



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
147

Box
52

Folder
128

Some Aspects of Jewish Humor, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "SOME ASPECTS OF JEWISH HUMOR,"
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
MARCH 19, 1922, CLEVELAND.

WRHS



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

During the past week Jewry throughout the world celebrated the feast of Purim, perhaps the happiest of Jewish feast days. It celebrated the true carnival spirit, young and old joining in the merriment. Those of you who are a bit older than others will recall how Purim was celebrated in the olden days in the Jewish home and in the synagogue. In the synagogue the Megillah was read--the story of Esther, which is itself written in the spirit of the carnival.

One must not take the story of Esther too literally; the story of the court chamberlain deposed and the lowly Jew, Mordecai, raised to his position; the story of the queen, Vashti, and the lowly Esther raised to her position; the story of Mordecai being led through the streets of Shushan, arrayed in the royal garments, led by Haman himself, announcing to all the people: "Thus shall be done to the man the king delighteth to honor." And Haman erecting a gallows fifty cubits high for Mordecai, and then Haman and his Hamanites being hung upon it.

All that can be understood only when taken as a pageant play, a play for a festival of merriment. And so in the synagogue on Purim eve the Megillah was read. You will recall that at every mention of the name Haman all the children, and sometimes the grown-up children, would join in making a terrific racket.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

At home the festival was celebrated with the interchange of gifts and the preparation of special Purim pastry; and you will recall the Hamantasch, and the children would borrow all the shawls and the kerchiefs and the draperies of the household and produce again the story of sweet Esther and brave Mordecai.

It was a day of joy, and the day brings us to the thought of how surprisingly full the Jewish calendar was with holidays of happiness, in spite of the fact that the lot of the Jew was so very often one of misfortune and misery and unhappiness. Purim was a day of rejoicing; so was Pesach, so was Shabuoth, so was Succoth; so was Chanukah; in fact, most of the Jewish festivals are days of joy and happiness.

Of course, the tragic experiences of our people did give to the Jewish calendar a few fast days; but these days by no means monopolize the Jewish calendar. The Jew and the spirit of the Jew never succumbed to untoward misfortune, never yielded to the onslaughts of adversity. The Jew by nature and by his religion is not a pessimist, nor is he an ascetic; the Jew never looked upon this world as a vale of tears; the Jew never hated life or shunned life. The Jew loved life and loved nature. One need but read the Song of Songs to appreciate how much the Jew loved the joy of life, the spirit of nature. He was not an ascetic; he was not other-worldly; and he was not a

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

pessimist. Had he been a pessimist he never would have survived.

The religion of the Jew is a Messianic religion, which means a religion of hope. The Jew always looked forward to the time when things would be better, to the time when sin and wrong would disappear and the kingdom of God would be established on earth; and that hope was a sustaining, an inspiring hope in his life, and that kept him in the darkest moments of his experience from giving way. His good judgment, his practical common sense helped him exceedingly; and especially his sense of humor.

We are accustomed to think of the Jew as a very solemn individual. We speak of Jewish ethics, of Jewish religion, of Jewish philosophy, and we somehow construct for ourselves a personality of deep solemnity. But the Jew had his lighter moments as well; the Jew could laugh and laugh heartily; the Jew could abstract himself from his environment and from his own experiences--remove himself, as it were, and then chuckle at things that were incongruous, unusual.

The Jew could see the absurdity not alone in other people's lives, but in his own life, and he could smile at it, and he could laugh at people and with people. From the earliest Bible times right through the Talmudic period, through the Middle Ages to this day, Jewish

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

literature abounds in the humorous. The Talmud tells of one great rabbi who never opened a discourse without first telling some yarn, some funny story to attract attention, to win the interest of his pupils, to get them into the proper mood.

The Jewish poets of the Middle Ages, like ibn Ezra, were very fond of writing in a vein of wit and humor. In our own day we have these splendid exponents of Jewish wit and humor--men of the type of Heine and Zangwill; and among the Yiddish writers, Abromowitz, better known as Mendele, the Book-seller.

Now, it is very difficult to analyze humor or to define humor. If you were to ask me: What is humor? I would be unable to tell you. Like every other human emotion, we know it, we can sense it, we can experience it, we can respond to it, but we cannot describe it. Humor is a very effervescent thing; things you laugh at when you are thirteen you will not laugh at when you are thirty; and a thing that a German would laugh at, or a Chinaman would laugh at, an Englishman or an American might fail to appreciate.

