



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
149

Box
53

Folder
250

The faith of the living and the pyramids of the dead, 1926.

"THE FAITH OF THE LIVING
and
THE PYRAMIDS OF THE DEAD."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER, D.D.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 4, 1926, CLEVELAND, O.

Six tombs, we are told, in Egypt lie buried, six tombs, one within the other, and the last, which is also the death mask, is one of solid gold, marvelously wrought by the cunning hand of some goldsmith. In the midst of palatial splendor Tutankhamen lies buried, surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance which delight the living king. The tomb of Moses is unknown. Even to his own generation, we are told, his tomb was unknown. No sweating slaves to cut the cliffs in order to carve out the grave of Moses, and the wealth of no toiling men and women adorn the sepulcher of Moses; no funeral pomp attended him as he went to his last resting place. He simply died and no man knows his burial place unto this day,--an old, tired man, wearied by the many tribulations of his life. With one last look upon the darkening fields of the promised land which he was not to enter, with a soft breeze blowing upon his lips, which our rabbis say was the kiss of God, Moses lay down and died.

The tomb of Tutankhamen is the marvel of the world, and yet even now curious hands are rifling that tomb, and before very long all the accumulated treasures will be scattered in museums and archaeological halls, and nothing will remain of that magnificent tomb but a dark, lonely cavern; just as nothing will remain of Tutankhamen but a memory--a memory concerning not the meaning of his life but the manner of his death. But not so Moses. His tomb

cannot be rifled, for no one knows his tomb unto this day, and there is nothing in that tomb that was essential to the life of Moses--just a tired brain that has long ago returned to its kindred dust. But the flame that was Moses', and the passion and the craving that was Moses', and the sorrow and the strivings that was Moses, and the hope and the glow that was Moses,--these these never descended to corruption. They entered into the life of a book, which is the Bible, and the life of a people, which is Israel, and in them they found their immortality.

Across the face of the world the spirit of Moses moves today as resplendent, as heroic, as living as in the days when that self-same spirit slew that cowardly task-master beneath the shadows of the pyramids; as heroic, as mighty as on that day when he rallied the demoralized hosts of Israel fleeing from the Egyptians, faced by the threatening waters of the Red Sea; as resplendent as on that day when it, the spirit of Moses, fashioned a nation at the foot of Mount Sinai--a host of erstwhile slaves into a people whose freedom was to be the law.

In this contrast, friends, between Moses and the Egyptian Pharaohs one may find the distinguishing mark which separates Israel from the ancient Egyptian, and Judaism from nigh all other faiths. The Egyptian civilization was a rich and a marvelous and a luxuriant civilization, but it was a civilization steeped in materialism, in matter, in things; its life concerned itself with things; the

affections of men wove themselves round things--wealth, power, possessions. Death has a habit of robbing men of these things, so that the Egyptians pathetically tried to carry over into the realms of death the things which they loved and worshipped during life. They carried into their tombs their wealth and their possessions and their furniture and their slaves and their concubines; they carried into the tombs their spears and their arms; they tried to snatch life from the cold fingers of death.

Not so Israel. Israel early in life discovered a new order of existence, a spiritual order of existence, in which the focal and the central things were not substance, not matter, but spiritual values in which a man's love shall be riveted not upon a perishable thing but upon an imperishable idea, in which the affections of life shall weave themselves not round transitory and passing objects but around ideals and hopes and aspirations and social strivings which endure forever.

So that Israel made very little of physical death. The body died as the body must die. Dust unto dust, and the swifter the better, but the spirit which passes from one soul to another, from one enkindling mind to another, beyond the portals of the grave, that is indestructible and imperishable. So that Israel has no graves to point to and no pyramids to point to, but Israel has prophecies and psalms and sacred books and heroic memories and mighty achievements--spiritual values to point

to, living things, dynamic and creative in life today.

It is told of emperor Titus, that when he destroyed Jerusalem, broke down the walls and entered the temple, he insisted upon seeing the Holy of Holies, the most sacred room in the temple, and in the pride and arrogance of a conquering emperor he drove his sword through the curtains which separated the Holy of Holies from the front chamber of the temple. To his amazement, in looking about him in this chamber, he found--nothing! Not a pillar, not a post, not a statue--nothing. And he was amazed. Had he the inner eye he would have found there in that empty room everything; for there was symbolized the religion of the immaterial, the faith in the spiritual. Gods which are physical grow old and decrepit, like the god Ra of the Egyptians; gods that are material are slain, like the god Osiris of the Egyptians. They are dethroned, they are overwhelmed by other gods. But the God who is spirit is young eternally, creative and omnipotent.

And so a people which worships material things, who grow old and decrepit, will be vanquished and destroyed; but a people like Israel, which identifies its life with that which is immaterial, spiritual, eternal, will partake of the quality of the eternal, will remain indestructible.

I should like to emphasize that simple thought this morning. The faith of Israel concerns itself with spiritual values. The slaves of Egypt did not know it.

