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Rock of ages - a Chanukah sermon, 1931.

"ROCK OF AGES"

BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER
AT THE TEMPLE
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, 1931

It is good, my friends, to recount from year to year the glorious story of Chanukah. Chanukah commemorates, as you well know, the victory of the Maccabees and their followers over the hosts of Syrian Greeks under the leadership of Antiochus, the Illustrious, during the sixth decade of the second century before the Common Era.

It is well to remember that this struggle of the Maccabees was not merely a struggle for political independence. It was that. But it was much more than that. The Jews at this time had not been enjoying political independence for a great number of years. They had remained under the rule of the Persians for nigh unto two hundred years without rebellion. They had remained under the rule of the Greek Empire for nigh unto one hundred and fifty years without rebellion. But suddenly rebellion flared up throughout Palestine. Why? Because coupled with the desire for political independence there came now the challenge to defend their faith and their cultural integrity, their survival as a people.

Let me make this clear.

Alexander the Great, who in a few short years extended his empire from the boundaries of Macedonia clear to the boundaries of India, in conquering Asia, parts of Europe and Africa, not only brought with him his Greek army, his Greek ideas, his conquered regions, he brought much more. He brought Greek civilization, Greek culture, a Greek way of life to the people.

Now this Greek civilization was a very rich, creative beautiful civilization. It had already seen its heyday when Alexander appeared. The days of Plato, Socrates, the great Greek productive campaign harvest was over. And yet even in his day, Greek civilization was abundantly rich, gloriously beautiful.

The peoples which he conquered, quite willingly accepted this Greek culture or civilization. Later on even a conquering people like Rome submitted to the allurements and fascination of this culture. And while Rome was a master of the Greek culture, not the slave, it was certainly a disciple of the Greek Roman culture. Writers of history of culture used the Greek as his model.

And if so happened when Alexander conquered Asia Minor he also conquered Palestine. In the course of time a higher strata of the Jewish population, if not the masses, were pervaded by the influence

emanating from this Greek civilization. And the Jewish upper classes, the aristocracy and the priestly higherarchy gave itself over entirely to Greek ways of living to the hurt and sacrifice of the Hebraic way of life. Greek became the language among them. Greek literature and not Hebrew was needed.

With it all we shall see a great deal which was admirable taken on by the Jews. Now there was a great deal in this civilization which the Jews could adopt with great profit to themselves. One of the secrets of Israel's survival is the fact that Israel always adopted cultural values from other races and other peoples. Israel never willingly nor voluntarily ghettotized itself intellectually unless forced to it by physical persecution. The Jewish mind was always ready to play, to give $\frac{1}{2}$ and take of the minds of other people and when they found themselves in Babylon, Greece or Rome, in Italy or in Western Europe it always borrowed, always adopted, even as it always sought to give of its own treasures in return for what it borrowed.

The reason why Jews today are so avid for learning and why they are found in such amazing numbers in every field of intellectual endeavor is due to the fact that during the Dark Ages they were denied the privilege of learning and when the ghetto walls crumbled, they have gone into these departments with a veritable hunger for learning and

and study. And though the Jew was eager to learn and did learn a great deal from the Greeks, he never accepted a foreign culture indiscriminately. He never permitted his own cultural individuality to be submerged. He knew that he had much to learn from other people but he also knew that he had much to teach other people. He was conscious of the great cultural heritage which was his own.

The Greeks had philosophers; the Jews had prophets. The Greeks had Plato, and Aristotle; the Jews had Moses and Isaiah and a Book of Psalms to give to mankind. The Greeks had art which mankind has not yet excelled; the Jews had a universal code, a God-idea which mankind has never excelled. So that while the Jew was ready to adopt intrinsic values from another culture, he was never ready to do it at the sacrifice of his own.

And that is the problem he was faced with in the days of the Maccabees, for many Jews accepted what was Greek without question to the sacrifice of their own Jewish cultural individuality. Moreover it should be remembered that the civilization of the Greeks which came to the Jews at this time, during the second century, was a decadent civilization. It was a mongrel civilization. It lacked strength and self restraint and creative powers of a culture at its heights. It had much of the looseness and the vulgarization of life and licentiousness in it. It was a Levantine culture which came to Palestine and it menaced the high moral code which was at the very

heart of the Jewish conception of life.

