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Is the Spirit of Lincoln Abroad in our Land Today?, 1923.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

"IS THE SPIRIT OF LINCOLN ABROAD IN OUR LAND TODAY?"

AT THE TEMPLE - SUNDAY MORNING

FEBRUARY 11, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.



The great Russian writer, Gorki, once said of Tolstoy, "With such a man in our midst one need never feel alone in the world." There is a profound truth in this observation. A truly great man makes other men feel less lonely. A great man by his very existence strengthens our faith in ourselves, in our ideals, in life; because a truly great man is proof, a symbol, of what aspiring mankind may attain to; and a great man, therefore, confirms our faith, vindicates our ideals; a great man is the pledge and the promise of humanity.

And so it is with real joy that we turn with the revolving year to the anniversary of a truly great man-- Abraham Lincoln. For no one can spend an hour in the world of memories invoked by the name of Lincoln, no one, I believe, can review the colorful pageantry of this man's efforts and struggles and achievements, and no man can reread some of his more prophetic utterances, without feeling a bit less lonely in this sorely tried, confused and chaotic world of ours today, without feeling a resurgence of faith, hope and high resolve, without being tempted to reform, to regenerate ourselves to those beautiful ideals for which this man lived and was martyred.

I believe that Abraham Lincoln helps us to hold onto our faith in democracy, even as he teaches us the ancient wisdom of patience when we deal with human institutions and human organizations. You know, you and I are driven,

sometimes, in exasperation, to complain of the deficiencies and the failures and the shortcomings of democracy; we are driven to complain of its mediocrity, of its inefficiency, of the ease with which, in a democracy, people cloak vast follies in attractive moral garbs; we are driven to complain, sometimes bitterly, of the obtuseness which drives people, in a free democracy, to turn traitor in moments of stress-- traitor to the very ideals to which it is pledged, and traitor to its own ultimate best interests.

And yet America experiences all these things. Perhaps few men felt as keenly, because few men were as sensitive to the shortcomings, the failures of popular government, as Lincoln did. He faced a republic which was pledged to the fundamental proposition that all men were created equal; and yet in that same republic where this magnificent dictum of truth, of thesis, was proclaimed from pulpit and platform, with reverence and with awe,--in this same republic he faced the situation where millions were endeavoring to enslave, physically enslave, fellow-beings, where millions were endeavoring to extend slavery even into new territories, and where millions were ready to raise the standard of rebellion and to drench the land in fraternal blood rather than to see this thesis, this magnificent proclamation, to which they all subscribed, actually, in reality, become a fact.

Lincoln knew the real inequalities of men in a democracy pledged to equality. Lincoln also knew the

incompetence and the inefficiencies, the briberies and the failures in the institutional forms of democratic government. Lincoln himself experienced the uncertainty and the shifting character of popular opinion and the instability of popular judgment. He knew it all; and yet at no time in his tempestuous career, at no time, even during the darkest hour of the Civil War, did he lose faith in government of the people, by the people and for the people; in fact, no man threw such a halo of glory, a veritable mist of grandeur, around the concept of democracy as Abraham Lincoln.

Why, to him it partook of the character of a religious dogma; it was dogmatic; it was creedal; it was eternally true and ultimate with him. Why, he believed that the American people, through its tribunals, its political machinery, its congress, its constitution, was actually the channel through which God revealed Himself. Faulty as it was, it was to him yet the one avenue of revelation--of Divinity.

In his first inaugural address, he says: "If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with His eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on your side of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people."

Lincoln refers constantly, as you will recall from his writings, to the "good old central ideals," as he calls them. He not only believed in them but he believed in their ultimate triumph; and the good old central ideals were simply

the ideals of human equality, and of the equality of opportunity for the children of man.

He says in one of his letters: "We can do it: (referring to the realization of these good old central ideals) the human heart is with us; God is with us. We shall again be able not to declare that all states as states are equal, nor yet that all citizens as citizens are equal, but to renew the broader, better declaration, including them both, and much more--that all men are created equal."

