



## 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  
281

The long road from slavery to freedom, 1927.

---

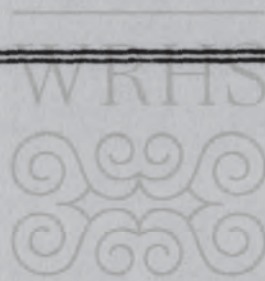
"THE LONG ROAD FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 17, 1927, CLEVELAND, O.

---



JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



Passover, friends, is the festival of freedom. It commemorates the first great revolution known to mankind of a people for freedom's sake. It is the first challenge which was hurled in the teeth of tyranny, and the echoes of it have reverberated down the corridors of time to the present day. In man's immemorial struggle to emancipate himself there have taken place many bitter conflicts and revolutions, but the first and the prototype of all the succeeding ones is this revolution of the Hebrews in Egypt and their amazing mass exodus from the land of their enslavement to the land of their promise. For all times shall this majestic canvas remain, and forever shall this story be told, so that the lovers of freedom in every land and in every age who are now and who will be in the future struggling for the greater freedom of mankind, may find strength, inspiration and sustenance in this epic struggle of Israel.

Behold, on the one hand, this horde of slaves ground down by four hundred years of serfdom, lashed by their task masters, beaten down into complete subjection, and behold, on the other hand, the glory and the splendor and the power of ancient Egypt, rearing its palaces and its pyramids and its cities and its fortresses by the labors and the sweat of these slaves. Egypt grown



fat and sleek and corrupt in her power! And behold suddenly a figure, majestic and heroic, the figure of Moses, the lover of freedom, the first revolutionist, the defender of the denied and the dispossessed, the soul of the flame of freedom--Moses! See how his words and message begin to enkindle the souls of these slaves; and listen to the grumblings and the murmurs and the gathering thunder of a people's discontent; and behold the sudden outburst of revolution, the swift organization of the peoples, the precipitate flight from Egypt; and then behold the long, long trek of forty years in the wilderness amidst warfare and thirst and hunger! Behold this people marching through desert lands unto their promised land to establish for themselves a national life, independence and freedom!

It is a magnificent story, chief among the sacred records of human history. And it is no wonder that the Thirteen Colonies of the United States, when they determined to break the yoke of the foreign tyrant, went to the story of the Exodus and to the inspiring account of the first revolution in behalf of human rights, for their guidance, their sanction and their inspiration. It is no wonder that on the first seal of the United States government there was engraved the picture of the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea with Moses in the van leading them.

The account of this revolution which we



find in the Book of Exodus is the work of a master hand. It is classic in every detail--in its condensation, in its colorfulness, in the swiftness of its movement, in its dramatic climaxes; and the author of this narrative was a profound student of human psychology, and more especially of the psychology of slaves and of erstwhile slaves. Were the writer of the account in the Book of Exodus a mediocre artist he would undoubtedly have given us the story of the Exodus in that unshaded and oversimplified fashion in which the stories of the American Revolution were given to us in the text books in our public schools. "There were slaves, and there suddenly appeared a great leader to free them, and they welcomed him with great joy, and they started a revolution, and they left Egypt and they were happy thereafter."

Not so the account given by our author. Here is a profound student and a keen observer. He knows psychology; he knows all the hidden ways of the mob mentality, all the crypts, all the folds, all the labyrinths in the mentality of the masses, and as he tells the story one is able to read a chapter in the psychology of freedom and of slavery.

When Moses first appears in Egypt among his brethern after having lived in the palace of Pharaoh and begins to speak unto his brothers about freedom and the promised land and the new day, they are suspicious of him. They feared him. They perhaps imagine that he is



an emissary from the palace of the king, a procurator.

They have been ground into slavery for four hundred years; their spiritual sensibilities have been calloused, dulled. They have even lost the memory and the recollections of freedom. They are like beasts of burden who can do nothing else but groan under the yoke of oppression.

"And the children of Israel groaned under the yoke; and the children of Israel cried bitterly under the yoke."

