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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

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Chains - from Egypt till now, 1925.

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"CHAINS FROM EGYPT UNTIL NOW."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 19<sup>th</sup>, 1925, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



Passover, friends, is the festival of freedom, and freedom is the festival of the spirit of Israel. No people has borne as many chains, and no people has broken as many chains as Israel. Our religious history begins with Abraham, who broke the chains of idolatry; our national history begins with Moses, who broke the chains of slavery. These two initial acts of emancipation were not of course valid for all time. I venture to say that out of the thirty-five hundred years of our known history approximately three thousand years were spent under some form of enslavement. Before our people entered Canaan tradition tells us that they spent four hundred years in the "caldron of iron" of Egypt. After they entered Canaan they were subjected frequently to the domination of native peoples, of foreign invaders, and of all the ancient empire from Assyria to Rome; and since the last dispersion Israel experienced every conceivable form of bondage, exploitation and enslavement at the hands of almost half of the nations of the world.

Up to 1917, just eight years ago, half of our people--more than six millions of the sons and daughters of Israel, were slaves in the land of the Slav in Russia. Yet in 1925, after centuries in which the Jew seemed at each and every move to be dragging an ever lengthening chain of servitude,--in 1925 the Jew seems to be as vigorous, as enterprising, as eager for life as he was the day his forebears forded the River Jordan and to go in and conquer the



land of Canaan.

In 1925, on Mount Scopus, overlooking the sacred city of Jerusalem--on Mount Scopus where Titus stood the day the temple lay smouldering in ashes, and rejoiced at the final collapse of Egypt,--on Mount Scopus in 1925 Israel is dedicating a Hebrew university, sowing the seeds of new life, new effort and new spiritual creativity. Why is this? Why is it that the people that has borne more chains than all other peoples was able to break more chains? It is certainly not due to our physical prowess; certainly not due to our numbers, to our strength of body, of organization. In our hour of greatest prosperity in Palestine at best we were but a small people, enclaved in a sea of hostile nations. At worst--and our norm was the worst--we were a pitifully weak and scattered people, subject to every conceivable form of humiliation and discrimination, a dispossessed and disinherited and discredited tribe of scapegoats--the scapegoat of the world.

Clearly our immortality is to be found in an idea; and ideas are stronger than mountains. Mountains may be laid low; ideas feed upon the very forces which attempt to disintegrate them. What was this idea? Self-preservation for the sake of ministering to the wants of mankind. That was the idea which sustained and inspirited us and gave us claim to immortality. Self-preservation for the sake of ministering to the needs of suffering mankind. Quite early in our history we discovered God. We were the first that



ever burst into that silent sea. We discovered God--the God of justice and the God of Love! The physical Deity! And very early in our history--in fact, tradition tells us soon after our fore-bears left the land of Egypt, and, guided by that Titan spirit Moses, were directed to Mount Sinai,--there we made a covenant with this God to be his priests, his servants, and, if need be, his slaves; to minister at the high altars of mankind's aspirations; to bring the imprisoned out of the prison house, and them that dwell in great darkness out into the greater life.

We covenanted with an idea; we linked ourselves, our destiny, our fortunes, with a thought, a conviction, a pledge; and in order to carry out this covenant, in order to minister to the desperate needs of God's children, we understood quite early in our history that we needs must be ourselves, and that we needs must be free. Free! If not physically free then spiritually free; and spiritual freedom is the real and the highest form of freedom. We were prepared by heredity to be free men. The people who stood at Mount Sinai were the descendents of those who for untold generations had wandered, free men, independent men, through the endless stretches of the Arabian wilderness. Free men they were, these nomad ancestors of our people, men who knew no class and no caste, no loyalty and no pomp of royalty, no tyranny and no oppression--men equal one with another; and this freedom of the open spaces entered into the blood-stream of the race, and Israel never quite forgot its



birthright of the free man--never quite forgot it.

