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If the Maccabees were Alive Today, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
SUBJECT: IF THE MACCABEES WERE ALIVE TODAY.
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
DECEMBER 17, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.

This festival of Chanukah which we are celebrating this week commemorates the victory of the Jews under the inspiring leadership of the Maccabean Family over the hosts of the Syrian Greeks under the leadership of Antiochus Epiphanes and Epiphanes the Illustrious, in the year 165 before the common era.

It is perhaps well to understand the real significance of this epoch-making event in the history of Israel, and perhaps also in the history of the world. The struggle of the Maccabees was not a purely political struggle for independence; not that the Jews did not appreciate political independence, political freedom, but because they were interested at all times in a higher type of freedom--perhaps the one kind of freedom that really matters: the freedom of the soul. We call it religious freedom, cultural freedom.

The Jews were content to remain, before this time of the Maccabees, under the Persian rule for close onto two hundred years without rebelling. The Jews were content to remain under the Greek rule before the days of Antiochus Epiphanes for a hundred and fifty years without rebelling; and the Jews were content to remain, after the days of the Hasmonaean Family, under the Roman rule for one hundred and twenty-five years without rebelling; and yet in the years 167, 166 and 165 the whole of Judea was caught up in a flame of rebellion, the like of which Israel had not known before.

Why? Because they were fighting then not for

political freedom as much as for the freedom of their faith and their culture--for the preservation of the soul of the people. You will recall that when Alexander, the Great, in the latter part of the fourth century, set out to conquer the world, and carried the conquest which led him from Macedonia, his home, to the very borders of India, that Alexander and his hosts brought with them to the lands which they conquered not alone Greek armies but Greek civilization, Greek speech, Greek manners, Greek philosophy, Greek thought, Greek attitudes towards life.

The Greek civilization--what we call Hellenic civilization--was a very vigorous and positive and affirmative and creative civilization, and a very beautiful civilization, and the vanquished peoples submitted readily to the charm and the appeal and the brilliance of this civilization which far excelled their own crude, primitive types of civilization. Centuries later, when the great empire of Rome conquered Greece, Rome, the magnificent and the all-powerful, likewise submitted itself to the culture of the conquered Greeks, and the Roman poets and Roman artists and Roman dramatists and Roman historians copied and imitated in a very secondary and poor fashion the poetry and the drama and the philosophy and the history and the music of the Greeks.

Now, this culture invaded every country in Asia Minor, and, of course, also invaded Palestine and pervaded the higher strata of the population. The aristocracy, the

wealthy classes, fell the easiest victims to this culture of the Hellenes. Now there was much in Greek culture which the Jews could have appropriated with great profit. The Jews were never averse to accepting gifts from other cultures. The Jew adopted and also adapted himself to foreign culture; and that, I believe, in a way, is the secret of his survival. He drew strength and inspiration from the peoples in whose midst he lived or with whom he came in contact,---whether it was the early Canaanite or the later Egyptian, or the Assyrian or the Babylonian or the Greek or the Roman, or, in later days, the Arab, and in still later days Western European cultures.

The Jew never ghettotized himself spiritually and mentally, but always reached out and took the good that was in every people's life and thought and mind and soul, and submitted these to the transforming power of his own peculiar genius and made it one. The Talmud tells of a great rabbi--Rabbi Mayer--who took a pomegranate and ate the meat of it and threw away the rind. And the Jew took the culture of every people, the meat of it, the worth of it, the real values, but the rind, the externalities, the superficialities, he had the good sense and the saving grace of discarding.

But since he came in contact with the Greek culture great numbers of the people were unable to use this discerning power. In the second century, when this Maccabean struggle took place, the Greek culture that came to the Jews was no

longer that pure, unadulterated civilization of the Athenians. It was very beautiful and very noble, but it was very much like the culture of the French which now pervades Asia Minor and the Levant--a decadent culture, a degraded culture, an adulterated mongrel type of civilization, that had all the superficial brilliancy and attractiveness, all the freedom of Greek civilization, but none of its restraints, none of its discipline and none of its creative power and none of its real soul. It was a cheap copy--an imitation; and that is the civilization that reached, in the second century, the Jews of Palestine.

It is perhaps well to emphasize at this moment this thought: that between Greek thought and Hebrew thought, between Hellenic civilization and Hebraic civilization, there may be differences but there are no real antagonisms. One of the great essayists of England--Matthew Arnold--popularized this distinction--which has since been accepted as fact by all people: that both the Greeks and the Jews strove for perfection. He claimed that the whole of modern civilization may be traced back either to the Greek contribution or to the Hebrew contribution. Both of these civilizations strove for human perfection; but each adopted a course of its own. The Jews emphasized conduct; the Greeks emphasized right thinking. The Jews emphasized duty; the Greeks emphasized clear intelligence. The Jews emphasized self-control; the Greeks emphasized self-culture. Hebraic genius emphasized strictness of conscience; Hellenic genius emphasized

spontaneity of consciousness--freedom; the development of all the aptitude of a man's soul and mind.

