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What has the Jew Given to Europe?, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "WHAT HAS THE JEW GIVEN TO EUROPE?"
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It is very difficult, indeed, to compress within the short space of one lecture a topic so vast as that which we have designated for the theme of our discourse this morning--What has the Jew given to Europe? I shall endeavor only in a most desultory way to point to the large influences rather than the specific contributions. I shall speak more of the influence of the Jew upon the economic, the political, the social, the cultural life of Europe, rather than of the specific contribution of Jews to these things. I shall endeavor to speak of these things objectively--not from the point of view of apologetics, nor as a propagandist, but simply as an historian.

Perhaps the first interesting phase of Jewish influence may be the commercial, the industrial influence of the Jew in the development of Modern Europe. Professor Sombart, in a very fine book called "Jews and Modern Capitalism," asks this rather interesting question, and answers it in this most interesting way: "Why did the center of commercial and industrial life shift in the sixteenth century from Southern Europe to Western Europe?"

Up to the end of the sixteenth century countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal were the great centers of commercial activity for the European continent. From that time on it shifts to France and England, to northern



Germany, more especially to Holland. And he analyzes the facts and he comes to this rather startling conclusion: that the reason for this tremendous shift in economic importance from the south to the northwest was due principally to the fact that during the sixteenth century the Jews were driven out from the countries of Southern Europe and were compelled to migrate to the North; and whithersoever they came they brought with them economic initiative, enterprise and prosperity, and whatsoever land they left began to decay economically.

He says in his own startling phrase: "Israel passes over Europe like the sun: at its coming new life bursts forth; at its going all falls into decay." You will recall, undoubtedly, that the Jews were exiled from Spain in 1492, from Portugal in 1495 and 1497, from Genoa and Venice in 1520, from Naples in 1540. Now, in these countries the Jew had for centuries been the channel for international trade for the whole of the European continent. With their going these channels, these avenues of communication moved north.

And where did the Jews go to? Some went to France; and at once we find in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the cities of Marseille, Bordeaux and Rouen sprung to life and enjoyed unprecedented prosperity. Some went to Germany; and the only two cities at the time that would welcome them were the cities of Hamburg and

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Frankfort; and it is strange to say that these two cities, and these two cities only, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enjoyed economic activity and economic prosperity. Some went to England--surreptitiously, at least, but after Cromwell, in 1654, publicly. From that time on the great international commerce of England, the great colonization enterprises of England, really begin. And principally these Jews from Spain and Portugal went to Holland, this little land half on the water, and Holland becomes the greatest commercial people, and retains that unenviable position of being the greatest colonizer for over two hundred years. The Jews came to Holland in 1593--the Moranos fleeing from Spain settled there, and it is they who made Holland the great pivot of international trade of the European continent.

Had I the time I would trace just what the Jews contributed to the colonization of the world--to the colonization of South Africa, of India, of Australia, of the Western Hemisphere. It is interesting to note that already in 1492 there was a Jewish settlement on the Western Hemisphere in St. Thomas. The Jews were, by their very position, able to carry on international trade. They were everywhere. They had a common bond between them, most often a bond of language; and that assisted them materially in their trade.

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The Jews developed the instruments of modern capital. The bill of exchange, the bank note, the stock exchange and similar devices for the facilitation of capitalistic enterprises were either created by the Jew or developed by the Jew. The Jew was the great. . . . the great undertaker, to translate the word literally. He was able to project great economic enterprises and make them possible; he thought of things in national and international aspects, and so he became the great developer of modern capital.

Now, that might be desirable and it might not be desirable. We have been accused and blamed both for the creation of capital and the destruction of capital. We are concerned now not with passing judgment upon facts but trying to ascertain the facts. It is quite clear to any student of economics that capitalism was a necessary stage in the development of the human race; that in order to pass from feudalism, from serfdom to a higher economic organization, society had to pass through an intense property-owning, capitalistic period; and insofar as the Jew contributed to the intensive and delicate organization of the economic system, insofar he may be said to have contributed to civilization.

