

SERIES IV

SERMONS

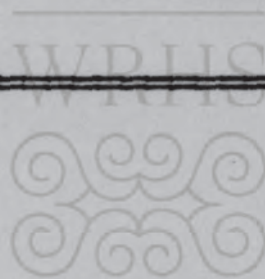
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Sermon title: Ghosts at the Conference Table, November 6, 1921

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"GHOSTS AT THE CONFERENCE TABLE," AT
THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER
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Two years after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which was supposed to usher in an era of peace and good will among men, another conference is called in the City of Washington to discuss the very things which Versailles was supposed to have settled. To my mind, the Washington conference is a frank confession on the part of the great powers of the failure of the Treaty of Versailles, and of its tragic blundering.

One cannot help thinking today what a wonderful phrase that was that President Wilson in his day uttered: "Peace without victory." We did not get peace without victory; we got peace with victory. But we also got peace with chaos, anarchy, starvation, unemployment--peace by which the victor suffered as much as the vanquished.

The Washington conference, to my mind, is summoned to make good the mistakes of two years ago. But it is all too innocent a thing to believe, friends, that this conference is called merely for the sake of discussing the problem of the limitation of armaments--or, rather, that the problem of the limitation of armaments can be intelligently discussed in and by itself without reference to these other innumerable problems that agitated the minds of the diplomats at Versailles.

If the problem of disarmament, complete or gradual, could be isolated and treated by itself, then it is quite

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clear that the entire subject can be amicably decided in twenty-four hours, for there is not a sane thinking man or nation that wants armament--unless it be crazy imperialists or munition manufacturers. The world at large is sick at heart because of the need to arm itself, and because of the consequent terrific burden of taxation, which saps the very life of the peoples of the earth.

It is, therefore, to my mind, a rather futile thing to urge upon people the wisdom of disarmament, or to paint the horrors of war in order to convince them of the principle. They are convinced, but it is not the principle that is the disturbing factor; it is the program. I believe it was Shaw who said that a principle without a program is a platitude. There is a world of truth in that. We can all agree upon the need, the wisdom, the ethics, the sanity of disarmament, yet we will have agreed upon very little. What we are called upon to agree on is the How--how this thing is to be effected; the technique, the methods, the agencies. And that is where the rub is. When you begin to discuss how to disarm, and what would be the consequences of disarmament to each single nation affected, then you touch ^a very sensitive spot, a very sore wound of the world.

Mr. Harding has endeavored during the past few months to limit the scope of the conference, because he realizes that unless the scope is limited the conference

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will resolve itself into a fine vagueness which will evaporate. But try hard as he will, the scope of the conference cannot really be limited. It is a herculean task that he has taken upon himself. We hope, we pray, that he succeeds.

But he will find that in this complex and involved thing which we call international relationships, where politics and economics are inexorably and inevitably interlaced and interwoven, and where all the past passions and prejudices of the peoples play a supreme and telling role,--he will find that in this vast complexity it is very difficult to try to unravel one thread without having to go through the entire texture of international relationships.

Armament is only the gout that has settled in the toe of the world. When you touch that toe it sends a shock right through the entire body of the world. And perhaps Mr. Harding will soon come to realize and understand why his distinguished predecessor failed. All nations want this conference, and yet all of them are suspicious of it. Briand, of France, had to fight one of the major battles of his career in order to be allowed to come here. Lieutenant-general Sato, of Japan, urges his government not to send to Washington men of the first rank, but only to send those who are fluent in foreign languages and are socially qualified. There was talk in England of sending

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men not of the first rank to the conference.

The nations of the world want the conference but are afraid of it or suspicious of it. They want it because the need is there, because the popular clamor is there, because the hunger is there, because the burden of taxation is there, because they are being driven headlong into future wars; they want it because their exchange has crumbled almost to nothing; they want it because their factories are shut down; they want it because the world is facing complete bankruptcy. But they are suspicious of it just the same; because if the conference succeeds they fail, and if they succeed the conference fails. Because the people who are coming to Washington are the very same people having the same outlook, the same traditions, the same convictions, as the people who came to Versailles.

There is not a prophet among them; there is not a man among them who has within his soul the burden of a vision; there is not one among them who can look through the mists that veil the present and catch the glimmer of a new order of things. They are all enmeshed and involved in the intricacies of the present, in all the diplomatic trickeries and bargainings and barterings that brought the world to the tragedy of 1914.

So that if they are to succeed in Washington, each one of them realizing those nationalistic or imperialistic ambitions which he harbors, then the

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conference will fail. If the conference succeeds, then they fail--and they are not ready to fail.

