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What is Freedom?, 1923.

SERMON BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

SUBJECT: WHAT IS FREEDOM?

AT THE TEMPLE - SUNDAY MORNING.

APRIL 1st, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.

The drama of Passover takes place, as you know, in the land of Egypt. With the return of the Passover festival our thoughts naturally turn to that land on the Nile, the cradle of the oldest civilization. This year the attention of the whole civilized world was turned dramatically and intrigued by Egypt, by reason of a series of excavations which revealed almost untold treasures, that startled the world and turned thoughts of men to Egypt, its ancient culture and its ancient civilization.

The archaeologist will undoubtedly be delighted with the sudden discovery, and so will the student of art, and the historian. But also the man of religion, the student of comparative religions, is deeply interested in the revelations which this ancient tomb has given to mankind.

One is tempted on this holiday of Passover to contrast the religion of Egypt, the faith, the attitudes, the point of view of the people of Egypt, with those of Israel. Israel and Egypt, Judea and Egypt, were also in close touch with one another. As you know, from the days of the patriarchs to this day Jews have lived in Egypt. Moses was born in Egypt, and fifteen hundred years later Philo lived and worked and wrote in Egypt, and a thousand years after Philo Maimonides lived and died. Alexandria for many generations was a great cultural center, and the Bible was first translated into Greek for the benefit of the large Jewish

communities, Hellenized, who lived in Egypt.

The political life of Judea was very often intertwined and interlaced with that of Egypt. Very often Judea was subject to Egypt; at times it was in alliance with Egypt. But Egypt influenced the political institutions and the religious practices of Israel undoubtedly; and yet there can be no two people so diametrically opposed to one another in their temperament, in their conception of life, and in their religious beliefs as the people of Judea and the people of the Nile.

The Egyptian people never had any conception of freedom. Egypt was always a monarchy whose king was absolute tyrant and autocrat, who claimed for himself the prerogatives of divinity. The people of Egypt, the masses, seldom rebelled because they could not even conceive of freedom. The idea of emancipation never entered their mental horizon, and the Egyptian ruler, the Pharaoh, never had any sense of responsibility towards these masses.

You recall when Moses came to him and said, "Why, your task masters are pressing the people too arduously," the ruler responded, "Why the fact that they are complaining shows that they have too much time on hand; they are lazy." And so he laid still heavier burdens upon them.

The priesthood of Egypt was just as absolute and just as fixed and just as tyrannically constructed in layer upon layer of caste as the ruling class. The whole political conception of Egypt was absolutism and authority. It was

fixed, stagnant. And so was the religion of Egypt. The Egyptian was terribly concerned about death; his whole religion was built around death. His Bible is called the Book of the Dead, a book which contains innumerable formulae that prescribe how to meet and placate the gods of the netherworld. The rich and the powerful and the kings built tombs for themselves, and pyramids, and placed in these tombs their household goods and their wealth and their dress and their regalia--all the pomp and circumstance that ritual sustains, because they wanted to be as comfortable as they could be in death, and because of that the spirit of Egypt lies buried today in their pyramids and in sand-covered tombs. The spirit of Egypt is no longer a driving impulse in civilization today.

Now, contrast with that Israel--the political philosophy of Israel. Israel began as a patriarchal people. Its earliest form of government was a government by the elder, the patriarch, who governed but never ruled. He was the primus inter pares--the first among equals. After the patriarchal system of organization in Israel there followed the system of a loose tribal confederacy--the period of the judges, when the leaders were selected and appointed by the people in hours of crises to lead the people, and after their work was done they returned to their plow, to their field and to their home; they sank back into the ranks of the people.

When a little later on, because of the menace of

the Philistines, the Jews began to clamor for a king--"Give us a king to rule over us"--Samuel, the prophet, refused. "Why do you wish a king to enslave you?"he said. "God is your ruler." And only because forced to and because of the need of the hour did Samuel finally consent and give Israel a king; and the first king, Saul, and the second king, David, and the third king, Solomon, were never secure upon their throne, to such an extent that they had to pay no attention to the will, or often to the whims, of the people; and when the son of Solomon, ~~Rehoboam~~, tried to act like a little Egyptian Pharaoh, and said, "If my father whipped you with lashes, I will whip you with scorpions, I will tax you even the more. You are my slaves and I am your tyrant, " why, the people tore the king into two. There was a clear, sharp division, caused by the democratic spirit of the people refusing to subject itself to a tyrannical conception of government.

