



## 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  
294

The role of Israel in the middle ages, 1927.



---

"THE ROLE OF ISRAEL IN THE MIDDLE AGES."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

DECEMBER 4, 1927, CLEVELAND, O.

---





In the first lecture of our series, when I spoke of the Role of Israel in the Ancient World, I endeavored to point out that Israel transformed the religious and the moral standards of the ancient world; that it gave humanity a new concept of God as One, as the source of all physical phenomena as well as of all spiritual phenomena; that Israel waged relentless warfare upon superstition and idolatry which engulfed the ancient world, and that Israel gave to mankind a code of private and public ethics, of national and international ethics, based upon justice, love and peace, which is to this day this code, the foundation of what we call civilization.

In my second lecture, on the Contribution of Israel to Christianity, I pointed out that Israel gave Christianity its three essential elements. It gave Christianity the personality of Jesus; it gave Christianity its Bible---without which Christianity is inconceivable--and it gave to Christianity its system of ethics and morality.

This morning I wish to speak on the Contribution of Israel to Mohammedanism and the Role which Israel played in the Middle Ages.

In the seventh century, just as in the first century when Israel influenced Christianity, the mind of Israel was very active, vigorous, and the race was far from



being decadent. Mohammed lived in that great world of Arabia, the land of mystery, the world of romance, the world from which the great religions of the peoples of the west have come. The Arabs in the seventh century were heathens and idol worshippers. Mohammed appeared as a religious leader among them. He, ~~like one of the ancient prophets of Israel~~, taught his people to <sup>abandon</sup> ~~surrender~~ their idolatry and their superstitions, and to worship only the one spiritual God.

Mohammed gave these millions of people a new faith, stirred their racial consciousness as it had never been stirred before, and set them upon a career of conquest, spiritual and physical, which within the short space of a hundred years brought them to the shores of the Atlantic and to the frontiers of China and India.

Mohammed was greatly influenced by Jews and Jewish teaching. There were Jews in Arabia from earliest times. They lived there; they had many settlements there. Many Jewish tribes lived in Arabia at the time of Mohammed. Jewish travelers bent on commerce passed through Arabia from Syria, ~~from~~ Babylon, ~~from~~ Palestine, <sup>and</sup> ~~from~~ Egypt. Mohammed learned from these Jewish travelers and from these Jewish neighbors. He learned about Judaism; he learned about the Jewish faith in the one God; he learned about the heroes of the Bible. ~~He imbibed all of it, and in his own Koran,~~ <sup>in his own</sup> ~~his own~~ Book of Revelations which he gave to his people, which has become the Holy Book of Mohammedanism, on almost



every page you will find <sup>some</sup> traces, ~~evidence visible~~ of Jewish thought and Jewish history.

Mohammed's conception of the one God--"There is no God but God"--is just a <sup>restated</sup> ~~revised~~ slogan of the declaration of <sup>the</sup> faith of Israel--"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." The ~~whole~~ concept of Divinity <sup>which</sup> that Mohammed gave to his people--God is One, spiritual, all-powerful, transcendent--is taken over in toto from Judaism, and insofar as this God concept has become the God concept of <sup>more than</sup> ~~over~~ two hundred millions of Mohammedans today, ~~and more~~, Israel may again be credited with influencing another vast segment of humanity in its spiritual life and thought.

Mohammed traced the origin of the Arab peoples to Abraham, through Abraham's son Ishmael, and thereby he established a racial contact between his people and Israel, just as Christianity through the personality of Jesus established a racial contact with Israel.

The early Mohammedans when they worshipped used to turn their faces to Jerusalem and not to Mecca, thereby indicating that they looked upon Jerusalem as the source of their own faith, even as they looked to Abraham as the progenitor of their race. The Koran tells many of the stories which we find in our Bible, which recount the history of the heroes and the prophets of Israel as they were embellished later on by the Midrash and the Talmudic law. ~~So that he introduced into Arab thought the whole~~



~~galaxy of a great personality.~~ In fact, the ~~entire~~ organization of the Mohammedan church was modeled after the organization of the synagogue in post-exilic times. Mohammedanism, as you undoubtedly know, has no pope and no priests. It is a very democratic religion, just as Judaism after the destruction of the <sup>second</sup> Temple had no pope and no priestly caste.

