



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
150

Box
53

Folder
263

The Middle Ages, 1926.

Our survey of Jewish history brought us to the Second Destruction, the final collapse of the nation under the blows of the iron legions of Rome. The Second Destruction was not like the first. The first, as you will recall, lasted just fifty years; the second lasted much longer than fifty years, or five hundred years, or fifteen hundred years. The second exile lasted well nigh unto two thousand years,--a long night full of ghosts and tragedies and tragic experience lasting very well nigh twenty centuries, during which our people was broken upon the wheels of untold persecution and misery, in which our people was destined to write the greatest drama of all times,--the drama of Israel invictus,-- - Israel unconquered, Israel undefeated.

Let us hastily sketch the history of our people from the time of the Second Destruction until the time of what came to be known as the Third Destruction, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Palestine, after the last heroic revolt against the Romans under BarKochba, an unsuccessful revolt, remained under Rome for many centuries until the rise of the Mohammedan power. As Rome became Christianized the fortunes of the Jews in Palestine became worse. With Constantine in the fourth century, who is said to have been the first Christian emperor of Rome, the first restriction against the Jews on account of their religion was introduced. Under a

succeeding emperor, F Christianity is made a requirement for holding political office. The Jews were thereby excluded and reduced to citizens of the second rank. In the beginning of the fifth century their last semi-political office, the patriarchate, of which I shall speak in a moment, was abolished, and the Jews of Palestine remained a subject and an oppressed people until the coming of the hosts of the Mohammedans in 634.

The life of our people in Palestine after the Bar Kochba rebellion began to center itself more and more in religion than in anything else. Their political independence was gone and their political interest began to recede into the background, but the religious interest becomes dominant in Jewish life. Their leaders from now on are not warriors or statesmen but sages, rabbis, and the centers of Jewish life are the academies in Yamma or in Tiberias or in Sepphoris or in other towns in Palestine where there are schools and seats of learning. Their representative bore the title of --prince, head of the community of Israel . . .

In Palestine, at the close of the second century and the beginning of the third, the great code of Jewish law known as the Mishna was compiled. These laws are derivative laws whose authority and source is the Bible. These laws were made necessary by the new conditions of life, and these men in Israel known as the Rabbis assumed the right and the prerogative to reinterpret

Biblical laws so as to meet the new needs of the people. With the third century Palestine begins to lose its central place in Jewish life, and the center shifts to Babylon, where it remains for about 700 years until the year 1000. You will recall that the Jews were exiled to Babylon 800 years before this period, back in 586. Fifty years later ~~the~~ permission was granted them to return to Palestine, but only a few returned; most of them remained, and a Jewish community persisted in Babylon right through the centuries. They were spiritual and religious autonomies, and, in a sense, also political autonomies. They were a state within a state, and their leader, their representative, was known as the head of the captivity. But Babylon remained up to this time, the third century of the common era, spiritually dependent upon Palestine, for, after all, Palestine was the home of the faith of the people.

But in the third century the transition begins. Two great leaders arise in Babylon, whose education was had in Palestine, but who transferred to Palestine much of the religious authority which belonged the to Palestinian. One of them was the great teacher

or as it is known, and the other Samuel.

These two teachers established two great schools in Babylon, the school of Sura and the school of This latter school, when it was destroyed, was succeeded by the school of And these two great academies are

for hundreds of years, and in them the faith of Israel was taught, the law was developed, and the Mishna, which was the work of the Palestinian rabbis, was interpreted and reinterpreted in these academies in Babylon. So that by the end of the fifth century we have a Babylonian Gemorrah, a Babylonian code of laws based on and derived from the Mishna, which, together with the Mishna, composed our present day Talmud. This Talmud was compiled in the fifth century of the common era, and from that time on to this the Talmud has remained, at least, as far as the orthodox Jews are concerned, the primary authority on all matters which is in Jewish life.

