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The Legacy of Wilson - The Opportunity of Harding, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE LEGACY OF WILSON--THE OPPORTUNITY
OF HARDING," AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY
MORNING, FEBRUARY 27th, 1921.

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Just five days more and Woodrow Wilson, whose name has figured so prominently and so dramatically in the annals of mankind during the past eight hectic years, will have ceased to be President of the United States and will have passed from the political stage; and another man-- Warren G. Harding--little known to the masses of people in this land or abroad, will have been inaugurated into the mighty responsibilities of this great office.

I cannot help feeling that there is a certain touch of sadness connected with the passing of Woodrow Wilson, for it is almost certain that this man, so harrassed, so broken, will never again participate actively and vigorously in the political affairs of this land or of the world.

I re-read last night that touching tribute paid to Mr. Wilson by his loyal friend and secretary--Mr. Tumulty, and I could not help finding that pathos and wistfulness in that picture which I believe both friend and foe alike can deeply and sincerely feel. Mr. Tumulty, in a statement of marked intimacy and tenderness, says this of his chief and of his friend:

"Two pictures are in my mind. First, the hall of representatives crowded from floor to gallery with expectant

throngs. Presently it is announced that the President of the United States will address Congress. There steps out to the speaker's desk a straight, vigorous, slender man, active and alert. He is about 60 years of age, but he looks not more than 45, so lithe of limb, so alert of bearing, so virile. It is Woodrow Wilson reading his great war message.

"The other picture is only three and a half years later. There is a parade of veterans of the Great War. They are to be reviewed by the President on the east terrace of the White House. In a chair sits a man, your President, broken in health, but alert in mind. His hair is white, his shoulders bowed, his figure bent. He is 63, but he looks older. It is Woodrow Wilson. Presently in the procession there appears an ambulance laden with wounded soldiers--the maimed, the halt, and the blind. As they pass they salute, slowly, reverently. The President's hand goes up in answering salute. I glanced at him. There were tears in his eyes. The wounded is greeting the wounded."

Those in the ambulance, he in the chair, are alike casualties. For after all is said in praise or condemnation of this man, one fact remains to his eternal credit--that in all his triumphs and his failures, in all his strength and his weakness, Woodrow Wilson was a sincere man, a man of uprightness and integrity. He was wounded mortally, and wounded in a great cause. He was broken in

an heroic effort in what proved to be an unheroic world.

It is perhaps too early to frame a just estimate of the man Wilson. We are too near the mountain slopes to see the vast contours, the gracious outline of his personality. Perhaps history will be more just to him than we have been. It is, of course, true in every great man that only the succeeding ages can get to the heart of him and give him his proper place in the estimate of history.

Wilson was not as fortunate, or unfortunate, as far as his chances of immortality are concerned, as was Abraham Lincoln. Wilson did not have the assassin to strike him down in the moment of his greatest glory. If Wilson had been slain the day the armistice was signed, he would have, by unanimous consent, been proclaimed an immortal. He would have passed out in the full blaze of glory, and men would have spoken of him in deepest reverence.

But he lingered on through the terrible, tortuous months and years of reconstruction; he, the leader, was compelled to become a statesman; he, the architect of a great vision, was called upon to do the exacting labors of the builder. And he was lost in the mazes and the perplexities of the details. The prophet could not be a priest. Perhaps Lincoln would not be held in the high esteem today if he had lived during the terrible years of reconstruction.

But, be that as it may, there is one attribute we can all, friend and foe alike, give encouragingly and

unstintingly to this man, namely--sincerity. In the days to come America may have occasion to regret the absence of other qualities in the man--statesmanship, foresight, strategy, tact, capacity for gathering men around him and working with them; but I am quite sure that it will never have occasion to regret or to be humiliated by the thought that her leader and spokesman to the world lacked the first, primary and essential qualities--manhood, honesty of purpose, character. And perhaps this very fact--that Woodrow Wilson represented the highest virtues of American life, as far as character and idealism are concerned--proved to be his undoing in Europe.