Humor is subject to the temperament of peoples, to the age of peoples, but there are some basic principles in humor. Humor is based on the incongruous; humor is based on the inconsistent; humor is based on contrast, the contrast between the ideal and the real,

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

between one's pretensions and one's actual achievements, between what ought to be and what is. Humor is based on the unexpected, on the sudden turn, on the introduction of an unexpected element. Everything that is out of proportion, out of the customary, may become, if properly handled, a subject for spontaneous humor.

And humor has real value in the world; it has a supreme usefulness in society. Humor helps us to restore our perspective; humor saves us from the vice of excess, from extremes; humor brings us down to earth; humor makes us realize the proper position of a thing in the scheme of life; and humor saves us from exaggeration, from the ridiculous; and humor saves us from fanaticism. The fanatic is never a humorist. A man who cannot see the humorous sides of his ideal is a fanatic, and that is why the fanatic always fails--because he cannot see the limitations of his ideal, because of the lack of his sense of humor.

Humor enables us to destroy certain things which logic and reason cannot destroy. I wonder whether you men and women realize that there are certain facts in life that do not yield to logic or to argumentation or to reason, but yield ultimately through the coercive force of humor. Don Quixote destroyed the pseudo-chivalry in Europe in knighthood, not by showing that it was illogical or unreasonable, but by showing how utterly foolish and

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

ridiculous it was. And Swift in Gulliver's Travels is a much more dangerous instrument in the hands of a social reformer, who is fighting hypocrisy and dishonesty and vicious social conventions, than is any treatise on sociology or philosophy.

Humor, by making a thing laughable, is sometimes the most effective weapon in the hands of a social reformer. If you can make a king ridiculous, you have destroyed monarchy.

And, lastly, humor has a social value because it softens failure and defeat; it sweetens life. If a man who has failed and who has suffered can see a bit of humor in his very situation, he is saved. Now, Jewish life needed humor because of these things. The Jew was in danger of losing his perspective very often. Surrounded by organized official hate and enmity and persecution, he may have lost his equilibrium, his spiritual balance; he may have seen nothing else in the world but hate, but his sense of humor saved him from it.

It showed him the limitations even of his persecutions, and helped him to remain wholesome in the midst of his suffering. And it helped him, by means of his fine sense of humor, to destroy much that his idealism and that his faith failed to destroy. And it helped to sweeten his life, to make his tragedy less tragic.

The sense of humor enabled the Jew to build

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

for himself in his home and in his synagogue a civilization which could not be touched by the misfortunes from without. In his home he was king. I think it is Heine who wrote that beautiful poem on Princess Sabbath, describing the Jew on the six days of the week--a huckster, a miserable human being, mocked and derided, money-grubbing, forced by necessity to stoop. When the Sabbath comes this beggar sheds the garments of the ghetto, the garments of the huckster and the peddler becomes a prince in his home.

It would be very, very sad if the Jew had lacked a sense of humor during the last fifteen hundred years. He never would have survived. Now, Jewish humor has special characteristics, and of these I want to speak a bit this morning. Jewish humor is not light-hearted; it is not hilarious. One of the rabbis said: "One who wishes to be truly pious, let him not be loud in laughter."

Jewish laughter differs from that of almost every other people in that it is never hilarious, never light-hearted. Humor is an emanation of people's experiences, and Jewish life was never such that the Jew could laugh perfectly free--whole-heartedly, as it were, with his whole being. He couldn't. The humor of Heine, and the humor of Zangwill, and the humor of Sholem-Alachem is not the humor of a Mark Twain at all. Mark Twain's humor is the humor of a healthy, normal people, in close

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

touch with the soil, that lives a very normal, untroubled life.

The humor of a Heine, or a Zangwill, or the humor of the East European Jew, is the humor of a people that lives constantly in certain fears and dreads and anticipations, the humor of a people's life that is troubled and full of perplexities, the humor of a people that has been forced into cities and torn away from the wholesome influence of the soil.

Heine, on his mattress bed in Paris, a year before his death--poor Heine, that made more kings and potentates unhappy because of the shafts of his bitter, poisoned humor--Heine, the brave soldier in the wars of human liberation, who gave of his heart's blood to make men free,--Heine was the type of the Jewish humorist who laughs in the midst of pain. Heine speaks of himself as the little Aristophanes, and of God, the great Aristophanes.

