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The Risen People, 1924.

"THE RISEN PEOPLE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 20, 1924, CLEVELAND, O.

WRHS



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

Jewry celebrates this day, the feast of the Passover, which is a spring festival. Christendom the world over celebrates this day, Easter, which is a spring festival. The origin of Passover may be traced back to the early nomadic experiences of our forefathers, when they, at this season of the year, brought the firstlings of their flock as a thanksgiving offering unto the Lord; and the origin of Easter, (the name, of course, is derived from that of an Anglo-Saxon goddess) may also be traced back to the primitive days of those peoples who, at this season of the year, brought their offerings unto this nature deity.

Back of the two festivals is the one common impulse: that of spring, of life resurgent, of life renascent, of resurrection. In the course of time these festivals assumed newer and higher meanings--spiritual meanings, historical meanings. The deliverance from Egypt transpired at this season of the year (in the spring), so that in the course of time Passover became the anniversary of the redemption from Egypt, and to the Christian world the resurrection of the deity took place at this season of the year, so that Easter became the anniversary of the risen God.

If a whole world this day bows in adoration before the miracle of a risen God, then surely we of the household of Israel should on this day bow in adoration before the miracle of a risen people. I mean the people of

Israel. For in the whole record and chronicle of human history there is nothing so miraculous, nothing so extraordinary and amazing as this risen people of an immemorial crucifixion--Israel!

Now, most all peoples began life as wandering peoples; most all peoples led a checkered and troubled career; most all peoples, some time or other, suffer disastrous defeat and recover. But in the whole story of mankind there is no record of a people that was brought so nigh and so often to the brink of death, no record of a people that so often entered the shadows and emerged into the light again, no record of a people that, after being uprooted and cast out, scattered and broken, clung to life so tenaciously, preserved its personality, and reintegrated so readily as this people of Israel.

You scan the purview of Jewish history, not as a Jew necessarily, but as an historian, and see how often this people was brought low to the brink of the grave, and how strangely and miraculously this people resurrected. Our people came near unto death in Egypt, first of all. In Egypt the history of our people, which stretched through the patriarchal period and back into the dim corridors of history out into the wildernesses of Arabia,--I say, in Egypt the history of this people seemed to come to a definite close. Four hundred years of slavery crushed and broke the spirit of the people. Four hundred years in this iron chaldron seemed to have finally destroyed the

individuality of this race, so much so that they even refused to listen to the voice of their leader, Moses. When he came to them preaching of freedom and redemption, and reminding them of their beautiful home in Canaan, so steeped were they in serfdom and so crushed was their spirit, that they would not even listen to him.

And so here was the end. But was it the end? It was just the beginning. Strangely, unaccountably, the life impulse began to move and agitate this people; strangely enough, they began to listen to the tantalizing voice of the leader and prophet and emancipator, and they broke the shackles of slavery and they raised the standard of revolt, and swiftly and silently they departed from Egypt, across the waste stretches of the desert, across the Red Sea, into the wilderness of Arabia and into the blazing dawn of a new day and resurrection--the first resurrection.

Then the centuries move on, swiftly and turbulently. This people conquers Canaan, grows and develops, enters a marvelous period of cultural productivity and creativity, gives rise to prophets, singers, fashions in the burning smithy of its soul a God idea and a dream world which will continue to be the precious heritage of mankind until the end of time; and then it is brought near unto death a second time.

The sixth century opens inauspiciously for this people. The sister state, Israel, has long been destroyed, and now the armies of Babylon sweep westward from

the rivers Euphrates and Tigris and threaten to inundate this little land of Judea, and the armies sweep across it and the armies break and destroy this people; Jerusalem falls; the Temple is laid in ashes; the people is exiled, bleeding and torn and scattered; only the poor and the weak remain to lead a starved life among the ruins of Judea. Surely it is the end. "Fallen, fallen is Jerusalem. It will never again rise. Death! The end!"

Ah, but is it the end? Strangely, unaccountably, in Babylon, in the valley of dried bones, a new spirit arises, new voices are heard. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." The dried bones take on sinews and flesh, and the warm blood begins to course anew through the veins. The people lives, and when Babylon succumbs to the armies of Persia, Israel snatches the golden opportunity presented by the political realignment and returns to Palestine to begin its life anew. A second resurrection!

