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Confessions of an optimist, 1935.

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CONFESIONS OF AN OPTIMIST JEWISH
A Sermon in the Spirit of Passover ARCHIVES

By
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At

The Temple

On

Sunday morning, April 21, 1935.

Men's minds, my friends, are largely absorbed today in material considerations and pursuits and questions of subsistence -- food, raiment and shelter, so that the spiritual interests of life have been rather crowded into the background. When millions of people all over the world have to wrestle desperately with the problem of providing the necessities of life for their families, the elementary needs of life, they cannot be expected to think much or often of spiritual values.

Nevertheless, while these values have been crowded into the background for the moment, I do not think that they have been discarded or lost sight of. These life hungers of man, man's hunger for truth and beauty and the lands beyond the horizon are never forgotten by man. Man forever remains an aspiring being. His dream is like the dream of the patriarchal Jacob, the dream of the ladder which stood on earth but whose top reached the sky. A man must forever climb this ladder even though he knows that its rungs are the rungs of pain and suffering.

Passover for us Jews is a symbol of this aspiration in man. And Easter for the non-Jew is also a symbol of aspiration. Passover is the symbol of man's wish to rise from slavery to freedom. Easter is the symbol of man's wish to rise from death to resurrection, immortality. The quest for freedom and the hope of immortality, of deathlessness, are two of the life hungers of the human being which endure forever. And both of these are grounded in man's unquenchable optimism, in man's faith in better things to come, in a world which is moving to greater justice and to greater nobility. Man never yields to

defeat in his own life or to imperfection in his environment and he refuses to regard these defeats and imperfections as anything final. On the ruins of ten thousand peoples man builds his dream castle. He knows that while experience and calm judgment will point to man the sharp ravagings of human possibility, man's will and hope will break through these brackets and overflow them. And this fact, this prophetic outreaching and upreaching of the spirit of man -- this aspiration is undoubtedly the most magnificent feature of human life. It is the thing that makes life livable. We call it optimism.

But it is a foolish type of optimism which is induced by one's vain well being and comfort and the absence of suffering. Because a man feels comfortable and secure, untroubled, he is inclined to think that the whole world feels that way. He cannot understand why some people are bitter, resentful, unhappy. He attributes this to lack of perspective. Such a man is inclined to think that everything is going to be better day by day. Now this is the comfortable well fed after-dinner mood of a man whose digestion is good and whose income is assured. It is a tainted foolish kind of optimism. It is a rather nice kind.

On the other hand there is a foolish kind of pessimism induced by man's personal misfortune, illness. Because he himself has been defeated in life, -- has suffered serious loss or is in the grip of pain, he is inclined to believe that the whole world is dark and dreary. He cannot understand why some people are cheerful, enterprising and happy. He assumes that the world, in spite of what any man can do about it is going to rack and ruin. Now this is the dark mood of frustration and exhaustion. It is a foolish pessimism.

The true optimist is neither naive nor partially romantic. He does not believe that this is the best of all possible worlds. He does not get up every morning singing that God is in his world that God is in his heaven and that all is right in the world. In fact the real optimist does not talk in absolutes nor in superlatives at all. Nor is he the happy-go-lucky Micawbre type of person hoping that something good is going to turn up. The real optimist believes that better things can be had in the world provided that better efforts be advanced and that better ways be found to achieve them. The real optimist believes in a world of rich possibilities, of great potentialities which can be had by man provided that man sets about translating these potentialities into actualities -- translating the possibilities in actualities. The real optimist believes in an expandable world, not forever contracted by sharp iron walls of fate or destiny. These frontiers can be moved, can be widely advanced provided that man exercises his pioneering spirit and has courage to go forward and discover it.

The real optimist recognizes the evil in the world but believes that many evils if not most of them can be corrected, that the crooked can be made straight.

The real optimist accepts no type of fatalism, neither pessimism nor defeatism which declares that the world is moving inevitably to certain doom and collapse, nor that rosy fatalism which assumes that the world is moving inescapably to some goal, some far off evil, regardless of what man does or does not do about it.

In other words, the optimistic person looks for a better social order, better condition of society, confident that such an order can be

had. In this confidence he finds grounds for cheerfulness, for hopefulness as well as a great challenge to his work.

It has been said by some one who sought to contrast optimism with pessimism that "two men look through the same bars. One sees the mud and one sees the stars." Now that is a popular but I am afraid inaccurate definition of optimism and pessimism. A true optimist sees the mud, but he sees also the stars. The optimist reminds his fellow men as well as himself when they are sunk in the mud and the mire that perhaps the stars are more significant and more durable than the mud.

