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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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My ten years ministry in Cleveland, 1927.

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"MY TEN YEARS OF MINISTRY IN CLEVELAND."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

MAY 22, 1927, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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Standing today, friends, at the tenth milestone of my ministry here in Cleveland, and looking back upon the road which I have traveled from the day I came here unto this day, I thank God in the same manner in which my people have always praised God on significant and important occasions. "Praised be God who has sustained me in life and enabled me to reach this stage."

These last ten years have been marvelously rich--rich in the only things which really matter; rich in spiritual

These last years brought to me the relish, the romance, the zest of new contacts and new experiences, new situations and new problems, which because they possessed the quality of novelty, were so much more revelational and soul-satisfying. As we get older we experience really very little that is actually new--new contacts or new situations; things take on the quality of a twice-told tale--pleasant but not at all revelational.

But these last ten years, because they were practically my first years in the ministry, brought with them a whole harvest of experiences, which possessed all the exhilaration and all the lift of things new and novel, and for these many favors from God I am deeply grateful.

These last ten years in the history of mankind were stirring years, troubled years and heroic years. They were years of war and of peace, of tumbling empires; they were



years which witnessed revolutions, the dying agonies of dynasties and the birththroes of new nations. The whole world was in a seething caldron of unrest; millions of people moved to and fro across the face of the world and joined in mortal combat, in a life and death grapple for victories which turned out to be gall to the victor and wormwood for the vanquished.

These last ten years witnessed new personalities flashing across the world's horizon--new people, new voices; the hammer of history was beating out upon the anvil of time new destinies, new careers, new personalities. It was a colorful decade and a dramatic decade. Life moved swiftly, very swiftly, at an accelerated tempo; everywhere about us one sensed new ideas, new projects, new programs, new enterprises,--the League of Nations, the World Court, disarmament, bolshevism, fascism, class struggle, dictatorship; everywhere there were new ideas gestating, everywhere there was a mighty leaven at work in society; and in the midst of this nigh universal heave and tumble of the world, in the midst of a struggling and suffering and groping mankind, I found myself, not altogether a spectator, charged with the sacred responsibility of a rabbi, charged with the duty of teaching and of guiding the fellowmen through the mazes and the perplexities of a troubled and a harassed world. Few men could have been challenged by more momentous and desperate opportunities than the men in the ministry during the last ten years.



I am fully conscious of the fact that my contribution to the course of events was very, very meager. No one mind, no one voice, could affect the course of great issues unless that mind or that voice belonged to one who is placed in a strategic position of office or of authority. I am altogether conscious of the fact that my actual contribution is small, and yet I never lost faith in this conviction: that there is a cumulative effect of many minds, of many voices working for the kingdom; that the consecrated labors of men here, there, everywhere, serving truth and justice, is bound to tell ultimately, and in that faith and in that conviction I lent my humble powers to that group of men and women throughout the land who worked in faithfulness of spirit for truth and justice and peace.

I tried to keep constantly before me in the past ten years the sanctities of human life which my profession was charged with to safeguard and to protect. Thus during the war I labored for peace. I was not of that small band of much abused and much persecuted men called pacifists. I was not a pacifist. I gave to my government in the hour of its need; I gave to my government in common with the millions of other fellow citizens my unstinted service and cooperation. At the behest of my government I crossed the high seas during the war and served in the capacity which was assigned to me over there, and upon my return I traveled through the length and breadth of this land in an effort to stimulate the purchase of Liberty Bonds, which would provide



the wherewithal for the continuation of the war, and in behalf of those contributions for the welfare of our fighting men which were so much needed. One of the allied governments did me the honor of recognizing my humble services by some form of decoration. But all through that time I was mindful of my specific mission in life, which was not the prosecution of a war but the establishment of peace. I was a servant of one who is called "the King of Peace."

So that in the midst of the war, in the midst of the rampant war spirit, in the midst of a war propaganda, a war of hate, war to the hilt, a war of extermination, I called for peace; I called for the decencies of international relationship; I called for a peace based on justice and not on revenge, and for a speedy peace. I was misunderstood. Frequently during the war I was subjected to espionage and to criticism; but I saw my light and I followed it, and since the termination of the war I have made the preachment of peace one of the major themes of my ministry.