During the long history of both of these kingdoms, the kingdom of Egypt and the kingdom of Israel, you find constant references in the Bible to ^{rebellions} ~~revelation~~ and the revolutions. The people of the land, the masses, rose and destroyed their rulers because they would not serve the people; and the prophets of Israel, who were at all times the spokesmen of the people--not of the classes--even as they were the expression of the genius of the Jew--the prophets of Israel paid no deference to crown or title. When the king sinned against God or against the people, the prophet faced

the king and denounced him. Nathan denounced King David, and Elijah denounced Ahab, and Jeremiah denounced Zedekiah.

The king did not govern by divine right, and he was not a law unto himself. He had to throw himself under the yoke of the moral law even as the common people. And after the destruction of the first temple, when Israel returned from Babylon, they had no kings at all. Their statesmen, their priests, their wise men, their sages, their scribes, Ezra and Zechariah, and those who followed them, administered their needs. And even in the second century, when the Hashmonahian dynasty arose, the Pharisees, representing the people, the hope of the people, never paid much attention or much deference to royalty or to the palace.

And so you have in the whole history of the people of Israel one manifesting an irrepressible democratic impulse. And why? Why is Israel democratic and Egypt autocratic, two people that are almost physically contiguous? Because the religion of Israel was a religion of freedom. The God of Israel was not a god of the netherworld. His name was Yarvah, and Yarvah means a God who causes to be, a God of growth, a God of life, a God of creation.

When Moses asked of God, "When I come to Pharaoh and he would ask me who sent me, 'What is the name of your God'" God says unto him, "Say that I that am always becoming, I who am the God of growth, of development, of revolution, I, the God, the vital urge, the driving force--life, sent you to

set the children of Israel free, that they may worship me." And the earliest worship of the God of Israel was a very simple one. When our people were nomads in the desert they did not have vast temples or synagogues or cathedrals with a vast sacrificial rite; God was worshipped very simply; and when the people fell victims to the lash of the Canaanitish tyranny, of the heathen, that involved an elaborate ritual, then the prophet arose, the prophet who hungered and thirsted for the simple worship for the God of the desert, and said to the people: "Who asked of you to come and tread my courts? I did not command your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. My worship is a simple worship, the worship of the heart and soul."

And the religion of Israel, as you know, is little concerned with death. The Bible has very little to say about death; the Bible has very little to say about resurrection; the Bible has very little to say about immortality. The Bible is concerned with the living. "The living man, the living man, will praise thee. The dead do not praise the Lord."

And so while they confine Tutankhamen in a vast, magnificent tomb, treasure laden, the tomb of Moses is altogether unknown. No one to this day knows where Moses lies buried. No vast pyramid or no vast monument marks his grave; his work having been completed, he passed away quietly, and, as the rabbis said, with a kiss of the Almighty.

While Tutankhamen in his vast tomb is dead today,

he never influenced human life, because his spirit was dead even while he lived. Moses, who left no tomb and left no monument, molded and fashioned the thoughts and the lives of men and women for millenia, and the spirit of Moses is just as dynamic and just as real and just as powerful today as it was when he led a group of slaves through the desert forty years. That is the difference between Egypt and Israel. Israel knew freedom; Israel knew the value of freedom, and so Israel demanded freedom in its political life, Israel demanded freedom in its economic life, Israel demanded freedom in its religious life.

Now, what is freedom? Upon what is freedom predicated? What is the basis of freedom? Why, the basis of freedom is just this: belief in the possibility and in the reality and in the value of human progress. If mankind cannot progress, or if the progress of mankind is undesirable, then freedom is not necessary; then you cannot grow, then you cannot transcend yourself, then you cannot rise to the higher level and the purer air; then you need no freedom; then it were best for you to subscribe at once to one fixed discipline, to one fixed regime and abide with it all the time.

That was the philosophy of Egypt. That is the philosophy of a man like Cardinal Newman, who lives the orthodox Christian point of view. Cardinal Newman once said, "Our race's progress and perfectibility is a dream, because revelation contradicts it. You see, religion is already

fixed; absolute truth was revealed long ago; it is in the past, not in the future. Religion is not a pilgrimage, a quest, a striving for truth, a growing force in the soul of man, but religion is merely obeying the law and subscribing to a discipline which was revealed in all its perfection thousands of years ago."

And Cardinal Newman says, "It would be a gain to this country (meaning England) were it vastly more superstitious, more bigoted and more fierce in its religion than at present it wishes itself to be." That is logical, that is consistent. Progress is undesirable and therefore freedom is undesirable.

The oriental Indian says, "Progress is an evil. Every effort on our part to change, to grow, to develop, is going upon a tangent, away from the circle and the sphere of divinity. Real happiness is to be found only by staying within the sphere, by denying every impulse of your life, by losing yourself as a drop of water loses itself in the sea--destroying personality, destroying individuality, ending all effort." Nirvana! That was the ideal of the Orient.

