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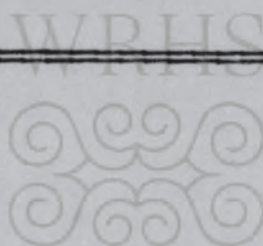
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Some Legends of My People, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
"ON "SOME LEGENDS OF MY PEOPLE,"
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
JANUARY 29, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.



For a brief moment let us leave the world of the real, the now, and transport ourselves to the world of legend, of story. Let us try and forget the world of today and all its cares and problems, with its indemnities and disarmaments and tariffs and taxes; let us lose ourselves in the world of romance, the world of yesterday, where facts lose themselves in the great sea of fiction; where everything has the glamour of far away things.

I sometimes wonder which is really the real world--the world of fact or the world of fancy; which is really history--history as we know it--or legend; and where is truth: in science or in human imagination. I sometimes ask myself whether we are not, after all, worshipping facts too much. A fact is only a fact; an incident, something that happened. But a poetic truth is something abiding and eternal.

I venture to say, in looking at things from the perspective of history, that the legendary figure of King Arthur and the Round Table, and all the beauty and the romance associated with the name of King Arthur, is, as far as human life and the culture of the race are concerned, just as real and just as true as the historic character, say, of Charlemagne. And I venture to say that the poetically created character of Hamlet, or the legendary figure of Faust, as embellished by a genius like Marlowe, are just as real and just as true as Napoleon is, or

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Hannibal, or Caesar. Legend completes an historic fact. What history fails to discover or to express, popular fancy completes and perfects in legend; what a great hero might have been, what he might have been even if he failed to do it because of the limitations of his life, legend enabled him to do and to perform.

Legend even is the verdict of history upon great men and great events; it is the judgment which a people passes upon the heroes of its history. Of course, there is a great deal of truth in the popular phrase: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Things that are removed from us, things that were loved and lost, assume a greater polish; the angularities of facts are dissolved in the distance; what we see is a halo and a smoothness and a brilliancy. That is the tribute which our love lays at the shrine of memory. Whatever is improbable in life becomes very probable, almost inevitable, in memory. The mind speaks in facts, the heart speaks in legend. When you want to know the soul of a people, what a people really feels deeply, do not read its laws but read its lore, its folk song, its myths, its romance.

Now, our people, a people of the book, a people of learning, a people of the intellect, was yet never without its rich vein of mysticism and poetry and legend and folk lore. Israel never permitted its imagination to run riot, to destroy truth; but it never starved its soul;



it gave free rein from earliest times to the present to the play of the rich fancy of popular imagination. From the first legend that you find in the Bible to the last legend that is today repeated in the households of Eastern Europe, legend never ceased in Israel.

In the Bible the great figure of Abraham, in fact, the patriarchs--Moses and David and Solomon and Elijah and Jeremiah; and the great events--the sojourn in the land of Egypt, the wanderings in the desert, the quest of Canaan, the destruction of the temple, the exile,--all these great figures and great events assumed, in the course of time, a veritable cluster of legends and tales and stories that embellished them, that enriched them, that refined them; the soul of the people expressed itself in them and through them.

It has been said that a dream is a fulfilled wish. The things we would like to have and like to be find vivid expression in our dreams. Well, a people has dreams even as an individual; and the real longings of the people, and its hopes, and the things it would like to be, express themselves in the legends of its heroes and its saints and its martyrs. What a people would like its heroes to be--that is the people. What a man dreams--that is the man.

The rabbis of the Talmud truly said: "A man should not say, 'I have studied the law and that is enough.'" "A man does not live by bread alone; the law is the bread.

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But a man lives by everything that comes out of the mouth of God," say the rabbis. And that is the Hagada, the legend. And I believe it is a great mistake on the part of students of Israel, both Jews and non-Jews, who have confined their study to the written law of our people, and have failed to supplement that study by an intimate acquaintance with the lore of our people; because a law is only a safeguard of a people against itself, but the lore is the revelation of a people's soul; and to understand the Jew and his soul and his psychology, his outlook on life, you must go into that rich treasure cove of his folk tales.

