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What is it to be an American?, 1936.

WRHS



WHAT IT IS TO BE AN AMERICAN?

By

Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At

The Temple

On

Sunday morning, November 1, 1936

Fifty years ago, a statue of heroic proportions, the gift of the French people to the people of the United States, was unveiled on Bedloe Island in the heart of New York. That statue is the famous Statue of Liberty. In its right hand it holds up the torch symbolizing life, liberty. In its left hand it holds a book upon which is inscribed the famous date in the history of the world - July 4, 1776. The book and its date symbolize liberty under law.

This statue which is the gift of the French people to America commemorates the alliance of two nations in achieving the independence of the United States and attests their abiding friendship.

There is a close spiritual and political linking between France and America - the spirit which informed and guided the action of the famous fathers of the United States - the spirit of ~~the~~ 18th century France. Without that spirit of the French philosophers, humanitarians, it is doubtful whether the American revolution would have taken place or if it had taken place, the same direction which it took. But there was more than spiritual concordance there. France vitaly aided the American Revolution. Out of the treasury of Louis 16 came the money and much of the supplies which were used by the American revolution. French generals, the type of the Marquis La Fayette came over and helped to train the raw recruits who fought in the war. In the last battle of the war at Yorktown, actually as many French soldiers were fighting in the revolutionary ranks as Americans. The French ships blockaded the harbor which kept Cornwallis from

reaching the battlefield.

The spirit of concordance continued through the generations which followed and received a new attestation in 1917 when American soldiers sailed eastward to do battle in France just as 150 years before that time French soldiers sailed westward to do battle on American shores.

So that the statue which was this week commemorated because of the Jubilee year of its unveiling, was in very truth and has been a symbol of the abiding friendship which exists between these two great republics. Its torch held aloft has come to signify the spirit of freedom for all the oppressed and the persecuted of the earth. To that extent the Statue of Liberty has become one of the sacred symbols to all of mankind.

It is interesting to note that America has two such symbols - this one and the Liberty Bell which is in the old State House in Philadelphia. They are both precious in the eyes of the American people.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that on the Liberty Bell is engraved a sentence taken from the Jewish Bible. And on the Statue of Liberty is a poem written by a Jewish woman. And it is no accident that Americans went to these sources to find the text for the spirit of freedom and democracy which is vital in American life. In the 25th Chapter of Leviticus which I read this morning we read "Proclaim Liberty through the land. It shall be a year of Jubilee unto you."

And on the Statue of Liberty, in its pedestal, is found this poem by Emma Lazarus called "The New Collossus." The men of the revolution

very often turned to the Jewish Bible not only for inspiration but for warrant of the revolutionary act to overthrow a king which was then looked upon as a supreme revolutionary action. They found in the Bible warrant for such action. In Exodus we find the first great revolution when the people broke their shackles of slavery and struck out for freedom. Samuel proved that there is no such thing as the Divine Rights of Kings. A free people governs its life by the will of God through its own chosen leaders and spokesmen. That is a fact in history. That democracy is of the very warp and woof of Jewish law and even the anti-Semites know it.

In Mein Kampf, Hitler writes that democracy is not a German product, that it is a typical Jewish product and that is true.

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants of it." That was written more than 30000 years ago.

Emma Lazarus in her fine new poem voices this Judeo-American spirit of liberty. More than that, she also voices the vision of America as the haven of the refugee, the home for all the denied and dispossessed of all the earth. Let me read you that brief poem because so few are acquainted with it. It is called the New Collussus.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from
land to land,
Here at our sea-washed, sunset
gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning,
and her name

Mother of exiles; from her becon hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes
command

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp," cries she
With silent lips, "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Now that was the vision of America. That was the vision which inspired Many Antin's "Promised Land", Israel Zanwill's "Melting Pot" - I believe that was the America. As the years passed, however, America has become much less generous, much less tolerant. The spirit of Xenophobia, of fear is displayed and the stranger, the immigrant has been invading our lives. You may recall that soon after the World War set in hundred of undesirable aliens came to our shores and a deportation of them set in. Soon after the World War, a clamor arose for a quota on immigrants, on immigrant restriction, not based on worth, or wealth, or even possessions but on racial antecedents. This was ^{an} utterly new and foreign principle which was introduced into American life.