Then the centuries glide on again, more quietly now, but nevertheless full, and Israel continues to create spiritual values, continues to write marvelous literature, which is today the sacred literature of mankind; sages arise, and scribes and new prophets; and then Israel faces another crisis. Assyria is now determined to destroy not alone the political independence of Judea, but to destroy the soul of the Jew. Hellenism threatens Hebraism; the greatest hoplites of paganism are about to destroy this little people of Judea. Death! The end! The story is about to close!

And yet was it the end? In a little town of M a voice is heard--the voice of the priest, and his five brave sons answer; and strangely and unaccountably the life hunger, the life passion, the love of faith and fatherland, sweep across the scattered hosts of Israel, and from hills and caves and mountain recesses they pour down to join the ranks of rebellion, to fight for God and for fatherland; and for three bitter years the war is waged, and the hills of Judea resound with the clash of armies and bitter struggle and guerrilla warfare--a struggle of the few against the many; but the faithful, zealous few who are caught up in this passion for life, triumph; the hosts of Assyria are discomfited and scattered; the country is freed, the Temple is rededicated. A third resurrection!

And three more centuries glide by in the cycle, the endless cycle of God, and Israel lives, and its spirit works and fashions; rabbis arise, and apostles, who carry the mission and the message of Judaism to the ends of the earth; and then Israel gives rise to the first daughter religion, which is destined to carry the word of God unto the barbarian hosts of the world. The fulness and the strength of the genius of the race now expresses itself in a new religion, and in a few centuries this living trunk will yet give rise to another fruit-bearing limb which will delight the hearts and the souls of mankind.

And then in the first century of the common era Israel faces annihilation again. The shadow of Rome has

fallen over the people, and the iron hand of Rome has crowded the hard pressed people for a century, until the people in despair, unable to endure any more, rebel, and then the weight of the great Roman Empire crushes upon this small people, seemingly extinguishing its life. In 70 A. D. the Temple is destroyed, Jerusalem is laid waste, a million of the sons and daughters of Israel are slain, three million more are exiled, hundreds of thousands of the best and most beautiful of the sons of Israel are sold as slaves, to rot in the salt mines and in the galleys of Rome, or to be torn by wild beasts in the circuses of the holy city of Rome, to delight the populace. And Titus erects an arch of triumph, symbol of his great victory over this small people--an arch of triumph which was to be, in his mind, the tombstone and the epitaph of Judea. Surely the end, the final, ultimate end!

And yet was it the end? Only another beginning. The scattered members of our people, deprived of the political independence, now realized that they must preserve more than ever their spiritual independence, and wherever these bleeding sons of our people find themselves, they at once proceed to establish a spiritual fortress, a sanctuary for the soul and for the Torah; ben Zaachia in Jamnia, Usha in Tiberias, Sepphoris in Babylon, Sura in Pumpedita,-- everywhere where our people wander and where destiny drives them, they gather and build for themselves the battlements and the fortresses of the soul--synagogues and schools and

academies, and the people lives anew and creates anew.

Another resurrection!

And a thousand years later, in Babylon, where for hundreds of years the greatest center of Jewish life had existed, where for hundreds of years our people lived in comparative peace and prosperity, under a spiritual head known as a Gaon, and a political head of their own known as Resh Galutha,---a thousand years later the story repeats itself. Death threatens themselves anew; a change of dynasty means the closing of the schools and the scattering of our people. Death again! The end!

But not the end. The sun sets in Babylon and rises in Spain. The scattered peoples take with them their faith, their God, their love, their loyalty, and carry it with them across the weary miles of exile and wandering until they find a refuge in Andalusia in Spain. Another resurrection! And the spirit of the Jew lives anew in Spain under the warm sun of political equality and freedom. Israel enjoys its golden period. Poets, singers, prophets, philosophers, thinkers, statesmen arise and yield abundantly of the gift of mind and heart to the treasure coves of mankind. And then at the close of the fifteenth century the shadow of the church falls over them. Expulsion is decreed, and four hundred thousand of our people, the best and the finest and the noblest of the race, are uprooted and driven out, impoverished and crushed in spirit, out into an inimical and hostile world; and those who remain are

compelled to lead frightened and secretive lives as Maranos, constantly under the shadow of the Inquisition. Surely the end, the death of the race!

But not the end. These exiles, wandering all over the Mediterranean littoral, through Africa and Italy, and across Asia Minor and Turkey, finally establish themselves in a few centers, principally Turkey, and some in northern Europe in Amsterdam, and there at once they rebuilt their schools, they rebuilt their synagogues and their academies. Life triumphs again over death; the spirit cannot be broken, and we stand marveling before the miracle of another resurrection.