And by equality, friends, Lincoln did not have in mind any theoretical, abstract equality, that does not exist except in formal logic or in mathematical convention. Abraham Lincoln knew very well, as you and I know, that all men are not equal in mental endowments, in spiritual attributes, in social position; no more than they are equal in color or in size or in weight. It is only in formal logic that A is equal to A; it is only in the conventional mathematics that 1 is equal to 1.

In actual life one is never equal to one because no two things are alike. No two men are alike; no two blades of grass are alike, and no two drops of water are alike; no two moments in time are alike, for one is built upon the other and therefore differs from the other.

Abraham Lincoln clearly states what he meant when he spoke of the equality of men--the equality as regards the inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; the right of every man, as far as it is

within him, to live his own life, to mold his own character, to fashion his own destiny; the freedom of opportunity given to the child of God to develop and to evolve and to release himself as he sees fit. Even there we are not altogether free, because we are not altogether masters of our destiny. The generations which preceded us, the myriads of generations back of us, balloted, as it were, for us, and, in a sense, determined for us; our environment determines and molds us, and those whom we love and those whom we are dependent upon influence us; we are not altogether free.

But within these confining walls man still has a certain amount of freedom which he may use to the transfiguration of self; and as regards the right to enjoy that freedom Abraham Lincoln maintained that all men, white or black, poor or rich, are equal because all are children of God.

Abraham Lincoln not only believed in democracy: he was democracy. And that is a thought I would like to stress this morning: he was the epic of democracy in himself. Washington was not, Jefferson was not, Hamilton was not, Adams was not; they were the rebellious children of an undemocratic civilization. They arrived at their conclusions through an intellectual process. They became democrats through philosophic speculations, in which they were aided by the liberal thought of France in the eighteenth century. They were not the products of democracy.

But Abraham Lincoln was. He was bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; he was of the very soil of democracy.

From the vast freedom of the untrammelled West, he rose; from the rude freedom of pioneer life, he rose; from the harshness and the coarseness of backwoodsmen's life, he rose; through poverty and ignorance and superstition and the early standards of political morality of an unknown lawyer, he rose--from the lowest ^{rungs} ruins to the heights, to the sublime heights of a world's great emancipator. And that is his epic, and that is his triumph.

You know, age has a tendency to smooth the shining angularity of facts, as Emerson says. Legend has a tendency to cast a veil of mercy over those whom we revere, and through the mist of the ages, through the receding character of the man, we are tempted to ascribe to Abraham Lincoln only the fine virtues. We speak of him in veneration and in reverence, as we should; we speak of Abraham Lincoln as the compassionate, and the wise, and the patient, and the gracious, the magnificent, rich and effective personality. He was all that.

But we must not forget that he was really, really human. We must not think of him as a saint; we must not think of him as a prophet; because in doing so we remove him from the touch and intimate contact and kinship of his fellow-men. He was human, and he had the stamp and the imprint of the frontiers life. There was much of harshness, there was much of crudeness and much that was not charming and graceful in the character and in the life and in the manner of Abraham Lincoln. There was a great deal of stubbornness,

and at times a great deal of towering rage in the man, and at times a great deal of the superstition of the backwoods, and at times there was a good deal of the shifting standards of morality, political morality, compromised in his younger days before he became the chief executive of this great republic.

And he rose from all that; he forced his way through the jungle of poverty and ignorance and superstition out into the vast spaces of sacrificial idealism, of moral grandeur, of sublimity. And that is the triumph and the epic of democracy.

And by his life I believe--because he was the common man extended to giant proportions, as has been said of him--that Abraham Lincoln is an inspiration, that Abraham Lincoln is a vindication of democracy. We cannot believe that every man born in a democracy is an Abraham Lincoln, but that any Abraham Lincoln may be born and reared and nurtured in a Lincoln democracy. We need have no belief, as some would have us believe, that democracy makes for mediocrity, but not for the excepted few and gifted ones. Here was a man having the very stamp and proportion of genius and greatness, and if Lincoln could be what he was in a democracy others may.

