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The Weak in the Hands of the Strong, 1939.

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## THE WEAK IN THE HANDS OF THE STRONG

From Ancient Judea to Finland Today
A Sermon for Chanukah

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At The Temple

On Sunday morning, December 10, 1939 My dear Friends:

The Festival of Chanukah has been gaining in increasing popularity among our people as the years go by. It has become one of the most beloved of the festivals in the Jewish calendar. Evidently the ancient Rabbis understood the real significance of the Holiday for our people, for they said that the lights of Chanukah will shine forever.

I suppose there were two reasons for it. The first is the fact that at all times our people was able to draw deep draughts of courage and pride from this Festival, and secondly, because of the fact of the Holiday, them. The Holiday theme was ever fresh, was ever applicable, recurrent in human experience. It tells us how our ancient people rose from degradation and defeat, how it beat back and expelled a powerful foe, how it recaptured its freedom and honor and resumed its mighty role on the stage of history. We therefore treasure such a Festival because there are not many such heart-warming and spirit restoring moments in our history. In these, our own darkening days, the warm glow of these little Chanukah lights is especially welcome. They are the gleams of hope and faith in a nigh universal back-out. They are the little stars which shine and keep their faithful vigil in our dark and storm-swept skies.

"The miracle will yet happen again", these little lights seem
to say to us. Sanctuaries that are now polluted may be cleansed, restored,
re-dedicated anew some day. New altars will be built in place of these
altars which are now being defiled. The strong will again be delivered
into the hands of the weak, and the many into the hands of the few. The
clean, and the
unclean may be delivered again into the hands of the/wicked into the
hands of the righteous, and the Godless into the hands of the faithful.

And a small cruse of oil that was hardly adequate for the illumination of a single day will yet feed again a full season of the world's Festival

of light and freedom, may usher in again to day of joy and song and happiness for mankind.

That is why Chanukah is a popular Festival among the young and

the old - because of the courage which it restores to tired hearts, because

of the pride rekindled. But it is also popular because of the utter

appropriateness of its theme to every age, particularly to our own age,

because of its perennial active fraternity. The elemental struggle

which is raging in the world today is reflected or anticipated with amazing

faithfulness of detail in the Maccabean struggle of Twenty-one Hundred

years ago. That struggle of course was on a much smaller scale, in

little Judea. The opposing forces were far fewer in number than those

which are battling today upon the darkening plains of the world. That

doesn't matter. What is important is that the issues men are the same.

The motives then and now are the same. The significance then and now

is the same. That is not said by way of homiletics. That is taken H as a clear and accurate historical facts.

Foreshadowed in the long and desperate struggle between the forces of Syria and Judea of the Second Century before the Common Era were all the wars of human freedom, for the spiritual independence of man and of men, for the rights of smaller nations which have been waged from that time on to this. The rebels under Mattathias and Judas Maccabeus - these rebels who challenged the great might of the powerful Antiochus, ruler of Western Asia and Egypt, were all the ancestors of all the soldiers who fought against odds the spirit of man from their day to this,

What was the struggle of the Maccabees against the Greeks which we are celebrating in this Festival of Chanukah? The Jews were not fighting for their political independence. They had lost it long before that time.

They had been a politically dependent nation for nearly two hundred years before that time under the Greeks and for more than one hundred years under the Persians. What, then, was this struggle? It was a resistance against an attempt which was made to establish totalitarianism in the world them, an attempt to coordinate Judea and the Jewish people into the vast fabric of at uniform paganism. The Jews resisted this attempt at coordination, this effort at Gleichschaltung. They did not want to be paganized. They did not want to become just another Levantine nationality in the midst of a pagan empire. They abhorred not the political deficiencies or the intellectual deficiencies of paganism, but its spiritual and moral deficiencies. They abhorred its moral conventions and its moral corruption S although they appreciated fully some of its cultural, artistic and philosophic values.

They resisted, they hated its materialism, its licentiousness, its cruelty, its system of slavery, its absorption and idealization of war, its contempt for the poor, the weak.

The Jews had a superior faith than that of paganism. They had higher concepts of God and of men and of society. They believed in a noble code of conduct, between individuals, between nations. They were conscious of that superiority, even as they were conscious of their political inferiority. Politically they were not a conquering people. Politically they had no mission for mankind. They never hankered to press political control over other nations. But spiritually they were superior. They had an ideal, a humanitarian which they wished all people to share in, and which they wished all people to share in, and which they wished all people to share in, and which they wished all people to share in, and which they wished all people to share in, and which they wished all people to share in, and which they wished all people to share in, and which they wished all people to share in a people with the salvation of mankind.

Antiochus, the head of the great conquering empire, bent conquest, and rether worried about the rise of the might of the competing empire, that

of the Romans, attempted to regiment his empire still tore, to bind it still closer with the iron bars of uniformity and submission. He wanted to impose a complete gleichschaltung on all the numerous peoples within his far-flung empire. That was not a difficult task because in one form or another, all his people were heathen. He people in one form or another were idol-worshipers. There was but one discount note, one non-conformist people which resisted this attempt at complete totalitarianism. That was the Jewish people. And Antiochus was not afraid of the political independence of this people. It possessed none. He was not afraid of the army of this people. it possessed none. He was afraid of the spiritual independence of this people and its implied challenge to paganism. He therefore attacked not the political structure of ancient Judea, but its spiritual structure. So we learn in the Book of the Maccabees that

"King Antiochus wrote to his whole Kingdom

"that all should be one people

"And every one should leave his laws and his faith."