It is very sad, to my mind, that the nations of the world today, realizing what transpired two years ago, did not see fit to send to Washington men of a new caliber, of a new outlook, of a new vision; not suave and polished and refined diplomats--men who potter, men who take the spigot to stop the bung hole, but men who can see the outlines of a new social organization, informed not by the lust for acquisitiveness but by the spirit of mutuality and cooperation among men. But they have not, and they will be the ghosts that will hover over the conference table in Washington; the past will be there. But not alone are the people the same as of yesterday, but the policies which these people will define are the same policies that wrecked Europe.

What is back of armament? Nations do not arm to defend themselves; that is a fallacy. And one of the supreme fallacies of the nineteenth century has been that armament is sort of a national insurance. Well, there is one thing that it makes sure, and that is war. Nations never arm to defend themselves. Canada did not need to arm to defend itself against the United States; the United States did not need to arm to defend itself against Canada. But if Canada had any imperialistic ambitions, if Canada entertained any ideas of ultimately snatching some parcel

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of the United States; or if the United States entertained such ambitions, then you would have seen the complete frontier between the United States and Canada dotted with fortifications.

Back of armament is imperialism, and back of imperialism is economics. Please remember that. And the bane of the world today is economic imperialism. Germany did not have to arm itself to have a place in the sun; Germany had a very spacious place in the sun. But to Germany a place in the sun meant free access to and ultimate dominion of the Near East--of Mesopotamia, of Bagdad, because German monopolists and German bankers were interested in the exploitation of that vast, rich land of Mesopotamia, of Turkey, of the Near East; and so these economic imperialists got their government to back them with bayonets. And hence armament.

That is why it is so foolish on the part of our American citizens to speak of our splendid isolation, of our freedom from entanglements and foreign alliances. Why, we are entangled up to our noses in foreign alliances! Every time our monopolists, or our bankers, or our corporations, or our trusts, invest capital or exploit oil fields in Mexico, in China, in the farthestmost points of the earth, our government is duty bound to back them up--at least, so the morality of the present day is interpreted. And back them up how? Why, with navies and with armies.

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A Japanese might kill one of those exalted Chinamen, in whom we are so little concerned, in Peking, and it might kill your boy in Cleveland, just as the shot that killed a man in Serajevo, in 1914, killed fifty thousand American boys, three thousand miles away, four years later. Why, these things are linked inseparably, one with another. There is no national isolation today, because there is no commercial or economic isolation. We must trade with other peoples in order to keep our factories working; and the whole sad cause of unemployment in this country today is that we cannot trade with foreign peoples, because they can not buy our products; their money is worthless.

So that the problem of armament is the problem of economic imperialism and how to curb it; and that is a very serious and a very difficult problem. That is a ghost that will hover over the heads of the men in the Washington conference.

There are other ghosts. There is Japan. Japan, to my mind, is the key to the entire situation, and the cause of the convoking of this conference. Japan is the Germany of the Pacific, or, rather, let me say, the Prussia of the Pacific; an intensely militaristic government, physically of the twentieth century; psychologically still belonging to Medieval days; a nation that has not yet outgrown its feudal spirit, its caste system. There are

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in Japan today the rumblings of new things, but it is still in the grip of the old order of things; a little country, scarcely one-sixth the size of Alaska, and yet having a population of over fifty-five millions of human beings, Japan must expand--at least, so the Japanese feel.

Japan also seeks to realize its national destiny--a place in the sun. Japan is not wanted by Canada; Japan is not wanted by the United States; Japan is not wanted by Australia; Japan is not wanted by New Zealand; but Japan must expand, and so Japan goes to China and begins the economic exploitation of China; and Japan goes to Siberia and begins the economic exploitation of Siberia. Then America comes around and says: "You cannot do it; China must be independent; China must be let alone; the integrity of China is sacred." And the same thing of Siberia.

And there you have the problem of a growing, expanding, intelligent, aggressive, proud people being confined in a steel ring, even as Germany was confined in a steel ring; and war is almost inevitable. Because the Japanese say to England: "What right have you to preach morality to me? What are you doing in India? What are you doing in Egypt?" "And what right have you, the United States, to preach morality to me? What are you doing in the Philippines? And didn't you grab the Panama when you thought you needed it?" "What right have you, France, to preach morality to me? Didn't you take Indo-China? Didn't

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you take everything in sight, or everything you could grab? Why should I sacrifice my national destiny to satisfy the scruples of you whose own hands are not clean?"

