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Some Fictions about the Jew, 1920.

ADDRESS BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"SOME FICTIONS ABOUT THE JEW," AT THE
TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 17,
1920, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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Ignorance, my friends, is the mother of all superstition. When men do not know the facts, they spin fancies, and out of their luxuriant imaginations they weave fictions about things. We imagine all sorts of impossible things about strange and foreign peoples. We fear and suspect them. The romancer who tries to write a story of great improbability chooses for himself some distant Arcady in which to place his poem.

When men seek for an almost impossible thing, like the Fountain of Youth, they place it in some little known continent. I remember during my early days, in the melodramas that were popular in those days, the man of sinister motives, the man of devilish devices and intrigue was almost always a Chinaman; and of all people of the earth, the Chinese are perhaps the most human, the most peace-loving, the least harmful of human beings. And yet because he was little known, imagination swathed him and wrapped him up in fancies and fictions which were not altogether complimentary to him.

The Jew, because he was for centuries estranged, isolated and ghettotized; because close, familiar contact

with the non-Jew was rendered impossible by custom and legislation, became just such a semi-mythical character in the world. It is really remarkable how little the average intelligent non-Jew knows about the actual, living, real Jew. Those of you who have had contact with the non-Jew, and more especially those of you who have perhaps had the opportunity of meeting him in the smaller cities of this land or abroad, know what a terribly distorted picture the average intelligent Christian has of the Jew.

Most of his information came from his Sunday school, and the Jew has remained in his mind a sort of a semi-Biblical, exotic, strange character, wrapped up in rumor, and hearsay, and legend. Concerning the actual, living Jew as he is in his flesh, it is astounding to find how utterly naive, not to say uninformed, the non-Jew is.

It is like an experience, altogether trite in itself, which came to my notice a few years ago, which may, in a way, illustrate what I have in mind, if an illustration is at all necessary. I was during those days making a tour through the state of West Virginia in the interest of woman suffrage--may God account it unto me to my credit. I came to a little town, and as I alighted from the train, I looked around for a committee that was to meet me. I waited for some time, but no one approached me, and finally, a little distance off, I saw a group of three women stand and stare at me. I stood and stared at them. And

finally the bravest of the three approached me and said, "Pardon me, but are you Rabbi Silver?" I said yes. "Why," she said, "goodness, gracious, Rabbi, where is your beard!" In the mind of this dear friend there was a picture of a minister in full oriental regalia, dressed up as perhaps Moses and Aaron were in the old, big, family Bibles. It is a trite story, but it is illustrative of just exactly what I have in mind--the naivety of the average intelligent non-Jew concerning the Jew.

I remember during the terrible days of the war, here in the city, very early one morning--all too early--I received a telephone message. I picked up the receiver and a woman's voice was at the other end of the wire, and in great perturbation, with trembling voice, this poor woman asked me, "Rabbi, tell me, is the world coming to an end?" I said, "My dear woman, why do you ask this question so early in the morning?" She said she had read the Bible the night before and had had a night mare. I said, "That is very likely." She said, "Rabbi, this is Armageddon, isn't it?" This is the beginning of the second coming of the Messiah, isn't it? And are not all the Jews going to return to Palestine?" I said, "My dear lady, I don't know. As for myself, I haven't packed yet."

One wonders why there is so little correct information about a people that has lived for two thousand years among the non-Jews, and the answer is, of course, apparent--there was no contact; there was no exchange and

interchange of ideas; there was no attempt to know. And because of this lack of information there was suspicion and fear, and because of fear there was hatred, because people hate the things they fear.

Now, some of the things that have been spoken and woven in the minds of the non-Jew concerning the Jew are deserving of some comment. In the first place, we are frequently accused of being so criminally wealthy; we are rich. In years gone by we had come to look upon this as sort of a compliment, but today the poor rich man has got to apologize for his wealth; especially a people, because this superstition, this notion that the Jew is in control of practically all the wealth of the world is back of much of the anti-Semitism of today.

