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Solomon Ibn Gabirol, 1924.



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"SOLOMON IBN GABIROL."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

APRIL 27, 1924, CLEVELAND.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



I shall speak this morning on the poet Solomon ibn Gabirol, who was born just about nine hundred years ago, principally because his works have just now, for the first time, been edited and translated into English and published. It is the first in the series of Jewish classics to be published hereafter by the Jewish Publication Society.

I believe that the very publication of this text and the contemplated publication of the whole series of classics is, in itself, an event of great moment. It will enable our people to become acquainted with the great storehouse of Jewish thought since the time of the Bible; and there is much in Jewish thought and culture outside of the canon of the Bible.

Solomon ibn Gabirol was a Spanish-Jewish poet. Now, there are very few Jews in Spain today, and before the year 1858, when the edict of expulsion, promulgated in 1492, was repealed, there were practically no Jews in Spain for about 350 years, but up to 1492, and for five hundred years before that date, Spain was the home of the largest, most prosperous, most enlightened, most creative Jewish communities in the world. Beginning, say, at the year 1000, and ending with the expulsion at the close of the fifteenth century, for five hundred years, Spain harbored the most glorious Jewish epoch since the time of the destruction of the Temple--a thousand years before that.



When the sun set in the East in Babylon, says a writer of the Middle Ages, it rose again in the West, in Spain. Babylon, as you know, from the second century on to the tenth, contained the most important Jewish center in the diaspora. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 A. D., and more especially after the successful Bar Kochba rebellion in 135, and the consequent Hadrianic persecutions, Palestinian Jewry declined; the physical and the cultural life of the Jews in Palestine disintegrated and the center shifted a thousand miles eastward, to the cities along the Tigris and the Euphrates, to Babylon, and there from the second to the tenth century Jewish life flourished and yielded flower and fruit; great academies of learning were established; the great Babylonian Talmud, that code of Jewish law and lore, was compiled in Babylon, and all the work of the later rabbis, known as Geonim, took place in Babylon; but in the tenth century there was a change in dynasties unfavorable to the Jew; restrictive measures were enacted against the Jew; the academies were shut down, the Jews were scattered, and the sun set in Babylon. But by that time Spain was prepared to receive the immigrants from Babylon.

It seems to be an almost miraculous thing that somehow the Jew was provided with a refuge just prior to his expulsion from any one country. In the seventh century the Jews who lived in Spain were threatened with annihilation at the hands of the Christian Visigoths, and just as the edict of extermination was about promulgated, the Arabs swept across



the straits of Gibraltar and conquered Spain, and the Arabs were tolerant towards the Jews. Again, just as the Jewish life in Babylon was disintegrating, Spain was ready to receive the exiles, and just before the great expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Turks swept across the Bosphorus and conquered Constantinople, in 1453, and Turkey became the haven of refuge for the exiles from Spain, and the very year that the Jews were expelled from Spain, in 1492, was the year in which America was discovered, the land destined to become the refuge for tens of thousands of our suffering brothers,--one of the strange phenomena of Jewish history.

Spain, under Mohammedan rule, soon became the center of culture, of commerce and trade. The Mohammedans, the Arabs, of those days, were a virile, creative, energetic race, and wherever they came they established culture and civilization. Cordova under Mohammedan rule could vie with the ancient splendors of Athens and Alexandria; the cities of Seville and Granada boasted of universities which attracted students from all parts of the world. The Mohammedan was rather tolerant to other faiths, and so the Jew was attracted in larger and larger numbers to this new Jerusalem--Spain.

And the Jew developed in Spain in a most marvelous way. His development was many-sided. We think of the Jew as having a particular genius for religion, and a particular genius, say, for commerce; but given an opportunity freely and fully to develop himself, the creative genius of



the race expresses itself in almost every department of human thought. Before very long we find the Jews in Spain in the van of science, of philosophy, of statesmanship, of mathematics, of cartography; before very long you come across such illustrious names in the realm of statesmanship as

Samuel Hanagid, who was vizier of the head of Granada; you come across philologists and grammarians like Ben Ezra and Ibn Labrat; and you come across poets, like Solomon ibn Gabirol, the two ibn Ezras, Jehuda Halevi; you encounter names of philosophers like Bachya, Maimonides and Albo,-- a galaxy, a firmament studded with brilliant luminaries whose light has come down to our own day; altogether a golden era in Jewish history.

Now, of one of these luminaries I want to speak this morning--Solomon ibn Gabirol, poet and philosopher, whom Heine, you will recall, called the pious nightingale, who, unlike the minnesinger of the Middle Ages, sang not to a rose but to God. We know very little about the life of Gabirol, except that he was born in Malaga in 1021 or 1022. He was orphaned very early in life, and his earlier poems have the cast and the hue of sadness about them; and that he was a very precocious child; at the age of sixteen he was writing first rate poetry; at the age of nineteen he composed a poem of fourteen verses on Hebrew grammar. In those days convention sanctioned the writing not alone of the expression, not alone of human emotions in poetic form, but of logic and philosophy, and even of medicine and scientific subjects in



poetry.

