



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
148

Box
52

Folder
173

Taking Stock of the Year 1923, 1923.

.....
"TAKING STOCK OF THE YEAR 1923."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

DECEMBER 30, 1923, CLEVELAND.

.....

WRHS



It is, of course, difficult, my friends, to take stock of a whole year in a few minutes period. It is well nigh impossible. It is even difficult to take stock of a year of one's own life, of our gains and our losses. But one must make the attempt if one is to orient himself properly; if one is to be in a position to construe intelligently future events, one must strike, or endeavor to strike, a balance at a certain period in the year of what has preceded in human events.

For the sake of convenience, I will divide the subject into three heads: Europe, America, and Israel.

A few days ago I read a very intelligent summary, or general survey of conditions in Europe, from the pen of a keen student of international affairs. Mr. Simonds sums up the situation abroad in these terms: "In some sense on the economic side there has been a striking progress everywhere, everywhere on the Continent save in Germany; and this economic advance has been accompanied by notable if less considerable gain. We have avoided any considerable conflict for the first time in any year since the Armistice. Several unsettled issues of very troublesome nature have at least had tolerable adjustment. One very great crisis has been promptly disposed of without any permanent disturbance to the European tranquility"--referring, of course, to the difficulty between

Italy and Greece. "Were it not for the German situation, it would be fair to say that 1923 has been the best year for Europe since the outbreak of the World War in 1914. And again, the writer says; Aside from Germany, it is fair to say that it is a healthier, saner, and more prosperous Europe at the end than at the beginning of the current year. And again, if only the German question could be resolved, it would be possible to assert that Europe has seen the worst of the present period, and having lived through the fatal years of the war and the opening years of peace, is on the highroad to renewed prosperity."

One must, of course, show due deference to the opinion of an authority such as the writer of this article undoubtedly is, and yet one is prone to feel that he is a bit too optimistic. It may be true, perhaps is true, that the year 1923 has been a better year as far as political and economic life of the world is concerned, than the year 1922, or any year since the outbreak of the war; and that, of course, is not saying very much. It would be a mistake to permit ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security because of the evidences of sporadic gains in stability in one, two, or three countries in Europe. Had the peace which was fabricated at the close of the war been an intelligent one, and had it been effectively and honestly executed, had there been an intelligent and consistent program of economic restoration evolved in Europe, then these isolated instances of progress, we would be justified

in taking them as an earnest of a steady and certain restoration of the whole of Europe to normalcy and to economic well-being. But no such peace was planned, and no such program was projected, so that these gains which one may note here and there may be only, in reality, isolated manifestations of local conditions, and not at all part of a general rehabilitation.

I make bold to say that Europe is still in that precarious period of convalescence when a fatal set back may be expected at any time. The European situation is still full of menace and dynamite. During the past year there have been half a dozen revolutions in Europe. Half of Europe today is in the grip of a dictatorship. All the succession states, that is, the states that were carved out by the treaty of Versailles, with the possible exception of Czechoslovakia, are semi-solvent; its economic life is a dizzy pyramid built upon unstable currency of worthless paper money. Each one of these succession states is being bled white with preposterous and unnecessary military organizations. Within each one of these succession states there are restive minorities, fretting and waiting for a day of recompense.

The whole map of Europe, to my mind, presents today a picture of nationalities ingrown, passion ridden, mutually suspicious, internally chaotic, unstable currency, preposterous prohibitive tariffs and customs, fear, suspicion, and

hate everywhere.

The finances of Poland have gone to perdition as the result of a military system kept alive largely at the behest of France, which is draining the very sap and life of that new republic. And within Poland there are minorities of people dissatisfied and disgruntled, making for political chaos. A similar situation we have in Hungary and in Roumania. Greece, in the past year, has gone through hell. Because of the blindness of its rulers, or because of the plotting of the allied powers, Greece today is turning in desperation to the one man, the one statesman who can save Greece, Venexelos, after having foolishly experimented with royalty under the guise of Imperialism. Even a country like Switzerland, as a rule financially sound, is today suffering economic depression because of its gold standard, because it is unable to sell its main trade, - the making of watches has been for the time being, at least, ruined. And even a country like Czechoslovakia, which of all the succession states is the soundest, is suffering economic depression for the same reason. There are a million and a quarter unemployed in England today, affecting perhaps one-eighth of the population; and in despair England is endeavoring to reverse its policy of free trade in order to keep out cheap commodities and reppen its factories. And the last election is tremendously significant, not only for England but for the world. The phenominal growth in the strength

of the labor movement in England holds within it great and grave possibilities. It may very well be that before many weeks a Labor Cabinet will come into power in England,- England, the conservative! England the bulwark of conservatism of the world!