Twenty to thirty years ago, we stressed the immigrant motif in our own national celebrations. We were proud to think of America as a home, a haven to immigrants. Today, that motif is torn down though there are fourteen to fifteen million foreign born here and twice to three times that number of children of foreign born

Old
Contact with the World during the World War has infected us with old world ideas which have proved so rolific in the Old World. Racism, Gleichschaltung - these are typical oldworld obsessions. They have come to dwell in certain circles in our own land.

Now an occasion such as this one which we witnessed

this week - the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty - ought to bring home to the American people that it is not too late to recapture the vision of American destiny. Perhaps it is not too late and it may be too late, before very long, to stress and take part and parcel of our collective life those self-evident truths which were of the very heart of American life until very recently.

That book in the left hand of that heroic figure symbolizes liberty and the date commemorates the immortal doctrine written in this land and given as a legacy of the whole world - the Declaration of Independence - and in that Declaration of Independence certain principles were enunciated which have acted as a beacon light clear down to the present day. Its principles are simple. They are not ambiguous. They are dynamite in the modern world. "All men are created equal", is one of the plattitudes. You know that we have repeated this ever since our school days - one of those plattitudes which has suddenly become a focus of the bitterest controversy in the modern world. In a sense that is a religious idea - this idea that "All men are created equal." It derives from a basic conviction that every man is created in the image of God - therefore every man partakes of the glories and the grace which belong to God.

All men are equal not in their endowments - physical or mental but all men are equal as far as their basic rights are concerned - to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In the sight of God, therefore, there must be no special privileges for any one in a just government set up by the people of God.

It is like a harp. A harp has many strings. Some of the

strings are longer than others. Each string yields up its own sound. The little string is just as important in the melody as is the long string.

All men are equal. That means race equality. There are no superior races. There are no inferior races. There are backward races. There are forward races. There are no inferior races. No race exists for the sake of allowing another race to exploit it.

It is well for us to recall what America stands for. All men are endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The President of the United States, not so long ago said: "Liberty depends not so much on government but the liberty which is derived, wrested from that government. The Revolution started from that very idea - that the state has absolutely no power of curtailment of rights which belong to man because man is what he is not because he is a member of a political society. There are certain areas in the government reserved for the people which the state dare not trespass on. They knew its dangers and they therefore established a Bill of Rights to protect the individual against the invasion of bureaucratic state against individual rights. - Freedom of speech, freedom of criticism - that is what freedom of speech means, freedom of assembly, freedom of press, the right to criticize public officials which you have elected. Today in every country of the world these privileges are being scrapped. Man everywhere ~~isn't~~ today hasn't the right to criticize his government or to question its motives. Today man is being driven into terrified submergence to his state.

He has been re-enslaved by a state which has completely mobilized every department . Now the genius of America is the complete antithesis of such totalitarianism. We fought that battle more than one hundred and fifty years ago and will have to fight it out again, I am afraid.

But it is well to remember what America was when we plan what the future America shall be. The purpose of government you read further, is to make such rights secure. Government exists in order to enable an individual to pursue his rights to liberty and happiness. Government does not exist for itself. Citizens do not exist to serve the state. The state exists to make life secure for the citizen. Today efforts are being made to idealize the state, to set up the state as an idol - the state is something mystic, something sacrosanct. The individual must prostrate himself before the high officials of state. The state is merely the machinery which free people set up in order to do something for them, to insure law and order. There is nothing heroic and nothing holy about a state or about a government. And therefore they said in that same Declaration of Independence whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ideals, the people have a right to alter or to abolish it and to institute a new government.

I hear a good deal today about radicalism as being un-American and I say to myself - people who make that statement don't know the spirit of America. Radicalism ~~may~~ may be wrong. Ideas may be wrong. Change is the very heart of Americanism. Man has a right ~~to~~ to alter or to abolish the form of government/existing when

he decides that that form of government no longer contributes to the life and happiness of his people. It doesn't say that it is either a wise^{or}/practical thing to do. The constitution provides ways of altering the government but it never deprives ~~to~~ an individual^{of} his way of thinking. That is the America of Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, the Fathers of the American Revolution - certainly not the America of the sons and daughters of the American Revolution. But it is the real America to those who made it. And I maintain ^{is} that if America/to maintain what it was, these must remain the hallmarks of true America, the real aims. "Eualigh of Men" is a hard thing to believe in but it is a great and noble thing to aspire to.