You take, for example, a law of the Bible and see how inadequately it expresses the soul of Israel. "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." Take that as mirroring the soul of a people, and what have we? A people that is vindictive, a people that worships a God who is nothing but stern, unyielding, cruel justice. That is law--primitive law, to be sure, but a law, nevertheless. When you go into the legends of the people and into the lore of the people, you find how thoroughly inaccurate such a conclusion would be.

Take the legend of Abraham, standing upon the top of the mountain facing his maker and calling upon him: "Thou judge of the world, wilt thou not do justice? Here is the city of Sodom and the city of Gomorrah, sinful men and women, to be sure, but thy children; wilt thou not save

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the city for the sake of fifty righteous? And thirty, twenty, ten and five?" --imploing not for the execution of stern justice but for compassion and mercy. For whom? Not for his own people and his own household, but for a strange people not of his tribe or of his race--a cruel people, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And the legend of Jonah, the Prophet, fleeing from the city of Nineveh; the wicked city of Babylon not wishing to give the people of Nineveh the chance to repent, ^{he} and ^{he} was afraid to fulfill the decree of God. And the Lord said unto him: "Jonah, return unto the people of Nineveh and tell them to repent, for they are my children. I do not desire the death of the sinner, but that he should return and live." A legend, but how true it is of the whole outlook of our people upon justice and retribution and sin!

Then there is a little legend in the Talmud. Moses before he died asked of God the privilege to go through the heavenly spheres and observe all the angels that inhabit the heavens above; and he came to one place and found great treasures accumulated, and he asked of the Almighty: "Almighty God, what is this that I see?" And God said: "These are the treasures accumulated here to be given as rewards to the righteous; this vast treasure will be given to those who study the Torah; and this great treasure will be given to those who are charitable; and

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this great treasure will be given to those who are honest and truthful in life." And so on and so on. And Moses looked and beheld a vast treasure, greater by far than any of these he had seen. And he asked of the Almighty: "What is this treasure for?" And the Lord answered and said: "For those who may never have done a good deed in their life. They are my children, nevertheless. I will have mercy upon whomsoever I ought to have mercy." A legend, too, but how much it reveals!

Take the position of the woman in Israel as revealed in the law. While the Biblical law is in advance by far as regards the position of woman, to that of any other Oriental people, and while it protects the woman her rights, one cannot feel that from the law one may be led to the conclusion that the position of women in Israel was exalted. The law of divorce was very lax; a man could divorce his wife upon the slightest excuse (I suppose they do that today); but when you take that law and subject it to the test of legend in Israel, of story, you get an entirely different picture. For example, the legend of that competent and dominant figure of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, for whom he mourns for so long when she dies; and Rachel, for whom Jacob slaves for forty-five years; and Deborah, that martial figure, that Biblical Joan of Arc-- Deborah, who instigates and incites a people to rebel and throw off the yoke of a foreign people; Deborah, who leads

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and judges a people, and prophecies. And one reads of the legend of Ruth,--Ruth among the corn; Ruth of the fields,--that charming, graceful, beautiful idol of the Bible.

And when one reads the words of him who indicted the thirty-first chapter of the Book of Proverbs, perhaps the finest tribute ever paid to womanhood in the history of the world, one sees the position and the dignity of womanhood in Israel that the law fails absolutely to give. When one goes over to the Talmud and reads some of the legends there recorded of Jewish women, one realizes what and wonderfully exalted position woman occupied in Israel.

You know the story of Beriah, the wife of Rabbi Mayer. Beriah had two beautiful children, and one day when they were both at play in the open, the sun struck them and they fainted and they died. And Beriah took these two lads into her home and laid them upon their little beds and covered them. When Rabbi Mayer, the great, the wise, returned from the house of study, Beriah, his wife, met him and said unto him: "My dear, I have a question to ask of you. Some few years ago a good friend of ours gave me two precious stones to keep for him, and during these years I have kept and guarded these stones, and I have come to love them; and now the friend returned to day and asked for these two precious stones. Did I right in returning them to him?" "Why," said Rabbi Mayer, "of course, you did."