I believe that it is the specific duty and the supreme opportunity of organized religion, of the church in modern society, to work aggressively for the establishment of that machinery which will make war less likely and peace more permanent. I am convinced, friends, that the church today is confronted with a choice of roles. The church may choose one of two roles to play in the days to come; in a world which is undergoing a radical reconstruction and



reorganization, the church can play one of two roles: either the role of aggressive and affirmative leadership, or the role of pious irrelevancy. The church must decide--and when I speak of the church I mean church and temple and synagogue and any and every organized religious institution--the church must decide whether it means, today, tomorrow and the next day, to vindicate its historic claim of being the peace maker of mankind, and affirmatively to set out organizing the religious consciousness of mankind and the mighty hosts of the faithful in the cause of peace, or whether it means to continue along as heretofore, more cautious than gracious, more shrewd than wise, to content itself to a mechanical repetition of the old phrases about universal peace and good will.

Ten years ago there began a vast economic upheaval in the world, which has, in a sense, continued to this day. In some lands the existing economic order was torn up by its very roots; in other lands where no such radical economic changes took place, the war nevertheless unleashed a whole pack of economic problems, which brought in their wake strikes and lockouts, many of them of menacing proportions. Because of these upheavals men became extreme in their views and intolerant. Class struggle appeared, class dictatorship,--the most brutal in the history of civilization. In the midst of this economic struggle again I tried to safeguard in my own humble way the sanctities of human life, which the rabbi and the minister are called upon



to safeguard. I spoke for sanity; I spoke for social justice; I spoke for the rights of labor; I spoke for greater security for the toiling masses of the world; I spoke for their right to enjoy a greater share in the profits of industry; I championed their inalienable rights of organization and collective action; I championed their cause when I believed that justice was on their side; I criticized their cause when I believed that justice was not on their side; I challenged the power of great organizations here and elsewhere when I believed that they were pursuing a course which was hostile to the highest interests of man--man, who is superior to the machine; man, whose legitimate need is higher than and primary to profit or to production or to wealth. I made friends and I made enemies, and I am as proud of my enemies as I am of my friends.

A few days ago it was brought to my attention that a chauvinistic organization known as the National Society of Scabbard and Blade, did me the honor of including my name among three American Jews in a list of fifty-six public men and women in this country, who are charged with being tainted with patriotic heresy, un-American, and somehow tainted with bolshevism. Among the fifty-six were included Senator Borah, Professor John Dewey, Jane Addams, Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt, Sherwin Eddy of the Y. M. C. A., and many others,--a very fine company to be in.

I am afraid that I shall continue to be misunderstood as long as God will help me to remain faithful to



the prophetic mission of a minister. Here, again, I believe that the church has a definite role to play in the world. I do not believe that the church ought to identify itself with a propaganda for one economic system as against another; I do not believe that the church ought to involve itself in economic dogmatism; but I do believe that it is not enough for the church to speak of social justice in the abstract. After all, the church is not an academy for abstract sciences; the church is an agency equipped for dynamic work in social reconstruction; it has a mission, a purpose, an ideal to serve. But I believe that in this world, still so sadly disfigured by want and poverty, in this world where so many millions of God's children are still broken upon the wheel of industry, denied their opportunities, their God-given privileges of developing themselves into full and rich human personalities, in this world where the burdens of our industry still lie heavy upon the shoulders of our womanhood, in this world where so many lives are still starved by poverty, and spiritually and mentally drained by exploitation, it is the duty, the sacred obligation of the church to speak, to speak fearlessly for the rights of the laboring masses of the world, for the rights of the denied and the dispossessed of mankind.

During the last ten years, as a result of the war, a wave of intolerance swept over the world. The war stirred all the nationalistic and the racial passions and antipathies in the world, and the peace did not allay them.



