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Resurrection, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,

ON "RESURRECTION,"

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 16, 1922 - CLEVELAND, O.

WRHS



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Back of the festival which Jewry the world over is celebrating this week--the Passover, and back of the festival which Christendom the world over is celebrating today--Easter, is the one idea of the resurgent life and the nascent hope--Spring. Both Passover and Easter are nature festivals, celebrating the end of winter, the coming of Spring. In origin they are one, and they share the common characteristics of similar festivals among peoples the world over.

Among all peoples the advent of spring was an occasion for rejoicing, whether it be the Greeks or the Egyptians or the Indians or the Teutonic peoples, and by whatever names, expressing themselves in diverse symbols and ceremonies; the motif was the same, whether it was the holy festival of the Hindus, the great Dionysian festival of the Greeks, the Passover of the Hebrews, or the Easter of the Christians.

Easter, as you know, is derived from the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess, to whom people brought sacrifices in the early spring; and Passover is derived from animal sacrifices--the Paschal lamb which was brought in the spring as the firstling, a sacrifice unto the Lord, for all first fruits and all firstlings belong by right unto God. Before very long these nature festivals--Passover for the Jew, and Easter for the Christian--were spiritual-

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ized; they were given ethical and historical meanings. The Passover became the anniversary of the exodus from Egypt, and Easter became the anniversary of the risen God of Christianity.

Even the symbols of these festivals, the matzos, the unleavened cakes which were originally brought as the offering of the harvest from year to year to God--and they were unleavened because all bread offered to the Deity had to be unleavened,--these matzos came to assume, in the course of time, the added meaning, the added historical significance of the Jews in their hurried flight from Egypt; they had no time to leaven their dough, and so they ate unleavened bread.

And likewise the symbol of Easter, the risen God, was a spiritualized fact. Among all pagan peoples at this season of the year there were various sacred rites and ceremonies performed as a vegetation charm. Among some pagan peoples at this season of the year the image of the god was put into a coffin and buried and mourned over as a symbol that the god was dead, and then after a time unearthed and brought to light again as a symbol of resurrection.

This mystic rite was, of course, a magical practice symbolizing vegetation destroyed by winter and coming to life and light again in the spring, or symbolizing the seed which was put in the ground, there to die, as it were, to decompose, before it can spring forth again

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into new life of fruit, plant and flower.

Now, Christianity adopted this pagan symbol of spring, but spiritualized it, gave it a new interpretation, made it symbolic of the dying and the risen God of Christianity. To the unorthodox Christian the story of Jesus coming to life after his crucifixion and appearing in the flesh to his disciples has always been a perplexing problem. Unless one accepts this story as a dogma, unquestioning it--this story of the risen God--one sees in it, if it is a historic fact, a challenge to all our scientific knowledge; it challenges our entire conception of the world, governed by immutable law, fixed for all time by an omniscient Deity.

Men can question the historicity of this thing; men have questioned it; in fact, it appears in the earliest gospel which tells the story of Jesus. The gospel of St. Mark knows nothing of the revivifying of the deity appearing in the flesh to his disciples. The last few sentences of the closing chapter of the Book of Mark are clearly a later interpolation.

But the story of the resurrection as a nature myth, spiritualized by Christianity and adopted into the epic of Jesus, has real ethical and spiritual significance, and as such may be accepted even by unorthodox Christians. Passover and Easter both swiftly pass from their original physical, ^{ethereal} atomic nature character

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of a resurrection to a spiritual type of resurrection. Passover became symbolic of the resurrection of the whole people, the emancipation of the people from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, a people setting forth in the new found freedom, on the way to new revelation, to Mount Sinai. It was the rebirth of a people, a spiritual resurrection.

And Easter to the pious and devout Christian became symbolic of truth crucified but risen again, of the triumph of the idea, of the triumph of life over death; and as such both of these festivals, Passover to the Jew and Easter to the Christian, struck a real significant note and conveyed a real message to the world.

It seems to me that there are a few vital ideas which this day and this season might convey unto all of us; and the first one of these is this: that life moves in cycles; just as the physical world has its successive seasons of growth and decay, of life and death, of summer and winter, so does the spiritual world follow the self-same laws of growth and decay. Life moves in cycles; an idea holds within itself the seeds of its own destruction, and death holds within itself the seeds of a new resurrection.

There is no one enduring condition in life; no one phase, no one fact, no one institution remains permanent and abiding in civilization. It is well that it does not. ~~Eternal winter means death, and eternal~~

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summer means stagnation. It is the rapid and swift succession of the seasons that creates the adventure of life; it is the change, the development, the blending of one into the other that gives all the movement and all the color and all the zest that there is in life. Civilizations grow and decay; they move in cycles; every age has a message to bring, an ideal to project, a truth to fashion. And then it begins to grow; first, as a timid sprout, as it were, coming out of the earth, and then the sun of life and of opportunity begins to ripen it and mellow it, and it reaches its summer of brilliancy, of creativeness, of productivity; and then comes the season of autumn, of over-ripeness, of growing lassitude and weariness; and then the winter of death.

