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Napoleon - Who is a Man of Destiny?, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON

"NAPOLEON--WHO IS A MAN OF DESTINY?"

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 22,

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I suppose that the legend of Napoleon is unique; it is incomparable. It is unique because it is modern. We think of legends evolving out of the dim past; but Napoleon is of our day, and yet there has been woven round his name personality, and achievements, and a wealth of lore and legend as to make of him almost a myth. There is a world of romance associated with the name of Napoleon. One thinks of him as one thinks of Hannibal, of Caesar, of Alexander, of Charlemagne.

A most unusual story is that of Napoleon, the son of a poor Corsican lawyer, rising from a starved lieutenant of the streets of Paris--down at the heels--to the position of emperor of two-thirds of Europe, and dying a lonely exile upon a small volcanic island in the south Atlantic. He was a man who brought untold misery upon France and upon the whole of Europe; a man who, for his destructive powers, was almost equal to a Tamerlane; a man who destroyed the liberties of the French; who nullified all the achievements of the Revolution. Yet today he lies enshrined in the heart of France in the tomb in the Invalides--the idol, the worshipped idol of the French nation.

A curious compound of a personality was this man

Napoleon. Small in essential things, full of vanity, selfish, proud, self-seeking, cynical--a man without friends; no one really loved him; many admired him. But there are very few people that are so blessed by God that they can be admired and loved at the same time. His own wife, Josephine, was unloyal and faithless to him, even as he was faithless to her. His young Austrian wife, whom he married as a political convenience, even refused to follow him to Elba after his defeat.

And yet he was the man of destiny. The men who fought for him called him in most endearing terms, the "Little Corporal." By a word, by a wave of his hand,--by a gesture, he was enabled to drive armies into battle determined upon victory; he could turn defeat into an almost impossible triumph just by a phrase of his; a man supremely competent; a military genius; a man of destiny--Napoleon Bonaparte.

I sometimes ask myself whether this man Napoleon was truly a man of destiny. I ask myself for a definition of the word or the term--a man of destiny. Who is a man of destiny? I believe that a man of destiny is he who helps mankind in its destiny. I do not know what the ultimate destiny of mankind is. Those of us who believe look forward to a far off divine end to which the whole creation moves; and yet we know that it is very possible, very likely, that the whole human race may some day perish. It is very likely that the human species may some time

become lost in utter oblivion--even like some of the other species that lived their day and ceased to be. It is very possible that some day--one knows not when--the encroaching ice bergs from the North and the South may drive the last miserable human being to the last shore of the last sea upon this earth, and that all our wonderful cities--Rome, London, Paris, New York,--and all the achievements of the centuries, and all the pride of our civilization, may some day be as dust, and leaving not even a record or a recollection.

I say, I do not know what the ultimate destiny of the human race may be, and, frankly, I do not care. I am deeply concerned with the more immediate destiny of the human race--the nearer goal, the more immediate objective to which we move; and the man of destiny is the man who helps the human race in some measure, in some way, to approach a step nearer this destiny of mankind.

And what is it? We look forward to three things, I take it. First, peace--concord among free peoples; the end of that primitive, savage and stupid warfare, which is a relic of barbarism under whatever name you find it and under whatever excuse it travels. It is an antiquated barbarism; it is an anachronism in our day. Secondly, I take it, human destiny depends upon freedom--freedom of peoples, of nations, and freedom of individuals. There may be a peace established by the force and the power of empires, without the consent of the governed; that is not

a lasting peace--that is merely the peace of a truce. Real peace can last only when there is real freedom for all. I say, the man of destiny is the man who helps to bring freedom to peoples and to individuals.

And, lastly, I take it, human destiny is bound up with the ideal of democracy--democracy in our political life, in our social life, in our religious life, in our economic life; equality of opportunity, freedom for self-realization and self-expression, where every man, figuratively, will dwell under his own vine and under his own fig tree; a man sacrificing nothing that is essential unto him in order to extol something else; men enjoying the full rights and sharing in the full responsibilities. That, I take it, is the destiny of the human race, and the man of destiny is the man who facilitates our progress to that far off definite end toward which we move.

