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The Status of the Jewish Cause in America, 1925.

"THE STATUS OF THE JEWISH CAUSE IN AMERICA."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MAY 10, 1925, CLEVELAND, OHIO.



AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

The subject of our brief symposium this morning is, as announced, the present status of the Jewish cause in America. Clearly, we should at the outset agree upon what the Jewish cause is. Now, I am afraid that inside or outside of our ranks one would find no unanimity of opinion. Outside of our ranks there are traducers and maligners of our people who have in the past decade popularized the fiction that the Jewish cause, the furtive Jewish cause was the domination of the world; the Jewish cause is a secret international intrigue to destroy throne and altar, to undermine the foundations of society, and then to seize all power and control and master the world. Thus Israel, who throughout the wearying centuries and the untold tribulations of a pilgrim's life--Israel, which heretofore believed its cause to be that of the "suffering servant of God"--Israel was now dowered with a new cause and a new purpose and a new mission: that of the international conspirator.

Within our own ranks there are those who believe the cause of the Jew to be swift and thorough assimilation. They answer that eternal question voiced by the melancholy --To be or not to be?--with a sharp and eager negative. They would solve all the problems involved in the survival of Israel by destroying Israel. Quite simple, but unaccountably difficult in the execution.

Again, there are others who assume that the

Jewish cause is philanthropy. Burdened as we are, with an inescapable uniqueness, you are to make the best of it. We ought to give to the world such abundant evidence of the generosity of our spirit, of our noble impulses, that the world will be prone to overlook our other shortcomings and failings, principally our shortcomings. . . . These racialists in our midst believe that the Jewish cause is self-effacement behind hospitals and orphanages. And again there are those in our midst who believe that the Jewish cause is exclusively one of political reintegration; our entire concern in the world today is to become like every other people; when that is achieved our work is done-- forgetting that the supreme nationalists of Israel, the prophets of Israel, were the very ones who waged incessant warfare upon this doctrine that Israel is to be like every other nation. "Israel was to be unique even in its nationalism." And so these national secularists in our midst assume that the Jewish cause is simply one of political self-determination, and thereby they are losing themselves in that great, insuperable bog of racial and national chauvinism in which the whole world is now sunk.

What, then, is the Jewish cause? What do you and I believe the Jewish cause to be? What does the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, represented here this morning, assume the Jewish cause to be? What is it that solicits our devotion and loyalties and sacrifices? Perhaps the prophet of Israel would answer that. "I (God) summon

you in behalf of my plan of universal righteousness; and I took hold of thy hand and I fashioned thee, so that I may set you up as a covenant among the people as a light unto the nation." There it is! For righteousness, for a covenant, for light--to be the champions of justice, the covenanters of peace among the nations of the earth, and the light bringer! There it is! Our unique mission, our unique destiny--there it is! For which we were taken hold of by destiny and fashioned in a thousand crucibles of trial and tribulation. There it is! To keep the lonely vigil of the eternal God in the world of men--to bring light! What light? Why, surely, that light of which our mystics spoke when they spoke of it as the brilliant light, the radiant effulgence, the "light of God" which illuminated the darkness of the world.

Are we light bringers today? Have we enough light by which to warm our own cold and shivering bodies? We, who were once upon a time caught up by a flaming vision and saw God face to face, and thereafter went forth revealing unto mankind the holy God of human need and human aspiration? We today are no longer the path-finders in those fields of splendor. The world in its perplexities and in its doubts and in its sufferings turns for guidance and inspiration not to us but to our forefathers twenty-five hundred years ago. The great religious works of today, the great theologic and philosophic speculation of mankind today are not the works of the Jews. We are followers, oftentimes blind followers of any and every will-o'-the-wisp, any momentary, tantalizing, fascinating notion or philosophic or sociologic concept. We

have lost the power of tremendous affirmation because we have drifted from the living well of our racial genius.

"I have summoned you in view of my plan of universal righteousness." Let us no longer speak and so frequently dwell upon the contributions of our forefathers. Are we today leaders in social reconstruction? Once upon a time, of course, we were the economic emancipators of mankind. We were the voice that spoke for the oppressed and the needy and the enslaved and the dispossessed of the earth. But are we today? We were the last of the great religious bodies of the United States to subscribe even to a minimum program of social reconstruction.