He says: "What does it boot me that all the roses of Shiraz glow and give their scent so tenderly for me--ah! Shiraz is two thousand miles away from the Rue d'Amsterdam where, in the wearisome loneliness of my sick room, I have nothing to smell but the perfumes of warmed napkins! Ah! God's mockery weighs heavy upon me. The great author of the universe, the Aristophanes of Heaven, wished to show the little German so-called

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

Aristophanes of the earth, what wretched little jests are his weightiest sarcasms in comparison with His own, and how pitifully I lag behind Him in humor and the making of colossal jokes.

"Yes, the biting contempt which the Master pours down upon me is horrible, and terribly cruel is his jest. Humbly do I acknowledge his superiority, and I bow before Him to the dust."

And poor Heine compares himself with that legendary clerk of Medieval Europe who composed such marvelous songs that everyone sung and whistled his songs. But he himself was an outcast because he was a leper; he himself had to go beyond the walls of the city sounding his leper's clapper, warning people away from him.

Thus the bitter humor of a Heine is not altogether true of the humor of the Jew, but a bit of it is true. The poverty, the squalor, the want, the uncertainty of Jewish life gave to Jewish humor a certain tinge. You can't always tell when you are smiling when you are about to shed tears. The smile and the tear are very close to one another.

That is one characteristic of Jewish humor. And the second characteristic, to my mind, is that it is intellectual. It is more wit than humor; it is more of a flash and less of a glow; it is more incisive and more intense than genial. The Jew has been called "the people

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

of the book." The Jew was a bookman; his life was an intellectual life, and so his humor, his wit, is of the intellectual sort; it is head humor; it has brilliancy; it has sparkle; it is the foam in the champagne glass. Because of that Jewish humor is very seldom coarse, as is the humor of most other peoples. There is very little of the animalic in Jewish humor.

You do not find anything like the writings of Aristophanes, or Boccaccio, or of Rabelais, or of the type of Falstaff in Jewish humor. It is mental; it is intellectual; it is brilliant. You find in Jewish humor the sort that is told in the story of Mendelssohn. In the days of Moses Mendelssohn Jewish bankers were in the part of lending money to the sons of rich counts and lords, with the expectation that at the death of the lord the son would then pay the loan with interest. The bankers, then, were extending credit to the sons of counts and lords.

One of the leading Germans of the day--Tiller--once wrote a couplet to Moses Mendelssohn, saying to him in rhyme something to this effect: "You already believe in God, the Father; why don't you also believe in God, the Son? You are in the habit of giving credit to the son during the lifetime of the father." And Moses Mendelssohn replied: "How can we give credit to the son when the father will live forever?"

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

That is a type of the purely intellectual. A story is told of Moses Montefiore. He was in the presence of royalty one day when a traveler returned, who reported about his visit to some hinterland in Africa, and he said, among other things, seeing that Montefiore was in the room: "There is one country that I visited in all my travels where I found no pigs and no Jews." Montefiore at once arose and said: "Well, friend, let's both go there and then they will have both."

Eastern European Jewry, because it lived a homogeneous life longer than that of Western European Jewry, developed, to my mind, a more native humor and a richer humor. Much of it has been published, but recently another excellent collection of the humor of the East European Jews has been published. The humor of the East European Jew covers almost every phase of human life. It revolves around the important functions and incidents in the life of the Jew. And when one reads these stories and anecdotes one realizes what a wonderful, saving grace this sense of humor proved to the Jew amidst the misery, the poverty and squalor and dirt in which he was compelled to live for centuries.

His humor revolves first, of course, around the cheder; the yeshibal, the school, the academy. Being a people of the book, much of his humor would have to do with learning, with study--something to break the monotony of study. And so

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

his humor abounds in clever things said and done in the school room. The learned Jew of Eastern Europe held the ignoramus and the country lout in great contempt. Nothing was as contemptible as ignorance, and nothing was as praiseworthy as learning; and so the ignorant man came in for a great deal of jibes and a good many jokes.