~~So that~~ <sup>this</sup> the second great religion, <sup>summarizing</sup> ~~to my~~ mind, may be said to be another daughter religion of Judaism. ~~When~~ Mohammedanism arose in the seventh century Europe was already beginning to sink into what are known as the Dark Ages. Rome fell before the barbarian invasions in 476. The classic epoch comes to an end. The whole Graeco-Roman world now becomes submerged under these ceaseless tidal waves of barbarian invasions. The great culture, the beautiful culture, of the ancient world is soon completely forgotten. Ignorance and superstition set in. The Goth and the Hun and the Vandal and the Lombard now rule in ruthlessness over Europe. Fear and insecurity fall upon the peoples of Europe and the night, the long, dark night of the Middle Ages, which lasted close onto a thousand years, now falls upon Europe.

While the sun is setting in the West it is rising in the East where these Arab people live; for the Arabs ~~were not enemies of learning; they were not barbarians; they were not ruthless destroyers.~~ They loved learning; they fostered it. They established universities; they had



~~all~~ the learning of the ancient Greeks translated for them ~~by Syrians and Persian and Jew and Arab scholars~~. They added to that accumulated learning; they devoted themselves to philosophy, ~~to~~ mathematics, ~~to~~ physics, ~~to~~ medicine, ~~to~~ law, ~~to~~ <sup>and</sup> astronomy. A great revival of learning ~~takes~~ <sup>took</sup> place in the ~~whole~~ Eastern world, and for five hundred years, from 750 to 1250, it is the East which is the repository of civilization and not the West. The West is passing through its deepest gloom of the Dark Ages. The East is carrying on the culture and the civilization and the noble traditions of the ancient world.

It is well for the Nordics of our day, who arrogate unto these peoples of Northwestern Europe all superiority of mind and soul, to realize the fact that five hundred years before the peoples of Northwestern Europe knew how to read and write, these Oriental people whom they hold in such lowly regard today were the monitors of civilization, the teachers of mankind, the torch bearers of the world.

*9th century*  
~~Now the Jews during these five centuries~~ *lived principally in Arab countries--Babylonia, Syria, in Palestine, in Northern Africa, in Sicily, in Spain, which had been conquered by the Arabs. They, too, reacted to this cultural stimulation of the Arab world. They began to speak Arabic; they began to write Arabic; they attended Arabic schools of learning; they exchanged ideas with the Arabs. And from that time on there begins in Jewish life*



our great philosophic period.

*As a result, this contrast*  
~~the Jews~~ *From the ninth century on we begin to give*  
~~to mankind~~ *beginning with Saadia and collectively*  
a group of remarkable philosophers which in-  
fluenced the thought not alone of Jewry but of mankind. ~~For~~

~~There is Bahya, there is Saadia, there is Crescas, there is~~  
~~Jehuda Halevi, there is Moses Maimonides.~~ *All of them*

lived in Arab environments, reacted to the cultural  
stimulation of their world, and added to the culture which  
they derived from the Arabs.

Now the important thing is this: that these  
Jews came in contact not alone with the cultured Arabs but  
with the unlettered Christians of Latin Europe. In many  
localities they lived side by side with the Christian  
peoples of Europe, -- in Italy, for example; in Spain. In  
other parts they came in contact with the European peoples  
on their travels; for the Jews were the great travelers of  
the Middle Ages, bent on trade. ~~The Jews~~ *They* carried on great  
commerce between the Orient and the Occident. They were  
the commercial people of the Middle Ages, and so quite  
naturally they became not alone the commercial ~~carriers~~ *intermediaries*  
of the Middle Ages but ~~the~~ *on* intellectual and cultural *intermediaries*  
~~carriers~~ as well. They became the intermediaries between  
the Arab world and the Latin world or Western Europe; they  
became the channels through which the learning of the Arabs  
~~flowed~~ *where they had taken one*  
~~peured~~ *from the* into Western Europe, and prepared the day for the re-  
awakening of the peoples of Europe, for their ~~own~~ *own* Renais-  
sance, ~~their own revival~~.



Before very long ~~these~~ Jews, who knew the Arabic culture, ~~and therefore also the ancient Greek culture,~~ were asked to translate the works of the Arabs into Latin, ~~and~~ <sup>we</sup> have literally hundreds of works on medicine, logic, philosophy, mathematics, which ~~these~~ Jews <sup>of</sup> the Middle Ages translated from the Arabic, first into Hebrew and then into ~~the~~ Latin, and <sup>it</sup> is from these translated works that the peoples of Europe became ~~conscious~~ <sup>aware again</sup> again of the ~~wonderful~~ legacy of the ancient Greeks. It is through these translators that they became ~~conscious~~ <sup>aware</sup> again of Aristotle and Plato, <sup>and</sup> ~~of~~ Euclid; It is these translations that quickened their minds ~~and~~ after the long centuries of slumber ~~and decadence.~~ \* \* \*

The greatest of the scholastic teachers of the Middle Ages was ~~St.~~ Thomas Aquinas, <sup>He</sup> ~~who~~ dominated Catholic thought <sup>in</sup> during the Middle Ages, ~~and who is looked upon as one of the outstanding doctors of the church, theologic doctors.~~ St. Thomas Aquinas owes most of his essential thinking to Moses Maimonides, whom he studied and whom he quotes. In fact, the whole of medieval scholasticism, which is a term applied to the mode of thought of the Middle Ages, is indebted greatly to the work of the Jews of the Middle Ages.