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He gave them to you; he can take them away from you; they are his." Beriah took the hand of her husband and led him into the bed chamber and uncovered the faces of the two little lads, and said unto him: "These are the two precious stones which our friend lent unto us, and now He has called for them."

A great sob racked the frame of Rabbi Mayer. Taking the hands of his wife, he kissed them and said: "Brave soul, brave soul. The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Oh, the dignity, the nobility, the sublimity revealed in this simple legend of a Jewish mother!

There is yet another legend, probably as well known as this one--the legend of Rabbi Akiba, perhaps the greatest of the rabbis of his time. Akiba was an ignorant shepherd, tending the flock of the richest man of Jerusalem; and the daughter of this rich man saw Akiba, the shepherd and loved him, and said unto him: "Akiba, would you like to study?" And Akiba said: "Yes, very much." And she said unto him: "Wilt thou betroth me unto you, and then wilt thou go to the great schools of study and learn the Torah? And she was betrothed unto him. When the rich father heard of it, he drove her from his house; Akiba married her, and they lived for a while in the extremest of poverty--cold and hungry; and daily Akiba would kneel before her and say: "My dear soul, if only I could give

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thee the whole of Jerusalem made of gold, I would give it to thee and lay it at thy feet." And she said unto him: "Akiba, go forth and study the Torah." And Akiba left her and for twelve years he studied the Torah day and night, while his wife remained alone, slaving, toiling, waiting--waiting for Akiba. And after twelve years Akiba returned, a famous scholar, and twelve thousand pupils followed him; and he came to the village where his wife lived, and overheard someone say to his wife: "Your father did well in driving you forth from his house; you married a dull, ignorant, stupid shepherd, and he has left you for twelve years, a living widow, whose husband is alive." And she stood up and said unto her: "I wish to God he would continue for twelve more years to study the Torah, so that his name may go forth unto the ends of the earth and through him I may be blessed."

When Akiba, the great, heard this passionate wish expressed by his wife, much as he longed to take her in his arms and to remain with her, he left again, and for twelve more years he wandered over the face of the land, visiting the great academies, listening and learning and teaching, until the words that came forth from his mouth were as fire that burned into the souls of the people; and from all parts of the world the cry went up for Akiba-- Akiba the learned, the wise, the great, the hope of Israel. And after twelve years Akiba returned again to his village,

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followed by twenty-four thousand of his disciples. And then a little bent and broken figure of an old woman in tatters and in rags, pushed her way through the multitude. When the pupils saw this figure trying to force her way to the place where Akiba the great stood, they tried to interfere, but she insisted and came and faced Akiba. When Akiba beheld her he fell upon his knees, and, kissing the hem of her ragged skirt, he said unto her: "Great soul, all I am, all I have, and all that I may be privileged by God to do in this world are yours! yours! yours!"

How much does that legend tell of womanhood in Israel! Not all legends are as beautiful; not all legends contain within themselves so much of the eternal wisdom of an eternal race. There are some legends that are purely didactic, purely homiletic, purely intended to teach a simple story; and one of them is the legend told of Elijah. You know Elijah descended to heaven in a burning chariot, and throughout all the Jewish history to this day Elijah has been a semi-mythical, a semi-divine figure. On Passover eve we set aside a cup for Elijah, the prophet.

Elijah was supposed to be able to answer all difficult questions and all perplexing problems, and the great rabbi, Jochana ben Zaccai, who lived during the destruction of the temple, one day prayed that he may be permitted to accompany the prophet Elijah upon his wandering over the earth, so that he may learn to understand the ways



of God. Elijah at first refused, but then consented on one condition: that Jochana ben Zaccai was to ask no question of him; he was just to look and observe. Jochana ben Zaccai went forth with Elijah. They came to the house of a poor man, who had but one cow to sustain him and his wife, and the poor man welcomed Elijah and the rabbi unto his home, and offered them the choicest of what he had, and gave them a comfortable place to sleep in during the night; and in the morning before Elijah departed, he offered a prayer, and no sooner was his prayer ended than this one cow the poor man and his wife had fell down and died; and the rabbi wondered, but refrained from asking. And they went on and on, and that night they came to the house of a very rich man, and he welcomed them--not. He sent out his servant and gave them a crust of dry bread and water, and refused them a place to sleep in his house; everyone was curt and crude to them. And that following morning Elijah, before he departed, saw that one of the walls of the house was cracked, and he summoned masons and builders, and at his own expense fixed the wall and left. Rabbi Jochana ben Zaccai was terribly amused and inquisitive, and wanted very much to ask the reason, but he did not.