Now, this distinction, to my mind, is more apparent than real. While it is true that the Jew emphasized conduct and duty and conscience and self-control, the Jew was never averse to the development of the intellect. On the contrary, the whole tradition of the Jew from earliest days to the present day has been one of loyalty, to learning, to scholarship, to thought; and nowhere in the whole literature of the world do you find such superb eulogies and apostrophes of wisdom as you find in the Book of Proverbs, as you find in the Ecclesiasticus and the Apocrypha, as you find throughout Hebrew literature.

The Jew never confined the human mind; the Jew never demanded blind submission to creed and dogma and doctrine. The Jew wanted to think. Why, the Jew questioned his faith, the Jew questioned his God! Think of Job, that marvelous, perhaps the most wonderful drama of the ages--Job questioning God, questioning the righteousness of God, questioning the wisdom of the Almighty, the justice of the Almighty. And that book is incorporated within the Bible, the sacred text book of our faith--and Koheleth.

There is, to my mind, one fundamental difference--and perhaps that, too, is a matter of emphasis more than a real distinction--between Hebraic culture and Hellenic culture, and between Hebraic culture and European culture today; and that is why I believe that the Maccabees have a

mission to perform today even as they had twenty-one hundred years ago. The Greek conception of life was secular; the Hebrew conception of life was sacred. The Greek ideal was the good; the Hebrew conception was God. The Greeks had a marvelous system of ethics; the ethics of Aristotle have not been much improved on by philosophers of later days. Greek ethics were derived from speculation; Hebrew ethics were derived from revelation--from God.

What did this mean? It meant that while the Greek built up a magnificent structure of ethics, he failed to have a driving impulse within him. He had a marvelous ship that had no propeller; the impulse, the inspiration, the driving force, the will to do what is thought right and good--that he did not have, and that the Jew had; because for the Jew the source, the basis, the sanction, the driving impulse of his entire ethical structure was God. "Love thy neighbor as thyself, for I am the Lord." "Ye shall not oppress the poor, for I am the keeper." "Ye shall be holy, for I, the Lord, thy God, am holy." "You are my people, for I brought ye out of Egypt."

The motive of God became the ideal of Israel. Just as He is merciful so must we endeavor to be merciful; just as He is kind so must we be kind. This sanctification motive, as I call it, in life, is the big contribution of the genius of the Jew. There are peoples who are wiser than we, and more philosophic than we, and more scientific than we, and more artistic than we are, but there is no people in

the world that conceived of this ideal "to perfect the world through and by the establishment of the reign of the kingdom of God" as the Jew conceived of it. There is no people that threw a halo of holiness and glory around every act and every possible human relationship as the Jew did. To the Jew nothing is profane. The Jew washes his hands and recites a prayer, for cleanliness is a commandment of Divinity. The Jew sits at his dinner table and pronounces grace because the dinner table is the altar of the Almighty. Every act of his, every move of his, is in God, of God and for God. And so the Jew sanctified the whole of life.

Now, this is the unique culture of the Jew, and it is for this that the Jews of those days, perhaps unconsciously, fought and won. They may have sacrificed something for the victory, they may have given up something of Greek culture that was highly desirable, but it was worth the price.

Now, if the Maccabees were alive today I believe they would wage the same war all over again. First, against the de-Judaizing influences within ourselves, and then against the secularizing influences in the world. The Jew survived the inroads of Hellenism; he fought it and won. The Jew not only survived the inroads of Arabic culture but the Jew did not even have to fight Arabic culture; there was something in the civilization of the Arabs that was so much akin to that of the Jews that the Jew could readily assimilate almost everything that was in the philosophy of the victorious

Mohammedans and still keep his own soul intact; and from this contact of the Jew and Arab there grew a glorious period of Jewish creativeness such as we have not yet seen since those days. It was this contact that gave us Saadia and ibn Gabirol and Maimonides and Halevi; it was that contact which gave us Hebrew poetry and Hebrew philosophy and Hebrew mysticism. It was that contact which seemed to have struck new fire and new expression in the soul of the Jew, and we had a marvelous period of almost six hundred years when the genius of the Jew was creating things of magnificent value.

Now, the contact of the Jew with Western European civilization has not been so helpful, and it is yet to be established whether the Jew can survive this contact or not. With the French Revolution there came the beginnings of Jewish emancipation. The ghetto walls crumbled and the Jew stepped out from his own narrowed sphere into the great world. And what happened? The Jew began to lose first the things he could lose without much loss to himself--the superficial, external things which the exile imposed upon him; the crudeness and the rudeness and the sense of isolation. He lost these things; and it is well that he did lose them.