But no power of organization to throw off the yoke, and no power of will to initiate the work of their own emancipation.

Moses appears in their midst. Moses sees an Egyptian lashing an aged Israelite. In anger Moses, the free man, rises up against this Egyptian and slays him. And he thinks that perhaps that might be a signal for a revolt; that all these slaves would rally round him. The slaves are suspicious of Moses; in fact, he is greeted with this cry: "Who made you for a leader and a judge in our midst? Do you want to slay us as you have slain the Egyptian?" The slaves were not ready for freedom. And so Moses flees from Egypt to the land of Midian, and there he remains for many years. But Moses is a lover of his people, the defender of the oppressed, a free man, and the voice within him cannot be stilled; the voice that speaks from the burning bush of one's own soul and conscience. "Moses, get thee back to the land of Egypt! Raise the standard of revolt! Set your people free!"



And Moses leaves the quiet of Midian and returns to the dangers of Egypt, and he proclaims his message of revolt. "But," says this keen student of human psychology, "they did not listen to Moses because of the constriction of their spirit, because of their hard labor." They were not ready for freedom. But Moses remains among them, and Moses preaches his message, and Moses kindles the flames, and soon, after a period of time, there begins to flare up the spirit of freedom among these slaves. The first consequence of this message of revolt of Moses is that the Egyptians lay on heavier burdens upon the Jews, and the Jews at once turn against Moses and say, "Why did you come in our midst to make our lot even more difficult? May God judge you, for you have made our suffering abhorrent in the eyes of Pharaoh, in the eyes of his servants; so that they will now use their swords to slay us." The slaves are not yet ready to make sacrifices for freedom.

And when finally Moses, by dint of labor, succeeds in organizing them and arousing them to flee from Egypt, they are brought up against the Red Sea, the sea in front of them and the hosts of the pursuing Egyptians back of them, and the Israelites find themselves trapped. They again turn against Moses and cry out in wrath: "Because there are no graves in Egypt have you brought us to perish in the wilderness? Is that what we told you? Let us alone! Let us alone! It is better for



us to serve the Egyptians than to perish in the wilderness." The slaves are not yet ready to die for freedom.

And when they are enabled to cross the Red Sea Moses finds it necessary to lead them through the wilderness along devious routes so as not to encounter any enemies, lest, seeing enemies, they will grow afraid and return to Egypt. The slaves are not yet ready to fight for freedom. And as they wander in the wilderness they suffer of thirst occasionally, and they suffer of hunger occasionally, and at once, says the author, "They complain, and they sought to stone Moses." The slaves had not yet learned to suffer, to suffer for freedom. And when food was given unto them, the manna food from heaven, and they were commanded, each man, to gather for himself just one measure, just one omer, many of them went out and gathered more than one omer, so that the manna spoiled and endangered the health of the people, and when they were commanded not to gather the manna on the Sabbath, many of them went forth and gathered the manna on the Sabbath. The slaves had not yet learned to obey the law, which is one of the prime requisites of freedom.

And when Moses brought them near to Mt. Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments, and sought to make of them "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"; when Moses held up before their eyes the tantalizing vision of a marvelous destiny for themselves and their



descendents, a people consecrated to the God who is one and spiritual, and being his spokesmen and prophets throughout the world unto the end of time; and as soon as Moses is gone for a few days to the top of the mountain, these erstwhile slaves cry unto his brother Aaron and say: "Make unto us a golden calf so that we can worship it, since Moses has left us, and we believe that Moses' God has left us." The slaves have not yet acquired a steadfast faith, which is the prerequisite of freedom. And constantly and over and over again, they ask themselves the question: "And is God in our midst, or is he not?" And as they wander through the wilderness Moses' lot is embittered by the bickering and the rebellious spirit of this group and that group; and once there flared up a great rebellion under the leadership of Korah, and the cry of Korah and his cohorts against Moses is: "Why do you elevate yourself over all the other Jews?" The slaves had not yet learned to submit to authority, which is one of the prerequisites of freedom.