We have been blamed, rightly or wrongly, for our great capitalists. I suppose we suffer as much for our off child as we do for our Trotskys. Much of the anti-

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Semitism of the last fifty years is due to the envy, to the rivalry encouraged by Jewish success in capitalistic efforts. Be that **as it may**, the fact remains that the Jew brought prosperity wherever he went. And prosperity means happiness; and prosperity means opportunities for education; and prosperity means health, and clean cities, and schools and colleges.

But more than commercially, the Jew has contributed culturally to Europe. You know that with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth-sixth centuries, and with the constant surge of invading barbarians that swept over Europe--the Goths and the Visigoths, and the Huns and the Vandals--the intellectual life of Western Europe began to decay. In 529, I believe, the School of Athens, the last great philosophic school of Europe, was ordered closed by the Emperor Justinian. While the night of the West was sinking into the night of Medievalism--the Dark Ages, philosophy and the ancient wisdom of the Greeks were disseminated in the East--in Syria, in Mesopotamia, in Persia.

When the Mohammedans conquered the Orient in the seventh century they took over this learning and the philosophy and the science of the Greeks unto themselves. The Mohammedans loved learning and fostered it; they saw nothing in science and in philosophy contradictory to their theology or their religion. So they fostered



learning; and they had all the works of the Greeks--
Herophilus[?] in medicine; Euclid in mathematics; and
Aristotle in philosophy, translated into the Arabic; and
they opened great schools in Bagdad, Cairo, Cordova, and
in other parts of the world, where these sciences and
philosophies were taught. They were the only schools
in the world at that time.

When we speak of the great Christian
civilization, and when these Christian apologists speak
with contempt of the Orient, of the Mohammedans, it is
well to remember that for hundreds of years, when Europe
was staggering in the Stygian gloom of intellectual
darkness, with ignorance and illiteracy and superstition
so prevalent, the Arabs were developing a wonderful
civilization and a wonderful culture--medicine, astronomy,
logic, philosophy--while the Jews came under the influence
of the Arabs and learned from them.

The center of Jewish life was, at the time,
Babylon, and Egypt, and Syria, and Palestine, and the Jews
began to speak Arabic and to write Arabic, and to study
in the schools of the Arabs, and at once they came under
the influence of Greek thought which the Arabs had taken
over. Now, it was through the medium of the Jew, who were
the disciples of the Arabs, that Greek thought, Greek
learning, came into Europe. The Jews were the disciples
of the Arabs, but the teachers of the Christians. The



Jews were the medium through which the ancient wisdom which had been forgotten by Europe came back into European civilization; and that made possible the Renaissance, the revival of learning, the opening up of new horizons for the peoples of Europe. So that the Jew, who took the works of the Arabs and translated them to Latin, made possible modern European civilization.

Had I the time I would go into greater detail, showing how a man like Maimonides tried to harmonize Judaism with the doctrines of Aristotle. And may I say that Aristotle is as much a force today in thinking as he was during the Middle Ages and as he was in his day. Aristotle was perhaps the greatest single human mind that the human race has ever produced. Maimonides, the greatest Jewish philosopher, was the model and the teacher of Thomas Aquinas, the greatest Christian philosopher of the Middle Ages; and all the learned men of that time--Albertus Magnus, Duns Scotus, and other great thinkers, drew their inspiration from Jewish learning, which in turn came from Arabic learning, who took it from the Greeks.

Culturally, the Jew gave to Europe tremendously. One can but point to the name of Spinoza, the philosopher, who held European thought enthralled for two hundred years, and is as much a factor in human thought today as he was in his day. One can but point to Bergson, who is today

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the arbiter of metaphysics; one needs point only to the new science of psychoanalysis, which, to my mind, will revolutionize most of the human thought in the next one hundred years, and see that it is almost exclusively a Jewish creation, from Freud to Adler. I say, one but needs to mention these facts to realize what an overpowering influence, what a vitalizing and energizing influence the Jew has been in European thought from earliest to latest times. I am but outlining.