Then he began to lose things much more valuable. He began to sacrifice his identity, his uniqueness, his culture, his soul, for the gifts of political freedom and emancipation which were bestowed upon him. Western European Jewry in the last one hundred years was not a creative Jewry. It did not give us Jewish poets; it did not give us Jewish

writers; it did not give us Jewish thinkers and Jewish philosophers. It did give us a science of Judaism, a critical, historical study of Judaism, which has remained in the possession of a few, but which has not permeated the rank and file of the German Jew, of the French Jew, of the American Jew.

The Jew seems to have succumbed . He took his religion of the Western European Jew; he took his religion, which was rich with a great legacy and a great tradition, and he denuded it of content; he reduced it to a pale, ethical formalism. He put his religion asleep on the pillow of a vague humanitarism. Judaism, a religion of mysticism, and a religion of loyalties, and a religion of prayer and piety and worship, and a religion of contact with Divinity, became just a mere abstration. Western European Jewry began to lose the sense of group-loyalty, and group-discipline, and religious habits, and religious contact; and Western European Jewry began to lose that marvelous tradition of Jewish learning and Jewish scholarship which saved the people throughout the fifteen hundred years of persecution and antagonisms.

We have not yet adjusted ourselves to Western European culture. The Jews of Eastern Europe are much more fortunate spiritually but much less fortunate physically; they suffered more and their emancipation came much later--if it has yet come at all; and because of the continued discipline and because of the continued isolation the Eastern European Jew--the Jew of Russia, the Jew of Poland, the Jew of Rumania,

the Jew of Galicia--was able to feed his own soul. The religion continued to be a vitally essential factor in his life to this day; and Jewish learning and Jewish scholarship continued to be of primary interest and concern to himself and his children, and religious discipline and religious conduct still held, with the result that today there is a veritable Hebrew Renaissance in Eastern European Jewry. Men are writing Hebrew poetry, Hebrew essays, Hebrew books and composing Hebrew music; and Jewish essayists are expressing the soul of the Jew--not the soul of the Pole or the Slav or the Teuton--but the soul of the Jew in sculpture and in deed.

The soul was saved within while the body suffered much; and of course it is yet a question whether Eastern European Jewry, when once it comes in real contact with European conduct and European civilization, can survive. And therefore I say that if the Maccabees were alive today, if the Maccabees were here today, they would wage with real determination and firmness the same battle of the East; they would fight today as they fought then--for the preservation of the soul of the collective mind and the collective character; for a people has a mind and a people has a character and a people has a soul unique and distinct; and they would fight for the preservation of these things today.

And why? Because the world needs us as Jews. The world needs our contribution as Jews. Because we remained firm in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes Judaism was enabled to go forth in the world, and through the channel of

Christianity and through the channel of Mohammedanism influenced the thought of hundreds of millions; and if Judaism will continue to remain true unto itself, and true unto its like, and true unto its life, Judaism will, in the days to come, continue to exert even greater influences upon the course of all civilization. We have not yet said our last say in the world. The world needs us as Jews; the world today needs the sanctification motive of Jewish life.

We have a great deal of science and a great deal of invention, but of what good are they? Do they increase the happiness of human beings? When science is regarded as an end in itself it becomes a destructive influence in life rather than a helpful influence. The Jew says science must serve the ends of sanctifying and ennobling life. We have art, but when art becomes an end in itself it turns upon the artist and destroys him. Art, too, must serve the ends of increasing the beauty and the nobility of human life. And we are struggling for economic justice, but economic justice is not an end in itself. Higher wages and less hours of work may mean, after all, nothing but more money to spend and more time to kill. To the Jew economic justice is a means and not an end. Time and leisure must be utilized intelligently for self-development and self-fulfillment, for the sanctification of our lives.

And we have democracy; but democracy, too, is not an end in itself but a means. It is no great ideal to have one hundred fools rule in place of one tyrant. Democracy,

too, must call forth the latent capacities and aptitudes in each man and enable him to develop and grow spiritually into a fuller realization of the worth and the meaning of life.

And so the world today needs the Jewish ideal of the sanctification of life. Why was the Jew the first to proclaim in the world, where the clashing and the jarring and the struggling of peoples were the dominant notes, peace unto those that are near and unto those that are far off? Why was it that the Jew projected the ideal of being serious into pleasures? an ideal which seems today just as far off as it was in those days. I will tell you why: because the Jew regarded human life as infinitely sacred and holy; because man, made in the image of God, partook of sanctity and the divinity of God.