And then too, it should be remembered that Antiochus attempted to do something which none of his predecessors attempted to do. His predecessors allowed people to keep their own religion. They did not interfere with the religious observances of the people. They demanded political tribute. Antiochus was threatened by the rising political power of Rome. He tried to consolidate his empire by wiping out the religious distinctiveness of the various peoples and nations which composed his empire. He thought that would merge them into one mighty empire which could resist the onslaught of Rome.

Most of the other peoples were quite ready to surrender their own faith and religious traditions and accept the faith and religious traditions of Antiochus. But the Jews were not. Instinctively they resisted. The Jew has a remarkable instinct by which he can deduct that which can enhance his life and that which will corrode his life and undermine his life.

(quote Hebrew) "Why was the Torah given to Israel and not to any other people?" The answer is (Hebrew

) "Because the children of Israel are hard, stern, of strong stuff." Moses knew that when he said of his people whom he led for so many years; (Hebrew), "They are a stiff necked people."

Now that may be a vice or a virtue. In most instances it

is a vice. In some instances it is a virtue. Israel was stiff necked when it came to relinquishing its religious convictions upon which it knew its survival depended, instinctively.

At this time rebellion flared. The Maccabean struggle ensued and for three years they waged a bitter war against the trained armies of Antiochus. Finally came the leadership of Judas Maccabeas and his brothers. They defeated the enemy, regained their independence, re-entered the capitol city of Jerusalem and the sanctuary which stood as a symbol of the soul of the people. They re-entered the sanctuary, cleansed it, re-dedicated it. - That's the holiday of Chanukah - the Feast of Dedication.

In this connection, my friends, it should be remembered that in 1931, approximately twenty-one hundred years since the victory of the Maccabees, we are facing the identical situation that they faced. And it is interesting to ^{note} ~~KNOW~~ how very often Jewish history repeats itself.

Today we are faced by the same problem. The problem from without and the problem from within. The problem of the enemy from without seeking our destruction; the problem of the enemy from within unjustly destroying us through an indiscriminate assimilation of alien ways of life.

The Jewish skies today are overcast my friends. In the year 1931 they are very dark with threatening clouds. I don't know of a period in the last decade and a half, I don't know of a time in recent years when the position of the Jew in many parts of the world was so fraught with menace as in this year 1931.

In Eastern Europe Jewish life has been economically undermined. Our people are living in appalling poverty and distress in the midst of peoples openly hostile to them and governments distinctly unfriendly to them.

In the last few weeks you read of the riots in the various schools of Poland where students rioted against Jewish students being instructed in the university. Serious bloodshed took place in Warsaw and Vilna and other cities. Life is sad for our people in Poland, Roumania, Austria Hungary and most particularly is it brought to a most extreme danger, a danger which reminds us of the dark period of history in the Middle Ages, I am referring to the condition of the Jews in Germany.

There aren't many Jews in Germany, less than one percent of the population. But the German Jew was the leader of his brethren in throughout the world ~~and~~ the position which he achieved in the world of finance, science, art, and culture.

Recently I read an article which describes the present plight of the Jews in Germany. I want to read one or two paragraphs from it.

"It must be clear by this time that there is no use arguing with Hitler and his clan."

Hitler, by the way, will probably be the dictator of Germany in the next few months. The minds of the world are being prepared for

this dictatorship.

"Appeals to human decency, to the principles of love, to justice have failed."

"There is no use nailing their lies and exploding their foolish theories. Heaven knows it is easy enough. Only it makes not the slightest impression upon them. Hatred has simply blinded them to reason and common sense."

"The Hitlerites were told by Jacob Wassermann and other liberal German Jews that the Jews were not a nation, not a people, but a race. The answer was a whirlwind of Jew-bating in Thuringia under Frick. Hitler was reminded over and over again that the Jews wanted to be no more than German citizens of the Hebraic persuasion. He screamed that it was a lie, a piece of Oriental cunning, deceit, camouflage. Writers set about parading before his eyes the contributions made by Jews to culture in the Reich, and their brilliant participation in science, in philosophy, in art, in literature and the theater. He replied by throwing obscene taunts at the head of Freud and Adler and Wassermann. His young bullies began to insult a man like Einstein and Hitler's papers gloated over it."

"A German Jewish journal came out recently, calling upon Hitler's sense of patriotism by giving figures and names of Jews who

died for the Fatherland in the mud of Flanders and France. Hitler answered with a brutal attack on helpless Jewish men and women leaving a place of worship. He instituted a boycott against Jewish merchants in small communities and terrorizes those who feel disinclined to heed his barbaric decrees. He warns farmers to be on the look-out for Jews wandering around the countryside as they might throw mysterious, cabalistic spells over their crops."