Now, Napoleon can be said to have helped in none of these things. He was not a man of peace, as you know, and he is not one who made for peace. Napoleon waged something like eighty-five battles, and fought something like six hundred minor skirmishes. And all for what? To establish peace in Europe? No! To liberate the oppressed peoples of Europe? No! To make himself emperor of Europe! There is no question at all but that Napoleon had the Oriental dream--the dream of all the great conquerors of antiquity--to make himself monarch, ruler of the world!

Napoleon was an imperialist at heart, fascinated by the records and the stories and the legends of the great conquerors that preceded him. He was an unhappy man because of it. On the day that he was crowned emperor of France in Notre Dame, legend tells that he turned to one of his friends and said: "I am an unhappy man; I was born too late." You recall Alexander said the very same thing. Alexander wept because there were not enough worlds to conquer. Napoleon told a friend of his in great confidence one day: "Think how infinitely sad my lot is! Think of Alexander, who could proclaim himself a god and no one questioned him. If I were today, in this prosaic age of ours, proclaim myself a god, there wouldn't be a fish woman that wouldn't scoff at me. I was born too late; I was born too late."

He went to the Orient not alone to break the power of England in Egypt, in Palestine, in Syria--and it is interesting, is it not, that every empire builder goes to the Orient?--he went to the Orient hoping that out of the great East he would emerge the brilliant legendary, story-crowned conqueror of the world. He brought war to a suffering world, and no peace; and he brought no freedom to the peoples of Europe.

You remember that he set out in his military career as the great emancipator. He was welcomed in Italy as the great liberator of the Italians; they hailed him as the one who removed from their shoulders the yoke of their

ancient and traditional enemy--Austria. He came to Germany in the early days of his career as a liberator, and the lovers of freedom in Germany, in the various states and principalities and kingdoms of Germany, welcomed him; the Jews especially welcomed him, because he destroyed all the feudal prohibitions and restrictions, and all the last vestiges of ghetto life for them. They were so fond of Napoleon that they even named their children and their families after him. Many a family in Germany called itself --Bonaparte.

He began his career, then, as a lover of freedom, of liberty; he ended his career as a tyrant--a Caesar; he became drunk with power, and, heedless of the sensibilities of the countries he conquered, before very long he began to distribute the countries of Europe to his family--to all the members of his --his brothers and sisters, as one distributes Christmas baskets--without regard, cynically. And that led to the awakening of that sense of nationalism and patriotism, which had not up to that moment been the dominant and determining influence in European politics. But from the day of Napoleon until our day it is nationalism and political self-determination and patriotism that have played the tremendously significant roles of European civilization.

And it is to Napoleon Bonaparte that we owe this fact. He violated so cynically all the traditional sanctities of every people that before very long they rose

and rallied around the very kings and princes whom they were heretofore determined to dethrone. Napoleon owes his downfall to this violation of one of the most fundamental facts in human life, namely, love of country and love of one's own people. His three disastrous campaigns--Spain, Russia and Germany--proved disastrous because the peoples in these countries, angered and roused to a fury at the desecration of their national instincts and sentiments, rose against the armies of Napoleon and defeated them.

His first great debacle took place in Spain, and his second one was in Russia. Napoleon led an army of half a million of his best trained and best equipped soldiers into Russia--the best army that Europe had seen up to his day; and he came out of Russia with twenty thousand men--starved, hungry, wounded, miserable. The Battle of Leipsic, in 1813, was the supreme evidence of a great people rising to avenge the desecration of their national personality by Napoleon.

In this connection it is interesting to note the contact of Napoleon and the Jews. Napoleon was a good meddler; he liked to meddle in everything. He was a man of infinite energy. It is told that after he got to Elba, his first place of exile, within seven days he knew everything about the island, and about every house on the island; he had organized the whole government; he had appointed all the officials; he had a new flag made; he had attended to a thousand and one details, smarting under the greatest

defeat that he had experienced. His mind was always working.