And during the past ten years you and I were chagrined and rendered unhappy by the sight of hate and enmity being organized and propagated throughout the length and the breadth of this land and the world over. Whole groups appeared, financially equipped, physically organized, to spread the gospel of hate,--hate between Jew and non-Jew, between Catholic and Protestant, between the Nordic and the Mediterranean,--hate based on pseudo-scientific theories of race; hate which turned brother against brother, and people against people.

And so during the past ten years I devoted myself to the cause of tolerance and understanding between peoples and races and religions. I joined with my fellow clergymen of other denominations in this city and elsewhere--and Cleveland is particularly fortunate in having a large number of Christian clergymen who are true and who have remained true to the spirit of their master--broadminded,--I joined with them in an effort to dissipate misunderstanding and suspicion, in an effort to establish good will, in an effort to provide opportunities for cooperative effort among all groups and religions within the community, so that out of a commonality of interest a better acquaintance would ensue and better understanding. For that reason, too, I devoted myself so strenuously to our great Community Chest--not merely because it was an instrument of beneficence, intelligent and rational in its administration, but because it was a mighty instrument for merging the souls and the



minds of our people into common tasks which made possible human beings to get acquainted with one another, to understand one another, to lose their sense of estrangement which makes for suspicion, and suspicion ultimately makes for hatred.

The last ten years, friends, were stirring years and trying years and tragic years for our people. In Eastern Europe millions of them were crushed by the war and by those horrors which followed the war. Millions of them were left homeless, unprotected, a prey to every disaster and misfortune, and they stretched their hands out in an effort to seek help to their brothers across the sea, to their more fortunate brothers in America, and vast programs of relief were launched by the millions of American Jews who did not forget their brethren in distress, whose love and affection turned to them and embraced them. American Israel engaged itself in a mighty, in a titanic task to save the lives of millions across the sea, and I was privileged to lend my humble services in that great effort.

The last ten years saw an achievement in Jewish life which two thousand years waited in vain for,-- the establishment of the Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration which ushered in a new epoch in Jewish history was issued, and I gave of myself again unstintingly to make real this dream which has been the dream of our people for untold generations--the dream or the hope of reestablishing among that sacred soil, so rich in memories



and in associations, a Jewish civilization which may, in the days to come, bless mankind with spiritual gifts, even as it blessed mankind in the years long ago.

In America Jewish life during the last ten years enjoyed a marvelous renaissance, also due to the war, to the rise of anti-Semitism, perhaps to the number of leaders who came to us from across the sea. Jewish life became more active, more alert, more eager than at any time in its past history. New synagogues were built, new schools, new community houses, and in this work of building American Jewish life, I believe that our Temple played some significant role in leadership. In Jewish work, friends, I endeavored to stress two facts, which I hope to continue to stress in the years to come, as long as a good God will grant me strength. First, Jewish unity. I endeavored to serve Israel, not a fraction of Israel. I endeavored to serve "the whole community of Israel." I did not identify myself with a wing or with a sect or with a group. I love my people, all of them, of whatever wing or sect or group or persuasion they may be. I believe that "the synagogue" is not synonymous with "the whole community" of Israel. I believe that there is much more in Jewish life, and that much more I sought to serve, to strengthen to the limit of my powers.

I believe that Israel is and will continue to be a variegated, colorful, diverse people, like every living group of people, and to that end I sought to bring groups



closer together in mutual understanding and cooperation, and I sought to labor for that which will alone insure the immortality of our race--education. Israel cannot survive unless its mind is enlightened and its soul invigorated. Israel cannot continue unless the roots of its life are sent down deep into the rich soil of its past cultural creations and achievements. No Jew tomorrow will be able to face the onslaught of circumstances, the undermining and assimilative influences all about him which will tend to destroy his individuality, to wash out his Jewish personality, unless from earliest childhood that personality is charged and surcharged with Jewish learning and Jewish knowledge and Jewish enthusiasm. All of our magnificent institutions in this city and throughout the land have as their foundation and base Jewish loyalty based upon Jewish contacts, Jewish associations and Jewish knowledge. Once that base, once that foundation is destroyed, the whole of Jewish community life crumbles to the ground.

