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What is Permanent in Jewish Experience?, 1937.

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WHAT IS PERMANENT IN JEWISH EXPERIENCE?

The last of a series of lectures on the theme, "Things Permanent."

By  
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At  
The Temple

On  
Sunday morning, November 28, 1937



It is history that the Jewish people found its strongest proofs for the existence of a personal and moral God who reveals himself in historical apostasy. Theologic postulates: "I am the Lord Thy God" is buttressed up in the Bible not by any logical syllogism or by any scientific proof but by the statement concerning a great national historic experience: "I am the Lord Thy God who has brought thee out of the land of Egypt and out of the House of Bondage."

What happened in time and why it happened always intrigued the genius of our race. All the narratives of the Bible, for example, are strung on a continuous thread of chronology - a thin thread with the moral implication of each narrative. The first word of the Bible is a time term: "In the Beginning". The saga of creation is very carefully divided into time periods - what happened on the first day, on the second day, on the third day, etc. And each act of Creation is formally closed with a mural judgment: "And God saw that it was good". Throughout the Bible you will find such a phrase as "These are the generations", "This is the book of the generations".

Jews like to write history. They like to read history. And they like to trace the ways of God in history. It might interest you to know that the historic narratives of our people are the earliest historic records of mankind. And the Jews like to reflect longingly and searchingly upon men of history and particularly on their own history, "Things of Old". They like to study them and draw wisdom and guidance out of the past for the future.



And this history of our people which they lovingly studied and searched and analyzed is a long history - 4000 years old, the longest recorded history of any people still living. The stretch of Jewish history, the very sweep of it captivated not merely the minds of Jews but of non-Jews. So a great French writer, A. Leroy Beaulieu, says this about the Jewish people after having studied their history.

"They Are Our Elders"

"Next to the selection that has been in operation for centuries, it is, in my opinion, the antiquity and the continuity of their civilization that throws some light upon the Jews as well as upon the place they occupy in our midst. They were here before us; they are our elders. Their children were taught to read from the scrolls of the Torah before our Latin alphabet had reached its final form, long before Cyrillus and Methodius had given writing to the Slavs, and before the Runic characters were known to the Germans of the North. As compared with the Jews, we are young, we are newcomers; in the matter of civilization they are far ahead of us. It was in vain that we locked them up for several hundred years behind the walls of the Ghetto. No sooner were their prison gates unbarred than they easily caught up with us, even on those paths which we had opened up without their aid."

This being the case, it is not difficult in scanning the whole sweep of Jewish history, to discover the things which are permanent in Jewish history and conversely the things which are only transversal.



We can, with confidence, knowing what has preceded, trace the trajectory of Jewish life. And so, if I were asked to express an opinion on what is permanent in Jewish experience, I would point first of all to this fact, an incontrovertible fact in Jewish history - namely - the strong vital sense, the strong life line, the strong will to live. The Jewish race is physically, a very hardy race, a prolific race. The ancients commented on it. Cassidus in one of his books calls attention to this remarkable phenomenon - their hardiness and their fertility. In the ancient world, that is in the Graeco-Roman world, one out of every fifth person was a Jew.

During the Middle Ages, massacres, persecution and conditions under which the Jews were compelled to live - in ghettos and economic conditions sharply decreased the population so that by the time the seventh century arrived, there were probably no more than a million or a half-million Jews in the whole world. Yet, such is the inherent strength, the will to live of this people that as soon as opportunities to live were extended to the Jewish people, they began to increase and multiply at an amazing pace. In the year 1800 there were probably two and a half million Jews; in 1900 there were ten and a half million Jews. In 1933 there were sixteen million Jews in the world. The Jews today are increasing at the rate of one hundred and twenty thousand a year. In the large and small communities throughout the last two thousand years, the people of Israel have been exiled, persecuted, were voluntarily or involuntarily assimilated. Intermarriage tended to decrease the Jewish population. But in spite of it all, in spite of the squalor which existed, in spite of innumerable restrictions under which



it lived. One is amazed to discover this remarkable persistency, this tenacious and triumphant clinging to life. And this is a tremendously significant fact, perhaps the most significant thing about the Jewish experience in these thousands of years. All those who are given to calculations over the Jewish experience, ought not to overlook this amazing fact, that thirty-five centuries of the most severe and trying and in many ways disruptive experiences, with a highly elaborate technique of foes of Israel to destroy them, it has not succeeded in breaking or diminishing them. And this fact, this capacity to live can be counted on in the future, in the indefinite future of Israel.

