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Ezra - The Builder, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "EZRA, THE BUILDER," AT THE
TEMPLE, EAST 55th AND CENTRAL
AVENUE, CLEVELAND, OHIO, APRIL
18, 1920.

In 586 the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed and Jeremiah, who had written the epitaph for his own people, was left to mourn among the ruins. The leaders, the priests, the preachers of Israel were exiled to Babylon and night settled over Judea. In the Babylonian exile there were some faithful souls who despaired of the future of the people of Israel. They said, "Behold, our bones are dried, our hopes are lost, we are clean cut off." Not that they were men of little faith, but that they were men who loved their people with such infinite compassion that the misery and the destruction about them could lead to but one conclusion--that Israel was about to perish.

As I read Jewish history from age to age and from land to land, I frequently meet such expressions of despair coming out of the lips of poets and writers, and more especially of religious leaders. There are always some who become lost in the maze of untoward circumstances. There are some who cannot look beyond the ruins. There are some whom the

present imprisons so completely that they lose sight of the future altogether.

I remember reading not so very long ago a poem from the pen of a Hebrew bard who lived some seventy years ago, Judah Leon Gordon. And I remember how startled I was when I came across this phrase: "Who knows but what I am the last of the singers of Israel, and that you are the last of the readers."

And it wasn't but thirty years after his death that there took place a veritable renaissance of Hebrew literature and Hebrew poetry in the very land where this singer sang his psalms, and today there is more fine literature written in Hebrew and more men and women and children studying the law and the literature of Israel than at any time in the last fifteen hundred years.

A hundred years ago people said, "Judaism is disappearing; the Jew is assimilating himself; Judaism cannot last another generation or two." And today there are more synagogues and temples raised in this land, and more sacred associations formed of loyal worshipers of Israel than at any time in the last two thousand years.

Ezekial, the prophet of the Exile, whose burning words we read this morning, knew of this plague of the men who said, "We are dry bones and our hope is gone." And he said unto them, "God will

open your graves and breathe unto you the spirit of life, and ye will live."

Ezekial knew what we, his descendants twenty-five hundred years later know, that Israel is an eternal people, that nothing and no one can destroy it. Alongside of those who despaired of Israel were other men who welcomed the opportunity of assimilation, just as there are men and women today in our ranks who welcome the opportunity of assimilation.

They said, "Let us be like unto the other nations, like unto the families of the earth. Why remain a separate and distinct people when our separateness and distinctiveness bring to us nothing but misfortune and calamity? Let us lose ourselves in the great world." But even they could not encompass the destruction of Israel.

The Babylonian exile was not, in the real sense of the word, a misfortune to Israel. On the contrary, the Babylonian exile helped to purify the faith of Israel. It was in Babylon that the synagogue as such was founded. Heretofore the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of worship, and its ritual the only method of worship. In Babylon, with no temple and no priesthood and no possibility of bringing sacrifices, the worshiper turned to a more direct and immediate communion

with his Maker, and in place of the temple, the synagogue--"The House of Assembly," and "The House of Study,"--was founded. And it was during the period of the Exile, also, that Israel became aware, to a degree heretofore unknown, of its own peculiar mission and destiny in the world. Israel looked upon the destruction of the Temple and the exile not as upon chastisement only, as an act of vengeance and vindictiveness on the part of the Almighty, but looked upon the exile and the destruction and all the concomitant misfortunes of that tremendous, tragic event as an act of purification, of preparation, so that through its suffering Israel might be prepared for its great historic task to be-- "A light unto the nations; a covenant for the peoples"--so that Israel might assume the sacred prerogative of being the "Servant of God" in the world.

And it was the second Isaiah, who lived during the exile, who formulated in words so brilliant and magic that they lived down the ages, the immortal mission and destiny of Israel.

And because of this mission and destiny Israel became an eternal people. A man becomes eternal when he identifies himself with the eternal, who is God. A man becomes immortal when he speaks an immortal word. And Israel became

eternal when Israel identified itself with the purposes of the eternal --of God.