These last ten years, friends, have been to me rich and satisfying, and I thank God for the great privilege which was mine to live and to work and to serve. What I would ask for for the necessary years which are mine, what I would pray for at this hour, friends, would be, first, that in the years to come I might have a little more of quiet, a little more of a chance to study, to observe, to reflect. I am afraid that my life has been altogether too active. One scatters his personality in the performance of



too many duties, which, unfortunately, every modern minister is burdened with. This congregation, thanks to our kind Father in Heaven, has grown mightily in the last ten years, nay, doubled in its membership. It has extended almost to the limit of its possible physical expansion, and all that has meant, as far as your rabbi is concerned, a great task, a great tax upon his energy, his energy, his time and his spiritual reservoir.

The rabbi in Israel, friends, in olden times, was not an administrator, nor was he necessarily a preacher, nor was he the tribune of the Jewish community to the non-Jewish world; he was specifically the student, the repository, of Jewish learning; he had many hours of quiet for research and for scholarly pursuits. I should like, in a way, to remain true to that noble tradition of my profession, but to that end our congregation must increase the personnel. One man cannot do all that the rabbinate of a temple as great as ours ought to be doing. He cannot be preacher, he cannot be teacher and he cannot be pastor, and he cannot identify himself with the civic and with the national movements and do each particular task adequately and well. It is a physical impossibility. These things need to be done and should be done, but you must therefore enlarge the personnel of the rabbinate of your congregation.

Your officers have been aware of this fact for some time. They have wrestled with the problem of how to bring this about, and they realized that there were



possibly three ways of doing it. One, increasing the membership of our Temple, so that the increased income would make possible an enlarged personnel. This is looked upon with disfavor, because it would make our congregation altogether too top-heavy. As it is, it is almost unwieldy now with nigh unto fifteen hundred families. The other avenue that was open was the prospect of increasing the dues of the membership, and that, too, was looked upon with disfavor, both by your officers and by myself, because that would place a heavy burden upon those who may not be able to pay any increased dues. It has always been our ambition--and I think we have always succeeded in realizing our ambition--of keeping our institution a democratic institution. So that there remained just the third avenue open for the solution of our problem--the wiping out of the Temple indebtedness, which would mean a savings of thousands of dollars in interest and in amortization charges, which money would then be applied for an increase of the personnel of our institution and for intensification of our entire program in our city. I understand that a quiet campaign is now being made among the membership of the Temple as sort of a tribute to me in my ten years work, to liquidate that debt, which amounts, I understand, to about \$180,000.00. I trust that our membership, which has at all times been generous, which has made possible this outstanding synagogue of America, will now make possible for us to improve the quality of our work and perhaps to give your



rabbi a greater chance to do the things which he would like to do, by responding to the appeal which will be made to you.

Ten years ago, in my inaugural address, when I came to you a man ten years younger, some were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the congregation and by the greatness of the task which were confronting him. I offered this prayer at that time, which I will again wish to offer this morning.

At this sacred hour I would pray to him who is my strength and my fortress and my refuge, that I might prove worthy of the service in which I have been called, and deserving of the faith which men have placed in me; that his spirit might descend upon me, granting to my work and my ministry an abiding value and an enkindling enthusiasm and a power which will enable me to touch the lives of some of you, win some soul to higher aspirations, and guide some hand in its outreachings for the higher gifts of God. I would pray for the men and women of this congregation, and for their earnest efforts to rise and to raise to ever higher altitudes, to widen the circle of their life's interests so as to include a segment of the infinite. I would pray that their loyalties and sincerities may reveal unto them the purposefulness of life and the glory of service, that they may drink deep of the waters of contentment at the fountains of spiritual salvation; and I would pray that American Israel, rededicated and reconsecrated, may in a still larger measure serve the cause of Israel



and of Israel's faith, that it may continue to be a blessing unto men, reaching out into their lives, mellowing their higher ambitions and inspiring their finer motives; that the young men and young women who shall be reared under its influence may grow into splendid manhood and womanhood, and into a supreme and transcendent devotion to their people and to its great, imperishable missions.

This, friends, is still my prayer at the tenth milestone of my life's pilgrimage.

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