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A Saint of Democracy: Abraham Lincoln, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "A SAINT OF DEMOCRACY--ABRAHAM LINCOLN,"
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
FEBRUARY 12, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.

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I have chosen to call Abraham Lincoln a saint of democracy, and I use the term "saint" not as a vague term of adulation, but almost deliberately. Heretofore, and generally, the term "saint" has been used exclusively in a religious sense by the church. A saint is one who has led an exceptionally pious and godlike life, and, as a result of it, been sanctified and canonized by the church.

The synagogue has restricted the use of the term "saint," as a rule, to those who were martyred for their faith. The Kodashim--the saints--were those who hallowed the name of God with their lives; who died * * * for the sanctification of God's name; and martyrdom alone was sufficient to win for one the designation of Kodash--the saint.

But I believe the term ought not to be used in so exclusive a sense. It is too beautiful a word, in the first place, and it has come to mean so much. I have always believed that any great ideal that inspires men, any great ideal for which men live, through which they suffer, by which they are ennobled and exalted,--that any such ideal has, somehow, a sacred ritual of its own; it needs must have its mystic shrines and its saints. They need not have the same physical form or manifestations, but the spirit, I say, is the same.

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Science has its saints, because science has its shrines and its rituals and its zealots and its devotees--those humble souls who, in the studies and the laboratories of the world, through the days and the years, worship their gods, and who die long before their efforts are crowned with victory or achievement. I say that that those humble students and scholars and scientists--benefactors of mankind--are mankind's saints.

When consecration to a great purpose is coupled with a transcendent enthusiasm for that purpose, and these two are attested by sacrifice and martyrdom, then you have sainthood. And so democracy has its saints. All those known and unknown dead, who, out of their love of man and faith in him, labored mightily in their time and place to ease man's crushing burdens, to straighten his path, to brighten and sweeten his life; and who, because of their great love and consecration suffered during their life and died for their faith.--I say that they are the saints of the world, that worshipfully burns incense--incense of sweet gratitude at the shrine of their memory.

And Lincoln was such a saint--perhaps the truest and the noblest of them all. Now, of course those men and women who have been accustomed to think of a saint as a perfect man will be rather startled at my designating Lincoln a saint; for Lincoln was not a perfect man, however

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much our love of him would prompt us to apply perfection to him; however much the natural human tendency to idealize great men--hero worship--would prompt us to picture Abraham Lincoln as the summary and the perfection of human life. But the fact still remains that he was not a perfect man; that he, himself, would have been the first to deny it and to condemn such a foolish attempt at hero worship.

Lincoln was human and shared all the weaknesses and deficiencies of men, and of some of them he had a greater share than most men. Lincoln never had throughout his days a sense for some of the finer esthetic values of life; he was not really a cultured man, if by culture we mean the restricted meaning of the word--a full orbed, well rounded man. There was an element of coarseness in his makeup which survived from the harsh and charmless days of his early youth.

We are accustomed to think of him as a genial, kind, self-possessed man; but Lincoln had his moments of towering rage, and furious passion, and sullenness and stubbornness. Lincoln oftentimes was morbidly cautious and secretive and suspicious. Rationalist though he was, he was the victim of superstition; he believed in dreams, presentments. He did not always have those high standards of public duty and responsibility which he had during his days in Washington. He was far from a perfect man. But, in spite of it, and perhaps

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because of it, I think we are justified in calling Abraham Lincoln a saint of democracy; because a saint is really not a perfect man, but a saint is the man who by dint of heart-breaking effort perfects himself.

Lincoln grew and developed. Lincoln's personality was something which evolved through experience and trial and suffering and responsibility; Lincoln fought his way through a jungle of poverty and ignorance and backwoodsmen's superstitions and coarseness, and the early standards of political morality. I say that he fought his way through by dint of self-mastery, of effort, of sacrifice, to the open spaces of a magnificently rich and marvelously effective personality. And it is in this very triumph of will over heredity and environment, this triumph of the higher self over the lower self,--I say that it is in this triumph that the heroic testament of Lincoln's saintliness is to be found.