There is a vast store, an unlimited store of the precious ore of human personality in the souls of the common people. That, Abraham Lincoln's life attested. I believe we need him very sorely today. I believe at no time

in the last fifty years did we need so badly the spirit and the prophecy of Abraham Lincoln as we need it today; for we are drifting, even as the peoples of his day were drifting, from the ancient moorings of fundamental ideals. Abraham Lincoln saw his fellowmen, his fellow citizens, drift from these basic ideals of American democracy, and he summoned them to return.

He said in one of his speeches on the question of liberty as a principle: "We are not what we would have been. When we were the political slaves of King George and wanted to be free, we called the maxim that all men were created equal a self-evident truth, but now, when we have grown fat and have lost all dread of being slaves ourselves, we have become so greedy to be masters that we call the same maxim a self-evident lie. The Fourth of July has not quite yet dwindled away, it is true. It is still a great day for burning fire crackers."

Abraham Lincoln warned his fellow citizens: "You cannot trample upon liberty in one instance and expect it to be held in reverence in another. You cannot invade one of these basic ideals without putting your own necks in bondage." He said unto them: "Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors. Familiarize yourself with the chains of bondage and you prepare your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of others, you have lost the genius of your own independence and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises

they are all too familiar to you. When you have in this day a Congress of the United States endeavoring by artificial means to limit immigration, which last year was limited to a three per cent quota on the basis of the Nationals residing in this land in 1910, and is now seeking to redraft it to a two per cent quota on the basis of Nationals residing in this land in 1890--an attempt clearly dictated by a No-Nothing spirit; a desire to classify immigrants on the basis of race, giving the preference to so-called Nordics as against East European Italians, Slavs and Jews; at a time when this land is far from being flooded and inundated by immigrants; at a time when the quota set by the three per cent law was not reached in this land, then the danger which Abraham Lincoln foresaw has become a very real danger.

When you have a president of the oldest and the most honored university in America urge the enactment of a law, a percentage law, against the Jews, and then follows that up with a perfectly uncalled for cruel act of discrimination against a negro student, whose father is an eminent writer in this land, himself an alumnus of that institution, refusing him a dwelling place in a university dormitory, where residence is compulsory for all other freshmen students,--I say, when the head of the oldest and the most honored institution in America subscribes to these racial discriminations and gives them academic sanction, then the prophecy of Abraham Lincoln has become a very real one.

And when all about you you have organizations that

have made it the supreme function to keeping alive hate, and subsidize it, as it were, and to drive it into the law of the land, then these things become of terrible concern to those who love American freedom. I want to say there, to those who love American freedom, that the danger is not on the side of those who are being discriminated against; the Jew has experienced all these things before; it is not a new thing in his life; he has weathered these storms before; he is accustomed to them; he is accustomed to the sporadic distemper of the world; he is reconciled to it; it cannot hurt him; it cannot demoralize him; it cannot break him; he will abide and endure until the storm passes.

But the hurt, the danger, is to this young democracy, to this beautiful experiment in spiritual unity which we call America; the hurt is to the soul of this land, which is the dream, because it is the expressed desire of all the submerged and the denied peoples of the earth; the hurt is to the dream of Abraham Lincoln, who paid with his life blood that this ideal may remain pure and unadulterated in the world.

Here is what Abraham Lincoln said: "The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society. And yet they are denied and evaded with no small show of success. One dashinglly calls them 'glittering generalities.' Another bluntly calls them 'self-evident lies.' And others insidiously argue that they apply to 'superior races.'"