Politically, the Jew has always been a liberal, and I suppose that is the reason he has been disliked so much. People do not like liberals, especially the entrenched and privileged classes do not like liberals. Politically, as I say, the Jew has always been a liberal; I mean as a people. Individually there may have been the Jewish exception, like Disraeli, the great empire builder. It was Disraeli who gave India to England, and the Suez Canal to England; and today when England has a difficult problem in India, or in Palestine, it sends a Jew to India and a Jew to Palestine to solve the problem for her. It is a rather clever way of doing things.

I say, as a group, as a people, the Jews have always been liberal; and naturally and inevitably so, because liberalism meant freedom from persecution, and liberalism meant opportunity--economic opportunity and educational opportunity. The Jew has been, as a class,



a middle class--of the Bourgeoisie; a small capitalist or a large capitalist. The Bourgeoisie destroyed feudalism. The industrial group wanted freedom--the policy of laissez-nous faire--let us alone. Let politics stay out of business. And so the industrial centers ultimately destroyed the power of the feudal lords; and the Jew, who was interested in the industrial centers and in capitalism, was greatly responsible for the undermining of the power of the feudal lords in Europe.

You read the history of the last one hundred years of Germany, of Hungary, of Austria, of France, of Russia, and you will find these brilliant sons and daughters of Israel fighting the war of human liberation everywhere. German liberalism is a product of two Jews--Heine and And you know how much the Jew has given to the freedom of Russia. Siberia can tell a very tragic tale of the martyred sons and daughters of Israel who gave themselves up for the freedom of Russia.

The Jew is a liberal also because of his tradition, and because, I believe, of his religion. The Jew from earliest times had no use for royalty, for monarchy, for authority--political authority. The only authority that he recognized was the authority of God--a religious authority. When the people came to Samuel and asked for a king, he refused to give them a king. "God does not wish kings. Your kings will enslave you

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and exploit you." It was only when they urged him and threatened him that he finally consented to appoint a king over them. And when the early American commonwealth sought for justification in its rebellion against British tyranny, they pointed to this early instance of Samuel, and the early commonwealth of Israel, and said that God does not look with favor upon royalty. And I believe they were right.

In the very blood of the Jew there is an intense individualism which does not brook super-imposed authority. A Jew will submit to a voluntary authority, a religious authority, an authority which he himself creates--a self-imposed discipline, but the authority of other human beings imposed upon him he frets under; and wherever there is such authority, wherever there is such oppression, you will find the Jew as the great restive, unsatisfied element. People do not like that. But it is the leaven of civilization; it is what makes the world move.

I have now spoken of the Jews' contribution to commercial Europe, to philosophic, to cultural Europe, and to political Europe. A word about his contribution to the economic thought of Europe. People who speak of Jewish unity and of Jewish conspiracy, implying a unity, ought really to acquaint themselves with the facts, ought really to realize that this same people that created capitalism--or, to put it more conservatively, developed



capitalism in Europe, is the same people that has produced the greatest champions of socialism in Europe, the men who wish to destroy capitalism. The great bible of socialism was written by a Jew--Karl Marx. And some of the greatest disciples of socialism, like Ferdinand La Salle, were Jews. And even some communists are Jews. I suppose that may be fortunate or unfortunate, as one looks upon the philosophy of communism. But it might be well to bear in mind that communism, while it may be very impractical in part, while it may be destructive of some of the things that society must hold dearest, it still remains a fact that communism as an ideal must always wend hand in hand with great religious revivals.

The early Christians were communists. I said last week that Jesus was a communist. He was. And the early Christian church for a hundred years or more was a communistic church; they all pooled their resources and shared alike. When that great Cossack rebellion took place in Europe in the fifteenth century, or the uprising of the masses in England, they at once began to establish im-
communistic societies. Very practical, I suppose, but somehow the idea went hand in hand with religious enthusiasm.

R..... called the Jews the first socialists. He made many general statements, only part of which is true. If by socialism he meant that the Jew has always

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had a social point of view rather than a selfish point of view, he was correct. The Jew was the socialist of all times; he preached the gospel of social responsibility, and social service, and social cooperation, and social helpfulness; but it is true that nearly all the great experiments for new economic forms of organization--and mind you, the capitalistic form of organization is only one of them--had the Jewish intellect behind it.

