



## 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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The Light that Never Failed, 1920.



SERMON BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON  
"THE LIGHT THAT NEVER FAILED, AT THE  
TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 12,  
1920, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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I do like this festival of Chanukah--the symbols associated with it, and the memories which it calls to life. It is a festival of light, and we cannot have too many of such festivals at this time. All that is cheerful and lovely in human life is associated with the idea of light. Light has come to mean day, warmth, life, just as darkness has come to mean night, cold, death.

All people, and more especially our own people, have come to read God as light, because light is the finest and most immaterial substance known to man. The struggle between light and darkness is represented by primitive man as the struggle between two gods--the God of Light and the God of Darkness. Among the Babylonians it was Marduck against , the Goddess of Darkness; among the Athenians it was Horus against Seth, the god of the underworld.

The world began with darkness. You recall the first sentence of our scripture--"The world was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and then God (Yarvah) said, 'Let there be light.'" We have come to associate light with life, with immortality. Even the memorial symbol of our people is the act of kindling a light--to symbolize the immortality of the human soul.



"The soul of man is the life of God, and just as the life of God endures forever, so does the soul, which is the spark of God's fire, endure forever." And our faith has come to be symbolized by a "perpetual light." And most of our feasts and festivals have seized upon this beautiful symbol of brightness and cheer and love,--the Sabbath lights and the lights of the festivals and the Chanukah lights.

But of all these festivals Chanukah is perhaps the most essentially, I might say, a feast of lights. In origin, in history, in tradition and in legend it is light all the time; around the season of the year when Chanukah was celebrated by the peoples of antiquity with light and the kindling of bonfires. It was a universal festival around this season of the year, and the Jew, by his peculiar genius of giving an ethical and a historical meaning to a festival which is purely natural, seized upon this period and this feast of light which was universal, and identified it with the feast of the Maccabees--with that historical event, the triumph of his faith, of his life over the darkness of paganism.

And in legend Chanukah is associated with light. You all recall, do you not, that beautiful legend, one of the finest of our faith, which is connected with this festival of Chanukah. The temple had been desecrated, the altar had been defiled, the unclean beasts had been offered upon the sacred altar of God; all the sacred utensils of the



✓ temple had been destroyed; the sacred oil which bore the high-stamp of the priests upon each cruse thereof had been defiled; and the victorious Judeans return from their mighty victory and at once wend their way to the temple to offer thanksgiving and praise to the God of Victory, but the temple is defiled and desecrated, and the temple is in darkness; and they look about for the oil to kindle anew the light in the sanctuary, but they find only one small cruse of oil still kept sacred and undefiled--still bearing the stamp of the high priest, and they kindle this cruse of oil, and instead of burning but one night a miracle happened and it burned throughout the eight days of the festival.

You know, a people reads its soul to a legend. A legend is the index to a people's experience and a people's faith and a people's hope; and I sometimes see in this beautiful legend of the cruse of oil a symbol of the faith of Israel, of the hope of Israel; that in a world defiled and desecrated, a world where darkness holds sway over the minds and the souls and the affairs of men, if there be but one small cruse of oil left undefiled--the precious oil of the human soul, of human faith, of human idealism, the miracle is bound to happen: that this small light will burst forth in resplendant flame and illumine the darkness of the world.

The feast of the Maccabees is a double triumph of the God of Light over the gods of Darkness. In the first place, it is the triumph of the light of the simple



faith and the religion of our fathers over the darkness and the superstition and the idolatry of Hellenic paganism. Now, the Greeks were a wonderful people and the Greeks gave much to the world in the way of beauty and philosophy and science. Alexander the Great, who set out to conquer the world, brought along with his army and navy the culture of Hellos and                      It was not the same culture that Athens had; it was not the same spirit, the same love for the beautiful, the same sanity that the Athenians had; it was a Hellenism degraded and degenerate; it was a Hellenism only superficially Greek. The temples were there; the amphitheaters were there; the festivals were there; but the spirit, the love of the beautiful, the discipline of the Greek soul, the fine sense of civic loyalty and morality were not there. The Orient had heathenized the spirit of the Greek. The Hellenism of Palestine was no more the Hellenism of Athens than the present day Anglicized Levant is French; it is only in its superficial shape--in dress and manner of speech that it is French; and it was, in those days of the Maccabees, only in speech, in dress and in customs that it was Athenian and Greek.