Is that familiar? that equality applies to superior

racess? When, at any time in our history, did we have this pseudo-scientific lie of superior and inferior races, of Nordic races as against the inferior Mediterranean and Eastern European races, as broadly disseminated and as broadly held as it is today? Lincoln, sixty-five years ago, warned the people against them.

"These expressions, differing in form, are identical in object and effect--the supplanting the principles of free government and restoring those of classification, caste and legitimacy."

Abraham Lincoln has here used a familiar word which came into current use after the Treaty of Peace of 1815--legitimacy, which really meant reaction.

"They would delight a convocation of crowned heads plotting against the people. They are the vanguard, the miners and sappers of returning despotism. We must repulse them or they will subjugate us."

Perhaps Abraham Lincoln's attitude to immigration and to immigrants may not be untimely of note today. In his day they attacked the Germans and the Irish; they did not like them in those days. Nowadays the Germans and the Irish are acceptable because they are of the Nordic stock. But this is what Abraham Lincoln said:

"We have, besides these (that is, those who are natives) men--descended from those who are not our ancestors--among us, perhaps half of our people who are not descendants at all of these men; they are men who have come from Europe--

German, Irish, French, Scandinavian--men that have come from Europe themselves or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equal in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood (meaning the Revolutionary days), they find that they have none; (no physical link with the Revolutionary days) they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us; but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence, they find that those old men say that 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,' and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it, as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world."

In other words, that immigrants and the children of immigrants, who may not at all be racially related to those men who founded this republic and who framed the Constitution, are yet, according to the words and testimony of Abraham Lincoln, blood of their blood and flesh of their flesh, because they partake of their spirit, because they subscribe

to their moral convictions, because they have established an electric cord between their souls and the souls of those founding Fathers.

Abraham Lincoln knew the depth and the height of democratic philosophy; Abraham Lincoln knew that America is not an experiment in racial unity, in physical unity; that America is an experiment in spiritual unity, that America is an experiment in the transfiguration of man above his prejudices of race and caste and position, into the heights of spiritual harmony with all other fellow human beings. And that is the ideal that is being challenged today; it is being challenged not among the rank and file--they are not dangerous--it is being challenged by the leaders of thought in this land; and that is very, very dangerous.

I believe that the old world is stifling the new world. I believe that America is becoming Europeanized; I believe that we are losing our soul. We certainly are losing this vision of this real America. And I believe that the day has definitely come when we must bestir ourselves; we need the spirit of Abraham Lincoln so much today. There must be, on the part of all men, a return to the simple, eternal truths enunciated in the Constitution and in the Declaration of Independence. We must not permit our minds to become befogged and beclouded with the temporary hostilities and the temporary rivalries and the temporary passions of our day. These truths must be safeguarded or

this magnificent experiment will crumble into dust.

Let me conclude with the words of Abraham Lincoln himself, marvelously powerful, tremendously true, words.

He says:

These communities, by their representatives in old Independence Hall, said to the whole world of men, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'--(notice how constantly he hews on that one line, notice how constantly he stresses and scores and underscores this one truth that is basic, that is fundamental; all else is superstructure; the superstructure may crumble and change and be altered, but the foundations must endure)--that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

"This was their majestic interpretation of the economy of the universe; this was their lofty and wise and noble understanding of the justice of the Creator to His creatures; yes, gentlemen, to all His creatures, to the whole great family of men; and these men, the founders of America, erected a beacon to guide their children and their children's children, and the countless myriads who inhabit the earth in other ages. Why, statesmen as they were, they knew the tendency of prosperity to breed tyrants. Much of the ills and the ailments of our day are directly traceable to the corrosive and destructive and debilitating influences of great wealth.

"And so they established these great self-evident

me for the Senate, but you may take me and put me to death. While **pretending** no indifference to earthly unrest, I do claim to be actuated in this contest by something higher than the anxiety of office. I charge you to drop every paltry and insignificant thought for any man's success. It is nothing. I am nothing. But do not destroy that immortal emblem of humanity--the Declaration of American Independence.!"

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