So that when the children of Israel left Egypt and were on their way to the promised land, with profound insight it was decreed that the generation that left Egypt, the emancipated serfs, should not themselves ever enter Palestine and build the political state. They were not **free** men; they were only freed men. The marks and the scars of servitude were on their souls, and such people are not qualified to be the builders of a free state. They must perish in the wilderness, it was decreed; their children, born in freedom, the freedom of the wilderness, they shall go in and inherit the land. And with similar profound insight it was declared that a Hebrew who is impoverished and sells himself as a slave to a fellow Hebrew, that his term of servitude shall be strictly delimited, and that at the end of that short period he must be set free; but if this man who sold himself out as a slave says, "I love my master and I wish to remain a slave in perpetuity to him," then men shall take this man who seeks voluntary slavery and lead him to the doorpost of the house and bore his ear, drive a spike through, to remind him of the time when at Mount Sinai it was proclaimed, and the people heard with their ears, "For unto me are the children of Israel slaves, and not slaves unto slaves."

Freedom became the symbol and the soul of the race. A great non-Jew, Henry George, in writing his famous tribute to Moses, senses this fact and declares: "The striking differences between Egyptian and Hebrew polity are not of



form but of essence. The tendency of the one is to subordination and oppression; of the other, to individual freedom. Strangest of recorded births! from out the strongest and most splendid despotism of antiquity (Egypt) comes the freest republic. From between the paws of the rock-hewn Sphinx rises the genius of human liberty, and the trumpets of the Exodus throb with the defiant proclamation of the rights of man. The Hebrew commonwealth was based upon the individual, a commonwealth whose ideal it was that every man should sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, with none to vex him and none to make him afraid; a commonwealth in which none should be condemned to ceaseless toil, in which for even the bond slave there should be hope, in which for even the beast of burden there should be rest. It is not the protection of property but the protection of humanity, that is the aim of the Mosaic code. Its Sabbath day and Sabbath year secure, even to the lowliest, rest and leisure. With the blast of the jubilee trumpets the slave goes free, and a redivision of the land secures to the poorest his fair share in the bounty of the common Creator. The reaper must leave something for the gleaner; even the ox cannot be muzzled as he treadeth on the corn. Everywhere, in everything, the dominant idea is that of our homely phrase--'Live and let live!'"

So that when Israel broke upon the world his was a flaming, free spirit, and for thirty-five hundred years, through the succeeding cold gradations of misfortune, Israel tried to keep this flame alive. Very often that flame came



nigh to being quenched, but it was never entirely quenched. Israel suffered much, but it was never entirely vanquished; Israel was never entirely vanquished but Israel suffered much. No man can live in a dungeon for a long period of time without receiving the mark and the brand of the dungeon upon his body and upon his soul, and no people can pass through centuries of degradation and humiliation and persecution without showing the scars; no people can bear chains upon its body for eternities without these chains eating themselves into the flesh.

And so today Israel stands before the world not in the splendor of a free people, but in the rather dim and bated light of a freed people, of serfs who were emancipated. You take the ghetto. The ghetto may have kept Israel intact; the ghetto may have fostered certain virtues among the people; but the ghetto, which was at once the symbol and the representation of Israel's degradation--the ghetto and all that goes with it, insecurity, poverty, servii chattels to king or feudal lord; persecution, exile, blood-accusation, riots, massacres, the yellow badge,--the ghetto, the narrow, serpentine, tortuous alleys of gloom and dankness in which the sons of the Maccabees were compelled to live,--that ghetto left its imprint upon the soul of Israel long after its physical walls crumbled and the physical ghetto disappeared.