He meddled also with Jewish affairs. Quite a ^{lived} number of Jews in Alsace at the time, and a complaint was launched against them. So Napoleon summoned together an assembly of Jewish notables and propounded to them twelve questions. This was in the year 1806. Among these questions was one: "Can the Jew be a true patriot of France?" Another was: "Is the Jew permitted to take usury from non-Jews?" A third question was: "Does the Jewish law permit him to merge?" Apparently the answers which this assembly gave Napoleon were satisfactory, and he summoned the following year all the leading rabbis of the countries he conquered and formed them into a San Hedrin, a reconstituted body of ancient Israel, hoping that this group would control Jewish affairs the world over. Napoleon hoped to assimilate the Jews; he was very anxious to have them intermarry and disappear as Jews. Of course in that work he failed.

He made this contribution to Jewish life, to them indirectly, just as all the great contributions of his were indirect and not direct.--he shook up the world, especially the countries of middle Europe; he destroyed the last vestiges of feudalism; he made kings ridiculous, and it is from the day of Napoleon that we can count the story of the twilight of the kings. The Jews' position naturally improves with the growth of liberalism, and so Napoleon

may be said to have aided mightily in the emancipating of the Jews.

To return to our subject, I said Napoleon helped little in bringing freedom to the peoples of the earth, and because of that he failed in the requirements for the true man of destiny. He did not help in democracy, either. He often called himself "citizen Napoleon." It was the fashion in those days; but he was not a democrat at heart. In one of his confessional moods he said to a friend of his: "If when the Revolution broke out I would have been a general, I undoubtedly would have sided with the king, but being only a subaltern I sided with the Revolution." It was that spirit of utilizing everything for self-aggrandizement and for the augmenting of his own powers that is the key to Napoleon's life.

He never trusted the people. He loved pomp, and show, and ceremony. I venture to say that no emperor of Rome was ever crowned with that same pomp and brilliancy and tawdry display as was Napoleon when he was crowned emperor by the Pope. When the Pope lifted the crown to place it on his head, Napoleon added a touch of the dramatic to it by taking the crown himself and placing it on his own head; he alone was to be responsible for having made himself emperor. He went to Milan to the cathedral and had himself crowned with the iron crown of Lombardy. He never omitted an occasion when he could display himself with all royal pomp and circumstance.

He founded many an order of honor. The Legion of Honor may be traced back to Napoleon. And it is very interesting to compare the frame of mind and the attitude of a Washington to Napoleon. Washington destroyed the one last order--the Order of Cincinnati; Napoleon founded the orders. It is a very interesting study of human psychology to see how Napoleon, a man of keen insight, was most fooled. Napoleon saw with his own eyes Louis XVI made a target for all the jeers and all the mockery of a Paris mob; with his own eyes Napoleon saw Louis XVI surrounded by a French mob, compelled to put upon his head the Red Cap, the sign of the Revolution; he saw the people around him hiss him and jeer him. And he at that moment spoke of the king as a poor driveler. Napoleon himself knew the humiliation of the king, Louis XVIII, who, when Napoleon became an exile, sent a letter to him begging him to restore him to the throne of France.

Napoleon himself one day, when he was surrounded by a cheering mob of thousands of people, after one of his wonderful victories, turning to one of his friends, said: "Bah! this crowd would surround me just the same if I were going to the scaffold." He knew all these things, and yet he permitted himself to follow in the footsteps of Louis XVI and a Louis XVIII; he permitted himself to take on all the pomp and show of royalty, and all the prerogatives of royalty; he hankered after these things. And one sometimes wonders just what Napoleon

thought when he sat in the palance of Fontaineblau, after the terrible disasters of 1814--alone for hours, sitting there kicking his boot in the gravel; and one wonders what Napoleon thought during the six long, agonizing years on St. Helena, with a stupid, nagging, cruel, vindictive jailor, omitting no opportunity to insult him--an outcast, an exile, unknown and forgotten. One wonders what Napoleon, this saturnine egotist, as he has been called, thought in those moments of introspection.