The Jews in Babylon remained faithful. One of the most beautiful psalms, one of the choicest pieces of literature in the whole world, is the Psalm 137--"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when He remembered Zion. Upon the Willows we hung up our harps. Our enemies said unto us, 'Sing unto us of the songs of Zion.' But how can we sing the songs of Zion in a strange land?" And it was by the rivers of Babylon that these faithful spirits vowed eternally, "If I forget my Jerusalem, may I forget my right hand!" When one reads that psalm, and when one feels how it has echoed down the ages and found a responsive chord in the heart of every Jew up to this day, one can sympathize very dearly with those who ever at this hour still remember the vow of their forefathers.

There is a beautiful legend told by the rabbis, of a group of singers among the exiles who were asked to sing the songs of Zion for the entertainment of their enemies, and the "sons of Moses," tore their fingers from off their hands, and showed their mutilated hands to their enemies and said, "We shall not sing the songs of Zion in a strange land."

When Babylon was conquered by Cyrus the Great, of Persia, in 538, the Jews asked permission to return to Palestine, and permission was immediately granted. Not many returned. The rich remained behind; the poor migrated. The poor always migrate; the rich always remain behind. Zerubabel was the leader of this first caravan that returned to Palestine. The first task which these returning exiles set about was the task of rebuilding the temples. And it is a beautiful commentary on the spirit of the Jew, that wherever he went, under whatever circumstances he found himself, almost the first thing he did, even before his own home was built, was to build a sanctuary for the Lord God of Israel.

I came across an interesting fact not long ago. The city of Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in 332, before the common era, and in 308 we have definite records that in the city of Alexandria a synagogue was in existence. Probably the first group of emigrants built the synagogue. And when you trace the career of Israel from Palestine to Egypt, to Rome, to Spain, to France, to Germany, to Poland, to Russia, to America, you can trace the course of progress by the foundations of their synagogues. I think it

shows that the Jew was at all times conscious that his salvation, that his safety, and that his mission laid in the synagogue.

And I believe, if I might digress for a moment, that it is a very beautiful commentary upon the spirit of our own community that it has dedicated itself to the sacred task of erecting a new house of worship to the God of Israel and to the work of His people; a beautiful house of worship that will reflect glory upon the people, that will intensify the loyalty and the consecration of the children of God, and that will become a source of inspiration to old and young, and more especially to the young, who must be our standard bearers in the future--"A house of worship; a house of study; a house of assembly."

After Zerubabel there followed a period of comparative silence. History is silent over the next three-quarters of a century. We know from the reforms that became necessary soon after that there set in a period of religious laxity. Worship was neglected, and observance of Jewish festivals, and more especially of the Sabbath, was discarded. The religious tone of the commonwealth was lowered, and a great movement towards assimilation set in. The Jews began to intermarry

with the neighboring peoples, and as a consequence of that the superstitions and idolatries of the neighboring peoples began to make incursions into the faith of Judea. And it was at this critical moment, when it seemed as though Judaism was gradually dying, that the great Ezra, the priest, came from Babylon.

Ezra came in the year 415. Ezra was a zealot. Ezra was an enthusiast. Ezra was a reformer. Ezra was a scribe. Ezra was not a prophet. We know very little of the life of Ezra except the few fragments that we find in the Bible. But from the effect of his labors upon the destiny of Judaism, from and what tradition and legend said concerning him, we are led to infer that Ezra was one of the titanic, one of the colossal figures in the history of Israel.

The rabbis said, "Ezra was worthy to give the Torah to Israel had not Moses preceded him." And another rabbi said, "The Torah had been forgotten in Israel but Ezra rediscovered it." What was the work of Ezra? It was a two-fold labor, and of unusual significance. First of all, Ezra set about to establish the authority of the Torah in Israel, to spread the knowledge of the law of God in Israel, to insist upon the observance of the laws, in the law of God. Ezra aimed to make the Torah the

popular possession of the people. Ezra desired to take the Torah out of the hands of the priests and place it in the hands of the laity, and to that purpose he transcribed the Torah from its old characters, which were unknown to the laity, to its present so-called Hebrew square letters. Ezra founded a whole school of scribes, who went throughout the length and breadth of Judea teaching the law of God to the children. Ezra insisted upon a discipline in Jewish life.

