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

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Box  
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Folder  
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Taking stock of 1927, 1928.



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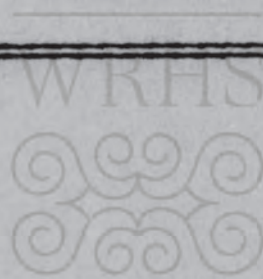
"TAKING STOCK OF 1927."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

JANUARY 1, 1928, CLEVELAND, O.

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It is quite difficult, in the short space of time allotted to us, to summarize the outstanding events of a whole year. For our purposes it is hardly necessary to do that. I should like to point to a few salient things which occurred during the past year which are indicative of trends or movements in humanity, which are significant for the progress of the human race.

I should like, first of all, to touch upon the progress which the cause of peace and international comity made during the past year; and here, I am afraid, the ledger books of history will write the events down on the debit rather than on the credit side of the ledger. The cause of peace did not make much headway during the past year; in fact, it received some serious setbacks in 1927. At the instigation of the President of the United States a naval disarmament conference was held at Geneva last June and July. This conference was to follow up the work of the Washington Conference, where the major nations agreed to limit the large battleships and determined upon a ratio which shall hold good for the building operations of these contracting parties; and the 1927 conference was to continue the work of the Washington Conference, and apply the same ratio and the same limitations, if possible, to other naval crafts,-- to the cruisers and the submarines, and so forth.

But in 1927 the nations of the world were not



as impoverished or as crushed as in the years immediately following the war, and so they were not as eager for disarmament and for any effort in behalf of universal peace as they were a few years ago. Of the four nations which were invited to sit in on this conference only two accepted the invitation--Great Britain and Japan. France and Italy refused to join; and the conference itself, after long and involved deliberations, came to a deadlock and adjourned with nothing accomplished.

Great Britain refused to grant absolute parity, as far as cruisers were concerned, to the United States, and instead of favoring a reduction in the tonnage of cruisers it actually demanded a huge increase. And so the conference ended in failure. One of the spokesmen of Great Britain at this conference, the Viscount Cecil, was so thoroughly disgusted at the attitude of his country at this conference that he resigned from Mr. Baldwin's cabinet.

The result of this conference has been a recommendation on the part of the President of the United States to Congress for an unprecedented increase in our navy--which of course will mean that England will have to increase its navy proportionately to retain its present advantage over the navy of the United States--which of course means the beginning of a tragic competition in naval armament, which can result in but one thing, as it has always resulted in but one thing--War! The last war which was to end war and to relieve the peoples of the world from



the crushing burden of armament has done nothing of the kind.

The naval budget of England in 1924 and '25 was 55 million pounds; in 1926 and '27 it was 58 million pounds. The naval budget of France in 1924 and '25 was one billion, 28 million francs; in 1925 and '26, one billion 433 million francs; in 1926 and '27, one billion, 915 million francs. The naval budget of the United States in 1924 and '25 was 275 million dollars; in 1925 and '26, 302 million dollars; in 1927, 322 million dollars. And so these budgets keep mounting and mounting until they will reach a point where the nations of the world unable to compete any further will determine to use what they have, come to a show-down on their military strength, and another war will follow.

The eighth conference of the League of Nations which was held last September at Geneva likewise resulted in nothing, and there, too, Great Britain was largely responsible for the thwarting of plans which had been proposed. It was proposed at this conference that the Locarno Treaty, in which France, Germany, England were particularly interested, would be extended so as to include practically all the countries of Europe, or that the so-called Geneva protocol of 1924 should again be revised. That protocol worked out a plan which would give all the peoples of Europe that measure of security and that feeling of safety which would justify them in decreasing their armaments and in depending upon arbitration for the settlement



of their difficulties. No nation will disarm unless it is secure, unless it feels secure from attack, unless it feels that the nations of the world will come to its rescue when it is being attacked. Great Britain refused to enter into any such agreement. And so the proposals were defeated.

A preparatory disarmament conference was held in Geneva last month, to which Russia was invited,-- the outlawed and the universally hated Russia; and Russia accepted the invitation and attended this conference, and at this preparatory disarmament conference Russia made certain simple, drastic, radical proposals, which fell like a bomb shell in that conference of diplomats. The proposal of Russia was as revolutionary as a prophetic thesis, as revolutionary as the Ten Commandments. They simply proposed that all armies and all navies be immediately, completely and universally scrapped. The cynics, of course, the wise men, shook their heads wisely, and the practical men immediately pointed at its impracticality, and of course nothing came of it; but it is significant that a nation representing one-sixth of the earth's area was prepared to subscribe to such a proposal and was ready to make that proposal in an assemblage not of idealists and irresponsible dreamers, but in an assembly of hard-headed, disillusioned, if you please, diplomats of the world.