"We are Christian people," so ran the Hitlerite proclamation in Thuringia, "we should only buy from Christian folk. The Jews plan the wreck of our country. We must love God and hate the Jews and prevent the execution of their nefarious designs." Herr Hitler was told that the founder of the religion he invoked said: "So anyone says I love God and hates his brother, the same is a liar." He paid no attention to it. He appeals to superstition, to prejudice, to greed, to hooliganism, to sadism, to religion alike so long as the effect might harm the Jews in some way. He circulates the old blood libel, spreads the protocol forgery, befouls the memory of dead men, such as Lord Melchett, and does not hesitate to concoct the most ludicrous yarns to gain his ends. He tells the readers of his papers that the Comintern and Wall Street are in conspiracy to wreck the present economic system, that Sir Herbert Samuel and Lord Reading caused the flight from sterling in

England as an act of Jewish vengeance over England's non-fulfillment of pledges in Palestine; he would have his clientele believe that Jews are behind the unrest in China; Jews behind the movement for independence in ~~SWA~~ South Africa; Jews manipulating the strings in the American crime wave; Jews backing Gandhi, Jews running the Rio de Janeiro white-slave traffic. The Jews robbed Germany of her colonies. They stole the Fatherland's merchant fleet. They stabbed the Imperial Army in the back. They inspired the murder of Serajevo. They mesmerized President Wilson. They murdered five thousand German soldiers with the Turkish army, in the gardens of Demascus. They started the Palestine riots of 1929. They planned the world crisis. They suck the blood of new-born Christian children. They murdered Jesus Christ, that "good German." The Jews, the Jews, the Jews!"

"In revenge and punishments for these heinous crimes, Jews upon Hitler's orders are systematically eliminated from the economic life in Germany."

"To pay for their crimes and "purify Germany from the Jewish poison," the Jews are to be ousted from the theaters, from the conservatories of music, from art schools and actors' associations. Applications for positions are returned with the questionnaire. "If you do not happen to be Jewish, please sign this statement." It is enough to have a Jewish wife to bar one from holding an official position in Thuringia. Scores of the ablest actors and musicians have but recently

lost their living for this reason. Methodically, inexorably the Hitlerites are removing Jews from Germany's cultural institutions. The outside world hears of a savage attack occasionally as recently occurred in Berlin on Rosh Hashonah, but they are not aware of the more insidious silent terror that haunts the Jews of Germany, the horror that flies by dark and in the night. Even partial lists of Nazi excesses, tortures, moral cruelty, discrimination, practices against the Jews of Germany are gruesome documents. Jewish teachers are the object of an organized hunt. In several districts where the Nazis are supreme they are required to teach that Christ was a German."

"Student associations clamor for the introduction of the numerus clouses. Jewish students are beaten up daily. Jewish attendance at Munich University has dropped as a result from 655 ~~in~~ in 1925 to 240 in 1930. In February of this year the Berliner Tageblatt felt constrained "in the interests of justice" to draw attention to the peculiar manner of justice frequently administered where Jews were involved. Jewish business men, especially in small towns, are virtually ostracized by the Christian community. Justice fails them in many places, religion turns a cold shoulder on their plight. The scandalous libels dishonor them. The persecution de-humanizes them. Their fear of being accused of dual nationalism or aliens had dejudaized thousands of Jews in the Reich."

"Jewish cemeteries are desecrated. Synagogues befouled. Jewish girls are molested. Scarcely a day passes without a new sample of Jew-hatred coming to the fore somewhere in Germany. Pages upon pages of individual cases of assault and battery could be drawn up."

Our brethren in Germany have desperate days ahead. I am a man of faith, I believe they will survive Hitler, just as our forefathers survived Hamann and all the other men who sought our destruction. I am a man of faith. The words of the Bible always come back to me whenever I read things of this kind. Hebrew ()

"I, the Lord, do not change and you my children will never be destroyed."

Hitler will find that he can not pogromize six hundred thousand people in a modern civilized country. You can not take the Jewish mind, the Jewish energy, the Jewish enterprise out of the life of a country like Germany without doing irreparable harm to its very being. Reasonability, if he ever comes into office, will support the Jew. But before that supporting process takes place, there will be some very sad days awaiting our people there.