And the same thing happens with the Jews of Germany during the three centuries of the Crusades, when community after community along the Rhine was exterminated, and the whole life of our people was demoralized. We see their resurrection. And the same thing happened in Poland in the seventeenth century, when two-thirds of the prosperous Jewish communities were wiped out in fire and in blood by the Cossack rebellion. Beaten down were our people, impoverished, hounded, massacred, and yet within half a century we have resurrection. And the same phenomenon, strange and unaccountable, your eyes and mine beheld in the Ukraine during this last war, where six hundred thousand of the sons and daughters of our people were pogromized and slain. Death! surely the death of a people!

Ah, no; just the beginning. In the very

hell of the Eukraine today these people are reconstructing their broken lives and rebuilding their ruined synagogues and establishing their schools, living again, more intensely and more devotedly than ever before. Resurrection after resurrection!

And so I say, if the Western world stands today in adoration before the miracle of a risen God, we of the household of Israel may well stand in adoration before the miracle of the risen people of an immemorial crucifixion.

What is it that gives this people seemingly eternal life? What is it that enables this people, unlike any other people, to rise and cast off the cerements of the grave, the shrouds, and come to life again? Why,

the very thing that breaks through the ice of winter and climbs and creeps into the cold trunks of the trees and makes the tree blossom and bloom--life hunger! The passion to live; the vital urge of the world that cannot be permanently retarded. There is no people so vital, so much in love with life, so eager to live life abundantly and fully, exquisitely, as the people of Israel. Israel has a passion for the free life.

That is what this holiday celebrates-- freedom, emancipation, expansion. Freedom! The first Jew, Abraham, left his home in Babylon and wandered for years through the wilderness to Canaan. Why? Because he was driven by a hunger to live freely, to live his own life and

to worship his own God and follow his own ideals. He couldn't help it; he could have preferred to stay in the comfort of his home, in the midst of his family and his friends; but he chose exile and the unknown, because he was propelled by an irresistible urge to seek freedom, to express himself completely in the new environment.

What drove the children of Israel out of Egypt, away from the fleshpots of the Egyptians? The love of freedom to worship their own God. "Send forth my people that they may worship me." To live their own life. Very early in our history our people conceived it to be its peculiar mission in life not only to be free, not only to be emancipated, but to become the emancipators of mankind. That is a strange conception of a people's destiny.

I read you this morning selections from the 41st chapter of the Book of Isaiah, written perhaps in the Babylon exile. Here was a people itself in exile, itself an outcast, in want, in misery and in destitution, that conceived it to be its mission in life to become the liberators of mankind. "I, the Lord, "said the prophet, "have taken hold of thy hand. I have made thee mine." Why? "That thou must be a light unto the nations; that thou must bring forth the imprisoned out of the prison house, and the incarcerated out of the dungeon." That they must be a light unto those who are blind, to bring the imprisoned out of the prison house; to be the emancipators of mankind. To that degree the life hunger and the hunger for freedom drive

our people.

Oh, some have said the Jew was a legalistic people; he submitted early in life to a rigid legal discipline of the rabbis; he was not free, his soul was not free. But how little they understand, the race who glibly and superficially pass such commentary on the life of Israel. When in the hour of want and danger the rabbis superimposed a rigid discipline upon the people, it was not to rob that people of its freedom but to keep it fit, as an army is kept fit by its rigid discipline, for its warfare against slavery and for its battle in behalf of human freedom.

I should like to have you grasp this thought on this holiday of Passover, for to me it is a highly significant thought. I have often asked myself that why is it that so very often so very many dislike the Jew; what is it that is the basis of the dislike and the hatred of the Jew? And many have told me it is because the Jew is rich, or the Jew is poor, because the Jew is weak or the Jew is strong, because the Jew is exceptionally bright or exceptionally stupid, because the Jew has vices or because the Jew has virtues; and I somehow knew that these were not the reasons. We are hated as much for our vices as for our virtues. Just what is it that prompts people to dislike the Jew? I think it is fear, and fear not for our superior mentality, or our commercial genius, but fear of the prophetic spirit of the race; fear of that passion for freedom, that hunger for the free life which seems to be the crown and the

cross and the immortality of this race--Israel.

The intrenched classes, the privileged classes, the reactionary group, from the days of Haman to our own day, are afraid of the Jew; not because he is an economic rival, but because he is a spiritual rebel. From the days of Abraham, who broke the idol, unto our own day, when the sons and daughters of our people are found in the van of every movement for the liberation of mankind, our people has always been spiritual revolutionaries, seeking constantly new horizons and new worlds; expansion, whether it be economic or political or social or dollars--expansion for the soul of man; and those who are the lackeys of the past, who hate freedom and who fear the rising tide of liberalism--the junkers and the kreutzers, and the race-maddened Magyars, and the reactionaries of our own land,--those who fear the on-rushing life of human progress, they hate the Jew, because of the double-edged sword of prophecy which is his.