The next day they came to a synagogue, and they announced themselves as strangers. "Will someone take a stranger into his home for the night?" That was a synagogue of rich Jews, and of course nobody paid any attention to

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them. And so the following morning Elijah appeared in the synagogue and blessed all of them, and said unto them:

"You may all be parnases (presidents)." And the next day they came to a synagogue of poor Jews, and they were welcomed; hospitality was extended to them; and the following morning Elijah came into the synagogue and said unto them: "May there not be one of you ever a parnas of this synagogue except the one who is parnas now."

And then Jochana ben Zaccai couldn't contain himself any longer and asked of the great prophet Elijah to explain these things to him. "The poor man who was good to you, you cursed; the rich man who was crude to you, you blessed; the congregation that turned you from their door, you blessed them all; and the congregation that opened its arms to you, you refused to bless." And Elijah said to him: "That is as human eyes see; the human eye sees a thing but cannot see through a thing, and because of that man is frequently driven to hasty conclusions, which lead him to rebellion and to question. The human mind is finite and cannot see the web back of these incidents--the law, the purpose.

And in a simple, naive way he explained these four facts. "When I came to the house of this poor man, I knew by revelation that his wife was to die, and I prayed to God to save her, and I prayed to God that he would take this animal as a sacrifice, as an offering in place of the

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wife. God listened to my prayer. And in the house of this rich man I knew, being a prophet, that underneath this wall was hidden a vast treasure; if the rich man himself had rebuilt the house, he would have dug down to the foundations and would have discovered the treasure; so I fixed it and kept him from finding it. And in this schule to which I came, where they gave us such a cold reception, you thought I was blessing them with many presidents. I was cursing them; where there are many presidents and many bosses there cannot be peace. But in this other schule I merely blessed them, and I said, 'Let one man be your leader.' There will peace abide."

Don't you see how a story like this entertains and edifies folks? Very simple, very naive, but holding within them a good deal of racial wisdom--good judgment.

I am going to finish with a story which, to my mind, is one of the most beautiful Jewish legends, and before I tell you the story I want to tell you just why I speak on this subject: Some Legends of My People. It is because I want you to become more intimately acquainted with this vast treasure house of Jewish folk lore, and I want you to transmit these beautiful stories, these fairy-tales and these myths to your children. These legends will give them the atmosphere of Jewish life, more so than the mere reading of a law or a text book will; it will give them the warmth, the glow, the passions and the longings

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and the hopes of our people.

No man was so beloved in Israel as was Moses-- Moses, the leader, Moses, the shepherd of his people. Already the Bible has a cluster of legends round this titanic figure of Moses: his birth, his miraculous escape, his years that he spent in the palace of Pharoah, his experiences in the wilderness, the burning bush, and so forth. But it was reserved for the Talmud and the generations after the Bible to weave wonderfully beautiful legends round this great figure in Israel.

When Moses was within sight of the promised land God said unto him: "Go up on top of the mountain and there thou shalt die alone. Go up to the top of the mountain, for thy death will be an ascent and not a decline, and die there alone, for no man must see the death of Moses and the reward that is in store for him." And Moses cried out unto the Lord and said: "Great God, for forty long years I have wandered in the wilderness and led thy people, and the one hope that sustained me during those long and terrible years of wandering and hunger and mutiny and strive, was that some day in my old age I may be enabled to enter the promised land. Wilt thou not let me go into the Promised Land before I die? And the voice of the Lord said: "It is decreed, Moses; thou shalt see the Promised Land, but in it thou shalt not come."