And so we have the enemy from without just as the Jews in 165 B.C. had their Syrian and Greek enemies. And then we have the enemy from within. The Process of indiscriminate assimilation. The Jewish way of life, really yielding and all too readily to the imitation of the foreign cultural, the foreign ways, of life. Our own religion is less

of an influence in our life than it might be. It is less invoked in the lives of our children than it might be.

That, to my mind, is the real danger. Our danger is not annihilation. Our danger is suicide, my friends. We need the distinctive Jewish life first for our own selves, for the culture of our own souls, for the contentment and harmony of our own lives. Why should we surrender that culture which ages, generations of the greatest minds of our people, prophets, sages and poets, men of God fashioned for us. Why should we sacrifice it? What has the world to give us in return for that? Why should we take the Bible out of the lives of our children? What can we place in its stead? Why, having survived to this day and having come through these seas of blood, these persecutions of the ages, shall we now destroy ourselves? And we need the Jewish culture and way of life not merely for ourselves but for the world.

A few weeks ago I spoke to you about the marvelous essay of Prof. Orton, "The Challenge to Israel" in which I pointed out how this non-Jew calls upon Israel now when the world is in despair, to bring to mankind its healing, the full vigor of its messianic vision. The world today, claims this student of economics and sociology, is in need of that which only the Jew can give it, a God idea which is the only one acceptable to modern man, a humanism, a moral idealism for an every day life in a sense, and the social solidarity and stamina which the Jew can give to the

world. He calls upon Israel today in 1931 to assume the moral leadership of mankind. There is a fine phrase from one of our Rabbis. He said (Hebrew) "As long as the light of Esau, the light of the Genile world is prevalent and sparkling, the light of Jacob is not noticed." As long as the non- Jewish world and its way of life is in the ascendancy and in prosperity, the Jewish light is not much in evidence. (Hebrew) "As soon as that light of Esau begins to dim." As soon as it begins to become darkened, as soon as its life begins to be filled with disillusionment and fear, as it is today, then, (Hebrew) "the light of Jacob becomes notices, is seen, is called for."

And this man calls for the light of Israel to illumine the darkness of the world. And not only he but others. Another article appeared recently which did not receive as much notice as the article of Prof. Orton. It is from the pen of a clergyman and ~~it~~ in it is written almost in the self same words the appeal of the Gentile world for the light of prophetic Israel in its dark hours.

And so Dr. Henry M. Edmonds writes:

"One of the controlling spirits of the world's life has been yours. The Greeks gave us thought; the Hebrew, intuition; the Greek, beauty; the Hebrew, duty; the Greek, nature; the Hebrew, God. We speak of the Hebrew spirit, but we have not bowed to you in token of our debt."

"We have called peace a Christian attitude, forgetting

that it was a Jew who first used those words, which now belong to humanity, about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks."

"We have described love as a Christian virtue, not remembering that Jesus found sunk in your ancient law His Great Commandment and the second like unto it."

"We have appropriated your heroes bodily. We can have no marriages without your Mendelssohn, no story of philosophy without your Spinoza, no anthology of verse without your Heine. Our Victorian age lacks its chief ornament without your Disraeli. And today we have your Brandeis in jurisprudence, your Straus and Rosenwald in philanthropy, your Flexner and Einstein in science."

"We have laid violent hands upon your saints. We stole the massive Moses, the flaming Elijah, the knightly David, and that most august group in all the succession of those who have declared God - the prophets. The mind lifts at the call of their names - Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah. The rapt John was yours, and that Apostle, who after the cornerstone was laid, built the Christian Church. He was yours, in whose face we have seen God supremely, Jesus was born of a Jewish womb, nourished at a Jewish breast, nurtured in a Jewish home, led by Jewish teachers, set aflame at Jewish altars."

"Now an emergency is upon us and we are turning to you

for help. We are faced with problems which of ourselves we fear we cannot solve. In our extremity we turn to all men of goodwill."

"We have a race problem, both in this land and in all lands, which some wise men fear may crack the world. Certainly it is defacing the world from the fair thing that God would have it."

"War threatens us. We tremble as we think of what portends in international relations. Can we survive another war? Will not the heart of God turn away from us if we ever allow again the cosmic chaos of armed and ordered hate. All men of goodwill must unite. We appeal to you for help."

"Once again the emergency calls us together. We are afraid for our lives unless something is done toward industrial adjustment. Governments and institutions have fallen all about us. Humanity is turned upside down. We are afraid."

"We turn to you for help."