But do not forget it was the Jew who preached political freedom to mankind. The Jew never had use for royalty, for kings and for lordship. Had I the time I would trace for you the political history of our people, so that you will see how thoroughly saturated with the democratic ideal our people was from the very beginning of time unto this day. The Jew began life as a democrat; the Jew began life as a nomad, as a wandering people, as members of a tribe. Now, in a tribe there is no tyrant, no lord and no king; in a

tribe all are equal; the chief, the leader, is only the first among equals, and for hundreds of years this sense of equality entered into the blood of the race, and remained with him to this day.

When they came into Canaan and they had to conquer the land, they did not select kings over them; they selected judges; they called a man temporarily to lead them, and when the job was done that man went back to his plow, to his farm. One among the others; no preference and no distinction, except the distinction of merit, of work well done; and when the tribes were faced by their greatest enemy, the Phillistines, and they began to clamor for a king in despair and fear, Samuel, their prophet, turned to them and cursed them for wanting a king. "Why do you want a king to rule over you, to enslave your sons and your daughters? God is your king." And it is only as the people insisted, maddened by fear, that Samuel, who spoke for the genius of the race, consented to give them a king.

What kind of a king was Saul? And what kind of a king was David and Samuel? All of them faced revolution during their lifetime; all of them had to pay very close attention to the rumblings and the grumblings of the people. The people would not put up with oppression on the part of any king; and after the first exile, for hundreds of years, Israel and Judea were ruled by sages and by priests, not at all by kings; and after the destruction of the second Temple, to this day, for a period of nineteen hundred years,

Israel, scattered the world over, had no central authority-- not even a central religious authority, not even a pope to rule over them.

Now, it wasn't that they were anarchic, chaotic, disorganized; on the contrary, the Jew was disciplined marvelously; the Jew recognized authority, but it was his recognition of the authority that was the important thing. Whenever he found a man of exceptional genius, of learning, of wisdom, he turned to him as his master and leader and sought his guidance and followed that guidance; but it was never a superimposed regime from above.

And so in the very blood of our people is this passion for freedom, for life. Do not forget it was Israel who set up the ideal of economic freedom. It was Israel who said, "Thou shalt not oppress the fatherless and the poor." It was Israel who said, "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue!" Do not forget that it was Israel who set up the ideal of social equality. "Ye shall not be slaves unto slaves; for all men are slaves unto me and not slaves unto slaves." Do not forget that it was Israel who set up the ideal of national freedom and international equality. "Thou shalt not oppress thy weaker neighbor. Thou shalt not conquer him through war. Peace, peace, shalt thou pursue!"

And so along every department of human life, along every avenue of human endeavor, Israel, from the very beginnings of its career, sought emancipation, this thing which Passover celebrates--the freedom of the soul. And it

is this eternal ideal which made our people eternal. A people becomes immortal, my friends, as it identifies itself with something which is immortal. A people that merely lives its own selfish life, bent upon exploitation and self-aggrandizement, to have and to hold for itself,--that people is doomed ultimately to disappear; but a people that reaches out and expands itself and lifts itself to an ideal which is immortal,--because ideals, being spiritual, of necessity are deathless,--that people can never die.

And Israel caught the vision very early in its life, to become not a self-centered, egoistic people, proud and arrogant and boasting of its patriotism, but a people, a holy people, a people of priests serving, serving at the altars of the great God. Servants and not masters of mankind; guides but not rulers of mankind; prophets and not tyrants of mankind. That people linked itself up with the eternal, and so it is eternal.

And so it will from time to time resurrect itself when men least expect it; that is, men who know not the hidden springs of national life, who do not understand whence life eternal springs. This, to my mind, my friends, is the great message of Passover--a message of resurrection. I believe that our people this day is facing a new resurrection; I believe that the people of Israel the world over are experiencing, after the disastrous experiences of the war, a rebirth, and as we remain true to our destiny, as we keep constantly before our eyes our dream world, as we remain

true to the song which sings within our souls--freedom--

"And thou shalt proclaim freedom throughout the land unto
all the inhabitants thereof" & expansion--the growing life,
the increasing life, the higher life, so long will we
remain an indestructible people.

--o--