When the ghetto walls crumbled our first freedom was the freedom of freed slaves, like the freedom



of our fore-bears after they left Egypt--the restless, impatient, ignorant, avid, cruel mob, hungering for the flesh pots, restive under any restraint, under any discipline, rebellious against every leadership; a mob, a horde of slaves who had newly found their freedom. And so our first reactions to our new found freedom were quite disastrous. We were ravenous for the things which the world had to give us; like a man who had long been starved; we were ravenous for the goods of life. We forgot that our idea was self-preservation for the sake of ministering to the world. We became self-engrossed. Our first reaction to our new found freedom was an exuberant effort to take in all that life had to give, indiscriminately, without choice of selection. Our first reaction was to try to absorb the world by imitating the world; we began to ape, to copy. In place of the imitation of God we substituted the imitation of the goy, of the gentile. The inspiriting motif of our life was lost.

This first reaction led to terrible disillusionment. A very few succeeded actually in assimilating themselves to the non-Jewish world. Many soon discovered that the world did not want them. And so they remained clipped spirits hovering on the periphery of two worlds; they lost this world and the next; they had voluntarily exiled themselves from their own world, from their own environment, from their own people, from their own traditions, from their own loyalties to the world which they hungered for and thought so resplendent and so tantalizing. That world



rebuked them, did not desire them; and others, more sensitive souls, who tried the same process of assimilation, were disillusioned by the ugliness and the coarseness and the cheapness of the world which they thought was bathed in sunshine, resplendent in beauty, and from excessive solicitude they were hurled back into excessive disgust. There was a terrific recoil, and was ended as ingrown personalities, embittered, narrowed, restricted, because they sought the world and they found the world not worth the seeking.

An excellent illustration of this type of which I speak is to be found in that cruel and tragic poem of Israel Zangwill, written in 1920, when the echoes of the massacres in the Eukraine were just beginning to die away, and when the civilized world still lay in wreckage about him. It is called "The Goyim"--the Gentile.

"Beware of the Goyim, his elders told Jacob,

In the holy peace of the Sabbath candles.

They make mock of our God and our Torah,

They rob us and spit on us.

They slaughter us more cruelly than the Shochet our cattle.

Go not outside the Ghetto.

Should your footsteps be forced to their haunts,

Walk warily, never forgetting

They are Goyim,

Foes of the faith,

Beings of darkness,

Drunkards and bullies,



Swift with the fist or the bludgeon,  
Many in species, but all  
Engendered of God for our sins,  
And many and strange their idolatries,  
But the worst of the Goyim are the creatures called  
Christians.

But Jacob grew bigger,  
Outgrowing the Ghetto.  
He laughed at his elders  
With their cowering fears and exclusive old customs  
And mechanical rites.  
He worshipped the Gentiles,  
No savage inferiors to Israel,  
But Plato and Virgil, but Shakespeare and Shelley,  
But Bach and Beethoven,  
But Michael Angelo,  
Dreamers and seers and diviners,  
Shapers of Man, not a tribe;  
Builders of beauty.

Poor Ghetto's fusty lore  
And the drone it imagined music  
And the blind-alley it called the cosmos.  
Hats off to the Goyim, he cried, hats off e'en in Synagogue.  
Great are our brethren, the Goyim, and the greatest of all  
are the Christians.



But behold him today,  
Little Jacob once more,  
Bowed small by the years and calamities,  
With his tragical eyes,  
The Jew's haunted eyes,  
That have seen for themselves,  
Seen history made  
On the old Gentile formula,  
Seen the slums written large  
In the red fields of Europe,  
And the Goyim blood-drunken,  
Reeling and cursing  
As on Saturday night.  
Back, back, he cries, brethren.  
Back to the Ghetto,  
To our God of Compassion,  
To our dreams of Messiah,  
And our old Sabbath candles!

For the others are Goyim,  
Who despite all their Platos,  
Their Shakespeares and Shelleys,  
Their Bachs and Beethovens,  
Drink human blood.  
Not only ours but their kinsman's.

Pitiless fratricides,  
Beings of darkness,





Foes of the faith,  
Fiercer than cobras acoil for the spring;  
Many in species, but all  
Engendered of God for our sins,  
And many and strange their idolatries,  
But the worst of the Goyim are the creatures called  
Christians."