Now, the Jews in Babylon fared much better than the Jews in Palestine, but their condition was not always a fortunate one, either. They were from time to time persecuted by the fanatic Persians, especially under the Sassanian dynasty, a chauvinistic, highly nationalistic dynasty, which insisted upon imposing the faith of the ~~Persian~~ Parsees, a fire-worshipping faith, upon all the inhabitants of Babylon and Persia, as a result of which the Jews suffered a great deal. So that by the close of the sixth century both the Jews of Palestine, living under Roman Byzantium rule, because all that time the Roman Empire, you will recall, had been divided into two, the Western Roman Empire with its seat in Rome, and the Eastern Roman Empire with its seat in Constantinople or Byzantium, and Constantinople belonged to the Eastern Roman Empire,--

I say, by the close of the seventh century both the Jews of Palestine, living under Eastern Roman domination, and the Jews of Babylon, living under Persian domination, were prayerfully awaiting some universal upheaval that would redeem them from the yoke of these two peoples; and that came suddenly and swiftly and miraculously enough with the Mohammedans. In the first part of the seventh century a strange figure, heroic, wild, fantastic, if you will, arose in Arabia whose name was Mohammed; an illiterate man, and yet a man of deep religious sentiment, a man of tremendous force and personality, who, for a brief period of time, succeeded in surrounding himself with a host of disciples who were ready to carry his religious message of one God and one people throughout Arabia, if necessary with fire and sword. The year of the hegira is 622. In less than fifty years Mohammedanism had swept over almost the entire Western Asia and almost the entire Northern Africa, and in less than a hundred years it had entered Europe, conquered Spain and was driving at the very heart of Christian Europe. Both Palestine and Babylon fell before the victorious armies of these Arab Mohammedans.

Now, the Jews welcomed their coming. First, they saw in their advance the beginning of the Messianic age; they saw the possibility of their own redemption and their restoration as a people to independence; and, secondly, they saw in the rising power of the Mohammedans a friendlier power than they saw in Christianity or in the

Parsees religion. The Arabs were, after all, members of their own race, Semites, and the religion of the Mohammedans was a monotheistic religion, very much like unto the Jewish religion; for Mohammed borrowed his faith and the essential doctrines of his faith from Judaism and from the Jews, with whom he was in constant contact in Arabia, for there were thousands of Jews living in Arabia at the time of Mohammed, not only as individuals but as tribes, and Mohammed knew the Bible, Mohammed knew the teachings of Israel.

So that Mohammedanism represents the second great daughter religion to which Judaism gave rise. The golden era of Jewish life in the Middle Ages was in Mohammedan Spain, and the darkest days in Jewish history was in ~~Jewish history~~ Christian Europe, and oftentimes when the Jews fled from the persecution of Christian princes they sought haven of refuge among Mohammedan colleagues and Mohammedan rulers. Now, the Jews in Babylon remained under the rule of the Mohammedans for a few hundred years. Their cultural life developed. They did not seem to have evidenced much originality, but they lived in peace and in prosperity, ruled by their . . . the chief of the captivity, and in religious matters governed by the head of the academy, who was known as the

But in the tenth century there is a shifting of the fortunes of the people and persecution begins to set in, which resulted in the abolishing of most of the

and the gaom, the shutting down of the schools,
and from the tenth century on Babylon ceases to be the
important center in Jewish life, and again there is a
shift from the distant East to the distant West, and Spain
for five hundred years becomes the most important center
of Jewish thought and Jewish life in the world. There were
Jews in Spain from the early Roman days, and prior to the
conquest of Spain by the Mohammedans the Jews lived under
the Visigoths in Spain, very much persecuted and very much
oppressed; so that when the Mohammedans began to cross the
Straits of Gibraltar and conquer the peninsula, the Jews of
Spain welcomed the Mohammedans with great joy and looked
upon them as their redeemers, and many of them fought on
the side of the Moors, the conquerors of Spain. In 711
Spain was conquered, and from that day on there begins a
golden period of Jewish life in Spain.

The Jews were given absolute equality of
freedom; they lived side by side with a people who under-
stood them, who were sympathetic, both racially and
religiously. Before very long we begin to hear great
Jewish statesmen in the courts of the Spanish rulers,-
Hasti ibn Shaprut, Samuel The Moors in
Spain were devoted to art and literature, and the Jews by
coming in contact with them began to develop themselves
for the first time in hundreds of years to these subjects,
along with their religious subjects. A few hundred years
of peaceful, creative life is now the fortune of our