It is impossible in the short time allotted to us to enumerate some of these outstanding contributions of the Jews as intermediaries between the East and the West. It might be of interest to point to a few of the outstanding



contributions. Thus there was the Jew ibn Daud in the twelfth century, who translated all the works of the Arab philosophers, Al Farabi and Ibn Sina, which was universally studied in the Middle Ages. He also translated the mathematical works of the Persian Al Farabi, and through this translation of ibn Daud of the work of this Arab, the Arabic numerals which are employed today were introduced in Europe for the first time. Up to that time they had been using the so-called Roman or Latin numeral. It was through the work of this Jew that the Arabic numerals that we use today, --1, 2, 3, etc., upon which our whole science of mathematics is based today, were introduced.

There was the Jew Abraham Bar Hiyya, who wrote on trigonometry in Hebrew, and it is through the translation of his work from the Hebrew into the Latin that trigonometry was first introduced in Europe. There was the Jew Jacob Anatolio, who translated into the Hebrew the works of the great Arab Averroes, and from his translation into the Hebrew it passed into the Latin, and Averroes was one of the mighty forces of the scholastic thought in Europe in this period.

When Alphonso X of Spain wished to draw up the most perfect astronomical tables giving the lists of planetary movements, he summoned two Jews, Judah Cohen and Isaac ben Sie, who drew up what has come to be known as the famous Alfonsine Tables, which are the basis of modern astronomy and which were consulted by Kepler, Galileo and



other great astronomers. There was the Jew, for example, who came to be known after his conversion as Peter Alfonsie. Among other things this man Petros or Peter wrote a book called "The Training School for the Clergy," in which he included many of the finest fables and folk lore of the East. This book was soon translated into many of the vernacular languages of Europe. Many of his stories came into that great wonderland known as the "Gesta Romanorum," from which Chaucer and Shakespeare drew some of their subject matter for their poems and for their plays.

There was the Jew Jacob ben Markia, who translated Euclid for the benefit of European peoples; who perfected the quadrant which came to be known as the quadrant --the Jewish quadrant; and who was also responsible for the perfection of the surveying instrument, which came to be known as Jacob's staff. There was Abraham Zacuto, for example, whom Vasco da Gama consulted, and who supplied Columbus with the charts which enabled Columbus to sail upon his journey of discovery.

One can draw up a list literally of hundreds of ~~these~~ Jews of the Middle Ages who became a leavening influence in European thought because they were in contact both with the great Arab civilization and the greater Greek civilization which antedated it.

~~I want to say a word~~ <sup>should he say</sup> about the contribution of Israel to the Protestant Reformation, ~~because~~ that movement, too, felt the impact of the spirit of Israel.



During the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries the study of Hebrew became very popular in Europe. ~~We~~ We are now in the days of the new learning, of the Renaissance. (The Renaissance, as you know, was largely the effort to throw off the shackle of the Middle Ages, the shackle of authority, the shackle of dogmatism; to turn to the political and the inquisitive spirit of man as the guide in human life. It was a humanistic movement as against the exclusively theologic or scholastic views of the Middle Ages. Man began to assert himself,--man's mind, man's soul, man's attitude began to clamor for a chance to express themselves. People were no longer satisfied with the ipse dixit of the church or of man.) ~~They~~ <sup>men</sup> determined to go back to original sources to find out the truth of things, in all things. And so they began to go back to the originals in the Greek, in the Latin, and they also began to go back to the originals in the Hebrew.

(Again, strangely enough, during the period of the Renaissance that strange science known as Kabbala--Jewish mysticism--became very popular among non-Jews. Leaders of the Renaissance thought that they could discover in Kabbala vast secrets of scientific import which could not otherwise be discovered; that they could find in Kabbala an escape from the dry and arid scholasticism, just as the Jews sought in Kabbala an escape from the dry legalism of the Talmud. And so some of the finest minds of the Renaissance, like \_\_\_\_\_ and others, actually studied



Hebrew in order to know and understand Kabbala.

