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On the banks of the Nile, 1931.



## ON THE BANKS OF THE NILE

BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER  
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY, FEB.

15th, 1931.

In Egypt the history of the Jewish people as a people begins. Up to that time we have the history of a family, of a clan, the families of the patriarchs, a story of a household. But with Egypt the history of the Jewish people as a people, as a nation, begins.

In Egypt the greatest Jew of all times, the Lawgiver of his race, Moses, was born and reared. In Egypt the first great contact of Israel with the Western World took place. In Egypt the greatest philosopher of all times lived, Moses Maimonides. In Egypt the two major attempts to adjust Judaism to the philosophic thought of the day were made; one with Philo and the other with Maimonides.

So that Egypt, too, like Babylon, wrote a mighty chapter in the history of the Jewish people.

This storied land of pharaohs and pyramids is much nearer to Palestine than Babylon is. Today you can travel over night from Egypt to Palestine. In olden days caravan routs were crowded with merchants, tradesmen, colonists who moved to and fro across the highways leading from Mcfrain, from Egypt to Canaan, from Canaan north to Syria, northeast to Mesopotamia, Assyria and Babylon. There was great constant contact between Palestine and Egypt, and Egypt exercised a great influence upon the civilization of those early days, just as Babylon did.



Egypt was ever a fertile land, as it still is. The Nile fructified it. The Bible speaks of Egypt as (quote Hebrew)

"Like the Garden of the Lord is the land of Egypt."

It was looked upon by the settlers as a paradise.

Palestine was subjected to drouths and famines and the Palestinians would march down to Egypt to buy food. Some of the early records of the Bible, - the Book of Genesis, tells us that Abraham himself, went down to Egypt. And Jacob, you will remember did similarly. So that there was constant communication between these two countries and many a Jewish law, and many a Jewish custom can be traced to Egyptian influence.

The religion of the Egyptians was a polytheistic religion, an idealistic religion in which animal worship played an important part and influenced the Jewish religion greatly but negatively. By that I mean that the prophets of Israel constantly sought to keep the religion of Israel from being polluted by the idolatrous peoples and the practices of the Egyptians. Just as Moses had to chastise the people after they left Egypt for building unto themselves the golden calf. Egypt worshipped the cow (Hebrew ) And this worship of the golden calf was just a throw-back to the Egyptian mode of worship. It was familiar to our forefathers who lived in Egypt for high unto four thousand years.

The first important contact which we read in our Bible is that which came about through the story of Joseph and his brethren, - a story too familiar to need any repetition on my part. Joseph is sold



into slavery in Egypt. But fortune favors him and he becomes, as the Bible says "Lord over the whole of Egypt," second only to Pharaoh, himself. He brings his brethren and his father's entire household over with him and settles them in Goshen on some fertile land in the Delta of the Nile.

In the course of time these immigrants are enslaved by Egyptian rulers who are in the habit of using them for slaves, slaves who labored for them and built for them the pyramids. And so these Israelite tribes are enslaved and remained enslaved for a period of about four thousand years.

And then Moses appears on the horizon.. And Moses emancipates these slaves. Moses, the first great revolutionist in history strikes the first blow for freedom and democracy. And Egypt may be looked at from this angle as the cradle of democracy.

Moses leads the slaves out of Egypt, through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Now Israel never forgot those years in Egypt. Those years were burned deep into the psyche of the race. And I believe that much of the social sensitiveness of the race, much of the fine moral idealism of the Hebrew code of conduct is due to the harrowing experiences of the people as an oppressed and persecuted slave people of Egypt. Over and over again you read in the Bible (quote Hebrew

) "Thou shalt not oppress the stranger, for thou wert strangers in the land of Egypt."

From the time of the Exodus, which probably occurred in the twelfth century before the Common Era, to the time of the



destruction of the first Temple which occurred at the beginning of the sixth century of the Common Era, a period of about six hundred years there was frequent political as well as economic contact between these two countries.

You will remember that the Bible mentions that King Solomon marries a princess of the house of Pharaoh in Egypt. Jerobom, the rebel escapes to Egypt and remains there during the lifetime of King Solomon and then returns to Palestine and becomes the first king of the Kingdom of Israel which follows of Solomon.

Not long after we read of the Egyptian King Shishak invading Palestine and plundering the Temple.