people in Spain, but it was not destined to last for long. The power of the Moors in Spain did not go unchallenged. The Christian princes of the North, who were of course under church domination, began to make inroads upon the Moors in Spain, and to force them down, down into the very southern extremity of the peninsula, and as the power of these Christian princes increased, the fortunes of the Jews decreased. Before long we begin to hear of discrimination against the Jews in Christian Spain. In the thirteenth century we hear of commercial restrictions; we hear of forced disputations between Jews and Christians; we hear of the introduction of the yellow badge, of which I shall speak in a moment. That was in the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century we begin to read the record of actual physical persecution of the Jews in Spain. In 1391 one of the bloodiest riots in Jewish history in the Middle Ages swept over the whole of Spain, incited by a fanatic of the church who preached against the Jews. Thousands were slain and tens of thousands were forced into baptism and into conversion. That was the beginning of the downfall of Spanish Jewry which was the pride and the glory of all the Jews in the diaspora. Up to that time the Jews in Spain had looked upon themselves as princes. They were rich; they were cultured; they had traditions; they lived as free men. With the growing power of the church in Spain their prosperity began to wane; their political rights decreased, and now with the bloody

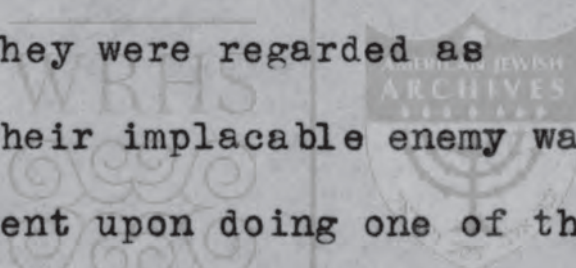
massacres of 1391 their morale, their spirit begins to give way. Twenty years later there appears another religious fanatic, V F who preached throughout the Jewish centers of Spain and urged thousands of them into conversion under the threat of new riots. It is said between 1290 and 1474 the Jewish population of Seville alone, which had numbered 850,000, had dwindled to 150,000. These new converts, these Jews who had been forced against their will to be converted to Christianity, who were known as the new Christians, were ultimately the reason for the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, because while outwardly they practiced Christianity, inwardly they remained Jews, and the Jews suspected them of this duality in faith and practice. So that in 1480 the church established the Inquisition, that terrible monster which the cruel ingenuity of religious fanaticism evolved.--an inquisition to seek out these heretics of the church. Within one year after this Inquisition was established 1200 men and women were burnt at the stake, and 17,000 were imprisoned and their property confiscated. The Inquisition ushers in a ghastly episode of human history.

But even the Inquisition could not compel a Jew, who had been by force converted to Christianity, to abandon his Jewish loyalty and his Jewish interest. The church maintained that the presence of the Jews in Spain alongside of these new Christians, who came to be known as the Morannos, the enforced ones,

in order to save the souls of the new Christians, of the Marranos, and through the pleading of that arch fanatic

Ferdinand and Isabella ~~werexpersuaded~~ rulers of Christian Spain, were persuaded to issue, on March 30, 1492, an edict of expulsion, giving all the Jews of Spain four months in which to choose between turning Christian or leaving the country. To the great credit of most of the Jews of Spain be it said that in spite of the horrors which awaited them in exile, in spite of the uncertainty, in spite of the fact that they were compelled to leave nearly all their possessions in Spain, the home of themselves and their forefathers for hundreds of years, at least 200,000 of them, conservatively estimated, left Spain upon the third exile.

The horrors which awaited them in their exile cannot now be described. It is a ghastly tale of human suffering,--how families were separated, how they were robbed and maltreated and humiliated on the way; how children were torn from their parents and forcibly baptized, some of them sent into the loose Spanish colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Hundreds of young Jews and Jewesses preferred to destroy themselves rather than submit to the humiliation. That is a story bathed in blood and human tears which remains the choicest possession of this martyred race, who were exiled in 1492. Four years later

parts of Europe,--in Germany, France, England, and ~~Italy~~ Poland during the Middle Ages. I haven't the time, but suffice it to say that from the year 1000, when the history of the Jews in Western Europe becomes at all important, up through the 500 or 600 years that followed, their history is one very much like the history of Spain,--not as brilliant; no country in Western Europe had a golden era such as Spain had, but as far as uncertainty, as instability as persecution, as misery are concerned, all those countries, all the Jewries of those countries had their full share. In no place were they looked upon as free men, as . . . Everywhere they were regarded as  and everywhere their implacable enemy was the church. The church was bent upon doing one of three things; either to convert the Jews or to humiliate them or to destroy them; and from the day when Rome became Christian and the erstwhile persecuted ones, the Christians,--for they, themselves, had in the first two hundred years been persecuted, been burnt at the stake and thrown to the lions,--when these persecuted ones gained power and turned persecutor