When the erstwhile slaves, now emancipated, appeared before Mount Sinai and Moses, their leader, was summoned to ascend the mountain, they at once began to grumble. "Our god has left us. We have no image of our deity. How do we know that he is with us? Make unto us a golden calf," they cried. "The Egyptians have their gods represented in calves, in oxen, in cows. We can see it. We want a god whom we can see." And so they took their gold and melted it and made a deity of it. "Behold your god, Israel!" They did not know that they had come into a new life and into a new conception of life, and when Moses descended from the mountain he had their idol ground and smashed and scattered to the four winds. "This is not your God, Israel! Not an image, not a thing, but a spiritual essence of which you can only think, concerning which you can only feel. There is no faith by sight and touch, only by hope and thought and dream and longing."

Even Moses himself, in the dark hours of his life, fell victim to that quite natural desire on the part of man to see his God. In one of the dark hours, beset by doubt and perplexities, and in the midst of a people grumbling and rebellious, Moses himself turns unto his God and says: "Show me thy glories. Prove to me that thou really art. I want to see you." And the voice replies: "A God whom man can see does not give life but death. No man can see me and live." There are many men who want to see not only God but God's way in the world. They want to

see God's retribution now and here. The good shall be rewarded; the wicked shall be punished here, now, at once, so that all men can see. There are men who would like to see the results of their labor right away; they would like to see their ideal realized before their very eyes, some tangible, concrete results. But Judaism has brought to man a new message. The God who is to be worshipped is the God invisible, a God who cannot be seen, and the ideals for which men must give the blood and the sweat of their life are the ideals which cannot be realized in one's own life. The invisible God and the essential worth of effort and not of achievement, of striving and not of attainment, of intent and not of accomplishment--these ideas underlie the living faith which we call Judaism.

Whenever I think of Moses, as one naturally does on the festival of Passover, I like to think of him in the self-same spirit of our faith; I like to think of him not in terms of what he did but in terms of what he was. What a man does is his conduct; what a man is is his character. Moses accomplished much. He liberated the people; he gave them a law; he led them for forty years during the early, precarious and desperate years of their existence as a people. He was emancipator and legislator and leader. He has many achievements to the eternal credit of his name, and yet it is not of these that I prefer to think primarily.

I prefer to think of Moses the man, of the

qualities of his life, of the things which made him, one for whose sake the Rabbis said the whole world might have been created. I like to think of Moses in some of the critical situations of his life, in some of the critical emergencies of his life, and how he reacted, how he responded to these emergencies. I like to derive inspiration from the mood and manner of his life, even as much if not more so than from the achievements of his life.

I like to think, first of all, of Moses the prince; Moses reared in the courts of the Pharaoh, amidst all the luxury and all the pampered indulgences of the court, the proud, free-born prince. One day he discovers, to his great amazement and consternation, that there is another world outside of the world of music and pleasure and beauty of the court--a world of slaves where misery and want predominate; salves quarters, dark and noisome alleys, where slaves dwell under the lash of the task-master; and that, to his great consternation, these slaves, the despised and the rejected of men, are his brothers. What shall he do? Will he descend into the slave quarter there amidst the filth and the poverty and the suffering, and announce himself to those people and say, "I am ^{of} your people," and help them? Will he face the jeering and the contempt of his erstwhile ~~priestly~~ ^{princely} companions, who will thrust him from them as being branded with a mark of shame, of a slave? Or will he turn his back upon these, his people, and remain the happy, joyous, pampered prince of Israel?

The Bible tells us, "Moses went down to his brothers." As between pride and loyalty Moses chose loyalty. How many of us would choose loyalty? How would we respond? Is it not true that so many of us, the richer and the more favored of circumstance among us, oftentimes are tempted to turn their backs upon their people for the sake of gaining some social prestige elsewhere? For the sake of not being identified with people which is a minority, which is disfavored and distinguishable? Is it not true that so many of our intellectuals, our writers and dramatists and journalists and others eschew Judaism and Jewry because there are richer pastures elsewhere?--Greater rewards, social and monetary? And it is only after their disillusionment, after realizing that these rewards are not forthcoming, that they return to the welcoming fold of Israel, a little bit embittered, a little bit saddened, and a little bit overzealous.

Moses went out to his brothers. As between pride and loyalty he chose loyalty. I like to think of Moses in a second critical situation in his life. He has fled Egypt; he has been living now for many years in the wilderness, a shepherd; he is at peace with himself and with his God. All the noise and all the intrigue and the scandal and the horror of Egypt is back of him. He is now a free man in the free open spaces of the great wilderness of God, and in the quiet of the oases he is at peace and he is happy. And then one day the voice speaks to him: "Moses, come now

and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, and bring forth my people of Israel from Egypt. Leave the quiet and peace of your life. Go back into that world of turmoil and strife, face struggle, contempt, death, to bring forth my people out of Egypt." Moses at first does not want to go. Moses knows what is to come if he were to go. Moses knows what the lot of a leader of men is, and Moses begs of God, "Send someone else; let me remain here." But the voice speaks again, "Moses, get thee unto Pharaoh and bring my people out of Egypt."

And Moses goes. As between ease and peace on the one hand and duty on the other, Moses chose duty. How would we respond? How many of us would be ready to sacrifice ease and comfort and the fine opinions of our friends and face a hostile world, jeering, scornful, hateful, for the sake of an ideal? How many of us would leave kith and kin for the sake of serving men? As between ease and duty Moses chose duty.