It is said that the Jew controls government because he controls capital; that the Jew makes war because the capitalist profits from international war. I remember the day in Paris when I met an Englishman--an intelligent Englishman; he even called himself a Free Thinker, and a Socialist, and what not,--we were chatting with one another, and he hadn't gone very far when he said, "Rabbi, don't you think, really, that the Jews are responsible for this war?" I said, "What makes you say that?" He said, "Why, this war was brought about by capital. Who are the people in control of capital in the world? The Rothschilds and their groups in England, France, Germany--everywhere."

Now, the sad part about it is that the Jew, as

a people, is among the poorest of the earth. Those of you who have perhaps traveled a bit in the Orient, in Egypt, in Asia Minor, remember how shocked you were, how humiliated you were, not only by the poverty but by the complete destitution, the pauperism of tens of thousands of our Jews. Those of you who have traveled through the pale of Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe will recall how the hundreds and thousands of them lived on the verge of poverty--the terrible, bitter competition among them for the copeck, and the grosh, and the penny, to keep them alive. Those of you who will recall the slums of the great cities of London and New York will know how the vast majority of the people, if not actually poverty-stricken are in constant danger of sinking into the abyss of poverty.

Of course, we have our wealthy Jews. It would be surprising if a people of fifteen millions, thrifty and industrious and intelligent, should not produce its financial giants. But they are so noticed! A Jewish millionaire is like a candle lit in a dark room--it flares up. The non-Jewish millionaire is like a candle lit in a well lighted room--it makes no showing at all.

Along with this fiction concerning the wealth of the Jew comes this other fiction--that the Jew does not produce; that the Jew is only a go-between; that he is exclusively a middleman, and because of that he is an exploiter who lives off other people; that he, himself,

produces nothing. Now, the people who make this charge are guilty of double-dealing. If capital is wrong, if capital is unjustified, then the Christian capitalist must be equally criticized and denounced. If capital in the modern system of social and economic organization is a necessity, then the Jew ought not to be blamed for being a capitalist.

Those who attack the Jew for being a capitalist are inevitably playing to the philosophy and the theory of bolshevism. If it were true that all Jews were business men, engaged in mercantile pursuits, men of commerce and not producers, it does not at all follow that because of that they are drones and parasites. Distribution, as society is organized today, is equally as important as production. Without commerce, without a distribution of produce, industry would soon come to a standstill. It is commerce that is responsible for practically every great civilization in the history of the world. Ancient Phoenicia, Carthage, Greece, Rome, Spain, Italy, Holland, and now England, owe their greatness as much to their commercial policies as to their innate capacities for greatness. And if the Jew initiated commerce, and instigated or encouraged it in all parts of the world, civilization is greatly indebted to him for that inestimable service.

Furthermore, if it were true that the Jew was exclusively a business man, he has no one to thank that

fact for but the Christian; for it is the non-Jew that excluded the Jew from the trade halls, that made it impossible for him to engage in productive industry. It is the non-Jew that prohibited the Jew from engaging in agriculture. Up to 1800 almost every country in Europe, and up to 1815 some of them, and up to 1910 Russia and Rumania, prohibited the Jew from holding land and from engaging in agriculture.

The Jews originally were an agriculture people and not a commercial people. The life of the Bible is not the life of the tradesman, it is the life of the farmer--the pastoral life, the patriarch life. Why, even Josephus, as late as the first century of the common era, makes the statement that we Jews are unlike the other people. They are mercantile people; we are a farming people living inland, and our entire concern is the rearing of our children and educating them in the law of our fathers.

I say, even if it were true that the Jew were exclusively a capitalist, his is not the blame. But it is not true. Those who know conditions as they actually are, know that among the six or seven millions of Jews that live in Russia, and Poland, and Galicia, the majority of them are small artisans,--hundreds of thousands of them in the woolens mills and the cotton mills and the tobacco factories; carpenters, and cutters, and painters, and builders. Those who are actually acquainted with

conditions know of the hundreds of thousands of Jews in this country and in England who are engaged in the needle industry, and the shirt industry, and the cap industry.

It is not true that the Jew does not wish to work. It is true that conditions for centuries have so hemmed him in, so confined him, so constricted his activities that he has been driven into certain channels, for which act he is now being criticized.