From that time on right through the ages the church pursued these wanderers with an implacable hate and sought either their conversion or their destruction. The church was, in many instances, responsible for introducing laws which restricted the Jews in trade, which

restricted them in commerce, which forced them into segregated quarters, into ghettos, which prohibited social contact between Jew and non-Jew, and which ultimately placed upon them the brand of Cain. The yellow badge was introduced in the Council in 1215 through the instigation of Pope Innocent III, who said that the Jews ought to be branded as Cain was as an object lesson to Christians. It was at this council that the yellow badge was decreed, a badge of shame which the Jew must wear upon his garments so that he would be easily recognized and become the object of mockery and taunt in the world.

Through the Middle Ages two terrible tragedies stand out in Jewish history which befell the Jews of Western Europe. One was the Crusades; the other was the Black Plague. The First Crusade took place, as you will recall, in 1096, the second in 1146. These crusading hordes moved down the Rhine country, through the thickly settled Jewish towns, bent upon the conquest of Palestine and the redemption of Palestine from the rule of the Mohammedans. But while they were on their way to destroy the power of the infidel, the Mohammedan, they thought they might just as well destroy the power of the infidel Jew at home, and so a series of massacres and pogroms set in, and in one city alone, in Mainz, a thousand Jews were killed. In many communities we have records of Jews sent in synagogues, slaughtering one another in order

to escape the greater horror of the oncoming mobs of the Crusaders. But even a more terrible tragedy overtook them in the middle of the fourteenth century in the Black Plague. The Black Plague swept over Europe and destroyed almost two-thirds of the population of Europe, and the Jews were accused by the ignorant mobs of being responsible for this epidemic. They were accused of poisoning the wells, and three hundred Jewish communities witnessed sons and daughters of our people burnt and buried alive or quartered or tortured through three years of horror, From Spain to Poland the horrible tragedy took place. Along with these two catastrophes occurred sporadic riots in all parts of Europe, incited by fanatics on the charge either that the Jews were using the blood of Christian children for their Passover ritual--the famous blood accusation--stealing or that the Jews were ~~stealing~~ the sacred host from the church and desecrating it in order to mock the Savior,--every wild rumor that superstition could give rise to that would incite the populace to turn upon the Jews. The Talmud in many instances was burned. The Jews were forced, in some instances, to attend church service and listen to sermons in order to convert them to Christianity. They were dragged into religious disputations, where Jew had to meet non-Jew or converted Jew to defend his faith. And expulsions were the order of the day; not only such vast expulsions in 1219, when all the Jews were exiled from England, or in France in 1394, but locally, from one

principality to another, from one town to another, expulsions were the order of the day. Above all, the Jews were economically forced into trades, which brought down upon them the animosity of the populace, and which reacted unfavorably upon their own morale. They were denied the right to engage in commerce on a large scale; they were denied the right to join trade guilds; they were denied the right to join craftsmen's guilds. So that they were forced into one or two occupations in order to sustain themselves. They could not engage in agriculture; they could not engage in commerce; they could not engage in crafts; and so they engaged, as a rule, in one of two things: either money-lending, which frequently led to usury, or surreptitious trading, peddling.

So our people moves through the Middle Ages impoverished, hounded, branded, an exiled people, and one which refused to accept exile as the norm, the ultimate; one which constantly hoped for a Messianic time when all wrongs would be righted and they would be vindicated and restored as a free people to his own home.