And fixity was the ideal of Egypt. But the ideal of Israel--and that is very vital, and that is of what the spirit of Passover speaks--was something very different. Israel said man is not perfect; God did not create man perfect, but man is perfectible. Israel said God has placed within the human soul the image of God, and it is the goal of life and the supreme task of life, the one task of life, to

try to approximate that image. The "Imitation of God" became the one supreme goal in Israel's life. Israel laid down certain guiding principles how man can reach that goal and approach the throne of God Almighty; and Israel told us how we can do it by being free.

The Mohammedan said, "You have no freedom. Every act that you do is predetermined. Just as every effect has its cause, and every cause has its preceding effect, there is no freedom in the world. It is an illusion." That is the fatalistic conception of the Arab.

The Jew said, "While it is very difficult to understand, intellectually, how God can be all-knowing and all-powerful, and yet man can be free"; Judaism said, "While it is very difficult to harmonize God's sovereignty with man's choice, man's freedom to choose between one and the other, and God's pre-knowledge of what he would choose, while it presents a real intellectual difficulty, nevertheless, instinctively and intuitively it is clear." Man feels, if he feels anything, and experiences, if he experiences anything, the freedom of choice. And so the rabbis said, "Everything is pre-destined, everything is pre-fashioned, and yet a choice is given. We are free." And Judaism taught men what real freedom is and how to use it.

What is the goal of freedom? We waged a terrible war in the name of freedom. We called it self-determination and the rights of the people. We called it democracy. What we had in mind was freedom. But what is freedom? What is

the goal of freedom as far as the individual is concerned? Why, simply this: to be free is to subject our lower self, our lower impulses and our animal aims and ambitions to such an extent that the commission of an unworthy act, of an immoral act, becomes impossible for us. To be free means to emancipate ourselves so much from the chains and the shackles of our lower self, of our mean, selfish impulses and passions and cravings, so that we will do the right thing all the time because we can't help but do it. X X

To be free, in other words, means to be continuously in accord with the moral law. When Luther said, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise," he was a free man. When we say, "Our wills, ourselves, make them thine," we are free men; when we reach the point that our character, cleansed and purified, compels us to do the right thing, then we are free; when we have subjected ourselves to the yoke of the law voluntarily, willingly, eagerly, we have lost all other chains; when we have become the slaves of God we become free men. Only the law, the moral law, the highest law, the law of ideals, can give us true freedom. L

And that is why the first thing that followed the Exodus, the very first thing that followed the political emancipation of the Jews, seven weeks later God took them to Mount Sinai and gave them a law; but only after they received the law were they free men.

"Who is a free man?" asked one of the rabbis. He who studies the law and subjects himself to the discipline

of the law. When the Jews left Egypt they were not free. You will recall how forcibly and pointedly the Bible brings that thought out. When Moses came to the people and said, "I am come in the name of the God to deliver them, the people," they could not listen to him, they could not even understand what he was speaking of, because of the oppression and because of their subjection of spirit; they were steeped in slavery so much that they could not even understand--like the Egyptians themselves, who as a people could not understand what freedom was.

And when again Moses went to the king and said, "Why, you are oppressing the people too much. Be human, relieve them of some of their arduous tasks," and the king, in true Egyptian fashion, replied, "They are lazy, and I will put more burdens upon them," the people, after these heavier burdens had been put upon them, turned against Moses and cursed him--"We do not want your freedom; you are making it even harder for us." And when Moses succeeded in redeeming them from Egypt and they were out of the land and on their way to the Red sea, the Israelites looked back and saw the hosts of the Egyptians following them, and at once these slaves, who did not understand and could not understand that to have freedom one must be ready to fight for it, turned against Moses and said, "What, are there no graves in Egypt, no cemeteries there to die in, that thou hast brought us out here that we might be slain by the Egyptians?" And when they came to the Red Sea they halted and again they complained,

and God, in anger, said to Moses, "Deliver the people and let them go farther."

They did not know that initiative and enterprise goes with the idea of freedom, and when they came into the wilderness, and they lacked water or they grew hungry, they turned against Moses again and said, "Ah, those flesh pots of Egypt! We remember the fish and the flesh which we ate in Egypt." They did not want freedom; they did not understand, they could not understand, that to have freedom one must be ready to suffer for it, to thirst and to hunger and to agonize for freedom.

And then, too, they misunderstood freedom. Freedom to them oftentimes meant anarchy. "The rebel" said to Moses, "Who made thee a leader and a master over us?" G and his band did not understand and could not understand that to be truly free one must voluntarily subject himself to the authority of a leader, one must know the discipline of liberty.

