of being an enemy of

society because he sometimes is compelled to preach disaster, when the populace would prefer to hear about victory and triumph. They call him a traitor, and they sometimes call him a pacifist, and they sometimes call him a betrayer of his people, especially when he begins to shake their confidence in the things which they hold true and sacred.

And this brings me to Jeremiah's most remarkable sermon, that prophecy which has come down the ages as the bravest, the most courageous words that have ever been uttered by the lips of men--the so-called Temple Sermon. Here the people of Israel assembled in the great sanctuary of the Lord in Jerusalem--the dwelling place of God. So long as the temple endured, the people said, so long is Israel secure; God will never destroy the sanctuary, because it is His dwelling place.

And Jeremiah enters the courts of the temple, and, facing the multitude, he says: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Amend your ways and your doings and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these. Nay, but if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if ye thoroughly execute justice between an man and his neighbor; if ye oppose not the stranger, the fatherless and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, and neither walk after other gods, then will I cause ye to

dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. Behold, ye trust in lying words that cannot profit! Will ye steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely? And thereafter bow and walk after other gods whom ye have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house whereupon my name is called and say ye are safe? That ye may do all these abominations is this house whereupon my name is called become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the Lord. For go ye now unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I caused my name to dwell at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.

"And now because ye have done all these works, saith the Lord, that ye heard not, and I called ye but ye answered not, therefore will I do unto the house whereupon my name is called wherein he trusts, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, even as I have done to Shiloh, and I will cast you out from my sight as I have cast out all your brethern, even the whole seed of Ephraim."

And for this sermon Jeremiah was apprehended, tried and sentenced to death, and it was only because of the intervention of a few of his friends that he escaped and remained in hiding for ten years until the king Jehoiakim died.

The prophet preached destruction, but destruction of the shams, and the insincerities, and the dishonesties, and the artificialities of life. He tried to make the people see that they must not put their faith in temples, and buildings, and rites, and ceremonies. These are not the things that God desires of his children. Oh, how many are the people today who still put their faith in temples, and in institutions, and in things, and in sacrifices, and in priest-crafts! Men sin today and then build libraries, and rob and then endow museums

They would approach God by bringing what they regard as sacrifices of things. Why, men today place more faith in temples, or in institutions, or in constitutions, or in forms of government than they ever did before. Jeremiah knew, as we know now, that it is of little consequence what the institution is and what the organization is. A man can be a knave under a democracy as well as under a monarchy; and a man can be a cutthroat under a soviet form of government as he can be under a democracy.

Things, shams, are what the prophet aimed to destroy, and he tried to build up those eternal and enduring realities of life--God, justice, mercy and truth. In one of his most wonderful and inspired prophecies, speaking of the name of God--for every prophet and every great man may justly speak in the name of God--he says: "Behold, I shall make a new Covenant. Ye would not look

unto the Covenant which I made with your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, which they broke; but a new Covenant will I make with them. And I will put my Covenant within them and upon their hearts will I write the Covenant of God." Written indelibly not upon tablets of stone that may be broken, not constitutions, or codes, or laws, that may be regarded or disregarded, but written indelibly and for all time upon the hearts of men; the religion and the morality that is indwelling in the souls of men.

You remember the last time I spoke of the suffering of Moses. Well, Jeremiah is the of prophetic suffering. He is the type of all greatness that must pass through the hell of suffering. Jeremiah was a fugitive for ten years. Twice he was flogged through the streets of Jerusalem; he was imprisoned once, and once when he was accused of deserting to the Chaldeans, when the City of Jerusalem was besieged, he was taken stripped of his garments, flogged and then thrown into a cistern to strangle to death in the mud of the pit. And it was only through the kind intervention of a slave, Ebed-meleck, that the prophet was saved.

Many a time he was spat upon and subjected to all the insults and the contumely that the cruel ingenuity of man is capable of. But the greatest tragedy of his life, as he said, was his loneliness. "It is alone I live because Thou didst fill me with wrath." Oh, in

those awful moments of retrospection and introspection Jeremiah pours forth the bitterness of his soul. "Great God," he says, "I have become the laughing stock the livelong day. Everyone laughs at me. They taunt me." "I have become a man of strife and a man of contention all my life. My own brothers, my own family, have betrayed me."

Oh, the terrible loneliness of the great man! He loves his people but is requited with hate. He loves his people and sees them go into the abyss. That was the fate of Jeremiah, and it was reserved for him to live through the great tragedy. When the temple was burned and Jerusalem was destroyed in 586, tens of thousands were slain at the hands of the Chaldeans and hundreds of thousands were exiled to Babylon.

There is a beautiful legend that the rabbis tell concerning Jeremiah. When the temple was destroyed and the millions had been slain, Jeremiah, now old, broken and crushed by the awful tragedy of his people, was seen to walk along the highways and byways of Jerusalem, gathering up as he went along the ^{broken} limbs of the victims, placing them in a shroud and sobbing all the while, saying, "Ah, my people, did I not say unto you, 'Give glory unto God before the darkness falls, and before your feet stumble about the dark mountains'?"

Can you ^{imagine the} picture which the mind of the Jew had of this prophet of suffering? Let us not overestimate

his suffering. He had his consolations and he had the sustaining strength. "Oh, see," he says, "When God is with me I am like a conquering hero." That is the word-- a conquering hero, with God at his side. "The Lord is my strength, my fortress and my refuge in the hour of tribulation," says Jeremiah. That was his strength.

"Let men mock me, let them tear me, let them spit at me, let them deny me and betray me, let the beautiful edifice of my life crumble in ruins round me. Oh, see, God is within me, and I am a conquering hero. For my faith and the truth which God has put on my lips they must conquer, for they are of God. The wicked prosper and the wicked enjoy life, and the righteous suffer. But what of that? A God is near unto their lips but far from their hearts." God does not dwell in the tents of wickedness, and that is the greatest punishment and the greatest unhappiness in life--the empty life, the hollow life, the Godless life.

And the prophet who might miss every joy in life, and might endure all the slings of a hostile world is yet supremely happy; as Jeremiah says, "I ate the words of God with joy and happiness, because God was with me." When everything vanishes God remains. Men may be depraved, and hate and misunderstand, but God knows and God loves. Show me the man whom pleasures coarsen and whom sorrow breaks and I will show you a Godless man. But show me the man or woman whom happiness refines and

sorrow strengthens and trials ennoble, and I will show you one who has found God.

Jeremiah's fate was the fate of every great man. Jeremiah's faith is the faith of every true son of God-- to worship God in the beauty of holiness, with a ritual that is service, with a consecration that means sacrifice; to feel God intimately in your soul; to be able to speak to Him; to reach out your hands to Him and receive the clasp that means new strength and new hope; to love, to pity, to forgive, to hope amidst disaster; to build among ruins. That is the faith of the prophet Jeremiah.

There is one sentence in his prophecy that may sum it all up, that sums up all wisdom for all time:

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom;
let not the strong man boast of his strength.

But if one must boast at all, let him
boast of this fact: that he knows Me."