Europe is unaccustomed to such a rare phenomenon as an honest diplomat. Europe at first was mildly amused at this rara avis, this strange appearance of an honest statesman; and then it grew suspicious of him when the man continued unswervingly in his purposes, and, finally, Europe grew manifestly outraged at such a thing. It violated all the traditions of European diplomacy. The diplomat, by definition and tradition, is a man who lies deliberately and gracefully for his country. The diplomat is an exalted politician; a statesman is a man who says one thing and means three or four things.

And here came a man, armoured in principles, insisting upon fundamental, moral theses, and challenging the standards and the traditions of Europe--a man who was rigid and inflexible and unyielding. In that group of

politicians that gathered in Paris, Wilson was the only honest man. Clemenceau, a hardened cynic and realist; Lloyd George, an astute politician and a time-server; Orlando, a chauvenist--each one concerned with the aggressive and aggrandizing policy of his own land; and here is Wilson speaking for that vague something called humanity--that vague something that is spoken of from the rostrum and the pulpit, but must never be brought into the council of statesman and politician.

And so Clemenceau and Lloyd George chuckled at first at Mr. Wilson. They humored him for a while, and then craftily, with years of training, they enmesh him in that snarled and tangled web of European diplomacy, so that the man, inexperienced, idealistic, living in a world of his own intellectual creation, was tied hand and foot. He tried to steal the fire from heaven and he was nailed to the rocks.

I said that Woodrow Wilson was a leader of men but not a statesman, and that is why he made a remarkably great president during the war--a remarkably poor statesman after the war. Woodrow Wilson, in the years 1917 and 1918, spoke as no man has ever spoken before--heroically, courageously. He truly spoke for mankind with words of living fire touched by Divine inspiration. The man Woodrow Wilson, in the years 1917 and 1918, spoke prophecy, but no man in the history of mankind spoke so haltingly, and so feebly, and so tragically as did Mr. Woodrow Wilson in the

years 1919 and 1920; for, then broken and saddled with all the traditions of health, this man felt compelled to justify acts which he himself in the earlier and freer moods of his life would have denounced most vigorously.

Woodrow Wilson made a great war president. He sounded the call to war and the nation hearkened and followed him, and when once launched upon the tremendous enterprise, Wilson was aggressive and insistent and alert, pushing the war to ultimate victory. I think we are prone to underestimate the part that Mr. Wilson played in the actual winning of the war, just as we hold him responsible for some of the things he failed to do. We must, in absolute fairness, give him credit for the things he succeeded in achieving. He did place two million American soldiers in France, and he did help materially to win the war--by men, money, morale.

Mr. Wilson lacked the gifts and the training of the statesman; the man who needs shrewdness more than vision, practical knowledge more than idealism; the man who must be flexible, and yielding, and compromising, more than rigid, inflexible, and uncompromising; the man that must handle men and not ideals. Wilson failed indeed. When one thinks of what he was compelled to bring back with him from Europe, of how he failed to make the war result in real beneficence to mankind, how he failed to win the war for humanity; when one thinks of all the abuses and the crimes and the injustices incorporated in the Treaty, that

Mr. Wilson was called upon to condone and to justify; when one thinks of the dismemberment of Austria and Hungary, of the economic destruction of Germany, of the criminal meddling in Russia, of the failure on the part of the victorious powers to do justice by their own dependencies; then when one thinks of Mr. Wilson's record at home, his failure to win the cooperation of the Senate, the suppression of free speech and the freedom of the press, the constant use of injunctions to force men to labor, the stupidities of a Mr. Palmer, the tyrannies of a Burleson; and then this last evidence of his utter incapacity as a statesman, his vetoing a resolution of Congress to decrease the army-- Wilson, the pacifist of old, actually vetoing a bill of Congress calling for a reduction in armament.--one realizes how much the man has failed in the tasks of reconstruction.