He used everything to serve his ends, I said. Even religion. He spoke of religion in the same terms as some of the communes of Russia speak of it today--as the opium of the people. "We need religion," he said; "we need religion to keep the people quiet and subdued and peaceful. There are such glaring inequalities in the world," said he. "Here is a man with luxury, and by his side is a man who is starving; if there wasn't the fear of God in the world, the fear of the hereafter, the world would come to an end." And so he urged the people to become pious on that basis.

His last draft of soldiers was made up very largely of children, almost all young lads. He depopulated France and many a country in Europe. And all his labors led to a frightful reaction; all the sacrifices led to that infamous Holy Alliance, which enthroned reaction; it led to that infamous Treaty of Vienna, which retarded the progress of

European civilization for half a century. Why, in Spain the Inquisition was restored as a result of Napoleon's efforts. With his downfall the persecution of the Jews began anew. They were expelled from Lubeck, Germany, in 1815, and in Bavaria they were attacked and mobs began to cry the old, old cry: "Hep! hep! kill the Jews!"

That was the sum total of Napoleon's contribution to civilization in a military way. He did bring contributions to civilization indirectly. The things that will live because of Napoleon are, first of all, the tremendous shaking up that he gave to the whole political structure of Europe. He paved the way to the revolution of '30 and to the revolution of '48; he ended feudalism forever in Europe. The things that will live after Napoleon are the constructive things.

The Code of Laws which he succeeded in having formulated, and which since his day goes by his name--the Code of Napoleon; the schools he founded; the colleges he founded; the institutions of learning that he supported; the city of Paris which he beautified; the wonderful roads that he built; the impetus that he gave to industry and commerce.--these things will live after Napoleon because these are constructive things; these help the destiny of the human race.

And one is inclined to ask oneself: do these things justify the slaughter of millions? Do these things justify the extermination of peoples? Could these things

not have been brought about in a less costly and a less tragic way? And from that point of view Napoleon stands accused as being one of the supreme failures of human history.

Who is the man of destiny? Not Napoleon, friends. Washington was a man of destiny; Lincoln was a man of destiny; Newton was a man of destiny; Boliver was a man of destiny; Wright was a man of destiny; so was Columbus a man of destiny. Every child of God who is blessed with opening up undiscovered lands, whether it be territory or intellectual fields; every man who discovers new horizons for the human race; every man who shatters the shackles of slavery, whether it be political, social or economic; every man who brings a little more of happiness into human life; every man who increases the sum total of human knowledge, who alleviates suffering, who heals, who strengthens, who brings men together into closer bonds of kinship,--is a man of destiny. Every physician who discovers a cure whereby millions of lives are saved--a Madame Cure, who discovers a new element which revolutionizes science and scientific thought,--they are children of destiny; they are the prophets of civilization, the guides of mankind.

I sometimes pray that we will some day re-write all our histories, for they are all written wrong; there is a wrong standard of values, a false way of gauging and measuring the value of the contributions of peoples. When all is said and done it is not Alexander, nor Hannibal, nor

Charlemagne, nor Caesar that made civilization. They are dramatic obstacles thrown across the pathway of human progress. It is often the humble, sometimes the unknown, scientist and scholar, the thinker, the poet, the prophet, who is the builder of human destiny. I would that more space be given in our histories to these men and less to those who strutted across the stage of history with the sword clashing at their side, with helmets and spurs; who fussed and fumed and had their day and left behind them ruined cities and devastated countries, and the sobs of women and the cries of children, and misery and suffering.

The less dramatic, the less heroic, but the truly courageous; the less ostentatious but the eternally, universally worthwhile,--these are the people who should be held up as the inspiration for the generation of tomorrow. There are no men of destiny but those who assist in human concord, through freedom. There are no men of destiny but those who assist in human freedom through justice. There are no men of destiny but those who improve the well-being of men and women through the increase of knowledge, through the destruction of ignorance and superstition, through the removing of the chains that enslave.

The true man of destiny, my friends, is the man who brings kindness and gentleness and the healing balm to the wounds of the world; the true man of destiny is the man who brings love and mutual understanding in the world.

Napoleon was no man of destiny. Many men of

destiny will be required to make good the things which
Napoleon destroyed, and to build upon the ruins which he
left.

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