Now, there are two tendencies in religion. One is the prophetic, and the other is the priesthood. The prophet is the man of vision, the architect, the man who projects the great ideal. The priest is the man who is the builder, who must embody this ideal of the mind of the prophet into living institutions. He must give to the ideals of the visionary a local habitation and a name. The two tendencies in religion may be described as the mystic and the institutional. The mystic is the direct communion of the soul with God. It needs no place of worship; it needs no ceremonies; it needs no symbols. It is direct, it is immediate, it is intimate. It is a sense of the realization of God in one's self. That is the essence of mysticism, or, if you choose, of prophetism.

But alongside of mysticism there is yet another current in religion, and that is institutionalism. To express a religious idea one must embody it into some living reality,--into sacred associations, into a communion of worshipers, into a ceremony, into a symbol, into acts, into practices. And it is these two tendencies that have run parallel through all religions up to this day, very frequently in deadly conflict and struggle with one another.

Now, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos and Hosea were the mystics, the prophets, the visionaries, the dreamers of dreams. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the scribes that followed him, the rabbis of the Talmud, the rabbis of today, are the builders, the men who must express these ideals--approximate them, as it were, incorporate them, corporealize them into definite religious institutions, so that the average layman who has not the sense of kinship, who cannot experience this divine efflatus, may have a guidance and a help in his religion.

That was the work of Ezra. And because of that Ezra saved Judaism, and saved prophetism for the world. If it were not for the work and the labors and the achievements of Ezra for the institutions which he founded, Judaism would have disappeared; Judaism would have been unable a

century later to meet in the life and death struggle with the charming^{and} attractive and beautiful culture of Greece, of Hellas. If it were not for the labors of Ezra and his descendants, Judaism would have been unable to meet, and meet successfully, the oncoming tide of Christendom five centuries later; and if it were not for the discipline and the organization which Ezra initiated, Judaism would have been unable to survive the misfortunes and persecutions and corrosive influences of two thousand years of exile.

Ezra therefore became, in a sense, the second Moses, and was so known to Israel. His second labor was to save the people of Israel, to preserve the purity of the race. He met the tendency to assimilation in his day with very rigorous, yes, with cruel, almost unpardonable severity. He demanded of his followers who had intermarried with wives of strange peoples that lived around Judea, to divorce their wives and sent them forth out of the community of Israel, a task which the majority of them refused to comply with. Ezra had the passion and the fanaticism of the zealot, and he thought that the end justified the means.

We are not here to condone Ezra. We are not here to apologize for historical events. We are here to understand them. The goal and the object of Ezra was praiseworthy. Ezra knew that

Judea was a little island in a sea of heathenism and paganism. Ezra knew that Israel was a small minority, and that if it be permitted to assimilate and intermarry with neighboring peoples, that it would disappear before very long; and therefore in order to save the soul of the people, in order to preserve the cultural self-identity, the spiritual independence, the prophetic spirit of Israel, he insisted upon their preserving their racial identity and their racial purity. He knew that "Israel must dwell alone, and must not be reckoned among the nations." Not necessarily a physical isolation, not necessarily a ghettoized exclusiveness; but a spiritual uniqueness, a religious self-determination was what Ezra demanded for his people.

And it is well that Ezra demanded it for his people. I venture to say that Ezra's message is just as vital today as it was in 415. I believe that we face today the same conditions that Ezra faced in his day, and I believe that there are two things that must be emphasized today, even as they were emphasized in the days of Ezra. First of all, that Jewish identity must be preserved, that the cultural uniqueness of the Jew must be safeguarded, that the Jew must still remain "A people dwelling apart."