If I were to express what I believe to be Mr. Wilson's lasting contribution to civilization, what I believe to be the vital and meaningful thing that Mr. Wilson has given by the blood of his heart to humanity, I would say that it is not so much a thing, or a reality, or an act, but a vision--a vision which is bound to be made progressively more real as the years succeed one another. I mean the vision of international comity and peace; the vision of a league of free peoples; the vision of self-determination and self-expression of all the denied and the oppressed and the submerged races of the earth--a league of free nations.

To be sure, the league that Mr. Wilson brought

back from Europe is proof within itself, as evidenced by the last overwhelming defeat in the elections, as being unacceptable to the American people. But it is only the structure of the league that was unacceptable; the ideal, the need, so vividly and patently made clear to the world by this remarkable man during his remarkable day, will never be lost to mankind. It may take a hundred years--it probably will take more than a hundred years, before a lasting and binding league, perfect in its structure, satisfactory to all, will be established. But much of the credit, probably most of the credit, will always redound to the name and the glory of this great American--Woodrow Wilson.

He saw the promised land. He caught the vision of it; he held the glimpse of it, tantalizing, challenging to mankind. But humanity will never rest content until its feet will have been placed upon the soil of the promised land. Many wars will yet transpire, and much sorrow and suffering will yet be visited upon the children of men; but this dream of the dreamer, this vision of the prophet, crucified by untoward circumstances, will remain as the goal of a suffering and enduring humanity.

Perhaps one of the sweetest things said of Mr. Woodrow Wilson by any of his admirers was said not so very long ago in the form of a legend by Dr. Crane, who recounts it as an Indian legend.

"There is a legend among the Indians that is

strange and beautiful. Once a tribe of Indians lived not far from the Western sea. At some distance from their camp was a high mountain. It was the ambition of all the youth, when they became of age, to climb to the top of the mountain. The way to it was across a barren desert, and the mountain was steep and rugged. One Spring the young men of the tribe presented themselves before the chief, and he gave them the instruction: 'Go as far as you can. Some of you may cross the burning sands; some may get part way up the mountain; perhaps one of you may reach the top, and from there you will see the shining waters. But when you have gone as far as your strength will allow, pluck there some token--a twig or a stone, or some such thing, and bring it back to me. Now go.'

"They went, high of heart and light of step. Along in the afternoon one came back. He was spent and drooping. It was the heat, he said. He did not get far, and he gave the chief his token--a cactus leaf. 'By this I see you got only half way across the desert,' said the chief. 'That is where the cactus grows.' Then one after another the other boys returned; one bore a twig of sage brush, which indicated he had reached the mountain's foot; another brought a leaf of maple, as he had got to the lake a little way up the mountain side, for there were maple trees; another held in his hand a bit of hemlock, for he had attained unto the slanting rock a thousand feet up; another brought a branch of stunted pine, whereupon the

chief said: "Good! you reached the timber line." At sunset came the last young man. He was weary, yet his eye was not dimmed. 'And what token did you bring?' asked the chief. And the youth spread out his empty hands. 'Nothing,' he said. Then the chief frowned, and the young men gnashed upon him with their teeth. 'Where I stood,' said the youth, there was nothing, but I saw--the sea.'"

Woodrow Wilson, I believe, did see the sea. While he brought back very, very little of tangible good, he brought back a great vision that will endure.

That, to my mind, is the legacy of Woodrow Wilson--a significantly American legacy.

And the opportunity of Harding lies just there--to make real by his qualities--which differ most radically from the qualities of the man Wilson--to make real by his qualities, as far as it is possible within a short time, this vision of this ideal of Wilson's. Harding has qualities that Wilson had not. Harding has the quality of organization; Harding has the gift of making and holding friends, of inspiring cooperation; Harding has tact; Harding has the homely wisdom and knowledge of men--a practical mind.