As far as Germany is concerned, nothing of helpfulness, nothing which will help us in our thinking can be said at the present time. Germany is in at least political, economical, and social chaos. Germany is torn asunder today by internal conflict and external invasion. Germany is being rent asunder by conflicting parties,- on the one hand the party of reaction, the monarchial party, whose strength is in Bavaria; on the other hand the liberal and the socialist parties, who stand by the Republic; then there is the Communist, who hate both these parties and are in turn hated by both these parties.

The individual states which comprise the German Empire are becoming restive -- and it is well to remember in this connection that the German Empire is a recent achievement which is not more than half a century old, and the component elements of this Empire still retain their particularistic sentiment. Each state within the Empire is conscious of a past and of a history, and these individual states may, under excessive stress through disorganization and demoralization within the Empire, through conflict of parties, or through external pressure, resolve into

centrifugal force and crash asunder, and little may be left of the Empire but a memory. In the Rhineland, of course, this separatist movement is being fostered and abetted by France. So that the future of the Empire is very uncertain. Economically, Germany has ruined herself, or at least has contributed to her own ruination. Her passive resistance in the Ruhr, the continuous exportation of real money from Germany into foreign lands, and the attempt to substitute for real money, or real wealth, worthless marks, has practically ruined the growth of the Empire. Hunger may stalk through the fair land of Germany this winter. The people in the towns haven't the money to buy the produce from the farm, and the farmer will not sell his produce except for kind, for things, for commodities, and not for paper marks.

The one real strong country on the continent today is France,- beautiful France! Loveable France! France is stronger today, and occupies a position of dominance and supremacy such as it has not occupied at any time since the days of Louis XIV, or perhaps Napoleon. Her economic life is not only restored, but greatly intensified because of the many things France learned during the war. Her enemy, her historic enemy, is crushed and broken, around her are a host of little states who are allies of France, and France has the largest army in the world today, and the greatest fleet of airships,- an impregnable position of power, and, in a sense, prosperity. And yet one must not be too optimis-

tic about the future of France, either. Germany is crushed, but Germany is always a potential enemy, and a bitter and wronged Germany, impotent for the time to vent its wrath, may, when it comes to health and strength and power again, as it undoubtedly will, for a people possessing that mental vigor and that moral sturdiness, such as Germany does possess, will come into well-being again in a generation, in two generations, then the day of reckoning will come. France is being progressively isolated from her strong allies. Great Britain finds herself in a position where she must sooner or later leave her allies, for their needs and national demands are no longer the same. England must have a restored Germany if English unemployment is to decrease; and France is not anxious to have a reconstructed and strong Germany.

Perhaps the two hopeful signs on the Continent today are Austria and Russia, strange to say. Austria stripped and amputated by the Treaty of Versailles, a city without a country; and Russia, disorganized by a revolutionary radicalism,- these two countries can be credited with decisive advances during the year 1923. And the case of Austria is significant, because it demonstrates how easily a nation may be saved, and how easily the entire chaotic situation in Europe could be improved if the peoples of the earth should apply a modicum of common sense and human intelligence. What happened to Austria, which three years

ago was in the very trough of bankruptcy and demoralization, was that the nations of the world, through the instrumentality of the League of Nations, extended credit, that is all. The recuperative power and innate bouyancy of modern civilization is such that, if given a chance, a breathing space, it will come to health in the quickest possible time. What was done in Austria can be done in every other country in Europe.