Passover, my friends, if it is anything, is a holiday of optimism, of hopefulness, of aspiration, of optimism. Every symbol connected with the beautiful historic festival of Israel speaks of hope, life, cheer, spring. When you or your father hold up at the very beginning of the Seder service the matzoth, when they say "Ha Lachma Anya", This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt, This year, we are here in exile, in suffering; next year in the land of Israel. Now we are slaves. Next Year we shall be free men." That proclamation in that note through the whole ceremony of the Seder speaks of this undying optimism and hopefulness of Israel.

If you read your Haggadah, over and over again you will find that same refrain sung. At first, in the early days, our forefathers were worshippers of idols, but now, after long centuries of upward climbing, God brought us nearer unto his true , progress and advancement. This is what happened to our fathers and to us. We read in the same Haggadah:

"Not one man alone arise to destroy us but in every generation tyrants and oppressors arose to destroy us but God, Beloved be He, delivers us from their hands." Never doom, never the victory of evil in the world but redemption, emancipation as the ultimate.

You may recall that beautiful song towards the end of the Haggadah. There came to the people in the darkness of the midnight when all hope seemed to be lost, redemption. Light broke through the darkness and salvation came. You recall that ⁱⁿ one part of the Seder service the door is opened and Elijah is welcomed in. Elijah is the forerunner of the Messiah -- the man who is to announce the glad tidings of a world redeemed from war, from hate, from poverty. Elijah is welcomed into every Jewish household on the Eve of Passover as a symbol of the Messianic era which is someday to come. And so the whole theme of the Holiday of Passover is joy and gratitude, my friends, for the fact that God has led our people from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from gloom to the great light, and therefore, we sing on this holiday of Passover, a new song of deliverance and hope.

No people has ever had more reason to be more pessimistic than our people. They have gone through so much from the days of the slavery of the Pharaohs in Egypt to the new slavery which has shaken the great community of Israel in our own day in Germany. How much of persecution, how much of degradation, how much of humiliation, how much wandering and exile! And yet, as you read Jewish literature, Jewish law and Jewish folklore, if you know the significance of Jewish customs, you will discover a marvelous note of cheerfulness and hopefulness throughout. The ones who should have been the great pessimists in history

who in their darkest hour will call upon the name of God with patience, with stoicism, with piety.

I wonder how many of the Egyptians standing beside the cities of Pithom and Rameses, thirty-five centuries ago, watching the Hebrew slaves building under the drive of the lash of the taskmaster, I wonder how many of the proud and aristocratic Egyptian noblemen could have imagined that centuries later, many many centuries later, long after the splendid Egyptian civilization will have become a memory, long after there will have remained of the great Egyptian civilization nothing but ruined temples and pyramids and crumbling mummies -- that centuries later, forty centuries later, the descendents of these same slaves would be carving highways for human thought in every land of the world, that the descendents of these slaves -- sixteen millions of them -- would be living, creating, achieving in every land of the earth. Who, of them, could have imagined that these slaves, least of all the slaves, who could have imagined that someday, four thousand years later, their descendents would be young again, free again, vigorous again and set about building in Palestine, driving, toiling with song on their lips, a young people again, a rejuvenated, a revitalized people?

That is the miracle, my friends, of Jewish history. When you think of the Jewish people, you somehow think of them as patriarchal, as old men, bent with the load of years, crushed, just as you think of Moses as Michael Angelo thought of him, as a stern law giver, long-bearded, venerable, cosmic. They don't think of Moses as the babe whose cradle rocked upon the waters of the Nile. They don't think of Moses as the prince who lived in the royal court. They don't think

They don't think of Moses as the young revolutionary who went forth from the gilded halls of the palace to his toiling brothers and in wrath slew an Egyptian. They don't think of Moses as a shepherd, a dreamer who heard voices and saw visions. They think of Moses as they think of the Jews -- in terms patriarchal, ancient, venerable.

We are an old people, it is true. But somehow we are a people with the mark of eternal youth. We are young. We are creating today at the end of our millennial wanderings all over the earth.

That, my friends, is the theme of Passover. It speaks to you and to me in hopeful terms. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged by the Hitlers and their henchmen in one part of the world or in another who would destroy a people which knows the secret of eternal self-renewal. And I suppose that the same message of Passover ought to go forth to the entire world.

The whole world today is in the midst of discontentment. Ice and snow, winds and storms are what mankind has had in the last few hard years. But do not fear. The ice will thaw and the snow will melt and the spring will come again. The buds will come anew. Right thinking and good will and brotherhood will again reclaim their places of old in human minds and years. This mad period through which we are passing is not the last final period in the history of the world. Hopefulness, confidence -- that is the message of Passover.

But it is well to remember that unlike nature, in society, the other seasons of the year do not follow automatically. Good is not automatic. Man has to work for good. Men have to work and struggle for the good. While Passover is a holiday of hopefulness, it is not a holiday of foolish optimism. It calls to men and women to exert

themselves to the utmost in defense of the great human values which are today being endangered in the world and in preparing of the way for a juster and nobler social and economic order. And for us Jews in particular, it is a challenge to work in defense of those institutions in Jewish life which have somehow become our

of strength; to work for the coming of that Kingdom of God which our prophets hoped for long long ago.