Of course, he has not the vision, the sweep, the outlook of Wilson, but perhaps the problems of this day, the problems of this hour, do not require a man of vision, a leader; they require a man of practical sanity and homely wisdom; a man who can wrestle successfully with distinct and separate problems, and bring to them wisdom, knowledge, and

the counsel of other men. Harding is blessed with what I may call flexibility, which Mr. Wilson never had. People called it in Mr. Wilson egotism--a love of oneself. I rather doubt it. I think it was a case of the uncompromising and unyielding leader and prophet. No prophet was flexible, and suave, and kindly, and yielding. Mr. Harding has that quality, which will stand him in good stead in the days to come.

His opportunities, as I see them, are these--and they are vast opportunities, and blessed will he be among men if he can bring these things to pass, and utilize these historic opportunities in this historic moment to the best advantage. Mr. Harding must, first of all, clear the deck, end the war with Germany, get us out of that anomalous position of being at the same time at war and friendly. All the cob-webs and red tape that have accumulated during the past six years must be swept out of the halls and corridors of American life. Constitutional authority must be re-established; the freedom guarantee and safeguard of the average American citizen must be reestablished; government by one man and one mind must end; the authority of Congress must again be affirmed and exercised.

In other words, we must return, as far as we possibly can, to the even tenors of American life. The war psychology, the war frame of mind, the war attitudes, the war tyrannies, must pass before any problem of reconstruction can be adequately and fairly dealt with.

And then the supreme task and opportunity, as I see it, of Mr. Harding will be to work for universal peace, whether through the League of Nations now established, or by other means. There is nothing so essential and so immediate, as far as American life and destiny is concerned, as far as the life and destiny of the whole civilized world is concerned, at the present time, as this problem of peace. For the world is not at peace; the world today is passing through a hell of suffering, bloodshed, misery, with suspicion and rivalry and imperialism rampant, and all the fine ideals to which we clung in the great days of the war have somehow vanished completely.

Nations today are grabbing and grasping and clawing at one another, bargaining and selling the rights of peoples as though the war had never taken place. We must have peace! If we decide to enter the League of Nations we must do so with a clear understanding that the League will never be used to enforce the treaty of Versailles; for if the League is to be used to enforce the Treaty of Versailles, it is to be only a tool in the hands of imperialism, and all the hopes of mankind will be blasted.

If we enter the League it must be clearly understood that the American people does not intend to underwrite every imperialistic scheme of every or any constituent unit within that League; that we are not going to safeguard the integrity of empires by the blood of our youth and the treasures of our land; that we shall use our discretion and

our judgment and our free opinions as distinct cases present themselves to us for our judgment and our decision. We shall not sign a blank check for European powers.

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And if we decide to enter the League--and it is very likely that we shall decide not to enter the League as it is now constituted--we must nevertheless work for peace along other lines. First of all, a court of arbitration, which shall adjudicate cases that may be adjudicated, must be established and power given unto it. We must work for a codification of international law; and we must work incessantly and vigorously for disarmament.

Now, I know how difficult disarmament is today. I know that as long as Russia is what it is, and the Treaty of Versailles is what it is, so long will Europe be an armed camp. France cannot disarm, and Poland cannot disarm, and England, with these wasps of India and Ireland and Egypt constantly buzzing away in the imperialistic bonnet, cannot disarm, and it is, in a sense, a vain thing to think or speak of disarmament today.

Certain fundamental things will have to be decided first, by agreement or by war, before disarmament can take place in Europe. But we can enter with safety into an agreement with two of the greatest naval powers in the world looking toward a naval holiday. I believe that absolutely it is of primary importance for England and the United States and Japan to cease at once their suicidal competitive building of constantly increasing navies; for we are

repeating today on an even larger scale what England and Germany did before the war. And this competition can lead to but one thing and only one thing--war!

Do not permit chauvenists, and profiteers, and munition makers to tell you that old story about insurance--that a large navy is insurance against aggression. A large navy has only one reason for existing, and that is fighting. When nations have no navies there will be no sea battles, and when nations have no armies there will be no land battles. The surest way to avoid war between two nations is to destroy the forts, and the navies, and the arsenals, and the munition factories within those nations.