An age sings its song, evolves its glory, and then ceases to be. That is the law of life. Ideals, whatever they be, are born and die. They are summoned into life by the need of life; the need of the onrushing life of mankind throws off certain ideals; they respond to the need and the exigency of the moment; they grow, they develop, they enjoy full bloom for a while, and when the need is no longer there, they cease to be, they die.

Feudalism began as a great ideal in response to the need of a Europe that had crumbled into anarchy and chaos, as a result of the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire. I say that feudalism came into European civilization as a

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blessing. Life was uncertain; chaos and anarchy reigned everywhere, and so men clustered around their leader for protection and safety. But after a while feudalism became an enslaving of mankind; it began shackle freedom, and so it became a menace. It lived, it functioned, it died. The French Revolution destroyed feudalism; the French Revolution enthroned the middle class; the French Revolution paved the way for capitalism. Capitalism had its growth, its fruition, its period of vast productivity, and now capitalism is being challenged because it has been found to exploit rather than create social values.

Bolshevism was hailed as the last word in human emancipation. It set out as an ideal to free men; it expressed itself before very long in acts of restriction and inhibition, in acts of oppression and suppression. Chivalry began in Europe a fine movement to protect the needy and the weak; it ended as a vast farce, the laughing-stock of the world. Nationalism developed in Europe as a need in response to the cry of the smaller peoples, the denied and the oppressed who were being exploited by vast imperialism. Nationalism was a blessing. But before very long nationalism became a movement of chauvenism, with all its viciousness and all its destructiveness.

In the thirteenth century a great movement swept over Christianity, a movement initiated by St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis saw the corruption of the Church;

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he saw the Church losing its soul in the obesity of prosperity, and he began a movement looking toward the return of Christianity to the primitive ideals of simplicity and service. He founded a new order, and before very long the gray friars swept and inundated the whole of Europe, and the ideal died in its own realization.

And so it has been from time immemorial.

Things move in cycles, but not hopelessly so and not monotonously so. Human life does not move in one complete sphere, never progressing. Civilization is very much like a spiral stairway: it winds constantly, but it winds upward, gaining ever more the purer air and the wider outlook upon things. But it is well to keep in mind, as we champion this cause or that cause, as we fight for this ideal or that ideal, for this institution or that institution, that no institution is ultimate and final and lasting that it is but the thing of a moment,--important, essential for the moment, but only for the moment. I think it was Mr. H...Ellis who said: "While we are putting our shoulder to the wheel, while we are doing the great things in life, it is well, if we wish to subject ourselves to a great deal of unhappiness later on, to put the Book of Ecclesiastes under our arm."

"Round and round goes the world; that which was, that shall be: and there is really nothing new under the sun." That is one of the great lessons that this

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season brings unto men. It is one of those ancient wisdoms.

Another lesson, to my mind, is this-- beautifully summed up in a sentence of the New Testament-- "That which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die." Life must first descend into the valley of death before it can come forth a life more abundant. Man must die before he is reborn into the higher life. Men must pass through the hell of suffering and sorrow, of trial and tribulation before they are purged of all the dross, before they are exalted to the higher level of life. That seems to be one of the most immutable laws of life. The seed must die before it is quickened; and any ideal must first be sacrificed for and died for before it can become a vivifying and quickening influence in life. Suffering and sorrow are the ways that lead to the crown of glory. And I sometimes think that of nations; nations must pass through periods of calamity, of catastrophe, before they find their souls.

I can understand the saying of our Rabbis, that before the Messiah comes there will be an age of extreme wickedness and extreme suffering, because it is through the very purging and purifying influences of these trials and these sufferings that the Messianic age of goodness can come to be. And I sometimes think that this, has passed through and our age, is passing through today the hell of agony and

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starvation and misery and suffering, walking "the way of sorrows" that leads to the crucifixion, in the hope that perhaps a new life and a higher ideal of human brotherhood may be consummated. That, to my mind, is a message of the season.

And then again comes this thought:

Patience! The man who has little faith and little knowledge, looking about him in the cold desolation of winter, when everything is dead, would be tempted, I suppose, to chant the sad litany of pessimism and depression. All is dead, and all is vanity. But the man who has faith and knowledge, the man who not only sees things but can see through things, knows that the very earth which at that moment seems to be the grave of everything, is at that very moment the cradle of a new birth; that under the ice and under the snow the sap is slowly moving and creeping, and that a new life is being fashioned in the womb of the earth.

The man of little vision is impatient, but it is well to remember that life moves very slowly: it crawls. I think it was *Dean Inge* who said: "Why should man be impatient? It took the Almighty a million years to fashion one little bit of red sandstone." Life must be seen in its vast contours, and only he who has infinite patience and carries within his soul the burden of hope can be of any benefit to himself or to society. For

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nothing is accomplished by furious impatience except unhappiness to ourselves and to others. Life moves slowly, and what we can accomplish in our own finite way is very small and meager, but, nevertheless, supremely significant.