Lincoln is a democratic saint, and by that I mean that he shares the strength of democracy and the weakness of democracy; he shared much of the harshness and the crudeness and the uncouthness of democracy; but he shared also its elemental strength, its moral sturdiness, its tremendous redemptive powers. Lincoln evidenced in his life, as no man before or since in a democratic state has evidenced, the redemptive, the saintly powers of democracy. By his very life he has vindicated democracy's

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faith in man--in the average man, in the common man. Given opportunity, so says the life of Lincoln, the experiences of Lincoln, the triumph of Lincoln, and the treasures that you may discover in the souls of common people are endless, limitless.

Lincoln's life is the epic of the common man. Not every man is a Lincoln, or can be a Lincoln, or has the mental and spiritual endowments of a Lincoln, or can have the opportunities of a Lincoln; but that Lincoln could rise from the slough of poverty and ignorance, and the charmless, graceless environment, to the heights of sublimity, to become of the few greatest of mankind's emancipators, is proof positive that somehow there resides in the soul of every human being an element of divine greatness and potentiality and latent power, which may be called into effective being by the spark of opportunity!

And so Lincoln proved, established and consecrated the democratic dogma, the democratic faith in man.

Men have frequently asked what was Lincoln's religion. He has been claimed by many churches and by many enemies of church institutions. It is clear that Lincoln was not an orthodox Christian; it is certain that Lincoln never joined the church. Lincoln ^{did not} never believe in the orthodox dogmas of the Christian church; Lincoln

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never expressed the belief in the divinity of Jesus; in fact, Lincoln mentions Jesus very, very seldom, if at all. But he was not an atheist or an agnostic; he had no well defined theology. (There are too few people in the world that have well defined theologies, unless they be professional theologians.) But Lincoln had a deep, ~~definite~~, ever-present faith in a God, whom he may not have succeeded in defining, but ^{who} a God who was real to him, ^{and who he} ~~felt was present~~ manifest to him in all the varied experiences of his life.

No one can read Lincoln's writings, especially those of the period of the war, but can fail to be impressed by Lincoln's superb faith in a ~~definite~~ being, whose instrument he was; a God in whom he trusted, upon whom he depended, who was the mainstay and support of his days in the ^{trial} ~~agony~~, in the suffering that he was passing through.

Lincoln believed in prayer, and many a time during the dark moments of the war he would repair to his own room, and there this leader of the hosts of democracy, this uncouth and ungainly but majestic figure would kneel down and pray in his own way, in his own words, for guidance and strength and wisdom. No one can read those magnificent words of his, spoken the day he left Springfield for Washington to assume the burdens and the responsibilities of the presidency, but can feel that here was a deeply, deeply religious soul. He said to his

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townsfolk:

To day I leave you.

"I now leave, not knowing when or whether ~~ever~~

I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being whoever attended him, I cannot succeed; with that assistance I cannot fail. Trust in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good. Let us fortunately hope that all will yet be well."

And Lincoln's second inaugural address is, to my mind, a page out of the Old Testament. It has the rythm, the classic diction of the sacred scriptures, and it breathes a faith and a spirit of humility and submission to God's inscrutable will that reminds one very much of Amos and Isaiah and the Psalms. He said, among other things:

"It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces. Let us judge not that we be not judged. The Almighty has his own purposes. Woe unto the world because of offences, for it must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh. If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now will remove,

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and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which believers in a living God shall always ascribe to Him?

"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still must it be said, ~~that~~ the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

"With malice towards none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on and finish the work we are in."

The religion of Abraham Lincoln was the religion of Judaism. The one central fact in the faith of Lincoln was that God is a God of justice and of righteousness, and that ultimately, through sorrow and war and bloodshed and sacrifice, justice and righteousness must become real and established.