I call this poem cruel and tragic because it is the speech not of a free man; it is the halting, desperate speech of a slave who had been emancipated, and looked upon his emancipation as a credential to all the best in life, and when the best was not forthcoming, disgruntled, disillusioned, broken, he returns to whimper, to complain and to decry.

This is the mark and the scar which the ghetto left upon the soul of our people. We are forging our way today to a new freedom--a freedom which is free from the allurements and enticements of the world about us; a freedom which dares to be eclectic, selective; a freedom which does not demand of him who is free that love which kills, that love which was the mark of the tribe of Asa, who die when they love; a freedom which does not bear the stamp of the slave psychology--this professing too much, this over-abundant gratitude, this cringing, this fawning, this self-abdication and self-annihilation, this break-up and scattering of personality, this aping and copying and imitating; this listening constantly with avid ears to hear "What will the goy say?"

There are men who think themselves really free



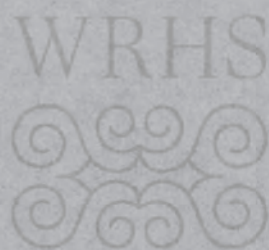
because, forsooth, they have thrown over the silken band of faith, of tradition, of custom, of religion, of Jewish loyalty, of community responsibility, and have taken on the more garish, the more disgusting guise of servitude, that of crude imitation of the goy; that ceaseless, soul-devastating attempt to regulate every act of one's life, every speech of one's life, so as to please and win the approval of the non-Jew. We have too many of them in our community; we have many of them throughout the land, slaves in the lust of freedom, as desperately sunk in the iron caldron, in the pit of servitude, as our forefathers were in the land of Egypt; because theirs is the spiritual slavery, which is even worse than physical slavery.

We are marching towards the new freedom, a freedom which is not a matter of ingrown racialism, of national chauvinism, of conceit or narrowness or circumscription or self-confinement; we are marching towards the new freedom of real men and women who live their own lives and think their own thoughts and fulfill their own destinies regardless; men who cooperate but who do not cater; men who work with other men but do not subdue their lives at the direction of other men. We are marching towards the new freedom which will recognize but one kind of servitude--servitude to the Lord God of the world! The new freedom which will recognize chains, but only the chains of self-imposed duties and obligations; the new found freedom which will impose upon us the privilege of sacrificial service; the



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new freedom which will give us not more privilege and not more opportunities and not more prerogatives and not greater wealth and not finer homes and not higher positions in state or society; the new freedom which will bring to us an overpowering sense of the old idea that came out of the vast stretches of the ancient home of our race: self-preservation for the sake of ministering to the desperate needs of suffering mankind.

And this is the message of Passover.



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1. Passover is festival of Freedom - and Freedom is festival of Sp. gls.  
 No people has bore so many chains - and no  
 people has broken so many chains - Its religious  
 history begins with Abraham - who broke the chains  
 of idolatry, Its national history begins with Moses  
 who broke the chains of slavery. - These miraculous  
acts of deliverance were not valid for all times. of its  
 3500 years of nat. life, Israel was hedged about and  
 shrouded the heavy yoke of bondage for perhaps 3000.  
 Before it entered P. it spent 400 yrs in the iron cauldron  
 of Egypt - In P. it ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> the dominated, at one time or another  
 by the native people, by foreign empires and by  
 the great Empires of antiquity from Assyria to Rome.  
 Since the last dispersion it experienced every conceivable  
 form of enslavement & exploitation at the hands of 1/2  
 the nations of the world - up to 1917. The Jews of Israel were  
 helots in Russia -

2. And yet in 1925 after centuries in which at each  
 removal the seemed to drag a lengthening chain of  
servitude, Israel, is as vigorous and enterprising as the  
 day his boots poked the R. Jordan to go in and take  
 the land of Canaan - and in 1925 on Mt Scopus  
 overlooking the Sacred City, from which Titus beheld  
 in gls the smoldering ruins of Temple that Israel  
 dedicates a Hebrew University. - It is in a new  
 era of youth, and effort & creative -