And along with these two charges that the Jew is wealthy and that he does not produce, comes a third charge--that the Jew is devoted to the accumulation of wealth. If that were true he would have no one to blame but his non-Jewish friend, too, because the only means that the Jew had whereby to receive the recognition of the world, to force recognition and acceptance, was money wealth and the power that came with it. As a human being he was ostracized, and denied, and mocked. His only chance in life lay in the ability to gain power through wealth.

I say, if that were true that the Jew were so completely addicted to the task of accumulating money, his is not the blame. But is it true? I read that within the few years that the Nobel prize, awarded for excellency in science, and art, and literature, has been in existence, seven Jews have been so honored. I look about me in every department of human activity--in philosophy, in science, in medicine, in engineering, in

the drama, in music, in research--and I find always among the two or three that stand out preeminently one or two or three Jews.

The Jew was never addicted to money. If in this land we have shown that weakness, it is because we have reacted quickly to the general tone and spirit and passion of the civilization about us. This land is so big, this land is so rich, this land can be so easily exploited that the millions who have come here have thrown themselves completely, with all their energies and with all their devotion, into the task of exploiting the physical resources of this continent; and the Jew has followed suit.

But it is a libel and a slander to say that the Jewish ideal of life is material success. The Jewish ideal of life was at all times learning. I recall a saying of the Rabbis--"A scholar of the lowest social scale, a scholar who is an outcast, is preferable to the highpriest who is an ignoramus." I read another saying of the Rabbis--"A father may as leave cast his daughter before a devouring lion rather than marry her off to a man who is a boor and an ignoramus, even though he be wealthy." Why, you know the ideal of the Jewish home from time immemorial--it was learning and scholarship. The " " was the man who stood on the highest, the scholarly Jewish life. The Jewish life was at all times pervaded by an ideal to be "the servant of God."

If the Jew were interested in money, in success, in comfort and in luxury, the Jew would have assimilated long ago. On the contrary, he remained true to his ideal in spite of poverty, and misery, and persecution, and oppression, and exile. "In spite of all this, in spite of all the trials and tribulations that now descend upon us, we have not forgotten Thy name."

Our people has at all times been a race of idealists, who were ready to give up their homes, the countries in which they lived for centuries, and all the happy associations of childhood; the comforts of home, friendship--everything, when their ideal was threatened--everything rather than deny their God.

But along with these fictions there comes yet another, and that is the fiction of Jewish solidarity, of Jewish unity. We are a closely knit, unified group, that is ready to fight the whole world if need be. And that reads like a compliment. I wish it were true. But that argument is now being used by anti-Semites to convey the impression that this Jewish solidarity means a conspiracy on the part of the Jew to undermine Christian civilization, to destroy, dethrone and alter it, and then get control of the whole of the world.

I say, I wish it were true that we were a unified, united people; we would stand so much stronger if we were. When I look about me, from my knowledge and study of Jewish life here and elsewhere, and see the

divisions, the antipathies of one group against another, of the Eastern European against the Western European, of reform against orthodox, of the Nationalist against the anti-Nationalist, of the rich against the poor, of the cultured against those who are not so privileged,--when I see all about me division, and passion, and disagreement, I think Hamen was more correct when he said of our people "Behold a people that is scattered, broken up, and not a united people."

There is one thing that unites us, and that is our faith, and our faith has been so potent that it has united sufficiently fundamental differences that have separated group from group. The Jew is not a conspirator; the Jew has never conspired against the safety, the well-being, the integrity of any people, of any civilization.

I will say unto you what I have said unto my friends across the sea: if it is conspiracy to fight injustice, wickedness, intolerance and bigotry; if it is conspiracy to stand uncompromising, immutable, immovable for the fundamental principles of truth and justice; if it is conspiracy to try to destroy despotism, in whatever shape or form it might appear; if it is conspiracy to remain for thousands of years consecrated to one ideal and one devotion,--to serve God and man, then the Jew is the arch-conspirator of the world.