"Today we labor under many disabilities, great unhappiness; next year, with the will of God and the achievement of man -- next year, we shall be free men."



1. Men's minds absorbed - Life's hunger - Man is aspiring - Jacob
Passover for us Jews - Easter - The quest - Grounded - in faith -
world order moving -
Man's strong, proud spirit - will not accept defeat, imperfections -
on the ruins - Reason + experience - Magnificent

2. This is a foolish optimism induced - well-being, comfort, absence
Because one feels well - secure, untroubled
Cannot understand
He attributes - lack of perception - wrong description
He assumes that world - getting better day by day - at least
This is the comfortable, well-fed, after-dinner mood of a man

3. On the other hand there is a foolish pessimism - misfortunes, ill-luck
Because one has been defeated -
He cannot understand
He attributes -
He assumes that world, in spite
This is the dark mood of frustration, exhaustion & resentful anger

4. True Op. neither naive - childishly romantic
"Best of all possible worlds" - "Gods in the Heaven"
Absolutes & superlatives generally
Happy-go-lucky 14th. Mikander, "will turn up"

Real Op. believes that better things can be had

Believes in world of rich possibilities -

Expandable world - frontiers - widely advanced -

Recognizes Evils - corrected

Accepts no fatalism - unthinkable doom - "Golden Age"

He works for a better social order - confident - cheer -

5. (Inst)

"2 men look thru the same bars

One sees the mund, and on the stars"

Popular - instant - The two Op. see both

Shutting his eyes -

Op. reminds men -

be widely advanced, if man ^{will} employ his pioneering zeal
and courage to go out on voyages of discovery.
He recognizes the evils of life. He believes that many if
not most of them can be corrected. He accepts no
fatalism either of an inevitable doom for mankind or a
now and ever capable golden age. He works for a
better social order - convinced that such an order
is possible, within reach of man. And he is made
cheerful and happy by the prospect as well as by
the challenge to him.

5. Sumner has said, the phenomenon & the personnel - (Just)
that is a popular - but inexact contrast. The phenomenon, if
he is not just a hollyhock, must see the ground as well
as the stars - shutting one eye to the ground & the ground,
the sun and tragedy, life does not make one an
unconscious foot and bone - not an opportunity. The
phenomenon reminds men & himself that there is ground
in life - there are also stars - and that the stars
are more lovely and significant than the ground

6. Panama is symbol of optimism.

הוא אומאן עמיל - הילגין אצט - אונד פארה צו חוץ (1)

מחאה סגור סכרם ה' וואלדן - וועט א דירטן האקאס (2)

③ ומה עמדה / ומה עמדה ומה - מה עמדה ומה עמדה
 מה עמדה - מה עמדה ומה עמדה ומה עמדה
 מה עמדה - מה עמדה

④ מה עמדה - מה עמדה ומה עמדה ומה עמדה
 מה עמדה ומה עמדה, מה עמדה ומה עמדה

⑦ In whole there, lament is joyous gratitude for
progress - for the miracle of advancement
 מה עמדה - מה עמדה ומה עמדה ומה עמדה
 מה עמדה ומה עמדה - מה עמדה ומה עמדה
 that is the new song!

WRHS



⑤ ומה עמדה ומה עמדה - in the darkness of the
 midnight - when all hope seemed to be lost - the
 event of deliverance and redemption

⑥ Elijah

7. Jew has every reason to be a pessimist & yet has remained
 an unconquered optimist.

- ① What people has suffered as much as Israel - from Pharaoh
- ② And yet with a optimism - in life - love - custom - ceremony
with pattern - stream - human - living - Faith
- ③ Who standing beside Pithon / Pharaoh -
- ④ Revival of a people - a language - a Jewish community -

8- We should not lose that hopefulness to-day.

5. people not deserted being Hitler this cohort -

Other days (brighter days?) are coming

Our task is to work for these other days - brighter days

To all we can to undermine - economic pressure -

Work for liberal preservation of prin. of liberty - equality - fraternity
- eclipsed to-day - but -

9. The World should not lose its hopefulness - its

feeling of (Spring) " Thus the is the (winter) 7 our

discontent " (Cold) (Ice) will return - Fear -

hates - depression - The ice will thaw, The snow,

will melt. " The bad will appear gain in the earth,

① the new season do not fall each

② the automatically as in nature. The new must
be forced by human will plans - Can be.

We can build a juster, richer, happier civilization

10. " The Great Parsons " -

There must be - Masses

The great leader - Teaching.

The mass - following

Cross road -

Promised land

40 ys in wilderness - as to

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sermon 434

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