And so God said, "This generation must die in the wilderness; they are unfit; they have the psychology of slaves, and their freedom will be to them only the heavier shackles. Let them perish in the wilderness; let them wander about for forty years until their entire generation perishes. Their children, those who are born in the desert, who did not know the crushing, debilitating, dehumanizing influences of Egyptian bondage, they are the fit people to enter Canaan and become the progenitors of a free people.

Freedom, then, means an act of the will, an effort to make our past, our heritage, our previous habits of conduct and thought, our environment, subject to our ideals; and that is the work of a lifetime. It is easy to be a slave; it is the undertaking of a lifetime to be free.

It is told of St. Francis of Assisi that a man came to him and said, "I know of a monk who lives all his days chained to a pillar. Is he the holy man?" And this saint said to him, "The true monk, the true man of God, is not chained to a pillar but is chained to God."

And I suppose that is what our people meant when they spoke of Israel as the "slave of God."

That is altogether different, isn't it, from the idea of freedom that is current today. We fought a war to establish freedom, and now I read of what Mussolini says: "That we effected a bloodless revolution shows that the world is tired of freedom and liberty. The great experiences of it after the war mark the defeat of liberalism. Both in Russia and in Italy it has been demonstrated that it is possible to govern outside, above and against all liberal ideas. Neither Communism nor Fascism has anything to do with liberty. If any government is deprived by force and left with only this principle of liberty, it will be at the mercy of the first group organized and determined to overthrow it. Liberty is no longer," says Mussolini, "a chaste, severe maiden for whom generations in the first half of the last century fought and died. For the intrepid, restless

youths who are now in the dawn of a new history, ^{other} surely words exercise a greater fascination, namely, order and hierarchy and discipline. Fascistum is not afraid to declare its [?]

or in those liberal days of the past, and if necessary will again pass without the slightest hesitation over the body, more or less decomposed, of the goddess of liberty."

I can readily see that the world would become discouraged and tired of this type of freedom, a liberty of which we spoke in the days before and during the war; for the freedom which we spoke of then for the races of the earth was not this freedom of the Jew; it was not the freedom within the law, the freedom which required self-sacrifice and self-denial and self-subjection for the sake of the redeemed, of the higher life; it was not the freedom which demanded of them and compelled them to chain themselves to divinity. It was a freedom to be able to exploit, it was a freedom to be able to dominate; it was the lower, selfish, mean, ordinary kind of freedom.

The freest nations in the world today--France and Great Britain--are the most imperialistic today, and their freedom is not an act of self-restraint but an act of self-aggrandizement, and that sort of freedom is a lie, and men like Mussolini, who are realists, realize that it is a catch-word and a lie.

The freedom which the world needs is the freedom of which Moses spoke. He said unto Pharaoh, "Send forth my people." Why? That they may establish a little Montenegro,

that they may build up a little country and fuss and fume upon the stage of history for a few centuries? That they may try to fight with their neighbors, subject them, conquer them and be in turn subjected and conquered?

"Send forth my people!" Why? "That they may become my slaves. The children of Israel are slaves and servants unto me and not servants unto servants." And that is why the symbols of the Passover festival are three-- Pesah, Matzos and Mourer--the sacrificial lamb, the dry, unleavened bread, the bread of affliction, and the moral bitterness; because it is only through sacrifice and only through self-denial and only through self-growth, by the bitter and through the bitter experiences of life, it is only through struggle and suffering and sacrifice that man can rise to the heights of a feast of freedom, of a Passover.

So the Jew today says unto the world through the spirit of this feast of freedom: "Freedom! Proclaim freedom throughout the world, to all the inhabitants thereof! Freedom! that true kind of freedom!"

To men and women Judaism says: "If you wish to be free take on the yoke of ideals. If you wish to lose the shackles of conventions and the shackles of wealth, of prestige and office, if you wish to live your own life, free yourself from the bondage of popular opinion and popular notions and popular standards and popular demands, why, then chain yourself to the chariot of the Almighty, become the slave of an ideal and follow that ideal across the burning

sands of adversity, through sacrifice and want and misery; follow the gleam, follow the light, that never was on land and sea; lose yourself in order to find yourself." Why? That you may be born anew. That is the spirit of spring. Resurrection, rebirth; rising from the gloom of our lower self, of our mean self, of our confining self, rising to the freedom and the enlargement, the sweep and the reach of an unconfined freedom.

And to all the nations of the world Judaism says: "Freedom by all means. Every nation that is subject, suppressed, submerged--freedom unto it; and after the red sea of blood is crossed and political independence has been gained, freedom must yet begin. And they must march through the desert to the Mount of Revelation and willingly receive a law, and say, 'We will do exactly what we have heard'--willingly subject themselves to the moral law of nations; to serve, to help, to seek peace and to cherish it."

That, to my mind, is freedom; and that, to my mind, is the spirit of Passover.

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