Now in Germany the Renaissance, this revival or new learning was devoted largely to the interpretation or the elucidation of the Bible. The three great Bible countries in the world today, as you know, are Germany, England and America.) The Renaissance in Germany expressed itself largely in an effort to understand the Bible, to go back to the original, and the original was Hebrew; ~~and the~~ great scholars in the generation preceding the Reformation, ~~like Young, Rosseau and others, even Luther himself~~, studied Hebrew, and because they were able to understand the originals they were able to challenge the interpretation of the Bible <sup>which was</sup> given by the church, ~~and~~ ultimately they were able to challenge the authority of the church itself; because, <sup>and</sup> (as you know, Protestantism) denied the infallibility of the church, of the pope, as the spokesman of the church, <sup>It</sup> and <sup>supreme</sup> placed the authority of the infallible book, of the Bible, in its stead.

And so it may be said that <sup>it</sup> ~~this~~ movement back to Hebrew, to the Hebrew language, to Hebrew literature--for these scholars studied not only the Bible but also the Talmud and medieval Hebrew works--that this return of the peoples of Europe to the original Hebrew sources was one of the determining factors in that great religious movement of the sixteenth century which is known as the Protestant reformation.

One other thought. Perhaps <sup>as in Christendom</sup> in no movement is



the influence of <sup>Judaism</sup> ~~Israel~~ so much in evidence as in that movement known as Puritanism. (Puritanism is today an ingredient, an essential element of the character of the English people. It molded the English race, and Puritanism is saturated with the Hebraic spirit.) Puritanism was a reaction against the moral looseness which prevailed in England during <sup>and subsequent to</sup> the ~~great age~~ of Queen Elizabeth, and the Puritans turned to the Old Testament for their authority, for their inspiration.) It was a moral reformation movement as well as a theologic reformation movement, (for it also turned itself against the corruptions of the church in England. They <sup>The Puritans</sup> turned to the Old Testament <sup>for their inspiration</sup> and made it their own; (they read the Old Testament as the Jews in those days read the Old Testament--not as the Jews are reading it today.) They read it every day. It became part of their thought; it became part of their life. (Their God became the God of the Old Testament, the God of righteousness.)

In the history of Israel they saw their own history reflected. They took <sup>to history</sup> ~~that~~ as a <sup>the</sup> prototype, as a history of the people of England. They gave their children Old Testament names; they adopted the very <sup>speech and idiom</sup> phraseology of the Bible, of the Old Testament. You <sup>cannot</sup> ~~can't~~ understand Milton, you <sup>cannot</sup> ~~can't~~ understand Bunyan, you <sup>cannot</sup> ~~can't~~ understand some of the greatest literary figures of England, without <sup>realizing</sup> knowing that they were steeped in the thought, in the <sup>and the ethical discipline</sup> moral ideology, in the idiom of the Old Testament. That great passion for freedom, for example, which the Puritans



manifested<sup>and</sup> which led them to <sup>behead</sup> decapitate a king and to establish the Commonwealth in England in the middle of the seventeenth century, -- <sup>Cherry</sup> ~~that great passion for freedom~~ ~~was~~ derived from the Old Testament.

The great historian Lecky makes this incisive observation: "It is at least a historical fact that in the majority of instances the early Protestant defenders of civil liberty derived their political principles chiefly from the Old Testament, and the defenders of despotism from the New Testament. The rebellions that were so frequent in Jewish history formed the favorite topic of the one, the unreserved submission inculcated by St. Paul of the other."

*STV* The passion for freedom which characterized all the actions of these Puritans came to them out of a passionate perusal of the pages of the Old Testament, where the idea of human freedom, of the equality of man, of man's dignity, of man's insubordination to another man, is found inscribed almost upon every page. I have taken occasion more than once to refer to this great contribution of Israel to the thought of mankind--the democratic contribution overlooked by most students and most scholars. The ancient world was a despotic world, ruled largely by tyrants, and the masses of the people were groveling slaves. The ancient world believed in the divine rights of kings, even as the medieval world came to believe in it.

We have no such notions in the Old Testament.



The Old Testament speaks of the divine rights of man who is made in the image of God--of every man--and that all men are subjected to the same moral law. Therefore the spokesmen of the masses of Israel dared to challenge the rich and the powerful; they dared to challenge the king. I sometimes think that the reason why the Jew is disliked in the world today is not because he is rich or because he is poor, not because he is wise or because he is not wise, not because he has good manners or because he has bad manners, but because in him there is ingrained from the beginning of time an unyielding, an irrepressible passion for freedom, which won for him the hostility of all the intrenched and all the privileged classes of the world, all the reactionary forces, all the yunkers of the world, who fear this two-edged sword of passionate freedom that is in the hands of the Jews--his legacy, his crown and his cross, and his immortality.