We are spending today almost ninety per cent. of the taxes collected from the American people for our army and our navy; we are spending as much as forty million dollars upon one capital battleship; and this battleship may within a year or two or three become junk, when aircraft is sufficiently developed, or the submarine is sufficiently developed. We are pouring the life blood of the American people--and so is England and Japan--into instruments of destruction, making for rivalry, for suspicion, for bitterness--for ultimate war. We are spending four million dollars a day for our army and our navy. I believe it was General Bliss who said that our modern civilization cannot stand this strain of military preparation much longer. And he is right.

We are embarked today on a program of naval

construction which will make us by 1925 the greatest sea power in the world--a navy second to none. That might tickle our national pride and make us feel that we are the greatest nation on God's earth, because we have the greatest navy. But the two do not go together at all. As long as we continue this naval program Great Britain will never permit the United States to be supreme on the seas, and that will mean that the British laboring people, already oppressed by heavy taxation, will be screwed down still further by increased taxation; they will grow bitter and resentful against the United States because of it, and then, at some critical moment, something will explode and the two great democratic powers on the earth will be tearing at each other's throat.

It is all within the realm of probability, not only possibility. And as long as we continue on our naval program Japan will continue its feverish construction of battleships. Now, the dictates of sanity and common sense, of practical business sense, ought to tell us that this thing leads only to perdition. Whether we enter a league or no, this proposal so ably put forward by Senator Borah ought to receive the indorsement of every patriotic and loyal American citizen, and a truce should be called to competitive naval armaments. And it will be the supreme opportunity of Mr. Harding to work industriously for the consummation of this end.

Of course, to stop building is not tantamount to

effecting an abiding peace. Two people may fight one another if they have fifty guns apiece, or only one gun apiece. There are certain things which should be ironed out between England and the United States, and which can be ironed out if we approach one another, not in a spirit of rivalry and suspicion, but in a spirit of amity and co-operation. I know at the present moment there are very serious and difficult things which are a matter of controversy between the two great powers. There is the question of the Panama tolls, and there is the question of the Mesopotamia oil, which is bound to become a very serious question; and there is the question of cables,--and there are three or four other perplexing problems. All of these problems may be settled amicably if the two nations determine that henceforth they will work together for their common and mutual good.

I am not an Anglo-manist and I am not an Anglo-phobist, if these are the two correct words to use. I am not excessively in love with England, and I do not nurse an excessive grudge against England. I do not belong to the group that believes that all freedom and all civilization in the world belongs to the Anglo-Saxon. And I do not belong to that group that sees in England and Englishmen a vast collection of hypocrites. There is truth in both contentions, but not the whole truth.

But I do know that the safety and the peace of the world depends upon a sympathetic understanding between

England and the United States. The two great English-speaking countries must be brought together in some sort of kinship and mutual relations. And it will be a great opportunity of Mr. Harding to work for some sort of an English-American understanding. I am not urging a political alliance for war, or an alliance for peace; I am urging a closer cooperation between these two great democracies, which will then mean that Japan, too, will be compelled to join in this union of great peoples.

If I were, then, to sum up the opportunities, as I see them, for this man who is about to be shouldered with these difficult responsibilities--and my prayer this morning is that a good God may bestow upon him the spirit of counsel and of wisdom, to strengthen his hands, to bestow upon him insight, understanding, great faith, so that he will be enabled successfully to carry out the great purposes of this land,--as I see the opportunities of this man Harding, about to become the President of the greatest republic on earth, it is, first, the end of war; the resurrection of the rights of American citizens; the reaffirmation of the rights of the various branches of our government--normalcy is his word; a return to the even tenor of the ways of American life.

Secondly, an earnest and prayerful effort for peace and disarmament, for an understanding with that other great power, whose history at certain points is bound to touch ours; and, in a general way, his opportunity will be: keep the channels of American life and thought free, to

foster a spirit of broadmindedness and liberalism in this land, to enable men to live free and fair and beautiful lives amidst peace and prosperity. And may this be the will of our Heavenly Father.

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