The religion of Hellenism was a crude, vicious form of Oriental paganism, with all its vicious practices and degrading religion, and the sanctity of family life was being destroyed by the vicious and immoral practices under the guise of religion.

Now, Israel realized the danger of Hellenism and



it fought it bitterly for decades until it triumphed. It did not fight the spirit of Athens and the spirit of the Greeks; it did not fight art; it did not fight science; it did not fight knowledge and the philosophy of the Athenians, but it fought the demoralizing of religion and the corrosive and destructive culture that paraded under the guise of Hellenism.

The climax came in the great struggle between the hosts of Antiochus and the hosts of the Maccabees, and the Jews won the day, not only for Israel but for humanity.

The vigorous ethics of the Jew, the rigorous system of human morality, is the basis of civilization. Art is well enough and essential to human life, and refinement and ascetic taste are needed to give the tone, the atmosphere to human life, but no human society and no human organization is possible without a code of conduct and ethics and morality--rigorous, insistent, uncompromising, such as the people of Israel evolved, and that the people of Israel insisted upon throughout the ages.

And so the victory of Israel over the decadent paganism of those days was a triumph for civilization; it was a victory of the light of the human spirit, a victory for progress, a victory for purity and decency over the darkness of Orientalism. And it was a triumph of light in yet another sense: it was the triumph of the faithful few over the faithless many; it was the triumph of the little handful



of God-inspired, zealous and devoted souls who were not daunted or frightened by the overpowering array of the enemy; who stood fast and endured, and fought and died for the sake of an ideal. It is the light of the spirit mastering the forces of darkness that at all times seem greater and more powerful and more dominating in human life. And because of that Chanukah is a festival of light.

I want to leave this word with you this morning: this spirit of Chanukah ought to be with us and with the world at all times; the light will triumph over the darkness. I know that men sometimes despair; I know that men and women looking about them see all the deficiencies of the human organization, all the injustices, all the crimes committed against the innocent, against the weak; all the exploitation, all the tyranny, and all the brutality. That is human life. Some of us despair, and in a spirit of dejection say, "Darkness is settling over the world, and light will never come."

This spirit of Chanukah ought to be with us as an inspiration that light will triumph; and as we look back upon human society and scan the full purview of human life, the tragic, faithful, painful yet steady progress from the jungle up to the present day, we cannot but feel that light is triumphant, that light is breaking through the cloud.

When I stop to think what wonderful progress the men and the women of the last two or three generations have



made, and what a forward step civilization has taken within the last century, I cannot but help feel hopeful of the mighty destiny of man in the future. Think of what we have achieved! Mechanically, we have made steam do the work of man; we have saved man from drudgery; we have laid a premium upon human intelligence; the ships that were of old driven by galley slaves chained to their oars are now driven by power; we have harnessed the forces of Nature; we have relieved man; we have given man luxury and comfort. Power is becoming cheaper, it has been said, but labor is becoming dearer, which means that man is rising in dignity economically.

Think what we have done intellectually within the last two or three generations only! We have emancipated the human mind from the shackles of uncertainty, of superstition, of all the cobwebs that have accumulated in the past century. We have established for all time within this last few generations that the universe is governed by law and not by chance. We have therefore enabled man to take hold of the universe, to reach out and touch, as it were, all the soaring planets of the heavens, and to reach down in his own soul and study the dark recesses of his own consciousness. Intellectually the man today is infinitely above the man of a hundred years ago, but he is as nothing as compared to the man of a thousand years hence. There is no limit to the reach, to the outstretching tentacles of the human mind, that will touch all the



spheres of the universe in the eons to come.

Religiously, how much we have progressed since the days of old! Perhaps not as much intellectually, perhaps not as much economically, but we have progressed. We have been enabled slowly and painfully to free man from fear, from the dread of priestcrafts and priesthoods, of superstition, of idolatry, of the fear of hell; we have been enabled to make men see that religion is not a matter of fear and terror of this world, of a nether world, of the world to come, but that religion is a matter of love, of kindness, of human fellowship; of longing, of aspiration in the human soul to reach up unto God.