Secondly there is a strong sense of solidarity among the Jewish people, a group loyalty the like of which you are not likely to find anywhere in the world. A rabbi said "that all Jews are brothers. All Jews are responsible for one another. The Jewish people always rally to the defense of Jews in other communities that are in need. During the Middle Ages, it was quite common as a result of numerous wars for Jews to be sold as slaves. It was the first duty of the Jews to redeem these captives from slavery. It is from Biblical times to the present that Jews always rallied to defense of fellow Jews in times of need. You saw it in the World War when life was stricken. And you see it today again in Germany. This, too, is a permanent feature of Jewish experience. It can be counted upon quite definitely at all times.

There is a third permanent thing in Jewish experience which also may be looked upon as a derivative of this first "will to live." - the movement towards, the striving after a



national restoration, national rehabilitation. When the Jews found themselves in Egypt - all the logic of history would dictate that these people be submerged, completely lost. Yet this will to survive as a people begins to assert itself. A leader among these slaves arises, a great leader - Moses - and leads them from slavery, from the lives of enshackled slaves to the lives of a nation on its way to the Promised Land. A few centuries later, when the Kingdom of Judea is destroyed and our people is exiled to Babylon - and there again the logic of history would dictate that the Jewish people as every other people, would be uprooted - again that impulse, that will to live as an independent people finds expression in a movement back to Judea. Again leaders arise to lead the people to Palestine, to a national home. And on the ruins of the Old Judea, they build a new Judea.

The same thing happened after the destruction of the Second Temple during the second exile. The Messianic hope, however, never disappeared from our people. Our messianic hope was always identified with a challenge that to every generation the Temple must be rebuilt for "In every generation in which the Temple was not rebuilt, is as if the Temple had been destroyed in that generation." In the 19th century, for many Jews, the hope of a national restoration of the Jewish Homeland began to wane. Jewish people were allowed economic equality and there was no longer a need for a National Homeland. With the reaction of the Dreyfus Affair in France, the Jews suddenly realized that emancipation is not an answer to freedom. And a third great movement was initiated back to Palestine.



And so you may postulate as another permanent thing in Jewish experience - this continuing indefeasible will, this hope to rehabilitate itself nationally in its own Homeland. What is going on in Palestine today - this remarkable epoch of rebuilding, is simply another manifestation of this hope of Israel to re-establish itself as a people in a national home.

A fourth permanent thing I would point to is this - Jewish adaptability and Jewish Religio-cultural independence. By that I mean that a Jew never lends himself to any truculent or cultural self-sufficiency. The Jew never voluntarily isolated himself in the world. The Jew welcomed all elements of truth from all cultures, from all civilizations. The Jew was in contact with all the civilizations of mankind - in ancient days, the culture of the Nile, the Hellenic, the Persian, Arabic and the Western-European culture. The Jew was eager to learn the languages. They studied their literature. But never to the point of submerging itself, never to the point of self-obliteration. The Jew was always conscious of the fact that he, too, possessed a unique and challenging culture, that he, too, had something to give as well as to take.

Only when the Jew felt himself threatened, only when he felt that the essentials of his culture, his Moral Life, his Monotheism, his exalted ethical culture was being endangered, that he began to build fences around himself. - Evidenced in Festival of Chanukah which we are celebrating.

By and large, the Jewish mind is open, eager and ready to welcome



new elements of truth, but he was always eager to conserve for himself the tremendous truths which are his gift to mankind.

And another permanent thing in Jewish experience has been Judaism - religion of the sense of moral and religion mission. It is true to say that the Jew has been responsible for the survival of Judaism. There would be no Judaism if there were no Jews. Jehuda ha Levi said "There would be no Torah if there were no Israel". Also, it is a truth to say, perhaps even more so, that Judaism is responsible for the survival of the Jewish people. For it is Judaism, its great faith and its high ethical postulates which sustained and inspired generations of our people and moved them to acts of martyrdom and sacrificial loyalty under all circumstances and upon all levels of culture.

Perhaps the strongest factor in the survival of the Jewish people is the "enduring tie" which held together the scattered host of Israel throughout all these centuries. The Jewish people could not have survived two thousand years without it and will not survive. Jewish people divorced from their religion go under as Jews, - unless active anti-Semitism, as in Germany, will force them back upon themselves against their wills. That is a very inglorious way of living. Our people should not depend upon external forces to underwrite its survival.

Therefore the synagogue is the center of Jewish life. And the interesting thing is that inspite of all the prophets of war and doom that one has been listening to now for many decades, many institutions vanished but the synagogue always goes on. Substitutes have been offered for the synagogue, secular Jewish nationalism centered in Palestine or diaspora minority rights, Jewish centers, a fictitious



Jewish civilization, Jewish philanthropic agencies, with organized charity as the central motif. That is fantastic. There will be Jewish philanthropy as long as there will be Jewish synagogues.

Lastly, a permanent thing in Jewish experience in the diaspora is anti-Semitism of one sort or another, active or passive, economic rivalry, regardless of what is the basis - the dislike for differences, the distrust of a minority which differs in any way from the majority - that has been responsible for a phenomenon in Jewish life which causes prejudice, anti-Semitism, bigotry which frequently attack great numbers of our people.