- (3) As fast freedom was a form of slavery - just as in case of Egypt - Flash-pots! (1) We were ransomed for the good things of life which had been denied us - Many forgot their mission - (2) The Idea of self preservation in the state of slavery - They lost eyes in the new found freedom - in stead of judging themselves <sup>their world became dark with excess light</sup> -
- (3) They ~~were~~ wished to amalgamate - They began to mix - to ape and in their eyes were they not - Hard Hard! - (1) They were not (scholar) any more & stared man at feast - They demanded everything good and bad - Some necessary - Others were disillusioned -
- (1) World did not want them - They lost both worlds - Clashed against the people of 2 worlds -
- (2) Sensitive souls decided that world was not worth waiting - and from extreme whicitude they passed to an equally extreme, dis just - Terrible Recoil with the world -
- (3) Zangwill - (Just) - "You Gentiles" -

6-We are forging our way to the new Freedom.

1. On the one hand we must be free (1) from world's allurement and pernicious (2) from a love which destroys the lover (3) from the slave psych. which prospers too much and cares too much, and abducts too much - (4) Broken & scattered personalities -



2. Slavery {<sup>(1)</sup> ingrown conceit (2) racial chauvinism  
(3) persecution-complex.

7. The New Freedom

1. which recognizes only one servitude - to God.  
only the chains - of self imposed duties, -  
the shoulders, sacrificial service -  
- the "nether" chains about the heart -





(1) Hebrew Slave Purse his bar! My servant. 327 1234 1234 1234  
(7) Henry George - (Dante) -

4. A flaming, freedom-loving, spirit who craved when he began his first book upon the world 35 centuries ago - And then the succeeding "old traditions" & was forth, it struggled to keep the flame alive - It suffered much, but it was never entirely vanquished. It was never entirely vanquished. But it shows the man its can of the old visions which has eaten deep into it. We can live in a dungeon for years, and show the marks of that life on body & soul - We can live a pariah life, and demand life for centuries & escape.

## 5. The Ghetto

1. Ghetto kept us intact - But the life of degradation which the ghetto symbolized & represented - Segregation, contempt, uncertainty - frequent persecutions - The yellow badge - the scars when we were semi communes - Charl & thing as penal prison - Then blinded eyes with dark. (1) Prophetic and grieved (2) Vision narrowed to tribal loyalty & rel. Communism (3) A Back - work of the world -

(2) When we were emancipated, we were no longer free men, but freed men - The scars were there - And for a 100 yrs. we have been struggling to recover the voice, the manner, the spirit of the free free man!



3. Why?

(1) Certainly no phys. power sheltered Is. - At best, it was a small state enclosed in a world of hostile people. At worst, as the west was the norm, it was a pitifully weak and scattered people, hemmed in by every way. Isolation, poverty, small, but, seen, was a disparaged, discolored, fate - the scapegoat of the world -

(2) It was an idea. And ideas outlast mountains. What can be laid low - Ideas feed on the very force which try to disintegrate them -

(3) His idea was self-preservation for the salvage of man leading to the needs of the world - He discovered God - "He was the first that ever burst into that silent sea" - an Ethical God - He made a covenant with him - to his everlasting priest and servant - Slaves of God -

(4) To accomplish this he needs must be free - if not physically then spiritually, and sp. freedom is the real & highest form of freedom -

(5) He was prepared for his mission by chastity. He was a free man, as free as the desert, where for untold centuries, his forebear wandered, free and ind. nomads, knowing no granny nor oppression of the - as things or potentials - That desert freedom entered into the blood - Hebrew / his life. He never quite lost -

(6) With perfect insight - the slaves who left Eg - the freed men, but not free men - were not allowed to enter Pal. to estab. the nation -