When I speak of patience I have not in mind a spirit of "Oh, well, what's the use"--a spirit of lassitude, a spirit of weariness. On the contrary, I have in mind a deliberate, firm, consistent effort to do, to create, to achieve, without impatience, without heart-breaking intensity, but quietly, patiently but firmly; to file away, to dig away, to mould, to fashion, realizing all the time that what we can, in our own personal, limited way, accomplish is, after all, only a little bit of reality, a segment; that it takes eons and eternities to complete the whole circle of life, but that, nevertheless, our segment, our bit, our art, is of supreme value, because the circle will never be completed without our segment, without our bit of effort and labor and soul-sweating.

I think this age of ours, having come out of the caldron of the suffering of war, is perhaps a little bit too impatient, that it wishes to create perfection and beauty in a day or a year. That is palpably and clearly impossible. An institution can be fashioned in a day, but it will live only for a day. It is like those hot-

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house flowers that are forced, but whose duration is very brief. An institution to live and to endure must be an expression of the life and the soul and the imagination of a people. A new institution must be an expression of a change of heart and a change of life and a change of environment, spiritual and mental, of a people; and these facts cannot be achieved in a day or in a year.

Patience! That is one of the great lessons that nature teaches to men but men seldom heed. That does not mean conservatism at all; that does not mean the spirit which says, "Well, nature is always the same, and human nature never changes, and therefore what's the use." Human nature does change, and nature itself does change, and if there is any fact that is absolutely certain in the world it is that everything changes, that nothing remains the same two consecutive moments; that life is constantly becoming something else, constantly changing from one phase to another. But patience means deliberateness, lack of blind haste. That, to my mind, is the third lesson of this season.

And, lastly, there is this thought: there is no death! There is no death! Death is only a passing phase of life. What you and I call death is only the seed time of a new life. The thing that endures forever is life. Life is like a perennial fountain whose waters fall to the ground only to rise again and play in the light

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of the sun. There is no death! The leaf that withers and decays feeds with its body a new leaf and a new life. Life is one vast, onrushing, irresistible stream, and death is not a check or a brake or a dam. Why, death is only a bend in the channel. There is no death! Our bodies of the earth may return to their elements, and for eternities be transformed and transmuted into other substances and other things; they are not destroyed. And our spirit, spark of the eternal fire which is the life force of the world, which is God, light of God's eternal light, radiation of an eternal energy, outreaching of a mighty force, manifestation of an all-embracing power,--our soul will live on in that same force whence it first came.

There is no death for man; there is no death for man's ideal. You may tear the ideal upon the rack; you may bury it deep down in the ground, but it will rise again and walk among men as a new and strange revelation. For man's highest ideals are at one with the life force which is in the world. Every human ideal that makes for expansion, every human ideal that discovers new worlds and new lands for the great romance and adventure of the human race, every ideal that liberates and emancipates the gifts and the capacities of the human mind and soul, every ideal that means life, freedom, movement, growth, is as eternal and enduring as life itself. It

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may change in its detailed expression, it may grow and decay, even as the individual plant or flower or tree grows and decays, but the ideal which is its background and its dynamic and driving force in the wheel of life-- that never dies.

There is no death! I wish that spirit could enter our beings and saturate us completely. Then men and women will not follow some wild will--o'-the-wisp, the spiritualistic notions and fads, hoping to snatch a bit of life from the jaws of death. Oh, that is so pathetic, and that is so sad, when in reality life is all about you; everywhere there is a throbbing of life reality. For all is of God, and all is in God, and God lives.

Is it more to a human being to hear those pathetic intimations of lost ones--raps, or signs, or signals? Does that satisfy the human soul more than a faith that there is no death? That whatever they be and whatever the condition of their life is, they are living in God? For nothing is destroyed, nothing dies, but changes from one phase to another; perhaps from the lower to the higher, who knows?

That is the spirit of Spring. That is the spirit of the holidays commemorating Spring. And, to my mind, that is the challenge to you and me, standing on the threshold of a new year. Resurrection! Resurrection! Have you been dead? Have you been dead to the appeal of

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all the finer things in life? Has your soul been dead to the appeal of the beauty and the glory there is in life? Have you been dead to all the romance and all the adventure and all the quest for the faraway land that one may find in life? Has your soul been dead to all the love and all the friendships that one can form in this world with men and women?

Has your soul been dead in this season of nascent life, of resurgent life of Spring? Go down on your knees and pray, pray at the moment the field and forest are coming to life, pray unto a great God to revive you! "Good God, create in me a new, fresh, vigorous spirit, a new heart!" That is the message of the season.

Has spring died within your soul? Has youth perished? Have you perhaps, in the summer and autumn time of prosperity, with all the wealth and comforts and luxuries that may have been given unto you,--have you perhaps sunken and lost your soul and permitted it to sag? Have you lost the spirit of youth?

Then in this great hour of resurrecting nature pray, pray unto a good God to bring back into your life youth and Spring and faith and hope and courage; for, although the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.

Resurrection and the new life! That is Passover; that is Easter; that is Spring!

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