One story is told about an ignorant country lout who was about to be married, and he had to see his intended for the first time; and his father began training him for the conversation in which he was to engage with his intended for the first time, and he told his son: "My son, among educated people one speaks of three things during a conversation, especially in the case of the young man and young woman. One speaks first of all of love, and secondly, one speaks of one's family relations, and then a bit of philosophy." And the poor young fellow remembered these ^{three} things. The eventful day arrived, and he met this young lady; the indulgent family left him alone, and then he had to begin the conversation; and the first thing he had to talk about was love, and so he said: "My dear Rebecca, do you love noodles?" And she said: "Why, yes--yes, I do." "Well, then, have you got a brother?" She said: "No, I have no brother." Well, he was through with love and through with family relations, and he now had to talk a bit of philosophy, and so he said to her: "Rebecca, if you had a brother, would he love

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

noodles?"

The relation of the Jew and the non-Jew proved a very fertile field for Jewish humor. The Jew did not have much regard for the intelligence of the average peasant about him, and rightly so, because ninety-five percent of the peasants were illiterate, while the Jews could all read and write. There is a story told which illustrates the general attitude of the Jew to the non-Jew. It reads something like this:

When you tell a story, a joke, to a non-Jew, he laughs three times--the first time that you tell it to him, the second time when you explain it to him, and the third time when he understands it. When you tell the same story to a paritz, which is a land owner, who is even more stupid than the average peasant, he laughs only twice--once when you tell it to him and once when you explain it to him, because he will never understand it. And when you tell the same story to a Russian officer, who is just the acme of stupidity, he laughs only once--when you tell it to him, because he will never give you a chance to explain, and he never will understand it. When you tell the same story to a Jew, he tells you it's an old story, he has heard it before.

Anti-Semitism was to the Western European Jew and the American Jew such a terrible ghost. To the East European Jew it is an object of humor. He takes it

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

for granted; it is a normal thing; he does not get perturbed about it at all; in fact, he says: "Now, really, what is the difference between Jewish anti-Semitism and non-Jewish anti-Semitism? It is all the same." You ask a goy what he knows about the Jew. Why, he says, "The Jew, they are a terrible people, perfectly awful! They should be destroyed!" Then you ask him what he thinks of Mr. Soloman. "He is a fine gentleman; I have had business with him for thirty years; he has always been honest and straightforward." "And what do you think of Mr. Isaacs?" "Mr. Isaacs is an admirable man; he has been my neighbor for fifteen years--a first class type of citizen."

He hates the Jews collectively; he likes them individually. You ask a Jew what he thinks of the Jewish people. He says: "The Jewish people are the chosen people, a wonderful race, full of genius and talent." "What do you think of Mr. Cohen?" "Well, Cohen, I have had dealings with him for one year; I am through. And Mr. Soloman--Mr. Soloman is a Polack!"

The Jew likes the Jewish people collectively; but he has no use for them individually. That very institution known as the institution of the schadkin, is a very fertile field for Jewish people. If I had the time I could tell you a host of stories about the schadkin. Maybe I'll tell you one. I assume that you all know what a schadkin is and are aware of its importance. A schadkin

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

was once extolling to an intended bridegroom the virtues of the intended bride in splendid eulogy, and the young man was very much interested until the schadkin dropped ebiter dictum a remark that the young girl was a bit lame. And the young man was taken aback; he was a little bit disturbed about it; in fact, so much so that he wasn't interested to listen to anything else. And the schadkin said unto him: "Now, Schmule, why all this excitement? Why are you so perturbed about the fact that the young lady is a little lame? Suppose you married a young woman who was not lame, and you went on your honeymoon and you had to board a train and by accident the young lady fell and the train ran over her and crushed her foot; you would have to take her to the hospital, go to a tremendous amount of expense, and have a great deal of worry about it. And here you have one readymade!"

Next to the schadkin there is this other institution in Jewish life called the schnorrer, who was immortalized by Zangwill in his "King of the Schnorrers." The schnorrer, you understand, was not a human being: he was a profession; he was an institution. Not everyone could be a schnorrer any more than everyone could be a multimillionaire; but the schnorrer in Jewish life was handed down by precious legacy from father to son. Many of my profession have inherited that thing.

The story is told of a schnorrer who went

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

to see Mr. Rothschild. The goal of every schnorrer was, of course, to go some day and see Rothschild. The two artists would meet. The schnorrer approached the door, and the secretary asked him what he wanted. He said, "I want to see Baron Rothschild." The secretary replied: "You can't see Baron Rothschild; you must tell me what you want." "No," said the schnorrer, "no; I insist." Now, when a schnorrer says "I insist" you might as well yield. I have that experience daily. And finally the schnorrer was led into the office of Baron Rothschild. Baron Rothschild said: "Well, friend, what is it you want?" "Oh," he said, "I don't want anything; I just want a little charity." "You want a little charity! Well, why didn't you tell my secretary what you wanted? Why did you have to trouble me? You shouldn't do that." "Now, now, Baron Rothschild," said the schnorrer, "in matters of schnorring you needn't give me any instructions."