All together Ibn Gabirol is said to have written three hundred poems, besides an authentic book on philosophy, The Fountain of Life; a book on ethics and psychology, the Improvements of the Qualities of the Soul; and a book of proverbs, The Choice of Pearls. It might be of interest for you to know a word about this Fountain of Life. There is a bit of interesting literary history connected with it. Solomon ibn Gabirol wrote his Fountain of Life in Arabic. Most of the Jewish philosophers used the language of the country as a medium for the expression of their philosophic thought. The Fountain of Life was translated in the fifth century into Latin as the Fons Vitae. The book was used largely in the academies and schools of the Christian scholiast, but the name Gabirol soon became perverted into "Avicbron," and in the course of time people forgot that the writer of this text was a Jew and regarded him as a Christian or a Mohammedan, and it was only in the last century, in 1846, that Solomon finally established the real identity of the author of this fine philosophic text, the Fountain of Life.

Gabirol's poetry is not exclusively religious. It is also secular, and it marks, as Zangwill truly comments, the transition period in Jewish poetry, when the poets began to write not alone of religious things but of secular things. In Gabirol you have nature things beginning to receive adequate poetic treatment. Up to his day and from the



earliest Biblical times, Jewish life was so completely steeped in the religious mood, that we have very little of secular poetry, unless you exclude a book like the Song of Songs from the category. Practically all of our poetic literature is religious. From Gabirol's day on we have quite a bit of secular things treated in poetry, the number growing and increasing until our own day, when there is a vast, authentic, many-sided, full-scooped Hebrew poetry.

But of course the real greatness of Gabirol's poetry is to be found in his religious manner. Gabirol, like all the other medieval Jewish poets, finds three things for his poetry. The one is God, his faith in God, his need of God, his quest of God; and the other is man, man's destiny, man's tribulations, man's mortality and man's immortality; and lastly, I srael--Israel wandering, Israel suffering, Israel martyred, Israel awaiting deliverance. And I have selected three of the shorter poems of Ibn Gabirol to illustrate these three things as treated by this great poet. The translations are of Israel Zangwill. They are not literal translations, but accurate, with due reference to the content and to the construction and to the spirit of the poem. It is very difficult to translate the poems of the medieval Jewish poets; they have so many technical conceits. Very often they are copying; nothing very involved. They are fond of acrostics; they are fond of weaving into their poems Biblical allusions and Biblical quotations. There is quite a bit of technical ingenuity which cannot be translated into



any other language; but Zangwill has caught the spirit of these poems and has endeavored, as far as possible, to preserve their rhythm, their swing, their imagery and their content. The first poem I shall read to you is poem 1, "At the Dawn." It is a perfect poetic creation; it has all the artistry and all the profound simplicity of the Psalm. It is polished and fine and complete. You sung it this morning, but at the hands of a different translator.

At the dawn I seek Thee,

Rock and refuge tried,

In due service speak Thee

Morn and eventide.

'Neath Thy greatness shrinking.

Stand I sore afraid,

All my secret thinking

Bare before Thee laid.

Little to Thy glory

Heart or tongue can do;

Shall remains the story,

Add we spirit too.

Yet since man's praise ringing

May seem good to Thee,

I will praise Thee singing

While Thy breath's in me.



Gabirol's faith in God was complete, but it was not a blind faith, it was not an unreasoned faith. Some of his poems give evidence of profound meditation and soul-searching on the subject of his faith in God. One of his most profound poems is the one on the three things which bring God to the poets<sup>mind,</sup>, and as Zangwill truly remarks, it recalls Kant, who centuries later came to his belief in God on the same ground as Gabirol hundreds of years before. The starry heavens above and the moral law within--these two wonderments led Kant to God. Now listen to Gabirol's statements.

Three things conspire together in mine eyes  
To bring the remembrance of Thee ever  
before me,  
And I possess them as faithful witnesses:  
Thy heavens, for whose sake I recall Thy name,  
The earth I live on, that rouseth my thought  
With its expanse which recalleth the expander of  
my pedestal,  
And the musing of my heart when I look within  
the depths of myself.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul, for ever and aye!

There is no more perfect definition of the basis for all religion than this.

The second theme--man--I shall leave for the last. The third theme--Israel. These poets knew of the



suffering of their brothers throughout the world. They loved their people; they understood the destiny and the mission of the people, and they prayed for the day when Israel would be redeemed from the hands of the oppressors and reborn anew in its political and in its cultural life of independence. And so I shall read to you a third poem of Gabirol, which speaks of his love for his people and of his hope for his people.