Now, a word about our spiritual life during the Middle Ages, and I shall be through. The first one thousand years was largely devoted to Talmudic and Rabbinic studies. It was the age of the Talmud; it was the age of the Midrashic literature; it was an age given over largely to the refinement of the Talmudic technique and the refinement of the religious law and doctrine. But as the Jews

came in contact with the Mohammedans, who loved science and established colleges and universities; who loved literature, it reacted to that new impulse which it gave to them, and they, too, began to engage in philosophy and in science and in literature, and in the tenth century we have the first of the great Jewish philosophers, Saadia, who was ~~the~~ head of the school at Babylon, who sought to adjust the Jewish faith in the philosophy of the day. It is the first time in the history of our people where we have an outstanding leader of thought attempting to rationalize about our faith, to justify philosophy and to point out the philosophic basis of religion. The great book "Faith and Science and Dogma or Faith and Reason" remains to this day a classic of Jewish literature. He was followed by others,--Gabirol, Halevi, and the greatest of them, Maimonides. Maimonides was the most enlightened, the most rational mind of Israel during the Middle Ages,--an encyclopedic mind, a colossal mind. He not only codified the whole of the Jewish law, he not only wrote tremendously important commentaries, but he also wrote the most important philosophic book of the Middle Ages, "The Guide to the Perplexed," in which he tried to harmonize knowledge and faith, to show that Judaism can be vindicated on the basis of the most advanced philosophic thought of his day. With Maimonides Jewish philosophic thought reaches its ~~greatest~~ crest. From that time on it begins to decline, and as the

fortunes of our people declined, so did its intellectual life; as the persecutions began to embitter the life of our people, its mind began to be beclouded and darkened, and from that time on we have not a virile, philosophic, speculative thought in Israel, but we have a mystic movement which gains in momentum and in force in Jewish life until in the sixteenth century it almost completely dominates Jewish thought,--obscurantism of one kind or another, occult signs, mysticism, which is wedded, of course, to fanaticism and superstition, and to all forms of

Not only did the Jews create in the golden era between the tenth and eleventh centuries great philosophers, but some of the most beautiful poetry of our literature comes from that period, the period of ibn Ezra, the period of Gabirol, the period of Jehuda Halevi, ^{that} remains a precious legacy of our race unto this day. Somehow, the soul of our people and the mind of our people had a new birth, a renaissance, after many, many years during which they were latent or slumbering. Perhaps I ought to call your attention to one interesting movement in the Middle Ages which has a bearing upon our reformed Judaism of later times. I said that the first thousand years were devoted to the subject of Talmudic literature, but in the eighth century a movement against the Talmud arose in Israel known as the movement of the Karaites, just as the Sadducees a thousand years before, and the Christians 800 years before, challenged the authority of the Rabbis to

impose laws upon the people not found in the Bible. So the Karaites in the eighth century, under their leader started a movement which denied completely the right of the rabbimates to legislate for Israel, and they said, "We have but one law in Israel,--the Bible. That we accepted; that we covenanted to obey; that was final and ultimate, and no human agency or school or institution or individual has a right to add thereto or to detract therefrom an iota, and that entire Talmudic accretion is blasphemous and infamous and should be disregarded." The Karaites gained thousands of followers, and for a few centuries thereafter were an important faction in Jewry. But they failed; they dwindled in numbers and they lost out because their fundamental principle was unsound. In trying to liberate themselves from the rule of the Rabbis they enslaved themselves. In the rule of the instead of remaining Rabbinists they remained Biblists. They enslaved themselves in a book, and no life can be restricted to the letters of a book, however sacred or however ancient, because the spirit becomes embalmed in a book; life is greater than any book, and the spirit of man is prior to any creation of the mind or the spirit of man. And so the Karaites soon found themselves hampered and restricted in their life, in their contacts, in their development by these rigid laws of the Bible, which may have been helpful at the time those laws were written, but not as helpful or as stimulating fifteen hundred years later.

So they are a sect,--a sect which, by the way, remains to this day in some quarters of the world, in Southern Russia, Crimea, Asia Minor and Lithuania,--they are a handful; the sect dwindled and is today of no importance in Jewish life.

But that movement against the absolute authority of tradition in Jewish life was to have another champion in Judaism, and that came with the liberal movement, the reform movement in the nineteenth century, and of that I shall speak next week. My final lecture, ^{next week} friends, will be devoted to the story of our people from 1600 to 1900, perhaps to 1926. We are coming into the dawn before very long; we have worked ourselves through the shadows, through the night. We shall see how this little people surviving are to be blessed and rewarded with the dawn of a new day. We shall see next time what the Protestant Reformation had to do with the emancipation of the Jew, and what the French Revolution. We shall see what role the Jew begins to play in the world when once he ~~has~~ is ~~gained~~ given the freedom to play the role of a free man in the world.

My last lecture of the series, then, next week will be devoted to the Jew in modern times, beginning with the sixteenth century.

--o--