And I like to think of Moses in yet another situation in his life. ^{at least} He had brought the people ^{out of Egypt} across the Red Sea, ^{over} across the wilderness to the foot of Mount Sinai. He ~~had given them a law~~ ^{Painfully}; he had led them; he ~~pleaded~~ ^{endured much for them} with them; he ^{had} instructed them; he ~~suffered for them~~ ^{to secure the will}; and now the moment he ~~is~~ ^{was} gone to the top of the mountain they flaunted all his instruction, they ~~made~~ ^{would} for themselves a golden image, and they dance ^{around} around it and ~~say~~ ^{cried out}, "This is your god, Israel." And Moses descends ^{from} from the mountain, and ~~he~~ is crushed by

the evidence of the futility of his work, the terrible failure which he has been. ^{He has} ~~And~~ the voice ^{says}: "I will destroy this people; they are worthless; they are serfs;

their souls are still in Egypt even if their bodies are not.

^{a stiff-necked people} They are ~~unfit~~. I will destroy them." ^{"But I say I will make a great nation"} And Moses said,

^{What was Moses' choice? Did he consent to the destruction of} "Yes, destroy them?" Moses in anger said, "Yes, annihilate

^{people - just so he would be spared and he would become the progenitor} them?" Oh no. ^{of a new nation?} Moses kneels before his Maker and said,

^{Great God, save this people. They know not what they do.} "Great God, save this people. They know not what they do.

^{Great sin, but now, if thou wilt forgive their sin - and if not, blot me,} Save them. If not, "destroy me." ^{I pray thee, not, thy work which}

^{thou hast written?"} Between hurt pride on the one hand and love

^{Between love of self and love of his people, the leader chose} on the other Moses chose love and pity. ^{How many of us}

would do that? How would we respond? When we see that our

work is flaunted, when we see that our best intentions are

misunderstood and misinterpreted, when we see that the

services which we have tried to render people is entirely

worthless as regards results, ^{How many men, when they feel themselves to} when we feel abused and wronged,

how many of us would choose the path of pity and understand-

ing and love as Moses did? How many of us would ^{rather} sulk in

our tents and say, "Well, I have done my best by these

people. ^{and been} I am through?"

^{And then, was a faithful and fervent choir who have made} And lastly, friends, I like to think of Moses

^{known is} In the last moments of his life on the top of Mount Nebo.

^{He is within} There he is now, within sight of the promised land. For

forty years he has trekked through the wilderness; for forty

years he has had to endure the heat and ~~the~~ thirst of the

wilderness, ~~and~~ the rebellions ~~and~~ the grumblings and the

complaints of his people; for forty years he has had to

fight ~~his~~ ^{without} enemies without and the ^{rebellious} ~~fees~~ from within; but now here is victory! it was all worthwhile ^{because} because it was not excessive, for here before me is ^{the} promised land; ^{this will repay all my trouble and hardships} this will crown my achievements with honor. And then the voice ^{that} speaks unto Moses: "Moses, look well over this promised land. Look over it to the north and the south and the east and the west; look long, for with thine eyes thou shalt behold it, but into it thou shalt not come." What! To be robbed of victory on the very threshold of ~~its~~ attainment? To die of thirst in the sight of springs of fresh water? ~~To be robbed, To be~~ frustrated at the very point of ^{victory} consummation? Is this fair? Is this just? ^{Did} ~~And~~ rebellion and bitterness welled up in the soul of Moses, and all the accumulated complaints of his life ^{had they} rushed to his lips? Ah, no! ~~They would rush to our lips, but not to the lips of Moses.~~ Moses hears the voice. He does not stop to question why, and ^{very} the first words that come to the lips of Moses upon hearing his fate and doom are not the words of rebellion, ~~words~~ of complaint, words of challenge, ^{a blessing,} but slowly he begins to intone the last blessing of his people. ^A blessing comes to his lips to crown his life of turbulence and suffering. "Let Reuben live and not die. Let Israel live and not die. What am I? I am mortal; I must die. What matters it if I cannot enter ~~into~~ the promised land? I do not count. ~~All life is~~ destined to be full of tribulation and suffering. Abraham was tried in a burning furnace, and Isaac was tried on a

~~sacrificial altar, and Jacob had to wrestle through the~~
~~live-long night with the angle of darkness. That is life.~~
I do not count. Let Reuben live and not die; let Israel
live and not die."

And so between rebellion and faith,
rebellion and submission to God's inscrutable will, Moses
chose faith. *This is the last, the chosen where man makes a*
~~And are not these qualities of Moses at the~~
~~As between position and loyalty he chose loyalty. As between~~
~~very heart of our faith--loyalty, duty, love, resignation?~~
~~Are not these the veritable pillars in the temple of our~~
~~faith? And do not these qualities make of our faith the~~
~~living faith?~~ For a religion which preaches loyalty to
truth, duty to God and man, love for all the suffering
children of God, and faith in the ultimate victory of
ideals,--a faith such as this is a living and an eternal
faith.

--o--