Establish peace, for us, O Lord,  
In everlasting grace,  
Nor let us be of Thee abhorred,  
Who art our dwelling-place.  
We wander ever to and fro,  
Or sit in chains in exile drear,  
Yet still proclaim where'er we go,  
The splendour of Our Lord is here.  
Sore-tried, involved in heathen mesh,  
Deep-sunk as though in midmost sea,  
Each morn the thought is roused afresh,  
Who will arise to set us free?  
All realms behold our driven seed,  
Like wounded doves we fly their hate.  
All nations hunt us and impede  
And in the desert lie in wait.



How many periods are past,  
And we in exile lingering,  
By enemies encompassed fast,  
Who jeer that now we have no King!

Shine forth, great God, in splendid flame,  
Bare Thy great arm of ancient days,  
Be jealous for Thy glorious name,  
Not unto us, O Lord, the praise.

Beneath the feet of slaves we bend,  
In pit and prison we are pressed,  
The hunters at our necks impend,  
We labour still and have no rest.

Uplift the lowly from the mire,  
And make our meditation sweet,  
The lily gather from the brier,  
And our salvation, Lord, complete.

There are innumerable of these soul-  
outpourings of the poet about his people.

For his third theme--man--I have selected a  
passage from his greatest poem, perhaps the greatest  
religious poem written since Biblical times--"The Royal  
Crown." It is very difficult to define this poem; it is a  
long religious rhapsody; it is poetry, it is philosophy, it  
is prayer. It is the glorification of God and His universe;



it is the adoration of the poet who stands in amazement and wonderment at the majesty and the vastness and the impenetrability of God's worlds; he sings of His suns and planets and constellations; he enumerates them all, he marvels at them all; he sings of God, of God's attributes; he sings of God's oneness, of God's existence, of God's wisdom, of God's omnipotence.

Philosophy in the alchemy of this great poet's genius becomes transmuted into superb poetry. And then he speaks of man in this vast scheme of things--small, corruptible, sinning, groping, insignificant, conscious of his weaknesses and his failings, and yet reaching out to that God who inhabits the unlimited spheres of the universe, and invokes Him to reach down and lift him up. He implores God to look with compassion upon this weak vassal of divinity; he asks of God to think of him in compassion and in mercy, to see him for what he made him, and he rises to that magnificent climax in which he says: "But I flee from God to God." I want to read you a few lines of that marvelous poem in the hope that you will read it in toto. I begin at the thirty-third part of this poem.

O God, I am ashamed and confounded  
To stand before Thee with this my knowledge  
That even as the might of Thy greatness,  
So is the completeness of my poverty and  
humbleness.



That even as the might of Thy potency  
So is the weakness of my ability.  
And that even as Thou art perfect, so am I wanting.  
For Thou art a Unity, and Thou art living,  
Thou art mighty, and Thou art permanent,  
And Thou art great, and Thou art wise, and  
Thou art God!

And I am but a clod, and a worm,  
Dust from the ground,  
A vessel full of shame,  
A mute stone,  
A passing shadow,  
To an asp akin,  
Deceitful underneath,  
Uncircumcised of heart,  
Great in wrath,  
Craftsman in sin and deception,  
Haughty of eye,  
Short in forbearance,  
Impure of lips,  
Crooked of ways,  
And hot-footed.

What am I?

What is my life?

What my might and what my righteousness?

Naught is the sum of me all the days of my being,

And how much the more so after my death!



From nothing I came,

And to nothing I go.

O God, my countenance falleth,

When I remember all wherein I have provoked Thee.

For all the good which Thou hast bestowed on me

I have requited Thee with evil.

For Thou hast created me not from necessity,

but from grace,

And not by compulsion of circumstance

But by favour and love.

And before I was,

With Thy mercies didst Thou precede me,

And breathe into me a spirit and call me into  
being.

And after I came forth into the light of the world

Thou didnt not forsake me,

But like a tender father didst Thou watch over  
my growing up.

And as a nurse fostereth a suckling didst Thou  
foster me.

Upon the breasts of my mother Thou madest  
me rest trustfully,

And with Thy delight didst satisfy me.

And when I essayed my feet, Thou didst  
strengthen my standing

And didst take me in Thine arms and teach me  
to walk.



And wisdom and discipline didst Thou impart to me,  
And from all trouble and distress didst Thou  
relieve me,

And from how many sorrows concealed from mine  
eyes didst Thou deliver me!

For before the hardship came  
Thou didst prepare the remedy for my distress  
all unbeknown to me,

And when from some injury I was unguarded,  
Thou didst guard me,

And when evil and constant distress anguished me,  
Thou hast freely healed me,

And when Thy dreadful judgment came upon the world,  
Thou didst deliver me from the sword

And didst save me from the pestilence,

And in famine didst feed me,

And with plenty sustain me.