Lastly, as a permanent thing in Jewish experience, in answer to anti-Semitism is this fact as someone put it: "that Jewish rights and universal human rights are inseparable. The attempt to solve the Jewish problem without trying to solve the whole human problem is doomed to failure. Our history has taught us that whenever reaction sets in, the lot of the Jews begins to suffer. When tyranny, despotism, intolerance comes ~~xxx~~ up, the lot of the Jews becomes unbearable. Whenever ideals of freedom, liberty become dominant in the life of people, the lot of our people becomes better. This is a law of Jewish survival among the nations of the world. Therefore, our ultimate hope lies in the building up of an international organization, whether you call it a League of Nations, or whatever federation of peoples will come into existence - an organization which will maintain international morality and defend the minority against the intolerant invasion of the majority. The Jews should work vigorously and aggressively and if possible be the leaders in every movement of mankind which makes for social justice,



for the improvement of the masses, for democracy, for the creation of international consciousness, the establishment of international morality, for peace, brotherhood - that is part of the inescapable destiny of intelligent Jews who understand the laws which have ~~governed~~ governed the history of our people in the diaspora. Therefore it is gratifying to see in so many parts of the world Jews, especially young people who understand what their role in the world is and who are not deterred by stupid charges which they may hear but who work courageously for these classic and enduring ideals of mankind which are of the very life-blood of Jewish existence in history.

- temperament of Jewish people different from  
temperament of other peoples -

And so, my friends, these are the things which are permanent in Jewish religion - the will to live, solidarity, a desire to be restored as a people to its national homeland, a capacity for adapting ourselves to our environment but at the same time conserving what is unique in our own religion.

Not long ago, I visited a Jewish cemetery at Newport. You may recall that Newport was one of the first Jewish settlements in the new world. This poem was written about it:



"How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their  
                                graves,  
Close by the street of this fair seaport town,  
Silent beside the never-silent waves,  
At rest in all this moving up and down.

How came they here? What burst of Christian hate,  
What persecution, merciless and blind,  
Drove o'er the sea -- that desert desolate -  
These Ishmaels and Hagars of mankind?

Pride and humiliation hand in hand  
Walked with them through the world where'er  
                                they went;  
Trampled and beaten were they as the sand,  
And yet unshaken as the continent.

For in the background figures vague and vast  
Of patriarchs and prophets rose sublime,  
And all the great traditions of the Past  
They saw reflected in the coming time.

And thus forever with reverted look  
The mystic volume of the world they read,  
Spelling it backward, like a Hebrew book,  
Till life became a Legend of the Dead.

In the past we see the prophecies of the future.

What we have outlived and survived here we shall outlive and  
survive there and of the strength which was ours here will continue  
to be the strength of ours there. And the ideals which we fought for and  
only partially established here, we shall continue to fight for,  
and God be willing, establish there. You heard this morning, that  
beautiful poem "Shomer Yisrael" - guardian of Israel -  
"Let not Israel perish forever."  
The Lord Our Father, the Lord is One."



6/ Jewish Adaptability + J. Poly-cultural independence / Assimilation + Separation  
~~Never~~ Never transcendent, self-sufficiency - Welcomed elements of other cultures  
 Contact with Ancient cultures - Egypt - Memphis -  
 Taken on - Persian - Hellenic - Roman -  
 In Mesopotamia - ~~Arabic~~ Arabic - West. Europ.  
 Gave and TOOK - Learned their language + literature - <sup>while retaining his own!</sup>  
 An intermediary bet. cultures - Arab. Christian  
 But never to point of submergence - self obliteration #  
 Jew, too, had a unique + great + challenging culture -  
 When threatened, he drew in his shell, and shut the world out. Built  
 fences! When an encroaching culture threatened the essentials  
 of J. culture - Monotheism + the Moral life - Jew reacted furiously  
 and stubbornly. - (Chamberlain) Mass. resistance to Hellenizing  
 J. life rather -  
Nat + Internat. - Jewish + cosmopolitan.

7/ Religion - permanent focus of J. life <sup>Moral + Rel. Mission</sup>  
 Jew responsible for survival of Judaism <sup>but the kernel!</sup>  
 - Sustained + surprised generations, our people, retain their sacred  
 loyalty, under all circumstances upon all levels, culture  
 - Strongest factor in the mind of our people. <sup>from the start</sup> -  
 the enduring tie. -  
 we could not have survived in the dispersion - 2000 yrs -  
 without - God - Moral Law -  
 we will not survive - without it.  
 Divided from rel. loyalties - J. group will not survive - unless  
 return auto-Sem. faces them <sup>back</sup> when East - West -  
 Our greatest contribution - <sup>When the Europeans wanted that - they went to the Jews</sup>  
 which challenged Ancient - Modern Organizers -  
 - Dream state - Jewish State - Free - war -  
 - Bio chemical - Peace - Justice



8) Synagogue - center of life. Holds its own!