It is amazing and yet not so amazing when one remembers, when one is informed and can remember, that after all it has been the ancient wisdom of Israel which has guided mankind or that portion of mankind which came under its influence for centuries and centuries. This code of living which calls for justice, for peace, for honor between men, for self restraint, for purity of life, for spiritual interest, that has been the code which has tempered the durability and inherent of the peoples of Western Europe for these many many hundreds of years.

It is amazing and yet not so amazing when one remembers, when one is informed and can remember, that after all it has been the ancient wisdom of Israel which has guided mankind or that portion of mankind which came under its influence for centuries and centuries. This code of living which calls for justice, for peace, for honor between men, for self restraint, for purity of life, for spiritual interest, that has been the code which has tempered the durability and inherent life of the peoples of Western Europe for these many hundreds of years.

And again there is a call for the spirit of Israel and its moral law to tame the child of man that is on a rampage of destruction in the world today.

on
And so/Chanukah in the year 1931 we kindle our Chanukah lights again. For twenty-one hundred years we have kindled them. They are simply our symbol of faith in ourselves, in our mission. They are a symbol of our eternity, as slender as they are, as frail as they are these lights are a symbol of our eternity. They are also a symbol of our contributions to the world. For wherever we come we kindle light. Wherever we come we kindle light. Therefore we repeat from on high
(Hebrew) "These little lights which we kindle every night, they are holy."

1. It is good to recount
2. Commemorates Victory - Not merely political - Persian rule 500 - Greek 150 - Rel Cultural
 - (1) Alexander - 4c - from Macedonia - not only g. Greece
 - (2) GK culture very rich - conquered peoples readily submitted - Even Rome -
 - (3) Invaded Asia Minor - Palestine - Perseus higher strata
 - (4) Jews found much in it could accept with profit always accepted - secret - never ghettoized - Hungry
 - (5) But were accepted wholeheartedly, submerged cult. indiv. - H. knew others had but so had he His genius were diverted itself: Eclectic
 - (a) Maimonides
 - (b) GKs had philosophers - Jews - prophets - Moral Plato etc
 - (6) Espe. could they not accept the kind of GK culture etc which holds core - decadent - force
 - (7) But here - too powerful in days Mace - Annihilation
 - (8) Antiochus - condemned - religion, absterging

An Abstract of the Address

"ROCK OF AGES" by
RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER
THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY,
Dec. 6th, 1931

The victory of the Maccabees in the second century B. C. was a victory not only for political independence but for cultural survival. The Greek armies carried with them Greek civilization.

There was much in the Greek civilization of the second century which the Jewish mind could accept with profit to itself. There was much in it which was opposed to the Hebraic way of life. The lure of the brilliant but decadent Greek civilization of the second century proved too powerful for many sections of the Jewish people who accepted all that was Greek indiscriminately.

The reaction soon set in. The genius of the Jew could not deny itself. The Jew knew that he had much to learn from the Greeks but on the other hand he also had to teach. The Greeks had their philosophers but the Jews had their prophets. The Greeks had Plato and Aristotle. The Jews had Moses and Isaiah. The Greeks had art unexcelled. The Jews had a moral code and a universal God idea unexcelled. He refused to sacrifice his cultural values for the sake of the values in other cultures. This was the struggle within the struggle of the Maccabean revolt. The victory remained with the loyal champions of Jewish survival and cultural autonomy.

Israel today is faced with the same problems which confronted it in 165 B. C. Enemies from without threaten it. The political and economic fortunes of the Jews in Eastern Europe are very low and great dangers are threatening it in civilized Germany where the vilest anti-Jewish campaign, exceeding the monstrosities of the darkest middle ages, is in full swing.

But the spirit which helped the Maccabees to survive Antiochus will help the Jews of Germany to survive Hitler.

The enemy from within is the process of indiscriminate assimilation which is in full swing and which threatens the spiritual and cultural integrity of the people, the undermining of the Jewish way of life. The Jew has always adopted the worthy qualities in other cultures. That is ^{its} secret of survival. He never ghettotised himself intellectually unless driven to it by persecution.

The Jew in the Western World has drunk deep of its science and learning. He has taken much but he must also give much - of his own racial treasures. The world needs today, perhaps more than in any previous time, the Hebraic moral outlook, its moral idealism, its prophetic hunger after righteousness, its sanctification of life. The Jew, by remaining true to these ideals, exemplified in the Jewish way of life, can be of great help to his fellowmen in solving the tremendous problems with which we are all faced today.