The Imperial policy of Egypt was most always anti-Babylonian or anti-Assyrian. These two countries at the termini of this crescent of which I spoke to you last week, these two countries were constantly at war with one another and Israel lying in between these two peoples was the shuttle cock of their imperialistic policies. At one time the Kingdom would make an alliance with Babylon against Assyria and then again it would ally itself with Mesopotamia against Egypt. Israel was therefore trapped, as it were, in the political policies of these two great empires. And it was just this factor which was responsible finally for the destruction of the Kingdom of Judea in 596.

There were always two parties in Palestine, the pro-Egyptian party and the pro-Babylonian party and at the beginning of the sixth century the pro-Egyptian party was more powerful and induced the King to make an alliance with Babylonia, whereupon Judea was invaded and destroyed.



Now following the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jews the number of Jewish settlers in Egypt increases steadily and keeps on increasing in the succeeding centuries. You will remember that Jeremiah himself, was compelled to wander down to Egypt, where he was later stoned to death, as you will remember, - many Jews settled in Egypt. They were attracted by the business possibilities of that country. Many others settled there out of necessity. Their numbers increased to such a degree that in the fifth century we hear of a Temple built in Egypt. In the fifth century before the Common Era in a city called Elephantine, on an island in the Nile, just south of the first cataract, there existed a community of Jews large enough to establish a Temple where sacrifices were offered and a priesthood established therein.

When Alexander the Great conquered Palestine and Babylonia and Assyria and Persia and parts of India, he also conquered Egypt in 331 B. C. and established the city of Alexandria and from the very day of its foundation Jews were found in the city of Alexandria and continued to live there from the year 331 B. C. to 1931 A. D. For over twenty-two hundred years Alexandria has had a Jewish community, sometimes larger, sometimes smaller. There are today in Alexandria some 30,000 Jews.

The great rulers of Egypt, the Ptolmies, who ruled over Egypt until the Romans conquered it were rather friendly disposed to the Jews. And the Jews prospered there. They became



influential. They became the best soldiers of the Ptolemies and the Ptolemies entrusted the defense of the frontiers of Egypt to Jewish troops and to Jewish generals.

In the second century before the Common Era the son of the High Priest of Jerusalem, by the name of Antiochus leaves Jerusalem and settles in the Egyptian Jewish city of Leontopolis and there in the year 160 builds a Temple,-which was magnificent and rivalled in many ways the Temple in Jerusalem,-and sets up a complete sacrificial cult and a complete Jewish priesthood in this Egyptian Jewish city.

The Jews under the Ptolemies enjoyed many privileges. They were allowed their own autonomy. They had their own law and spokesman. They built numerous synagogues throughout Egypt. And they grew and prospered.

When the Romans conquered Egypt in 331 B. C. these privileges were conferred. Now the interesting thing about the conquest of Egypt by the Greeks was this: they were not only political conquerors, they were cultural conquerors as well. Wherever they came they established centers, not only political, but cultural. They established the Greek language, Greek philosophy, A Greek outlook on life came with the Greek conquering armies. And Egypt on the Mediterranean became the greatest center of Hellenic thought and influence in that century immediately preceding and the centuries immediately following the beginning of the Common Era.

Next to Athens in its golden days, Alexandria became the



greatest center of Greek thought. It was there that Greek poets sang, Greek scientists made tremendous contributions to the scientific thought of the ancient world; Greek mathematicians, Greek astronomers appeared. And the Jews living within that milieu at the beginning of the Common Era, and there were probably a million Jews in Egypt at that time, found themselves in the most active intellectual center of the world.

No wonder then that they reacted to that civilization. The Jews for the first time began to turn their faces westward, as it were. Up to that time their history was tied up with the Orient. It now tied up with the civilization in Europe. The Jews began to speak Greek. They adapted Greek manners and studied Greek philosophy. They attended Greek schools and academies. In fact by the third century before the Common Era they had so far forgotten their own speech, the Hebrew or Aramaic, that the Bible had to be translated for them into Greek. And so we have in the third century the first translation from the Hebrew Bible into the Greek, the first translation in any language of the Five Books of Moses.

And in the next century other books were translated into Greek so that the Jews in Egypt could study their religion in the Greek, being unable to study it in the original. They were anxious to study, being loyal Jews, they were anxious to study their religion so that they could show the Christians

Now as soon as the Jews came in contact with this civilization which was far more developed than their own, they found it



necessary to make an intellectual adjustment between their religion and Greek philosophy, a sort of a synthesis. That's what the Jew has always done. One of the secrets of his survival is that he was able to adjust the ancient verities of his religion with the latest and most modern ~~XXX~~ scientific thought. Else Judaism would have become an antiquated religion long ago. But it always sought to adapt itself to all new thought which appeared on the horizon of mankind.