That, perhaps, is the most encouraging thing which happened during the past year. But one ought not to be discouraged about the progress of peace. One ought to



take a historical perspective of it. Human progress is very slow, and the pendulum of human progress moves in wide arcs and very slowly. It was only yesterday that we finally eradicated the last vestiges of slavery from the world. It took mankind three or four hundred years to destroy feudalism. It took mankind thousands of years to do away with monarchy. Long established ideas and institutions are slow in dying. And so with war--one of the last lingering superstitions of the human race. It is going to be destroyed, and this century, if not this generation, will destroy it. It is already undermined. The logic of it has already been destroyed. There are few voices in the world defending war as an institution; it is now already on the defensive and it has now retired to its last trenches, as it were,--habit, vast machinery and human inertia. There all the antiquated institutions of the human race find their last citadels and defenses, and from these last trenches war, too, will sooner or later be driven.

It is an anachronism. In this age of science and knowledge and international dependence and communication war is a medieval ghost hovering about which has to be laid; and it will be laid. The conscience of the human race has been educated or sensitized to look upon war as a plague, and mankind is fast learning how to conquer the worst kind of a plague. And so even as we recall the setbacks and the thwartings and the frustrations of



movements towards peace, we ought not to lose our historical perspective--the larger view of the subject, and we ought not to fail to remember that, as an onrushing tide, peace is irresistible and that the ultimate victory belongs to it.

Perhaps the nation that suffered most during the year 1927 from the ravages of war, foreign and internal, was China. Our newspapers were full, and still are full, about news of China. Many of us cannot be very much excited about what is happening in China, but let us remember that what is happening in China is affecting the well-being of four hundred millions of people--a considerable proportion of the population of the world. China has been during the past twelve months an arena of horror, tragedy, massacre and misery, and a good deal of what is happening in China today is to be attributed not so much to its own backwardness and medievalism as to the intervention and the exploitation of European peoples.

China has been brutally abused in the last one hundred years by the peoples of Europe. On one pretext or another one great European nation after another dismembered China. City by city, port by port, and sometimes province by province was torn from China by England, by France, by Germany, by Russia, by Japan. Most always the excuse was the Chinese assassination of European missionaries. These emissaries of the Prince of Peace were used by the imperialists of the Old World as catspaws, and under the



pretext of defending their missionaries these countries proceeded to dismember China.

The great Christian nation of Europe, England, forced two wars upon China in order to compel China to persist in consuming opium. China tried to free itself of this terrible curse of opium, but English merchant traders profited from this production and consumption of opium in China, and so England waged two wars upon the heathen Chinese to compel the Chinese to produce and to consume opium. All the large scale industries and enterprises of China are in the hands of foreigners, and China, which is by virtue of its natural resources a rich country, is yet among the poorest countries of the world, as far as the standard of living of the natives themselves is concerned.

These foreigners exploited the natives, worked them in their factories and their mills at starvation wages, and worked their children and broke them upon the wheels of industry; so that they grew fat and prosperous, and the resentment of the Chinese has been growing for decades, and frequently expressed itself in terrible uprisings and rebellion, like the Boxer rebellion in 1900. But all these rebellions were crushed by the superior forces of the peoples of Europe--crushed! And yet the spirit of New China is reasserting itself again. Many of the young Chinese have studied in the universities of Europe and of America and have learned Western standards and Western ideas and Western methods of doing things, and they have come to



the conclusion that if democracy and self-determination are good things for the peoples of Europe and America, there is no reason why they are not good things for the Chinese, and they are demanding the emancipation of China from the yoke of foreign dominion, and that is why China is today a seething caldron of unrest, because it would be expected that at the outset the great empire of China would be broken up into mutual warring units, and that China would for years be victimized by civil war and internal strife, and that is going on now. But ultimately the Chinese renaissance will triumph. This great race will some day have its place in the concert of nations as a free and self-determining people.