It was a Jewish rabbi who said that man is worth the whole of creation. It was a Jewish rabbi who said, "This is the generation of man, says the Bible." Why of man? So that every man may be able to say, and be justified in saying, "For my sake was the world created." It was the Jew who demanded the safeguarding of life from the dangers and the miseries of war; because life is holy and life is sacred; because life is the God dwelling in us.

And so the world today needs the spirit of the Maccabees. If the Maccabees were here I am quite sure that they would call aloud to all of us to retain the spirit of Jewish loyalty, to retain the spirit of Jewish learning, to foster Hebrew literature and Hebrew culture, and, above all,

to foster the spirit of Jewish dignity and self-respect.

Jewish dignity and self-respect! That is the heroic pride of the Maccabees which we are fast losing, and the wealthier we become and the more prosperous we become the faster we lose the spirit of Jewish pride. The thing I am going to say I shall not say in criticism and in bitterness, but in justice to this ideal for which we labor it must be said. I know of an organization in this city--a Jewish social organization--which serves a good purpose--which was once asked by the rabbis of the community, in a spirit of friendliness, not to celebrate the secular New Years on a Sabbath eve, out of deference to the millions of Jews to whom Sabbath is still a holy day; out of respect to their sensibilities and the sensibilities of a whole race. And the request was turned down. It was a secular organization that was maintained, although exclusively made up of Jews, and they were not going to submit to any blue law, and the New Years ball was held on the Sabbath eve. But two years later New Years happens to fall on a Sunday, and the same organization, out of deference to the susceptibilities of their non-Jewish neighbors, decides not to hold a New Years ball on a Sunday.

Now, the action of that organization is entirely within its control and province, but, to my mind, it is a tragic confession of the lack of a sense of Jewish manhood and Jewish dignity and pride of self and group-loyalty. In the olden days it would have partaken of the nature of a

national insult. There is so much of anarchy broadcast in this community--and in other communities, for we are no worse than other communities--that these things pass by us and oftentimes we do not notice them. How can we expect the non-Jew to respect us and our traditions, our lives and our opinions, if we do not respect them ourselves.

There is perhaps one other thing that the Maccabees would do if they were alive today. I believe that the Maccabees would be thrilled and exalted with what is transpiring now in that self same land for which they fought, in that self-same land which received their blood--in Palestine. The Maccabees were patriots; the Maccabees knew that the spirit of universalism in our religion did not combat and did not oppose the spirit of patriotism and the spirit of loyalty to one's own people and to one's own land; in fact, they knew, as we come to know, that if one has no loyalty for one's own, one cannot have much loyalty for other people.

The Maccabees would have, I believe, looked with great favor upon this experiment which is now transpiring in the ancient and new land of Israel; not so much because it is affording a haven of refuge for thousands of our people who have no other place to go to, who are harassed and driven about, hounded and persecuted in all the lands of Europe--wanted nowheres--not only because Palestine will offer them a place where they can rest their tired bones and rehabilitate their broken lives and reestablish themselves, but because it would give them that very thing for which they fought and for

which they would fight today--a fortress, a place of refuge for the spirit and the collective character and the collective mind and the soul of Israel; because Palestine may become another reservoir, another power house, another dynamo that shall radiate currents of inspiration to thrill and enliven and foment Jewry the world over.

The Maccabees would look with glory in their eyes upon these new Maccabees of the twentieth century, with their schools and their high schools and their universities in Russia, Poland, Germany, Austria and Hungary, and who are now, with their own hands, building roads and digging ditches and planting vineyards in Palestine.

And the Maccabees would look with favor, I believe, upon this great ideal of establishing on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the beautiful city of Jerusalem, a Hebrew university, where the mind of the Jew and the genius of the Jew may once again create its Bibles and its psalms and its songs and its brilliancy and its wisdom, and then send them out into the world that they may bless mankind again.

One thing is certain: the Maccabees would not be worried much about anti-Semitism in Palestine or anti-Semitism in America; for they knew, as some of us know today, that as long as the Semite lives so long will the anti-Semite live. They knew that so long as the Jew lives so long will the Jew-baiter live; and they knew that as long as the Jew lives a purposeful, creative, effective, challenging life, that as long as he is true to himself, to his mission, to his ideals,

as long as he remains the great Protestant of the world--
challenging the injustice and the wrongs and the oppressions
and the superstitions and the idolatries of the world; as
long as the spirit of the Maccabees has still in him the
"He who is for the Lord come to me," so long will the forces
of darkness and ignorance, the intrenched and the privileged
corrupters of the world, oppressors of mankind, be arrayed
against him, determined to destroy him. And the Maccabees
would welcome their opposition and welcome their hate, and
suffer and submit to the eternal suffering for the sake of
the eternal God.

That, to my mind, is what the Maccabees would do
if they were alive today. Perhaps some of them are alive
today. Perhaps in many of us their spirit and their faith
and their hope are still alive.

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