And so in Alexandria the Jews set about quite deliberately to adjust their Hebraic thought to Hellenic thought and the greatest spokesman of Egyptian Jews who did just that, who vindicated Judaism, who showed that the noblest philosophies were found in the sacred writings of Moses, who harmonized Plato with Moses, was Philo.

You probably know very little about Philo who not only exercised such a tremendous influence on Jewish thought but on Christian thought as well. Many of the ideas of the new Testament show unmistakably, the influence of the mind of this great Jew, Philo. He took the Bible and interpreted it through allegory. He used the old method of the Midrash. The heroes of the Bible were to him not merely human beings or expressions of ideals which expressed some philosophic thought. And through this process of mystic allegory he was able to show how the ideals of Greek philosophy were shown in the writings of the Bible. And it was through the writings and teachings of men like Philo that the Judaism of Palestine entered Europe and influenced European thought.



About this time there arose a wave of anti-semitism in Egypt. That's the fate of the Jew. He can't be happy for very long. He wasn't meant to be. They prosper and at once they encourage the hostility of their business competitors and they are rivals. And a great anti-Jewish movement very much similar to that which arose in this country and in Western Europe following the World War, began in Alexandria.

There were two traditional forms of anti-semitism. One was the literary and the other the pogrom.

Pamphlets and numerous books began to appear in Alexandria attacking the Jew, depreciating their work, mocking their religion, deriding their race, calling them all sorts of bad names. A literary feud, in other words, set in against the Jews in Egypt around the first century of the Common Era.

The most vindictive anti-Jew of his day, the Ford of his day was a man by the name of Mairethon, an Egyptian priest who wrote against the Jews but never apologized.

This Egyptian priest wrote a history of the Egyptian people in which he included a chapter on the Jews in which he stated that long ago the Egyptian king had ordered that all lepers shall be segregated in some spot in Egypt. And then there appeared a leprous priest by the name of Moses who incited the people and led them out of Egypt and thus inspirited they returned and conquered Egypt and subjected Egypt/<sup>ians</sup> to a cruel until they rebelled and drove these people out of Egypt. And these people are the present day Jews who live in Palestine,



wrote this priest Mairathon, and who worship the vilest sort of deities in their Temple in Jerusalem.

He was merely the first among a whole crowd of anti-Jewish scribblers of his day.

The Jews, of course, countered with polemics of their own. And there developed quite a literature of Jewish polemics.

The second form which took place was that of actual pogroms. We read that bloody riots broke out in Alexandria in the year 38 A. D. which incited the Romans. It was said that the Jews were disloyal to the Emperor, not wanting to place the statue of the Emperor Caligula in their Temple. The truth was that the Jews are now allowed to do that. The placing of any image in a house of worship is forbidden. And the Jews refused. Whereupon permission was given to pogromize them. The Synagogue was destroyed and many Jews were brutally killed.

The outcome was that two deputies, one for the Greeks and one for the Jews, left for Rome to present their respective cases to Caligula, the Roman Emperor. Apion was the spokesman for the Greeks and Philo was the spokesman for the Jews.

Caligula was a stupid and very arrogant individual who had caused the Jews much trouble in Palestine because of his desire to have his statue placed in the Temple of Jerusalem. But as fate had it he was assassinated about that time.

And so the Jews continued in Egypt until the Arabs conquered it in 641.



Around the third and fourth century Alexandria begins to decline. Nothing is reported from now on for quite a number of centuries. The Arabs conform to the Jews and their rights, occasionally persecuted them, but largely let them alone.

The Jews were not producing great books although they were active in the economic life of Cairo. We have recently found numerous manuscripts dating from this period, the eighth, ninth and tenth century of the Common Era, which shows that life went on at a normal pace in Egypt. Jews had their schools, their Synagogues. They wrote Jewish books and transcribed them. They were never extinguished although they were not distinguished. ~~XX~~ Egypt

Jewish philosophy comes to life again in the next century when Saadia appears, one of the first and greatest of Jewish philosophers. Before he went to Babylonia he lived in Egypt and wrote some of his important works in Egypt. In his day Jewish intellectual life began to become active again in Egypt.

The great century of medieval times for Egypt, of course, is the twelfth century when Moses Maimonides in 1166 comes from Spain and Northern Africa and settles in Cairo - which was the old Cairo.

Maimonides becomes the physician to the family of vizier, which was a position of Saladin and is granted a position of/supreme importance.