Substitutes - ~~J. center~~ Secular J. nationalism centered in Pal - or diaspora  
minority rights - "J. center" - symbol<sup>a picture</sup> of J. civilization, with gay -  
as a unit among many other attributes - Philanthropic agencies -  
with no charity - as central unit.  
They had not vitality enough to survive impact of reality.

8) ~~Intolerance + Emulation~~ Antisemitism - ① ~~the~~ dislike of differing minority -  
a faith which denies faith of majority - a race diff. - ② at times it  
is religious - at other it is racial - still other variations - again  
even competition -

As long as Jew is in diaspora - indefinite - and as long as world  
is ruled by intolerances of one kind or another - there will be Anti!

9) "Jew. Right + universal human rights are inseparable -  
Whenever reaction is in saddle - then Jew. position is worsened.  
This is law of Jewish existence among the nations.  
Our ultimate hope is Intern. org. of mankind, in some League,  
which will protect right of all people tall & minnows.  
Palestine can at best solve part. problem of a few - Cultural  
Center for entire J. people -  
Only Internat. solution is adequate - ① Tech. progress ②  
progress of transport & science - ensure that Intern. will  
triumph ultimately -

10) Jew will fight for that - and Social Justice - Confront - More  
interested in Man > nation; by whom life > Harmon. death of all human  
prejudices -  
By Temperament Jew subjective - anthropocentric. His spirit <sup>zealous - earnest</sup> fervent, extreme



1/ Sense of Hist. - It is in his Hist. Jew found Proof - <sup>Whose Will</sup>  
Theol. postulate - 13th - butressed - גורמים אלה -  
What happens in Time - Why - intrigued  
Biblical narratives are string - thread - moral implications  
First word - אלהים Saga of Creation - Carefully divided  
each act formally closed moral judgment  
אלהים אלהים - אלהים אחד - אלהים אחד - frequent heading.

2/ Jews liked to writ Hist - Read - Trace  
Hist. narratives of Bible - oldest  
Liked to reflect, long & searchingly, meaning of their Hist  
to פתח אלמים - to learn wisdom  
And it has been a long Hist - 4000 - longest recorded  
(Just)  
It is not difficult - in scanning - Trajectory.

3/ Will to Live ! Strong Vital Sense ! Strong life-line !  
Physically Hardy - Prolific.  
The ancients - phenomenon -  
Greco-Roman - 1 out of 5.  
Middle Ages - 17c. = 1 1/2

1800 - 2 1/2	/ 120,000 6 years
1900 - 10 1/2	
1933 - 16	



In spite - Intelligence +  
Large and small Communities - Perseverance -

But in spite, - amazed - Perseverance - Tenacious & Triumphant

This is a Remarkably big fact - perhaps most big -

calculations - 35 centuries

Can be counted upon.

4/ Solidarity . אמונה אחדות אחידות

Group loyalty - Prohibitive Isolation - אחידות -

אחידות אמונה - Germany: Our response to suffering -

Today J.D.C. - your Society -

5/ Restoration - Egypt

First Exile -

Second -

אחידות אמונה אחידות - אחידות אמונה אחידות

Messiah - אחידות אמונה אחידות

אחידות אמונה אחידות אחידות אמונה אחידות

Prayer - Festivals - Thruout Exile

To-day Zionism! 19C. -

6/ J. Adaptability + (Religio-Cultural Independence)

Truulent Self-sufficiency -

Welcomed - Contact - Voluntary Ghettos

Learned their languages - like - Intermediary

Never to point of Submergence - Jew, too, was conscious.

✓ When threatened - Essentials - אחידות -



7/ Religion - permanent Focus - Moral & Rel. Mission.

Jew responsible for survival of Jew - Halevi הלוי ה"ר ח' ר' אהרן

Sustained - inspired -

Strongest Factor -  $\frac{1}{\rho}$  or  $\frac{1}{\sigma}$ .

Could not have survived 2000

will not -

Well not -  
Divorced from Ral. Royalties - active Anti-Sem

③ Synapse - center - Holds its own.

Substitutes - secular nat - J. Civilization - Philanthropy

8/ Anti semitism - { Desire for Gentile - Minors - Intolerance -

9). "Jew. Rights & Universal Human Rights are inseparable"

## Whuman Reaction -

This is law of J. Existence among nations

Our ultimate hope - Inter. org. of mankind - League

Only Internal. Solution is adequate

10. For that we must Fight! We will!

Our position demands it.

Our character details of -

"Coronet" Anthony Parker

~~Zealots - convert - 7th century~~

~~(Inst.)~~