And when I provoked Thee,

Thou didst chastise me as a father chastiseth  
his son,

And when I called out from the depths of my sorrow,

My soul was precious in Thy sight,

Nor didst Thou send me empty away.

But all this didst Thou yet exceed and add to

When Thou gavest me a perfect faith

To believe that Thou art the God of Truth

And that Thy Law is true and Thy prophets are true.



The greatest gift that God gave to him was  
his faith in God. And so the author continues:

Unworthy am I of all the mercies and all the truth  
Which Thou hast wrought for Thy servant.  
Verily, O Lord my God, will I thank Thee  
For that Thou hast given me a holy soul,  
Though by my deeds I have defiled it,  
Polluted and profaned it with my evil inclination.  
But I know that if I wrought wickedly,  
I harmed but myself, never Thee.

I beseech Thee, O God, judge me by Thine  
attribute of mercy,

And not by Thine anger lest Thou wither me.  
For what is man that Thou shouldst judge him?  
And how shalt Thou weigh a drifting vapour?  
From the day of his birth man is hard-pressed  
and harrowed,

"Stricken, smitten of God and afflicted."

His youth is chaff driven in the wind,  
and his latter end is flying straw,  
And his life withereth like a herb,  
From the day he cometh forth from his mother's womb  
His night is sorrow and his day is sighing.  
If today he is exalted,  
Tomorrow he shall crawl with worms.  
A grain of chaff putteth him to flight,



And a thorn woundeth him.  
If he is sated, he waxeth wicked,  
And if he is hungry, he sinneth for a loaf of bread.  
His steps are swift to pursue riches,  
But he forgetteth Death, who is after him.  
Man entereth the world,  
And knoweth not why,  
And rejoiceth,  
And knoweth not wherefore,  
And liveth,  
And knoweth not how long.  
In his childhood he walketh in his own stubbornness,  
And when the spirit of lust beginneth in its season  
To stir him up to gather power and wealth,  
Then he journeyeth from his place  
To ride in ships  
And to tread the deserts,  
And to carry his life to dens of lions,  
Adventuring it among wild beasts;  
And when he imagineth that great is his glory  
And that mighty is the spoil of his hand,  
Quietly stealeth the spoiler upon him,  
And his eyes are opened and there is naught.  
If for an instant he stand in security,  
Suddenly disaster will come upon him,  
Either war shall come and the sword will smite him,  
Or the bow of brass transpierce him;



Or sorrows will overpower him,  
Or the presumptuous billows flow over him,  
Or sickness and steadfast evils shall find him,  
Till he becometh a burden on his own soul,  
And shall find the gall of serpents in his honey.  
And when his pain increaseth  
His glory decreaseth,  
And youths make mock of him,  
And infants rule him,  
And he becometh a burden to the issue of his loins,  
And all who know him become estranged from him.  
And when his hour hath come, he passeth from  
the courts of his house to the court of Death,  
And from the shadow of his chambers to the  
shadow of Death.  
And he shall strip off his broidery and his scarlet  
And shall put on corruption and the worm,  
And lie down in the dust  
And return to the foundation from which he came.  
O my God,  
If my iniquity is too great to be borne,  
What wilt Thou do for Thy great name's sake?  
And if I do not wait on Thy mercies,  
Who will have pity on me but Thee?  
Therefore though Thou shouldst slay me, yet  
will I trust in Thee.



For if Thou shouldst pursue my iniquity,  
I will flee from Thee to Thyself,  
And I will shelter myself from Thy wrath in  
Thy shadow.

Ibn Gabirol quotes that marvelous sentence  
of Job: "Yea, though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him."  
And he transcends that phrase with his own: "If God pursue  
me to punish me and to crush me, I will flee from God to God."

That is, to my mind, the most exalted conception of Providence that has ever been given to mankind. That is really what we understand when we speak of the "fatherly love." A child punished by its father seeks refuge ultimately in the love of that same father; for the child knows, or soon comes to know, that the punishment and the chastisement was not one of wrath but one of correction--really, one of love. And similarly that trials and tribulations which God sends into the lives of men and women are not evidence of cruelty and vindictiveness. God sends sorrow and pain into the world not to break our spirits, not to humiliate us, not to grind us into the dust, but simply that we might turn and seek Him anew; that we might fly from the burning wrath of Him into the shadow of His mercy and His love.

If I have done no more this morning than introduce you to this poet, to the profoundness of his thoughts and to the charm of his poetry, and of inspiring



you to a determination to read him and study him, now that he is accessible to you, all in English and in an excellent translation, I shall feel repaid.

He is in the truest sense of the word, the pious nightingale, or the nightingale of piety who sang not to a rose but to God.

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