Now, I do not mean by that that we must needs have a physical place of refuge for the spirit of the Jew. I do not mean that the Jew must return to the conditions which prevailed two hundred years ago. I believe that the Jew must go out into the world and touch every current of thought, and mingle with every fine movement that makes for the greater emancipation of the children of men. I believe that the Jew must continue to move through the world. But I do believe that he must move through the world as a distinctive force, as a definite message bringer, as a trail finder, as a bringer of gifts.

The Jew is needed today just as much as he was needed a thousand years ago. The world needs the Jew; the world needs the God of Israel; the world needs the ethics of the Jew; the world needs that uncompromising spirit of absolute justice and righteousness which the Jew has preached for centuries unto the children of man. The world is just at the very dawn of civilization today. Do not for a moment think that we have reached the very apex of achievement in civilization. We have but touched the surface of life. There is still ignorance, and poverty, and superstition, and idol worship, and brutality, and greed, and hate, and war, and lust in the souls of men.

And as long as the world is groping in the morasses, so long as the world is desperately in need of the burning words of the prophets of Israel, so long is the world in need of the God of Israel and of the ethics of the people of Israel.

The world needs us today, if for nothing else than that it needs a protestant minority. It needs the examples of a handful of courageous and loyal souls, who defy a whole world in arms for the sake of an ideal. That is the most inspiring thing in the world-- to see a man who can face odds, to see a man who can challenge the arrayed phalanxes of persecution and find his refuge and his solace and his reward in his own ideals. It is God's greatest blessing to the children of men. And Israel has been a people that has, in its weakness, in its frailty, in its paucity of numbers, challenged the whole world in the name of an ideal, and, strange to say, has endured. And the world needs, in all its struggles of tomorrow, this inspiring example of triumphant and victorious courage of a people. And so I say that we must emphasize today, even as Ezra emphasized in the days gone by, the uniqueness, the individuality, the cultural individuality of the Jew. The rabbis said the Jew is like a drop of perfume; when it is by itself it can send forth a beautiful odor and aroma through space. When this drop of perfume is cast into the sea its potency is gone and it is lost. The Jew can bless ^{the world only} as a Jew.

And we must emphasize, too, as Ezra emphasized in his day, the institutional side of our religion. Now, an institution in and by itself is not harmful. It is we that make it harmful. It is when the spirit is stifled in the institution that is built around it; it is when the soul becomes crushed in the body that was built to preserve it, that institutionalism becomes a menace.

But institutions are salutary and helpful, too. There is infinite religious inspiration to be derived from sacred associations, from a communion in prayer, from symbols, from ceremonies, from habits of worship. Why, you know, a ceremony is more than a thing, and an act. It is what I call an ideogram. It describes an idea. It is like an open sesame,--an open sesame to vast treasure troves of emotions and sentiments. The ceremonies and the practices and the symbols of a religion are reminders when we are indifferent, when we drift. A beautiful ceremony startles us into a higher and a finer mood. They are the sunrise and the sunset of religious life; the dramatic moments and instants that bring a newness of tone into our lives. And we need that badly.

The great mystic of England, the Dean of St. Paul, once said, "We need institutionalism if

only to save from theosophies and fancy religions the superficially cultured classes among us." He said, "It is not accidental that America, where institutionalism is weakest, is the happy hunting ground of religious quacks and cranks. Individuals are too prone to undervalue the steadying influence of the ancient and consecrated institutions."

Ezra knew that the ideal form of Judaism is the perfect blending of the two. We must not sacrifice the fine structure of forward-looking prophetic Judaism. None of us will advocate in this moment a return to a confined and stultified and narrow faith of practices and of observances only. What we advocate today, in the spirit of Ezra of old, is a technique that will make the ideals of the prophet real and vital in our lives, that we will be able to bring them into our homes and into our places of business and into our places of worship, in such a fashion that our eyes will behold them and our ears will hear them.