And Moses went up to the top of the mountain

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overlooking the land of Canaan, and shading his eyes he looked at it longingly, at the mountains and the rivers and the valleys; and his eyes filled with tears, and he prayed unto the Lord again and said: "Great Father, let me but once put my foot in this land while my children live, those whom I have left for these many years." And the voice replied: "Moses beseech no more; it is a decree." And then Moses cried unto the Lord and said: "Great God, if thou would not let me cross the Jordan, let me then remain on this side of the Jordan with the tribe of Reuben and the tribe of Gad ; let me in among them as a common man, just so I may be with my people." And the voice of God replied: "Moses, entreat no more. Joshua must henceforth lead the people, and if thou remain on this side of the Jordan the people will not follow Joshua." And the voice from heaven announced: "Moses, but three more hours and thou shalt die." And then Moses prostrated himself before the Lord and said: "Great God, I do not want to die; all my life I have suffered and hungered and wandered, and now that I am near to a bit of rest and a bit of peace, thou art now asking for my soul. Let me live if it is only as a beast of the field, as a bird of the air; let me live that I may fly through the air, pick my food from the ground and my water from the stream, and at night return to my nest."

And the voice from heaven replied: "Moses, it is



a decree from God that cannot be altered." And another hour had passed and then the angels in heaven began to weep for Moses, for they loved him; and Moses remained in prayer and supplication. And the voice announced: "But one more hour, my servant Moses, and thou shalt die." And Moses cried unto the mountains and the hills and the sun and the moon: "Ye hosts of heaven, creations of God, implore for me that I may live!" And they said unto him: "How can we, friend Moses?, we, too, are dust and must return to dust. All things that live must die."

When Moses found that creation could not implore for him, he bent his head and said: "Righteous are His ways, and all His doings are just." And the voice announced again: "Moses, prepare to die." And he went back to the camp of Israel and summoned Joshua, and laying his hand upon him he said: "Joshua, thou wilt now be called to lead this people. Always remember that this is a young people; they have just come out of slavery; they do not know always what is the right thing to do. Do not be harsh to them; be good to them; lead them as a shepherd would lead his flock." And Moses, the majestic, the great, fell upon the shoulder of Joshua and wept. And then Moses summoned the people before him and said unto them: "My children, my hour of death is approaching fast. I want to ask of you one thing. Your life with me has not always been pleasant and happy; I have often been harsh,

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and I have often rebuked you; I have often chastised you with the words of my lips. Forgive me, will you not? Forgive me." And the people raised their voice and wept, and said, "Moses, we forgive thee. Wilt thou not forgive us? For we have been rebellious, and we have made your life unhappy. Moses, our friend; Moses, our shepherd; Moses, our leader; forgive us!"

He bent his head and wept, and said: "Children of mine, I forgive you; but one favor I ask of you: when you go into the land, the beautiful land which I was not privileged to see some day, sometimes think of me; and think of me as a beast of burden, that carried all the burden throughout your wanderings, but whose bones remain to bleach in the desert." He left them.

And then God said unto Gabriel, says this legend, "Go thou and fetch me the soul of Moses." And Gabriel cried unto the Lord and said: "Great God, do not send me to fetch the soul of Moses; I love him." And God said unto Michael, the angel, "Go thou and fetch me the soul of Moses." And Michael said: "Great God, I cannot; I cannot. For Moses is dear to me." And then the evil spirit, Samael, cried out and said: "Great God, send me. Is Moses better than Adam, who was fashioned in thy image and who died? Or Abraham, who passed through the burning furnace and died? Or Isaac, who offered himself upon the alter as a sacrifice to thee and died?" And Samael came to Moses

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and said: "Give me thy soul." And Moses said to him: "No angel of Samael shall take the soul of Moses. Moses, who received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai; Moses, who saw God face to face; Moses, who led a rebellious people for forty years,--no angel of death shall take his soul."

And then God said: "Moses has spoken true. I, myself, will take his soul." And as night fell God descended from heaven and laid his hand upon the brow of Moses; and Moses heaved a deep sigh and said: "I will return thou, O soul of mine, to thy rest, for God has dealt bountifully with thee."

Then God leaned over and kissed the lips of Moses. And so Moses died. The night was on, but in the east, says the legend, the dawn was breaking.

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