Maimonides undoubtedly had one of the most phenomenal minds of the Middle Ages, Jewish or non-Jewish, - a rare phenomenon.



He proceeded to write his monumental works in Egypt. The first great book in which he engages himself is the "Commentary on the Mishnah" in Arabic.

The Jews under the influence of the Arabs began to speak their language and to read Arab philosophy. The Arabs in those days were the leaders of thought in the world. Europe was passing through dark ages and the Arabs were carrying on scientific research, philosophic speculation. And the Christians went down to the Arabian universities to study.

The first book that Moses Miamonides writes is a commentary in Arabic on the Mishnah which was the great work of the Rabbis of the first two centuries of the Common Era. He wants to enable the Jews of their day to study. And thus proceeds with his monumental work, the compilation of the whole jurisprudence of Israel as it developed from Biblical days to his own day, codifying and compiling all of that entire vast literature, the whole of the Oral and the Written Law, criminal law, - the whole of Jewish jurisprudence, into one remarkably lucid, remarkably well written code, known as the Mishnah Torah - the Second Torah, a repetition of the Torah.

The Hebrew word "Uad" is made up of fourteen This Mishnah Torah is divided into fourteen sections written in superb ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Hebrew . So that if men wanted to know what the law was on a certain point, like divorce, etc. they did not have to go through the volumes adapted to the Law which you find in the Talmud. They went to this Mishnah Torah and there found



what the law actually was.

And Maimonides was not satisfied with that. He proceeded to do in his day what Philo did in his day, namely to harmonize Jewish thought with the best Arabian thought of the day.

The intellectual thought,- Arabian intellectual thought, was dominated by Aristotle. The people were becoming skeptical again just as today people are quoting this or that philosopher.

for himself,  
Maimonides set/the task of showing that Judaism could withstand the most critical analysis. And he proceeds to show how the theories of Aristotle could be harmonized with the teachings of Judaism. He tried to rationalize Judaism. And therein perhaps is the great . He intellectualized Judaism. Perhaps he had to. Something of that character had to be done.

According to Maimonides God cannot be defined. To define a thing you must classify it, and God cannot be classified. All that you can say of God is that He exists and you may describe Him negatively; you may say what He is not. But no positive attributes can be ascribed unto God.



This book of Miamonides, this synthesis of Greek and Jewish thought is called (Hebrew). He wrote it in Arabian. It was translated by the people into Hebrew and it came to be known as "The Guide to the Perplexed."

The book created a furor in Jewish life for many years.

Miamonides belongs to Egypt and to this chapter of the Jews in Egypt. Thereafter there is little to report of the Jews in Egypt. You may be sure of this fact that wherever a Jewish community had no history, it had no **tzoros**. And so from the twelfth century on under the Arabs and still later under the Turks the Jews continued to carry on in Egypt unto the present time. Today there are in Egypt, I should judge about sixty-five thousand Jews, half of them living in Alexandria, having a Jewish Synagogue, enjoying a well-organized community life.

And so from Abraham down to our own day another Jewish community like that of Babylon clings to the Banks of the Nile in spite of Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Arabian, Turkish invasion lives in this land of the Garden of Allah and creates ~~XX~~ mighty Jewish values and carries on.

.                   Next week I will take you into Europe along the Sein and the Rhine and I will tell you the fascinating story of how the Jews came into France and Germany and what happened to them there; the story of the Crusades which marched down the Rhine and what happened to the Jewish communities there.



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9th E. J. nation - so that ~~contact~~ ~~2-3 years after contact~~ ~~341~~

1. E - the storied land of Pharaohs & Pyramids, little B, has written  
roughly chapter in J. hist.

(1) <sup>Near</sup> wave to P. > B - Over, at - contact comm. an old oil crisis long before Is. came into Tanaim.  
terrible - probn 4, 12 & 13 - attracted Is. from more  
ruined & less fertile Pal - subject to frequent  
drought & famine - would descend to E. -  
Abraham - + so was Joseph.

(2) 9th crisis influenced early just as much as  
B if not more - Many a custom Law can be  
traced - Prophets warned - idolatry - 'Golden  
Calf' - cow seems to H. H. - Bull - Serapis - Aphro -

2. First great contact came during Patriarch

(1) Joseph & his brothers - J. Benjamin Isid  
was 8<sup>th</sup> - was the last who played role in  
11th 18 - Joseph & family settle there -

(2) 9th E. Jew nation is born - 1000s -  
Then there is born - Then first great  
struggle for Alena - is born.