Russia has been blessed with the most talented and gifted statesmen of the world, and with conrageous statesmen. I call them courageous because they were brave enough to revise their own notions of things. They were not doctrinal~~ite~~ enough and stupid enough to stand by their unproved theories when these theories were being proved failures. They abandoned them. They reconstructed the whole economic life of Russia three times within the past four years. Sensitive to the needs of the people, studying altered conditions, readjusting the economic structure to meet the actualities. That requires courage, wisdom, and economic acumen such as no other land in Europe has manifested in recent times.

Bolshevism has, of course, failed. Bolshevism failed in Russia tocreate the bolshevistic; Utopic bolshevism failed to create the universal revolution of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the wise leaders of Russia have, for the time at least, certainly abandoned the ideal

of saving the world, and have applied themselves to the task of saving Russia. Russia is being put on a sound stable currency; private trade has been resumed, and is being encouraged. Foreign capital is being invited into Russia. Russia has been blessed with a fine crop this year, which will mean that during the coming year Russia will be able to import farm implements and machinery, and all the necessary things for economic restoration. It is to be hoped that when Russia has given up some of the absurdities which go with revolution, such as suppression of religious sentiment among the people, such as the denial of the right to practice one's own faith in one's own way; it is to be hoped that when Russia has shown good faith, that America will be among the first to extend a hand of welcome into the fellowship of nations, and recognize Russia. I am convinced that the good sense, the common sense, and the political realism of Mr. Coolidge will prevail over the doctrinaire notions of Mr. Hughes. So that, as far as Europe is concerned, one may say that Europe, while showing marks of improvement, is still in the shadows.

As far as our own land is concerned, the economic life during the past year has been an average one,- a bit of uncertainty, but an average year. Politically, we have seen the ascendancy to the position of Chief Executive of our land, a new man, one who gives promise of steering the ship of state courageously, intelligently, wisely. One has

seen the passing of a very lovable, very honest, very hard working, brave son of the Republic. I refer, of course, to Warren G. Harding. Warren G. Harding deserved well from the American people, for he served well. And as long as this Republic can produce men of the wholesome type, imbued with the fine spirit of loyalty and patriotism; as long as this Republic can produce men of the type of Warren G. Harding, the Republic is safe. What this Republic needs, my friends, is not men of rare brilliancy, intellectual aristocrats; but the type of man that this Republic requires at the helm is a man of fundamental honesty who is close to the soil, and to the soul of America. Intellectual aristocrats very often have the basic loyalty ironed out of them; they have too many subtler, smaller, less important loyalties, and in their intellectual abstractions in the world of ideals in which a man may move at leisure and at random, fundamental loyalties are often forgotten, modified, or compromised with. What we need are wholesome, solid, of the very soil type of men, who at all times are cognizant of the basic loyalties of the American people. These loyalties I believe Warren G. Harding had to a high degree.

Spiritually, America during the past year has touched bottom. As far as the fundamental ideals of this Republic are concerned,- equality and fraternity, the year 1923 has been an unfavorable one. All kinds of organized prejudices and organized hates have been given free field and great

scope; medaevalism and the diseases characteristic to decadent European nationalities have come to this land with the war and with the peace. Perhaps the year 1923 has seen the crest of the wave; it is too early to make any positive assertions. But this is clear to me, that ultimately the healthy organism of the American democracy, which has survived the onslaughts of all forms of adversity and opposition for over a century and a half, that this healthy organism will throw off these deadly germs of prejudice, of inter-racial, of intercreedial animosity. This, too, is certain, that the way to check these forms of organized hate is not through counter-organizations of one kind or another. If the agencies we have at hand, - the press, the pulpit, the school, - if these agencies are insufficient to check the spread of this menace, then no form of counter-organization can succeed. Our hope must be, as at all times it has been, in the logic and the reasonableness of our position, in democracy itself, and our weapons are publicity, education, frank speech, open discussion, and these means only, if any, will remedy the situation. I am convinced that disintegration has begun in at least one of the organizations which are founded in hate, in envy, and in greed, and all such organizations must destroy themselves ultimately, because nothing founded on falsehood or the negative qualities of hate, distrust, and suspicion can permanently endure.