A matter of great gratification which occurred in 1927 is the practical liquidation of the Mexican affair. At the beginning of the year the United States and Mexico seemed to have come to a dreadful deadlock, with the menace of war in the offing. Mexico, too, you will remember, has for years been exploited by foreign capital, and Mexico has for centuries been retarded in its progress by a reactionary church, and now Mexico has determined to take its affairs in its own hands and to liberate itself from the yoke both of a domineering church and of a domineering foreign capitalism.

The church of course refused to let go of its privileges and incited rebellion and revolution; but the church was licked in Mexico for the salvation of Mexico and



and for the salvation of the church, because any church which is tied up with politics is ultimately corrupted. In no country in the world is the Catholic Church as thriving and as prosperous as it is in the United States, where it is not entangled in the political life of the country. And the Mexican Government, in an effort to liberate itself from the dominion of foreign capitalism, among other things passed new laws regulating the production of oil on the part of foreign companies,--a new petroleum law which the foreign companies maintained was confiscatory and infringed upon their property rights and their vested capital.

Now the United States, unfortunately, took a very high-handed measure, high-handed means in its early attitude towards Mexico. It sent threatening letters; it set afoot surreptitiously a propaganda against Mexico in the hope of poisoning the minds of the American people against the Mexican people,--a stealthy propaganda meaning to imply that Mexico had suddenly become bolshevik. We refused to renew a treaty regulating the smuggling of arms with Mexico, in the hope that arms would be sent into Mexico to be used by revolutionaries in an attempt to overthrow the existing government, and our Secretary of State, Mr. Kellogg, was ready to use the mailed fist against Mexico, but he was stopped and stopped by the American public opinion. For the first time in years the American public opinion was directed at and focused upon the department of state so forcibly that it brought results, and the



American people, in its traditional spirit of fairness and the square deal, maintained that we ought not to use strong-arm methods in dealing with a weaker neighbor.

It maintained further that if America has been preaching arbitration to the world for years, it ought now, when its own interests were involved, to profit by its own preaching and practice arbitration. It maintained that any infringement of capital, any subject which involved matters of infringement of interests, is certainly subject to judicial review and arbitration. So that our State Department, sensing this rising tide of public indignation, and realizing too that the government in Mexico was firmly established and could not be overthrown, decided to adopt less belligerent means, and the Mexican people quickly reacted to the changed attitude. The Supreme Court of Mexico handed down a decision in a test case which involved these new petroleum laws favoring the American point of view, and the President of Mexico immediately called upon the Mexican Congress to revoke the objectionable articles in the new laws.

We sent down a new ambassador to Mexico, and we sent our ambassador of good will, Mr. Lindbergh, to fly from Washington to Mexico to convey our expressions of good will to that people; and the whole attitude, the whole relationship between these two peoples has undergone a complete change. That is as it should be. That is as a great and powerful nation like ours, which has prided itself



upon its fairness, ought to be in all relationships with all peoples, strong and weak,--as equals. We made the mistake in Nicaragua in 1927, and the quicker we withdraw our forces from that country the quicker will we regain our sense of self-dignity and our position of influence in the councils of nations.

Two sad events happened in 1927--one a natural catastrophe, the Mississippi flood; and the other a moral catastrophe--the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. It is hoped that the first catastrophe will bring into existence such measures of prevention which will make the recurrence of such a tragedy as the Mississippi flood unlikely in the future. And it is also to be hoped that our codes of law will be so revised in such states where such revision is necessary that a recurrence of the moral tragedy which occurred will not be repeated. The judicial murder of Sacco and Vanzetti brought no credit upon the American people, upon our courts of justice or upon our officials. I have spoken of the case before and at great length. The assassination of these two men horrified Europe and brought shame to us. The most merciful attitude that one can take of that entire tragedy is that it was part of the price which we paid for the madness and the intolerance and the bigotry which resulted from the last war.

I might say in passing--I mentioned the name of Lindbergh--the dazzling achievement of Lindbergh is perhaps the outstanding single achievement of the last year,



which brings a sense of pride and a thrill of joy not only to every American but to every human being. There was involved in the act not only daring, not only courage, but all those qualities which make for human progress and advancement. The human race depends upon that pioneering spirit to carry it forward, and America has real cause to be proud of its record in this department of human pioneering. The illustrious names of Lindbergh, Chamberlain, Levine, Byrd, Maitland, Hegenberger and others will long remain on the annals of our great land--illustrious and worthy of praise; and it is these achievements and the achievements in the laboratory, progress in chemistry and physics and aviation and engineering and medicine, and great books written and great music written and great art produced,--it is these things really which make up the real assets of America.