My ideal of Judaism, and I suppose it is the Judaism of every rabbi and every teacher, is the perfect blending of the mystic, of the prophet, and of the priest. Now, I want the faith of the psalmist, a faith that will be able to say in these immortal words, than which none more noble have ever been written, "Nevertheless, I am continually with

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thee, oh God. Thou holdest my right hand. Thou will guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me in glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And beside Thee I desire none upon earth. My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever. For lo, they that go far from Thee shall perish. Thou dost destroy all them that go astray from Thee. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good. I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of His work."

That is the faith that we want. We want the faith of a Job, who can say, "Yea, though ye slay me, yet will I hope in Him." The faith that will give us courage to say in the midst of our misfortunes and failures, and our bereavements, and the infinitely sad tragedies of human life, "Though ye slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

A faith such as that of the mother of Israel. Her two little ones died one day, and when her husband came she said to him, "Rabbi Mayer, the man, was here and gave me two precious jewels for safe keeping, and now he has come to claim them of me. Shall I return them to him?" And upon the reply of Rabbi Mayer, she took him to the place where her two little ones lay dead and said, "The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." A

faith like that of Rabbi Akevah, when the Romans tortured him, when the scraping instrument of torture came nigh unto his forehead, he joyfully and with ^a ringing voice of gladness exclaimed, " * * * ". And when those who stood near by asked him, "Why dost thou rejoice in this moment of supreme agony," he said, "All my life I have said, 'And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind,' and I have ~~never~~ up to this moment been able to fulfill it. I have served the Lord my God with all my heart, and I have served Him with all my possessions, and now it is the supreme gift of God that I serve him with my whole soul." And thus he died. That is the faith of our people. And I would preserve that faith. I would have that faith enter into your souls like a great

Do you know what religion is? It is "A great light." It comes into your souls suddenly and swiftly and then burst forth with infinite, dazzling rays and becomes a brilliant light that endures when all else is dark and gloomy; and heaven becomes a place as near to you as your limbs, and God becomes a reality as near to you as your own prayers. That is religion. The clinging, the clinging unto God--"I belong to my beloved, and my beloved belongs to me." That is the

faith of the Jew.

But I would also have you express that faith in a discipline that breathes love and sanctity. I would have you be faithful to a Jewish discipline, a Jewish conduct, and loyal to a Jewish organization, to the brotherhood of the servants of God. For mind you, the average man--and we are all average men--needs in his pilgrimage through life guidance and counsel and help, and they come through these agencies which history and tradition of three thousand years have established. And when we ruthlessly disregard them, we denude the content of Jewish life, we impoverish it, we strip it of its glamour, of its sanctity, of its weakness, of its charm, and we give to the average man and woman nothing but a few abstract principles that never feed the soul; that may satisfy the mind but certainly can never feed the soul.

Oh, I know that Ezra has been censured and criticised and denounced by Christian apologetics, and accused of narrowness and bigotry and intolerance and rabbinicism and Pharisaism; I know that he has been called the man who stifled the spirit of prophecy in Israel for five hundred years. But I say unto you men and women that it is not true. Ezra knew and knew so well that prophecy can be saved only when it is expressed in religious

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observances, and organizations when it is embodied in institutions--when you make "A fence around the Law." We have destroyed the fences around the law, and we have trampled rough shod over the beautiful ideals of Jewish life, so that even the spirit of ^{is} prophecy becoming silent among us.

I hope that my discussion of the three greatest personalities of the Bible has left with you this conviction: that Moses and Jeremiah and Ezra are more than personalities; that they are types, that they are influences, that they have a message for you and for me today. Moses the leader, Jeremiah the prophet, Ezra the builder--three great currents of thought in Jewish life, all of them mingling and joining into one swift and smooth channel that runs down through the ages.

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Their faith should be our faith; their ideals should be our ideals. And were I to embody all their labors and all their prayers into one definition, I would have to go back to that definition of the prophet who said, "Thou hast been told, oh man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee to do justly, to love mercy." That is the work of Moses, of Jeremiah, of the prophets. "To walk humbly with thy God," is the work of Ezra, a discipline of conduct in Jewish life. "To walk humbly with thy God."