And, finally, the Jewish contribution to the life and social vision of Europe. Let me read one short paragraph from the book of Professor Baldwin called, "Our Modern Debt to Israel." Professor Baldwin says: "To Israel the debt of our modern world is simply beyond compute. Our obligation institutionally we may indeed calculate with some degree of exactitude, but we can demonstrate accurately the extent to which our modern life is influenced by Israel's ideals. Our ideals of personal character are very largely those of the Hebrew sages; our visions of the kingdom of God on earth are those of the Hebrew prophets; our hopes of social justice are those of the Hebrew prophets and the Hebrew priests. Whatever there is in modern civilization that is making for human fraternity; wherever religious inspiration is calling men to a higher sense of duty; wherever men and women are toiling to prove that humanity is a great brotherhood, there we find men living, acting, thinking

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under the influence of these leaders of Hebrew thought."

I wish more would have this view of things; I wish more of our own people would realize this fact. As I conceive of my people--and on a day such as this, which is about to inaugurate the great festival of Chanukah, a festival commemorating the first great struggle of the people for independence and for freedom and for the right of worship--almost two thousand years before a similar revolt took place on this continent,--when I think of my people right through the ages, I can see as a golden thread running through the whole pattern of its life this dominant note of its life, first announced to Father Abraham: "Be thou a blessing." And it is one of the supreme convictions of my life that the Jew throughout the ages, consciously or unconsciously, has been a blessing to the peoples of the earth. Whether commercially, economically, politically, socially or culturally, he was, as Sombart said, like a sun passing over the peoples of the earth, bringing the vitalizing rays of the mind and the soul to bear upon the soil of any people to which he came, yielding abundantly of spiritual and intellectual gifts unto the races of mankind.

The world needs him today, I believe, even more than the world needed the Jew a thousand years ago. When the world hates the Jew most it needs him most. The world today needs the critical acumen, the intellectual honesty,



the practical sense of social vision, the code of ethics which the genius of our people has created. Mind you, we ourselves are not always faithful to these things, but the race has always been better than the individual, and the race has always retained its soul, even when some of its individuals had lost theirs.

The world needs us today. I said last week that what is essential in Christianity, in its ethics, is Jewish. I say today that what is essential in modern European civilization, apart from what the Greeks gave to European civilization in the love of the esthetic, in the love of beauty in art,--apart from what the Greeks gave to Europe, all else that is at the very foundation of European civilization today, all else that holds within itself the promise of future growth and future development, for new visions, for new hopes for the human race,--I say, all else is Jewish. And when men and women of my faith grow indifferent and begin to drift, I pity them. They think that they can best serve the human race by disassociating themselves from this little group of people called the Jews. They are sadly mistaken. When they leave this little group that holds within itself this mystic gift, this racial genius that throws off at all times new rays and new inspirations and new ideas and new visions, they are leaving themselves hollow, empty of content; they bring nothing to the peoples to whom they

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go, and they destroy the glory of their lives. The Jew can best serve the human race by remaining closely allied in close contact with the inspiration and the genius of his own race. Then he becomes a blessing to mankind.

The Jew has a glorious past, but, to my mind, he has a future equally as glorious. We have yet much to give to the world. Our last immortal phrase has not yet been spoken, and the last great prophet of our race has not yet been created. Even as we gave to the world abundantly in the days gone by, and as we are giving to the world today,--all about you everywhere the Jew is in the van of intellectual and spiritual creations--so will the Jew in the days to come, if he remains true to the vision that is his, if he does not sink his soul and wallow in the cesspool of materialism, if he remains true to that living fire of inspiration, of ideals, of faith which is his eternal heritage,--I say, if the Jew remains true to his vision, the Jew will yet give richly, profusely, abundantly to the races of mankind in the days to come.

And we shall march down the highways of history, on our lips the immortal song, in our blood the rhythm of an immortal race, and in our soul the ancient charge: "Be thou a blessing! Be thou a blessing!"

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