Fictions about our people! And today one hears yet another one. Why, the Jew is responsible for all the

unrest and all the radicalism and all the bolshevism that has been let loose in the world. I spoke to you last year in detail about the Jew and bolshevism, and I have not the time nor the inclination to go into these things again. I would but say that while it is true that certain Jews are identified with the bolshevist regime in Russia--and it would be a miracle and phenomenon if there were not such Jews identified with such an institution, or with any institution in Russia, for the Jew does represent the highest level of intelligence, of knowledge, of information, and any governmental body would seek him out and put him in responsible positions, because the illiteracy among the Slavic population in Russia is appalling, and almost every Jew in Russia can read and write, and has had some sort of an education.--I say, while it is true that there are some Jews among the Bolsheviki, it is not that bolshevism is a Jewish product, and that bolshevism is kept alive by the Jews. It is the contrary.

I read a statement a few days ago by a newspaper correspondent, who said that bolshevism has been smouldering in the soul of Russia for three hundred years, from the days of _____, who raised the standard of revolution in Russia three hundred years ago; and today bolshevism and communism have been smouldering in the soul of the Russian peasant, waiting for the opportunity, waiting for the moment of realization. It is not a

Jewish product. The psychology of the Jew is anti-bolshevistic. The Jew is an individualist; the Jew is an enterprising individual who hates state domination and state control, because he has suffered too much from state interference.

The Jew has legitimate ambitions and wants the opportunity to express himself and fulfill these ambitions. There is nothing in the religion of our people that in any way may be interpreted as communism. On the contrary. The new testament speaks of an ideal of "Mine is thine, and thine is mine." The old testament knows of no such doctrine. On the contrary, there is a very significant statement of our Rabbis--"The man who says 'Thine is mine, and mine is thine,' that man is a fool and an ignoramus."

The psychology of the Jew, the temper, the mood of Jewish life, is not bolshevistic; but from a practical point of view the Jew cannot be and is not a bolshevist. The majority of the Russian Jews were small trades people--shop keepers, middlemen--and bolshevism has destroyed the middleman, has swept him out of existence, and the Jew has been the one that has suffered, for his very livelihood has been destroyed.

The Jew is not the skilled mechanic in Russia, and the Jew is not the peasant in Russia. The peasant profited from the revolution because he gained land, but the Jew did not gain any land because he did not possess

it in the first place. The land, mind you, has not been nationalized by the bolshevik regime. What has happened in Russia to these tens and hundreds of thousands of Jews who heretofore were small trades people--shop keepers and store keepers? I will tell you what has happened to some of them this summer that have come out of Eukrania in Russia. I have asked them concerning the condition of my brothers there, and they told me, "There are no massacres in Russia, but conditions have been worse than massacres. They are being starved, destroyed, annihilated economically." The Jew of forty, fifty and sixty, who heretofore has led a dignified life and gained some sort of a sustenance from a little shop or a little store, is now compelled, because his shop has been nationalized and taken over by the government, and being unable to go on the land because the peasant refused land to the Jew, and being unable to do any skilled work because he has no previous training for it, to shovel coal and to clean the streets, and to do all the hard and menial labor to which his tradition and his education and his environment have not been accustomed.

The one hope of the Russian Jews, my friends told me, is to get out of Russia, because there is no salvation for them there. Those who speak about the Jew in Russia being a bolshevik are ignorant, are uninformed. And concerning all these who repeat these fictions, who pass them on from one to another, creating hard feeling between

brother and brother, fomenting discord between brother and brother, destroying the possibility of linking the new bonds of brotherhood, of bringing men closer together in the great task of rehabilitating society.--I say concerning all these who repeat these fictions, who spread these lying fictions, as a Jew once said of his people--"Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We Jews have survived these calumnies; we pin our faith in the ultimate triumph of truth and progress. "A lie can pass round the earth quicker than truth can begin to buckle on its shoes." A lie travels quicker, a lie is more readily accepted and credited, but truth has its ultimate say. We have faith that the truth concerning us that we are a people not of supermen, not of angels, but a people at least as good, as honest, as well-intentioned, as industrious, as intelligent as any other people; a people that has done civilization inestimable service, morally, spiritually, economically, intellectually,--

I say this truth is bound to triumph, for truth is of God, and God's will and yours forever.

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