As they continue their wandering through the wilderness, says this writer, they frequently turn aside to the gods of the heathens and to their immoral, incestuous idolatries of Baal or other of the evil deities of the peoples who lived around Palestine, and forsook their God and their law and their morality. The slaves had not yet acquired that stability of character and purpose which is among the prerequisites of freedom.



Now all these facts of psychology are marvelously and forcefully brought out in the story of the Exodus which this supreme artist narrator gives us. And he indicates, too, friends, that it is a long, long road from slavery to freedom. He even fears that it is a hopeless task to make of these slaves free men, free in spirit and in soul, and so he tells us that God decreed that the entire generation which left Egypt shall perish in the wilderness, and only their children, who knew not the yoke of the oppressor and the lash of the task-master, the children born in the free and open spaces of God, only they may become the founders of a free people and the progenitors of a free race. The whole generation which left Egypt perished in the wilderness.

This is a profound lesson, friends, and it is the one lesson which I would like to underscore this morning. Freedom, whether personal or racial or national, freedom is an achievement,--the result of unceasing labor, self-mastery, training, education, constant exercise of will. A hundred years ago the philosophers and the students of sociology spoke about the "noble savage" and envied the freedom which was the savage's. They said civilized man living in cities is constantly shackled with conventions and traditions; his freedom is circumscribed. The savage living out in the open spaces or in the jungle, restrained by no such conventions and social inhibitions, is the only free man and therefore



the only happy man. Dryden, you will recall, has these few lines which indicate the trend of thought among the thinkers of that century.

"I am as free as nature first made man,

Ere the base laws of servitude began,

When wild in woods the noble savage ran.

I am as free as nature first made man,

When wild in woods the noble savage ran."

Well, the savage was not noble; the savage was coarse and brutal, and his life was starved and stunted, and he was the victim of all kinds of dreads and fears, and the slave of the elements. Nature never made man free. Freedom is the achievement of man himself over tens of thousands of generations of struggle out of this jungle world of dreads and fears and ignorance and terrors into the light of truth and power. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

It is only as we acquired scientific knowledge that we ceased to dread the forces of nature; when we made them our friends, or when we harnessed them to do our purpose. It is only as we understand the inner workings of our own mind and soul that we no longer are afraid of the dreams and omens and premonitions which plagued the life of primitive man.

So freedom is an achievement, and it is a long, long road which man must traverse before he discovers that self-mastery, that willingness to obey law,



the moral law, before he discovers that stability of character and purpose without which freedom is impossible. It is a long, long road before man reaches that point in his spiritual and mental development where he is ready to live for and suffer for and sacrifice for, and, if necessary, die for, freedom. Our ancestors when they left Egypt had none of those qualities which could have made them really free. They had to pass through generations and centuries of suffering, of training, of self-education, before they could reach the point where they could feel themselves, if only partially, free.

We are not free today. We are not free today as individuals; we are not free today as Jews. The Jews of the world had enjoyed more political freedom and more economic freedom than at any time since our forefathers were exiled from Palestine over nineteen hundred years ago. There are still plague spots in Eastern Europe--in Poland, in Roumania and elsewhere, where our people still live under economic disabilities and political disabilities, in a sense, but by and large the Jews the world over are today enjoying more of real freedom--political freedom, economic freedom, the right to move about, the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, if you will, than at any time in the history of our people in the last two thousand years, since we lost our national independence in Palestine.

And yet I ask myself: "Is Israel today



spiritually free?" After all, political and economic freedom are external things. Real freedom is the freedom of mind and soul. Now, I take it that a man is free only when he organizes his life around a few central ideals and lives by them and for them. I repeat: I believe that a man is free only when he organizes his entire life around a few essential central ideals and lives by them and for them. A man who is the slave to appetites and to passions and to lust, a man who is victimized by every whim and every impulse, that man is not free. He is less free than our forefathers under the tyranny of Egypt.