"I have given ~~that~~ as a covenant among the nations." Are we aggressively leading in the work of establishing covenants among the nations for international comity and international peace? I make bold to say, and I say it with pain in my heart, that in the last decade of the war and the days after the war the synagogue was just as pitifully and tragically irrelevant to the tragic struggle for universal peace as the church was. We were not leaders. We were hesitant, timorous followers.

What shall we say, therefore? Shall we say that the creative powers have departed from us? Shall we confess to the world that the great rapture and the great ardor and the high exaltation of spirit have departed from us? Shall we say that once upon a time we were giants, but now we are enfeebled and weakened, tied seven-fold by the

bow-strings of the Philistines? Our enemies would have us say that; our enemies would have us acknowledge that our roots have grown old and our stock is dead in the ground; but you and I, we who believe in the perennial miracles of Israel's rejuvenation, we who have seen a thousand crests and a thousand troughs in the waves of our heroic career, we thrust aside this pronouncement of our fatal doom and degradation. We are not a people of the past only; we are not a people of the present only; we are a people of the future. Our reservoirs have not been dried; our creative genius is still in us like a burning fire. We have yet much to give to mankind, and we have yet many a revelation to bestow upon mankind. We will to live; we will to create. Our fires burn low, perhaps, today, but they therefore need stirring; our light is dim, and therefore it needs brightening; our heart is a bit tired, and therefore it needs the stimulus of renewed faith and renewed loyalty and renewed enthusiasm. And it is this, I take it, which you mean when you speak of the Jewish cause in America today.

The Jewish cause, the immediate Jewish cause serving the ultimate cause pronounced by the prophet,--the immediate cause is the stimulation of heart and mind and soul. Give us in our pulpits men enlightened, inspired and consecrated, in patience of soul and in resignation of life serving the cause of Israel; give us men of that type and you will send a thrill of revived devotion and earnestness and zeal throughout the length and breadth of Israel. And

this is what that marvelous institution, the Hebrew Union College, fostered, and, supported by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, is attempting to do.

We cannot say, we who are its children, how much we are indebted to that beautiful institution for the things we hold most dear in life; we cannot say, because words are poor vehicles for the expression of the deepest emotions of human life, how great our indebtedness is to those patient, quiet, peaceful, consecrated souls, the teachers and the professors who minister at the altar of Jewish learning there, and who of course love to share with you the vast treasures which they have garnered in a hundred fields of thought. A revitalized synagogue through enlightened and inspired ministers. And schools! The school is our promise and our security and our lien upon eternity. We need more schools and better schools, more text books and better text books; we need better trained teachers; we need more hours and more years of instruction for our children; we need more content in instruction. And with these problems, too, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, through its school extension department and its commission on Jewish education, is wrestling with successfully. By the books they publish and the curricula they evolve and the teachers they train and the problems for education which they carry on constantly, they confer an inestimable and supreme boon upon American life.

The Union of American Hebrew Congregations is

today the most hopeful agency for the intensification of Jewish life, on the expansion and innate potentialities of the Jewish soul in America. I am not a prophet of doom; I am an optimist. I believe that American Jewry is entering upon its golden era today. We are uniquely and most fortunately situated here; we are already the second largest Jewish center in the world; in America we have the most fortunate blending of Eastern European Jewry and Western European Jewry, each one bringing its own peculiar aptitudes and gifts; we are perhaps the best organized Jewish community in the world, but above all, we have been blessed by God with prosperity and well-being. The scholars from abroad are coming to us; their very books are coming to us. If we fail in seizing upon these opportunities, we shall be traitors, not alone to the spirit of our race but to the corporate life of America; for we can best serve this land, favored by God, we can best serve its soul and its destiny, by giving full and free expression to the innate gifts and potentialities of our Jewish soul, by expressing the legacies of our past, by making real our dream, by bringing these spiritual values and laying them upon the altar of our common life here in America.

The Master of all good workmen, the Master who first summoned us and first fashioned us, is now summoning the American community to do its part and to play its role in the marvelous experience of this eternal people-- summoning us to keep the lonely vigil for the eternal God in the world of men.

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