That is a ghost that will hover over the heads of the conferees at Washington. There are other ghosts. There is France. Ah, France! with a vast standing army, close onto a million! "We have," says France, "but you have left us again alone to defend ourselves; our population has dwindled; right on our frontier is our sworn enemy, whose population is larger, whose mortality is greater than ours. I asked you, England and the United States, to enter into an alliance with me to protect me in case of aggression on the part of Germany; you refused. But how am I to defend myself against a people that will never be reconciled to its defeat? I must have a vast standing army." That is a ghost of the conference table.

And all the Balkan States, and Poland, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia, Greece--all say, "Why, of course, we want to disarm; our people do not wish to pay these crushing taxes. But there is Russia; there is Bolshevism; and Russia has not even been called to attend the conference. But Russia has vast armies and vast resources, and is a constant menace to us. How can we disarm?"

And Greece will say: "There is Turkey and the whole Mohammedan world that may crush us unless we arm and

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arm to the teeth." These are ghosts at the conference table, and these problems cannot be solved with idealism unadulterated.

The prospects, of course, are not very bright for the success of the conference, but along with these ghosts of which I have spoken, there are other ghosts that may perhaps help the situation a bit. There are other considerations that might force the hand, the unwilling hand of each and every conferee around the conference table. There are the ghosts of the ten millions that died in the last war; they, too, will speak eloquently through the lips of death to the men there.

The ghost of the poilu, and the ghost of the tommy, and the ghost of the buddy--they will all be there, and they will say in whispered accents to the hearts of the people there: "We gave of the precious life blood that a new order of things may come to pass; we gave up life's careers, life's sweetness, all the promises of the days--the imperial years of our manhood,--we gave them all up that through our sacrifices a something finer and nobler might come to the children of man. Do not betray us now. Let not our comrades in the days to come be called upon to pass through the same agony of body and soul that we were called upon to pass." These are ghosts that will speak.

There will be the spirits there of millions of mothers the world over--some of them who gave their dear

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ones and lost them; others who gave the years of terrible waiting, of suspense. They, too, will be there, and will ask of the men: "Build us a world where children will be safe, where young men can grow up without this pall, this menace hanging over them."

There will be the ghosts there, my friends, of a world that is on the brink of destruction, a world that seems to be drifting to barbarism. Commerce and industry are fast coming to a standstill; cities are being ruined; millions of men are dying of starvation, as if this were not the twentieth century but the thirteenth. The whole delicate fabric of our civilization, wrought by the untiring labors of the choicest spirits of the world through the generations is in danger of crumbling to the ground.

The misery of the world will be there; the heart-aches and the agonies; and a public opinion will be there knocking at the door demanding to be heard; the men and the women who ultimately pay the price for every criminal diplomatic stupidity and blunder,--they will be there asking to be heard.

These things may have weight today. Frankly, I am not too optimistic; I don't want to be disillusioned again. Some good might come out of it, if only this: if the United States can come to an understanding with Japan concerning their mutual policies and rights and privileges

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in the Pacific; if the United States can come to some sort of an understanding with Japan, with England, with both, with either, concerning China. And mind you this: that it is not the strong nation that is a menace to the world, but the weak nation. A weak nation is a constant temptation to a powerful nation to exploit it; and China is today in the grip of anarchy and chaos. If the nations of the world--if England, Japan and America, can come to some understanding incident to the fate of China, then much will have been achieved--much more than we can hope for for the peace and the happiness of the world.

At least, it is a conference, and that in itself is an encouraging thing. As long as nations will get together in conference, whether these conferences fail or succeed, something good is bound to come out of it--a clarification, a removal of suspicion; because back of most of these universal catastrophes is suspicion first, and then hatred, and then war.

We are not going to be discouraged because we are not going to expect much. But this will always be true, and this will always redound to the glory and the honor of our great republic: that two of the major efforts for international comity and a better understanding among peoples were initiated by the representatives of our country.

My friends, before universal peace will come to

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be, and before nations will beat their swords into plow shares, a hundred conferences will have to be held, and many leagues will be devised and discarded. The world gropes and crawls; it does not move swiftly and majestically. It gropes its way up, stumbles and falls to rise again, to move on again; and these conferences are just so many gropings into the dark, into the future. But they are significant; they are tremendously important; they are full of promise, because they lead us a little nearer, and a little nearer, to the ultimate goal.

The temple of universal peace will have to be built through the coming ages, but it will always be the proud thought of an American that it was an American who first laid the foundations for this temple in the blood of his heart, and that it was another American who may now be privileged to add another stone or another pillar, who knows, to this holy temple.

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