America realizes that there are differences between men and just because there are differences tries to find a human denominator, to find that one basic point of difference. The true American is^a/tolerant person. He knows that this country was built by the sweat of the brow and the soul of nearly every race upon the face of this earth. Children from all corners of the earth came here and it was they who built our highways and erected our buildings and our cities and brought forth wealth from our mines. Children of all races built this country - not one race but all races and this country belongs to all who built it.

At the time when this immortal doctrine was written, America was a polyglot of races and of religions. One hundred and fifty years ago, America already had representatives of almost every religious denomination in the world. There were Jews, Christians, Methodists, Lutherans, etc. We began as a composite. We continue

as a composite people. The real America continues to resent all forms of racial arrogance so much of which is outcropping in our day.

"Thou Union holding all, fusing, absorbing, tolerating all, Thee, ever thee, I sing". That was Walt Whitman's definition of America and the true American today is still jealous of his life, jelouos of his prerogatives and privileges and resents too much government interference, too much government control. The true American continues to regard the dangers of free enterprise as a right. The pioneering spirit is still a moving, propelling spirit within him, that same spirit which brought his ancestors here and which enabled them to expand and settle a vast continent. The true American today insists upon reserving for himself the right to criticize his government, the right to dissent, the right of free speech, the right to speak his mind, the right of others to speak theirs similarly. The true American today, like his father a century and a half ago believes in change, radical experimentation. He is not a doctrinaire. He believes in making all necessary adjustments. He wants more freedom for himself and his children. He wants more economic freedom. He doesn't want the privileges restricted to the hands of a few.

These are to my mind still the hallmarks of real Americanism not a stodgy conservatism - a broad dream, love of adventure, of free living and of great opportunity in the world. That is the true American spirit. And as long as the free valiant spirit remains, so long will America remain what that Statue of Liberty says it is - a land of liberty in law.

We of our generation, unlike the men of those distant days, obtained our liberty, perhaps to cheaply. Se didn't have to sacrifice for them as they did then - seven bloody years of war, privation. That is why so many speak so glibly about a possibility of dictatorship in this country. That is why so many of us are indifferent to the menacing threats in American life which tend to undermine the temples upon which American democracy rests. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty - this was said by one of the revolutionary leaders. It still remains a true eternal vigilance particularly in 1936.

Why is it that the Fascists and Nazis and Communists in their countries pay so much attention to inculcating the rising generation with the principles of their philosophy? Why they take them from the very cradle in Italy, Germany and Russia and indoctrinate them day after day with their principles of madness.

We, in this country, how much time and thought do we spend inculcating these American ideals of inalienable rights, of equality of man, of brotherhood and tolerance and good will in the rising generation of America? We have taken these ~~ix~~ things for granted, we have accepted them. While we take that attitude of indifference, of quiet passivity, acceptance grave thoughts pass over the minds of the American rising generation great forces are being brought to them to shake their vast faith.

I think that America will soon awake to the necessity of impending its soul against a recrudescence of that ~~x~~ form of human enslavement for which the founders fought and wrested a century and a half ago.

There are three great democracies left in the world, the greatest of these is the United States and perhaps the last great war for these principles will be fought out on our own shores.



1/ So - a statue - heroic - gift - unveiled - Famous -
In its right arm - "Liberty based on Law"

2/ Statue commemorates "the alliance of the 2 nations in
achieving the ind. of the U.S. of Amer. - and attests their
abiding friendship."

(*) Close sp. + pol. link. the ideas which informed
without

(*) Strong financial + military assistance. Louis XVI

Fr. officers - Marguis - Baron de Kalb
Yorktown - ships blockaded

(1) Concordance - 1917.

3/ But Statue - more > Friendship of 2 Nations.
Spirit of New World - America
Symbol of liberty to Oppressed
One of the Sacred Symbols of Mankind.