Men have tried to find in Lincoln's words traces of old Calvinism. I believe that the religion of

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Abraham Lincoln will never be understood until it is clearly recognized that Lincoln was dominated ^{by} with the thought ~~and the~~ spirit and ~~the~~ morality of the Old Testament; and proof and evidence of this conclusion of mine I find in this statement of a friend of Abraham Lincoln's, ~~the~~ Congressman Deming, soon after Lincoln's death, was called upon to deliver a memorial address before the legislature of Connecticut, and among other things he said that he asked Lincoln one day why he refused to join a church; and Lincoln said unto him: "I have never united myself with any church because I have found difficulty in giving my assent without mental reservation to the long complicated statements of the Christian doctrine which characterize the articles of belief and confessions of faith. When any church will inscribe over its altars as its sole qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of the law and the gospel: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,'--that church will I join with all my heart and with all my soul."

Now, Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus when he gave this magnificent summary of religion--"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind"; and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." And if this is the

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summary of Lincoln's faith, and if this is the test of that religion which Lincoln would adopt, then Lincoln has clearly inscribed himself in spirit and in faith a Jew.

Lincoln always reminds me, somehow or other, of the ancient prophets of Israel. He seems to have the same colossal height, the same vastness of spirit, the same ruggedness, the same power that we are accustomed to associate with the prophets of Israel. And mind you, they, too, were not perfect men.

Some few years ago I likened Abraham Lincoln, because of many of the accidents of his birth in life, and the qualities of his soul, to Moses, and I think that it is rather an apt comparison. Both Lincoln and Moses were born poor, and both were born handicapped--one because of his difficulty in speech, and the other because of his ungainliness and unattractiveness. Both were of this type that are seldom chosen for leadership; both became great emancipators--Moses of the hosts of Israel, and Lincoln of the millions of slaves. Both suffered terribly.

I recall the words of Abraham Lincoln, spoken after the defeat of the union forces at Fredericksburg. He said: "If there is any man out of hell who suffers more than I do, I pity him." And you recall the words of Moses: "Great God, I cannot bear the abuse and the trials and the constraints of thy people, whom thou

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hast called me to lead; the burden is too heavy for me!"

Both men were slandered and libeled and denounced during their lifetime. You recall those four or five years that Abraham Lincoln spent in Washington, how his enemies in the North and in the South abused him and maligned him and slandered him. You recall how often Moses was threatened with death by his own people; the people wished to stone him in the wilderness. And neither of these people ever saw the promised land. Just when the clouds were rolling away and peace was descending upon the tortured land like a healing balm, Abraham Lincoln was shot down. And just as the emancipated Israelites were about to step into the promised land, to find a little rest and a little peace, their leader, who suffered so much because of them, had to go up on the top of Mount Nebo, and with his tired and weary eyes to look over the land of Canaan, because thither he could not enter.

Both were servants of men, but not their slaves. Both served their people in supreme devotion and sacrificed themselves for their people, but neither of them submitted to their whims and to their weaknesses; neither of them pandered to them. They served them, but they were not their slaves. Their spirit mastered them, even as their life's efforts served them. And that is the test of the real leader.

Both Moses and Lincoln, to my mind, are the

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inspiring examples for all time of the triumph of man over nature, over heredity, over environment, over the machinations of men--over everything. Somehow, in their souls there was a power greater than all the accumulated forces of the world--a power which enabled them to mold and fashion reality in consonance with their ideals and their visions. They were broken upon the wheel of their own faith, but their faith endured.

The prophet dies, but his vision lives on. Moses died a poor and broken old man on the top of Mount Nebo, and Lincoln was shot down, but the ideal of both of these great emancipators outlived their poor and tired frames. Their ideals were bequeathed unto mankind as a precious legacy. God be thanked for giving unto his children, in all times of stress and struggle and danger, leaders of the type of Lincoln, so wonderfully endowed with faith and courage and conviction and love as to be able to lead the groping millions of God's children through the darkness and the dangers to the open spaces of a freer and more beautiful life!

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