We are making progress today--wonderful progress--in an international sense. While it is true that we have just emerged from the greatest cataclysm of the ages, it is also true that man has snatched out of this welter of blood and tears and suffering a new ideal--the ideal of international comity, of international peace; the idea that sooner or later there must be established some communion among these broken bits of human society whereby friction and war and the terrible sufferings incidental to war would be made less possible in the days to come.

The children of men are drawing closer together the ties of human brotherhood. It might be the work of a year or a decade or a generation or a century, but war will be a thing of the past as slavery has become a thing of the past. Life is becoming sweeter and saner and lovelier;



life is triumphing over darkness. And perhaps in no other instance do I see the miraculous hand of God as much as in the history of my own people. No people has had such a dark history as my people, but the light has cleft the darkness; the ghetto is gone; the isolation is gone, and the Jew is taking his place in the citizenship of the world as an equal, as a man. Oh, it is true that from time to time there are sporadic outbursts of little souls and narrow minds and starved consciousness; it is true that at times there will be these outbursts of prejudice and hatred and hostility. These things are inevitable in a great society, but we have overcome them in the days gone by, and we shall overcome them in the days to come.

In reading the beautiful story of Chanukah, I came across a sentence which sounded so modern, and so much parallel to things that are being said today. In this story, written perhaps two thousand years ago, the author makes this assertion--he places this in the mouth of King Antiochus; King Antiochus says: "And they (the Jews) hope for the day when the kings will fall, and all the rulers of the earth." And the Jews are saying: "When will our king rule over us? And when shall we become the masters over sea and over land? And when will the whole world be put into our hands?"

Evidently the conspiracy charge of today is a very, very old thing. It is two thousand years since that was said and we are still here. And two thousand years



hence perhaps a rabbi, standing before an audience such as this, will quote some of the things that are being said today about the Jews, and round up in the same words that I round up in what I say--that light is bound to triumph over the darkness.

And why? Because in the world and in history and in the life of our own people there lives a God--a light that never failed. While His ways may be unknown to His children, and while sometimes we are lost in the mazes of confusion and disillusionment and are crushed in spirit, yet God lives; and behind all the suffering and behind all the clouds of darkness there is the light of God enduring. "The Lord, our God, will illumine our darkness; let the night settle upon us if it must; and let all the ghosts of the night appear, and let all the owls screech again as they did in the days of yore, the dawn is bound to come because God is with us--the light that never failed.

Let the waves of hatred, of prejudice, break in all their fury upon the rock of our endurance, we stand firm in our faith, abiding in our God, for we dwell in God; and we shall continue as long as the spirit of prophecy is ours; we shall continue as long as the God of our fathers is the God of our children; we shall continue as long as there is one small, little handful of brave, devoted Maccabees among us, even as they were found among our forefathers of yore--and I know that they are with us;



we shall continue in God's grace and goodness to keep alive the torch of light, of truth, of justice, blazing down the pathway of human history.

"Behold, I have given thee this day," says the prophet," as a light unto the nations--" A light that cannot be quenched; a light that cannot be extinguished; a light that may be denied, a light that may be surrounded with the pall of darkness for a time, but a light, because it is the light of God, which is bound to illumine the world.

That is our faith; that is our hope; that is our destiny from the spirit of the Maccabees, my friends, as it comes to us today on the wings of memory. May it remain with us in the days to come. I know that the spirit of the Maccabees is not dead among those millions who are today wandering upon the face of the earth, torn from their homes, deprived and denied and hunted about from place to place. I know that in their misery and in their bereavements, and in their suffering and in their sorrow there still burns within their souls the light of the Maccabees--the indomitable, unbreakable spirit of our people.

And I know that that same spirit, perhaps not as evident, but nevertheless as unbroken and as real, is with us today here in this land. We shall continue to live in faith and hope, knowing that the light is bound to triumph; for light is God, and God is light.

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