By. n When the Pilgrim Fathers, <sup>who we</sup> heirs to this spirit of the Puritan, came to <sup>these</sup> our shores, they brought with them that <sup>Hebraic love</sup> same ~~passion~~ for freedom and that same Hebraic <sup>and</sup> spirit of righteousness and earnestness and sanctity, and they builded their <sup>New World</sup> commonwealth on the model of the Old Testament. (This country is grounded in Old Testament tradition. And) <sup>el</sup> when the revolutionary spirit began to <sup>rather</sup> assert itself in the ~~last~~ half of the eighteenth century, <sup>and the American colonies revolted</sup> when the tyranny of England was no longer tolerable, <sup>did</sup> where do you think the spokesmen of the revolution, its



leaders and its preachers, <sup>but</sup> ~~found their text~~, their sanction and ~~their~~ justification for preaching revolution and treason against tyranny? Why, <sup>in</sup> ~~they went to~~ the Old Testament. { You read the sermons which were preached in the pulpits of New England by the great preachers of those days, and over and over again you will find texts from the Old Testament, illustrations from the Old Testament, } -- Moses leading the children of Israel out of slavery; Samuel telling his people not to <sup>ask for</sup> ~~want~~ a king; Nathan denouncing King David; Elijah denouncing King Ahaz; Jeremiah denouncing King Zedekiah. Why, <sup>very</sup> ~~the~~ whole passion of the Old Testament flares up again in <sup>that</sup> ~~the epoch before the American~~ revolution; <sup>only 2 days</sup> ~~and it is~~ no accident at all that the first <sup>draft of a</sup> seal which ~~was drafted for~~ the United States government following the revolution had upon one side of it Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, ~~across the Red Sea.~~ And on the Liberty Bell which is now in Philadelphia, <sup>they inscribed the words, taken from the Bible, "Proclaim freedom to the Lord's anointed."</sup> And so down to the eighteenth century we still find the spirit of Israel--active, leavening and powerful in the thought of the world. (We shall see again next week in our final and concluding lecture what is the contribution of Israel in the modern world today; that the same racial genius that first appears on the frontiers of Canaan three thousand years ago, and which comes down through the ages, fructifying and watering the dry places of human thought, bringing light and leading, never yielding,--that same racial genius today is still active,



still remaining, still a driving impulse in civilization.

Next week I shall endeavor to speak of the contribution of Israel in the modern world. I shall try to give a summary of this series of lectures of the role of Israel in history, of the role of Israel in civilization.

--O--





ABSTRACT OF THE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY  
RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER  
AT

THE TEMPLE  
EAST 105th STREET AND ANGEL ROAD

DECEMBER 4, 1927.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ISRAEL TO MOHAMMEDANISM AND TO THE MIDDLE AGES

Mohammedanism like Christianity may be said to be the daughter religion of Judaism; the essential doctrine of Islam. The unity, the spirituality of God is taken over from Judaism.

The Koran bears manifold evidence of Jewish influence. Mohammed was in close touch with Jewish teachers and learned from them the theology and the literature of Judaism. He traced the Arab race back to Abraham and thereby established a racial kinship with Israel, even as Christianity established a religious contact with Israel through Jesus.

In the middle ages the Jews were the great interpreters of the Arabic civilisation and the Latin world. The Arabic era of enlightenment preceded by many centuries, that of the peoples of western Europe. The Arabs fostered the learning and the sciences of the Greeks, when Europe was passing through its dark ages. The Jews who lived principally among the Arabs, but who came in frequent contact with the peoples of Western Europe, became the intermediaries between the two civilizations. Through the translations which the medieval Jews made of the Arabic books on philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy, the learning of the ancient world entered into Europe and prepared the way for the Renaissance.



A revival of Hebrew learning preceded the Protestant Reformation and this contact with the original source proved a strong factor in bringing about the Reformation.

Puritanism is of course grounded on the Hebraic tradition. It was the Old Testament movement. It was saturated in the spirit of ancient Israel. And in so far as Puritanism has molded the thought and character of the English people, Israel may be credited with being the potent influence in bringing it about.

The Pilgrim Fathers brought with them to the new world, the spiritual concepts of the Old Testament, and their social and political life was based upon the ancient traditions of Israel.

The passion for freedom which characterized the old movement, directly emanates from the pages of the Old Testament. It is therefore not surprising when the spokesmen of the American Revolution frequently invoked the authority of the Old Testament to justify their revolutionary activities.