As far as Israel is concerned, the past year has been

very little different from the previous years. There is still a tremendous amount of hostility, of prejudice in the European lands against the Jew. There are still all forms of discrimination being practiced, and a tendency to burden the Jew with the responsibilities of the war and with all the miseries which resulted from the war as well as those of peace; and the traditional scapegoat of the world is again being made the scapegoat of the tragedies and the miseries of the world. Perhaps the saddest of all is the lot of the Jewish students in Europe. Of all the professional classes, he suffers most. The middle classes in Europe, of course, have all suffered, and suffered terribly, are being wiped out, and more especially the professional classes, but the Jewish professional man and the Jewish student are those who suffer most. In every university during the past year there have been riots on the campus against the Jewish student, and in numerous cases the limited quota is being put into effect, and in many of the large universities of Eastern Europe attempts have been made to put it into effect in Germany. The tragedy of it is, first, that it is an attempt to limit the number of Jewish students in the universities, is an attempt to force the Jew back into the ghetto, because being denied an education, it denies a chance to be represented in the professional and political life of the country. It is an effort to repeople the ghettos of Europe. Consequently, all the universities to

which at all times mankind has looked for guidance and leadership have today failed to prevail in tyrant-ridden Europe. There was a time when the campus of the European university was the battleground for the ideal of freedom, political and economic justice; there was a time when the barricades thrown up by student rebels on the campus of the European universities would shake the thrones of Europe; there was a time when the assemblies of the Latin Quarter would be heard across the continent. The student of Europe was liberal, progressive, revolutionary, the hope of mankind; but today the student bodies of Europe are the world's hotbeds of ingrown, centrifugal, passion ridden, decadent nationalism, rampant racialism of all kinds. In the universities of Europe today we have the most disheartening manifestations of ingrown nationalism, nurtured by the impotent wrath of a defeated people. That is a very tragic thing.

There are today two great centers of Jewish renaissance in the world: one is America and the other is Palestine. The growth of Jewish life in Palestine has been slow but steady; colonies are being founded, immigrants largely from Eastern Europe are finding a place of refuge and a home there. The Hebrew University, which holds within it so much of promise, not only for Isreal but for the world, is beginning its activities. A normal life and a fine Jewish life is being fostered in the old cradle of our race. America is becoming the Jamnia of Isreal's diaspora.

In the year 1923 there were more schools, more temples, more synagogues founded and built than in any year in the previous history of Israel in America. The great scholars of Europe have come to make their homes here; even the great libraries of Europe have come to us. America, to my mind, is destined to become, for many generations to come, the center, the spiritual and intellectual center of universal Israel; and therein is a great challenge to all of us,

To sum up the year 1923, still aghast and bleeding from the great war, still showing the indelible imprints of the great catastrophe, but here and there signs of healing, here and there signs of well-being,- may the year 1924 be a year of increased health and prosperity to man and to nations.

From a friend of mine, a professor in one of the great theological seminaries of America, I received a few days ago this prayer, which we may all of us recite at this point of the new year:

"Oh, God, by whatsoever name Thou mayst be called, Jehovah, Allah, Adonai, Great Spirit, Heavenly Father: These are the things we long for and that must needs come to pass if ever we are to live together happily and worthily as Thy dear children: That war may come to be treated as a crime, illegal and outrageous, as private murder; that ferocity may utterly cease, the infliction of pain, and all the innumerable and ingenuous forms of cruelty wherewith we are wont to deal so deadly with our fellow man, may these

utterly cease; that all kinds of robbery, cheating, unfair advantage, and unjust gain may be outlawed forever; that fear and hate and ruthless rivalry may give place to consideration, respect, and mutual helpfulness, without regard to nationality, race, color, or religion; that hope and great expectancy for the future and its surprises may be cherished side by side with intelligent regard for the past; that the term of human life may be greatly prolonged, amid conditions that will make all work and endeavor joyous, free, creative, and richly remunerative; that the children in each successive generation, being early encouraged to wise adventure in ways that are new and strange, may outdo the achievements of their elders in an ever improving world. Grant, Oh, God, that the number of those throughout the world who cherish these ideals and devote themselves to their realization may increase continually until this globe becomes a happy home for all who dwell upon it; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen."

- - - - -0- - - - -