Of course, I wouldn't be telling you these stories if this was not the celebration of Purim. I will tell you one more, and then I will close., Jewish business methods came in for a great deal of keen analysis, as you can readily see. Mr. Potash and Mr. Perlmutter humor around Jewish were not the originators of Jewish business enterprise. One story popular around Eastern European Jews is the story of the scamp who played a lottery, and one day in the synagogue he made a vow that if his ticket won the grand

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

prize he would donate something to the synagogue. Well, his ticket didn't win and so he was through with the synagogue and with his God, and he decided to try someone else; so he went over to the Greek Catholic church, and he made a vow there that if his next ticket in the lottery won the grand prize he would present some ikon, some image, some gift to the church; and sure enough, two or three weeks later his ticket actually did win the grand prize; and so this scamp goes back not to the church but to the synagogue, and says: "Extolled be the name of the Lord. I know that the Lord the God of Israel is all-wise and all-knowing. He knows that I didn't mean anything when I made the vow, so He didn't let me win it; the other people actually thought I meant it."

The humor that is being paraded on the American stage and on the vaudeville stage as characteristic Jewish humor has not a grain of the real spirit or technique or purpose of Jewish humor in it. It is almost altogether vile, is almost altogether based on dialect and awkwardness; it is not at all based on intellectuality; it is not at all as pointed and meaningful as Jewish humor is. And it is intended to make the Jew and to present the Jew not as a humorous being but as a ludicrous being; it makes the Jew ridiculous. And the tragedy of it all is that both those who give vent to the so-called Jewish humor on the stage and those who sit in the

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

audience indulging themselves in this feast of humor, applauding it and laughing hilariously at this spirit thing, are both Jews.

In my mind that is a very serious thing; that is a public degradation of a people's dignity, and it can be stopped not so much through protests or through laws, but through the refusal on the part of Jews to attend these plays and these performances, to laugh at these stupidities and lend themselves to a public defamation of the dignity of their race.

We do not wish to appear before the non-Jew in the tragic role of a Wandering Jew--solemn, majestic, terrifying; but we do not wish to appear before the non-Jew as an awkward, ugly, impossible character, either. There is Jewish humor, native Jewish humor--rich, abundant, finer; that kind of humor ought to be popularized among Jews and non-Jews; but the other kind--that is nothing but exposing oneself, one's crudeness, one's coarseness before the public for the sake of gain. That thing ought to be stamped out of American-Jewish life.

I trust that this Purim lecture of mine on Jewish humor will stimulate interest on your part to follow up this very interesting and absorbing subject of humor among our own people.

--o--

1. Interesting myself in J. L. L. - we speak of J. L. L.
etc. - personality & deep sternness - laugh heartily -
- could see absurdity in other men - his own - Amner
is Book etc. - Rabbi's work began decrease -
① They have value & humor in ① resting perspective - ②
sawing from extremes ③ favorable ④ In destroying things
which logic could not - ⑤ topkay had almost & left.
② J. L. L. was in days & long to perspective in
perspective, the sp. equilibrium -

2. J. L. L. is
① Not hilarious - light hearted. Heine -
Zany will, a pik pik - in the eye - not like
M. T. L. - humor, a normal, unfettered
not bf
② Heine laughs - but in midst of pain - little
seems so-called Aristocrate - when poets
are wretched little jest in conv. with the
colossal poets which end - the best, Heine
(2) Intellectual. More not > humor - flask -
slow. Heine > general - little & the
course in artificial in it - nothing
to Heine, Rabelais, Falstaff.
Mental . = Mendelssohn = loans -
= Montefiore = jeans or jeeps -

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY HOPE STREET
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

③ Humor, Scholars - People, Work - Ignorance
held in contempt -

① Love - Family - Philosophy.

My dear Rebecca, do you love, words?

④ Disabilities of life

① Passport -

⑤ Laughed at himself

1. ~~down for the~~ memorable People - Solemn

reception
reception