(3) Jews reach point E. experience - Trivial  
Tribes - "Ye shall not oppress strange"

3. From Exodus - 1200 to about 586 - 600 years  
Contact - Jews trade - settle -

- (2) Solomon marries princes, thru, Pharaoh.

- (3) Jeroboam - flees to E. - Then returns & becomes

- (4) Shishak - invades Pal. & plunder Temple

(939)

- (5) Imperial policy - vs. B - 2 parties -

- Whitney & prophets ring

- alliance with E. - destroys Judah.



4. Fullowing destruction - great no. - Gen Jeremiah  
- settle in frontier towns - Takings -  
Migdal - Memphis - Pathos - in lower  
+ upper E -

(1) became so numerous - that in 5c.  
in Elephantine, an island  $\frac{1}{2}$  N.B. S. of  
first cataract - build Temple!

(33)  
5. The conquest of E. by Alexander still further  
increased no. of Jews - almost with the  
founding of Alexandria - Jews settled  
there - for centuries - influential part  
of population - under Ptolemies - Slaves - freedom  
of representation of Antioch 2c. - sent word -  
new chapter - freedom - Jews face west!

under Greek influence - E.

(1) Ptolemies <sup>300 years</sup> favorable to Jews - privileges -  
entrusted with military defence of  
country - farmers etc. Tax-  
collectors - revenue officers -

(2) We hear of Heliopolis - Leontopolis - great  
J. centers -

(3) 2<sup>nd</sup> c. Orias - son of High Priest of J.  
builds Temple in Leontopolis. (160)

(4) Privileges confirmed by Rome - confirmed E. 31 B.C.  
- regnum under Rome 10 - 641 A.D.

6. new Chapter - freedom - Jews face west!

- Learn Greek - speak Greek - names  
- "Septuagint" - 250 B.C. names

- Loyal Jews - but influenced by Gr. Culture  
- Autonomy - "Archons" - by synagogues



7. Under f.H. influence, E. becomes center of Hellenism  
- action intell. life - <sup>Sc. & literature</sup> Jews & fundamental -

(1) Need of intell. adjustment - J. rel. &  
full Philosophy - Synthesis! - Constant  
need of Judaism -

8. Philo - IC - a million Jews in E.

(1) Vindictah Jud -

(2) Stew - commonness with Platonism -

(3) already found in sacred lit. & Jews -

(4) Prophetic - Synthetic Orator - Missionary -

(5) Allegorized Scriptures - Midrash -

(6) Jap. Jew. Plot - are so - Christian  
thought - logos - justice -  
Patristic -

(1) Via Alex. Jud - Jud. enters Europ.  
civilization - Face West.

9. Antisemitism - Rivalry -

(1) Library Antisem - Manetho - E. priest -  
Hist. of Jews

(2) Jews converts with polemics & defense  
literature -

(3) Paganism - 38 A.D. Alexandria -  
- Statue of Emp. Caligula - Roman  
prefect Flaccus -

(4) Emperors - African - Philo -

And so they lived -

10. Decline - with decline of importance of Alex -

- Under Arabs 641 - Jews come under

new influence - Arabic! antiquary - Nagid -  
- Genizah action life -



11- 10c. Saudia - estat. of Talim. Schools.  
- ~~de~~ Forst - Old Cairo - 40,000 Jews -

12c. - Maimonides - 1166. Physician to  
family of Saladin - Vine -

(1) Cum. 2/14 - 1168. *Commentary on Mishna*

(2) 2/14 - 1180. *Mishna Torah*

(3) 2/14 - 1195 *The Guide of the Perplexed*

- center of <sup>learned</sup> J. World -

12. Under Maimonides - 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt ~~to~~ at  
Synthesis -

(1) his title - Proceeds to rationalize

God - God is pure intellect - Highest  
rank - Prophets - reason -

(2) Anthropomorphism - no position  
attributes -

(3) all 1130 are rationalized - Sacrifices -

(4) 100 yrs. of Kuthu - Haupt -

13. Continued to live under Mamelukes  
(1250 - 1517) + Turks <sup>Sol. Selim - Pasha Joseph Chelbi</sup> & British  
rule - to this day - occasional  
persecution - blood accusations 1844 - 1881.  
1902 -

Pop. 65,000 - Alex, 30,000.

14. Had 20 hrs in Bab - under Egypt - Roman -  
811 - Roman - Arab - Turkish & British  
rule - continued to live - & to  
4000 yrs -



- Cal. murdered - 41 - Sabrah - altar -  
" - ordered map in  
Temple.