4/ Am. has 2 such - Liberty Bell - old State House
Significant - engraved (Ser. 25) "Proclaiming.."
Inside pedestal - "The New Colossus"
No accident that Am. found the text - voiced
those who preached the Revolution - quoted
Not Royalty - but Theocracy -
Hitler - "blame = Jewish" -

5) Emma Lazarus - voices not only "Judean An" spirit of
Liberty - but also Vision of America
Haven - Heroic destiny - "God's Crucible"
Emancipator of dark-skinned - Rebuilders

(Just)

6) This was Ann - Mary Antin's "The Promised Land"
Since - less generous - intolerant - xenophobic
Alien deportations
Justa measures
Tendency - Lincoln - "White Prot. majority"
interlopers
Muzzling down immigrant motif - 14 m.
Old-world nationalisms - super-heated patriotism
"condemnation"
Growth of rel. + racial intolerance so rampant
Pace we are paying

7) Occasion - such as this - not too late - recapture
One of 3 - hopes of embattled democracy

8) Go back to Self-evident Truths,

"All men are created Equal -
A Religious doctrine - PB2 - partakes

Not equal as to endowments - as to rights - as to ⁽³⁾
Sp. worth -

Strings on Harp

All-important - none exists to be exploited

Race-equality - No superior - to be exploited

Race-modern - Nazism - 150 yrs. later

II "Are endowed by their Creator with certain
unalienable rights, including life, liberty and the
pursuit of happiness"

Liberty - Wrested

Bloody war -

State encroachment - Charters -

To usurp Freedom | Speech etc (Inst 2)

To-day - scrap

III "The purpose of Govt is to make such rights
secure... For these reasons, govts are instituted
deriving their just powers from the consent
of the governed"

Govt. exists for men - not vice versa

Liberalize State

Totalitarianism - Anti-liberals -

Regimentation - most vehemently opposed

(4)

IV. "Whenever any form of govt becomes destructive of these ends, the people have a right to alter or abolish it, and institute a new govt, in a form most likely to effect their safety & happiness."

Right to Revolution -

Those who damn radicals as un-American.

9) These still remain half-measures

(1) Belief in Human Equality - hard.

Dedicated to proportion

Seeks common human denominator

Recognizes diff - Tolerant -

Not Racial hatred - Races from all over -

hate - Sects -

Resents all forms - race antagonism - rel. hatred

(2) Jealousy - rights - freedom -

Resents too much - dangers - Robot -

Prefers adventure & dangers of Freedom - Pioneer
which but Ancestors

Freedom to criticize - change - Experiment

Right to dissent

(5)

Beliefs in Progress - New adjustments -
NOT doctrinaire - metaphysics -
new opportunity

10/ As long - free, strong variant,
"men to match our nts"

11/ Our age obtained too cheap - esteem too highly
External Vig, laud -



THE NEW COLOSSUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from
land to land,
Here at our sea-washed, sunset
gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightening,
and her name
Mother of exiles; from her beacon hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes
command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp," cries she
With silent lips, "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

(2) "It is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government, for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order - 1785 statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom.

(3) "Thou Union holding all, fusing, absorbing, tolerating all,
Thee, ever thee, I sing."

Walt Whitman

THE CLEVELAND COMMUNITY FUND

Cordially Invites You to the

Official Opening of the 1936 National Mobilization For Human Needs

Masonic Auditorium - - 3615 Euclid Avenue

Friday, November 6, 8:15 p. m.



Gerard Swope



Mrs. Harper Sibley



Rabbi A. H. Silver

Cleveland is honored as the site of the official opening of the 1936 Mobilization, which annually promotes contributors' interest in many local Community Fund campaigns occurring each Fall.

PROGRAM FEATURES

THE SINGERS' CLUB of CLEVELAND, BORIS GOLDOVSKY, Conductor.
First appearance under its new leader.

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER, The Temple.

MRS. HARPER SIBLEY of Washington, D. C.
Chairman of the National Women's Committee for the 1936
Mobilization for Human Needs.

MR. GERARD SWOPE of New York City.
Chairman of the National Citizens' Committee for the Mobilization,
President of the General Electric Company.

COAST-TO-COAST RADIO BROADCAST, 10 to 10:30 P. M.

During this interval, PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT will broadcast from the White House on behalf of the Mobilization. MR. SWOPE will respond by radio from the Cleveland platform. The radio time (and our meeting) will close at 10:30 sharp, with selections by the SINGERS' CLUB.

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