Two things of particular Jewish interest happened during 1927. One was the retraction or apology of Mr. Ford for his campaign against the Jews,--the retraction which preceded by a few months the appearance of his new car. After some five or six years of villifying a whole race, after broadcasting through the medium of a magazine, through the medium of published books, all the scurrilous, most vicious slanders imaginable, after having made anti-Semitism a living topic for the first time in the history of America, a living topic in the destruction of a people, and after having been dragged into court for some of the irresponsible



statements which he made, and after subjecting himself to an accident to escape court hearing, Mr. Ford finally retracted and made generous apologies and said he knew nothing about it; it was all a mistake. He knew nothing about it.

Well, we hope that his new model will be more successful than his old apologies. It is easier to withdraw from the market an old car and substitute a new one for it than it is to withdraw from the market of the world vicious and poisonous ideas which have found their lodgement in the minds and in the hearts of people. Much of the damage done is irreparable. But then I suppose we can bear it. We are an old race; we have experienced these things before, and we shall be patient as we have been and carry on. Our truest answer, our best retort, our only strategy in the presence of anti-Semitism--which has not ended in the United States with the retraction of Mr. Ford--is to carry on,--carry on our work, our constructive work in the world; to remain faithful to the highest and noblest ideals of our faith; to live as truly as we can in the spirit of prophetic vision, and let the heathen rage--let the heathen rage.

As long as we remain true to the basic ideals of our faith, so long do we remain an indestructible and eternal people. Not all the raging of the heathen, not all the accumulated hostility of the world can undermine it. The minute we let go, the minute we permit the corrosive influences of wealth and prosperity and self-indulgence to



draw us from the fountain heads of our inspiration; the minute we sink ourselves in the cesspool of the materialism all about us, that minute our decline begins to ultimate annihilation. We can resist persecution. We have yet to learn how to resist the invidious influences of prosperity.

And the second event of particular Jewish interest which has happened in the latter part of the past year--and for that matter, it is still happening--are the riots and the pogroms and the anti-Semitic demonstrations in Roumania. Just a few weeks ago at Grosswardein and Klausenberg and Jassy in Roumania, students rioted and attacked Jewish homes and Jewish places of business and Jewish synagogues, and destroyed, desecrated, robbed, wounded and killed. A student congress was held in the city of Grosswardein of Roumania, and the congress upon its adjournment went into the business of pogroms and attacked every Jew that they encountered in the streets of the city; they smashed the windows of Jewish homes and stores and destroyed the synagogue and took the scrolls of the law and desecrated them, paraded through the streets of the city with the torn parts of the sacred scroll.

It is maintained that the government of Roumania is back of these riots in an effort to divert attention from its own sad political difficulties. The Roumanian government has consistently maintained that it was not responsible for them; that it denounced them; that it arrested the rioting students; that it plans to make



reparations for the wrong done; and it has made ample apologies. Of course here again we shall have to accept the apologies. After all, it is our lot, the lot of the minority, to be abused, maltreated, and then to be asked to be satisfied with formal apology. But this is true, whether this particular series of riots and pogroms was the result of governmental machination or not, Roumania has a black record for fifty years so far as its attitude to the Jew and to other racial minorities within the confines of that country is concerned.

It is one of the most backward, one of the most brutal, one of the most medieval of countries in the world. Since the war Roumania has gathered into the territorial confines many racial minorities not of the Roumanian stock, and it has proceeded to Roumaniaize them, as it were, by the sort of methods which the czar employed to Russify, Slavinize, his subjectpeoples, and unless the conscience of the world interferes, Roumania will continue to trample upon the rights and the liberties and the sensibility not only of the Jewish subjects but of Hungarian subjects and of German subjects and of Russian subjects,-- to victimize their own people.

The year 1927 has ended--a year full of lights and shadows, a year of war and of peace, a year of plenty and of want. May the coming year be a better year. May the coming year advance the cause of international reconciliation still further. May the coming year show the



American people avenues of service to mankind and opportunities for moral leadership. May the coming year bring unto the household of Israel peace--peace so sorely needed. May the coming year bring to our own land prosperity and plenty, so that there may be no want or scarcity anywhere, and with that prosperity may there come to our people a keener realization; for it is not by might nor by power nor by wealth that a nation grows great, but by the spirit--which is God. Amen.

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