Now, similarly, I maintain and I believe the race is really free only as it organizes its life around a few all-important, all-transcending ideals and lives by them and for them. Now we have such central integrating ideals in our life from the days that Moses brought these slaves to the foot of Mt. Sinai and said unto them: "I will make of you a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." We had these central ideals which were given to us and through us to mankind, through the lips touched by the finger of God, the lips of the prophets and the seers of our race, and these central ideals were justice, righteousness, holiness, purity of personal life, peace. These words and these phrases echoed through our entire sacred literature and through our entire life. They are the light motifs, they are the inspiring theme of the



of the whole symphony of our life, and as long as we made these central and lived by them and lived for them and suffered for them and sacrificed for them and died for them, as our fathers did, through the long centuries of Stygian gloom, persecution and meanness and drabness, of ghetto life, of the Middle Ages, we were a free people--free in every sense of the word, even though the yellow badge branded us, and even though we moved cowed and bent through the narrow, filthy, dirty, dark ghetto alleys in which we were crowded. We were free people even though we were brutally victimized by marks and pogroms and crusaders and fanatics. We were free people because our lives had a focus and a center, an informing group of ideals. We lived by them and we lived for them. There was stability in our life, and there was character in our personality, and there was direction to our living.

I wonder how much of that freedom is in Jewish life today. I ask myself frankly, friends, "How much are we really concerned today about these central ideals?" And how many of us live by them and for them? It seems to me that too many of us are too much concerned with what our neighbors think about us or say about us than what we ought to be saying and we ought to be thinking and we ought to be doing. We are too little concerned today with the role which we, as a corporate group, as a people, as an historic unit, ought to be playing in the world. Our supreme concern seems to be to



avoid being irritated by this anti-Semite or that anti-Semite. Once we are left alone we are content to feel that our work and our mission in the world is fully carried out. But they are not. Too many of us, friends, have become the slaves to material pursuits, to material cravings, to lust for possession and for pleasure and for luxury. Too few of us are worrying and sorrowing over the fate of Israel in the world today. "Blow the trumpet anew for our freedom."

I wish that there would begin a great renaissance in Jewish life, a revival, a rebirth. Aiming at what? Aiming at making us as a people. I am not now speaking as individuals but as a people free; because our lives would then be organized around these ideas and our youth and our manhood and our womanhood will be inspired to live for those ideals and by those ideals at a time when the whole world is so desperately in need of them; at a time when men are walking in the valley of the shadow of death, in fears and hates; at a time when the souls of men are troubled and perplexed. This is the time when the children of Israel, heirs of a marvelous tradition, sons and daughters of a people that once made a covenant with Almighty God to be his priests and his prophets in the world. The time has now come for this people constructively and deliberately to organize its public life and its public activities looking towards the teaching and the preaching and the practicing of these



central ideals in Jewish life.

It is a long, long road from slavery to freedom. Perhaps from what I have said you will find a lesson for yourselves as individuals, men and women, and young men and young women. A young man or a young woman is not free when she or he exercises no self-mastery, no obedience to law; when he or she manifests no stability of purpose or character, looseness of talk, lack of restraint in conduct, laxity in morals, braggadocia gesturing in life. These things do not make for freedom. They are not the symbols nor the signs of emancipation; they are the old, old evidences of enslavement to appetite and to lust and to passion; they are the shackles, the chains of the enslaved men. The really free young man and young woman is the one who has organized his or her life around a few fine, noble, enduring ideals--purity, decency, honor, helpfulness, kindness--and lives by those ideals and for those ideals. That man and that woman is free in the only true sense of spiritual freedom.

That, my friends, is, to my mind, one of the great lessons of this festival of freedom. From the pyramids along the Nile to the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem; from the serfdom of Egypt to the liberty of Judea; from the superstition of the idolatries of the Nile to the spiritual religion of Amos and Jeremiah, is a long, long road of trial and tribulation and suffering and struggle, but it is a road worth while traversing,



and it is the only road which the true lover of freedom  
traverses.

--o--