The heathen people offered no opposition. "All the heathen agreed according to the commandment of the King." No heathen ever died for his religion. No Greek or Roman ever suffered for his pagan faith. The is an important factor. Pagantage of the seconds we wently.

and many Jews of those days consented to the abandonment of their religion, and accepted the new faith and sacrificed to the idols. The Book of the Maccabees called attention to over and over again. Antiochus set about to liquidate Judaism in the same way as all tyrants over set about to liquidate the Jewish people. He forbade the observance of the Sabbath and the Festivals. He forbade Temple services. He forbade teaching Judaism in its own schools. He burned all the Jewish books. This is that same

device weet by all totalitarian dictators. And he converted the Temple of Jerusalem into a Temple dedicated to Jupiter Olympus, into a pagan shrine. He set up altars and groups of idols and chapels of idols all over Palestine and reintroduced into Palestine the licentious and corrupt rituals which frequently went with this practise of Vishna, and he decreed death to those who disobeyed.

There were no concentration camps in those days. Death was decreed to all who disobeyed.

"There was very great wrath upon Israel". Many Jews fell away out of fear. Many had fallen away even before persecution of Antiochus. That is important to remember. It is written in the Book of Maccabaeus

"In those days went there out of Israel wicked men, who persuaded many, saying, let us go and make a covenant with the heathen that are found about us for since we departed from them we have had much sorrow."

That sounds very modern. "Then certain of the people were so forward herein, that they went to the king, who gave them licence to do after the ordinances of the heathen...Whereupon they built a place of exercise at Jerusalem according to the customs of the heathen..and forsook the holy covenant..and joined themselves to the heathen, and were sold to do mischief.."

There remained but a few scattered, harassed, hunted and with a price on their heads. There remained a few to carry on what they would call today an underground movement. It was an unequal contest, of course, the weak against the strong, the few against the many. There was not only war, as I indicated a moment ago. It was a civil war, also. They had to fight the enemy not only from without, but from within. But there did remain a few, a small determined band who challenged totalitarianism

who, unlike the Greeks and the Romans, knew that religion was something worthwhile dying for. With them it was all one whether their numbers were many or few, whether the prospects of victory were bright or dark. They believed that here was an inescapable challenge that could not go unanswered. There are challenges which was cannot ignore. There are moments in life when caution is the wiser policy. But there are certain moments in life when an individual is confronted by a challenge which he cannot turn saide 19 und and which he must accept.

These few in ancient Judea felt that everything must be sacrificed, if need be. Their homes, their peace, their life, even temporarily the they were very laws/fighting to preserve - the sanctity of the Sabbath, for example, at first they refused to fight on the Sabbath - great slaughter - finally they realized that in order to save the Sabbath and Judaism itself, it was necessary even at the moment to desecrate even the Sabbath; the Torah must not be destroyed. Its genius, its concepts must be saved. The genius of the race must not be slain. Its concepts of human mission and destiny, its standards of human justice, love, peace must not be lost to the world.

and so these few, intrepid spirits, led by Mattathias and his sons, unfurled their banner high, their spiritual banner. They summoned all the remaining Jews together. They rallied them at first secretly, and from them made numerous sallies on their foes. They attacked small outposts at first. The engaged in guerrilla warfare. The pulled down altars. Their numbers grew. They joined in battle first with smaller units, and then larger, at first with Apollonius of Samaria, then with Seron of Syria, and then with Lysias at Emmaus.

Prior to each battle, when the people were semewhat afraid, and their numbers were few, Judah reminded them: "For the victory of battle standeth not in the multitude of an host, but strength cometh from heaven. They come against us with much pride and iniquity to destroy us, but we fight for our lives and our laws." "Fear ye not their multitude!" That was their slogan. "Fear ye not their multitude!" And they won. Spirit triumphed over force. The weak in number but the strong in faith triumphed over the strong in number but the weak in faith. That is the eternal miracle. "The meek shall inherit the earth."

Strange when you think of it. The powerful aggressor nations of today, whom do they pick on as their adversaries? Why these bloated, and powerful aggressor nations of our day pick upon the small and weak little nations - Italy on Albania, Ethiopia; Germany picks on Austria and Czechoslovakia; and Rissia picks on Finland. They are great bullies picking on small and helpless peoples. They are afraid of a war with a nation as strong as themselves. That kind of war they call acriminal war. If France and England fight Germany - why that is a criminal war. But when Russia fights Finland - that is a real war.

There is no glory and no splendor in this shameless and inglorious invasion of little peoples. But that is the nature of the bully, or of an individual picking on and beating up and robbing helpless little children. Think of a nation of eighty million people bearing down on a defenseless minority of six hundred thousand Jews in Germany.

Now Israel, on the other hand, always a small nation, picked out for its adversaries the greatest empires of antiquity. Little Judea picked as its adversary Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome - the greatest

nations of antiquity politically and challenged them in the field of the spirit. It was always the mighty nation which attempted to destroy Israel. In ancient days, in the Middle Ages it was Spain - a power empire, then Czarist Russia and now Nazi Germany - these have been our adversaries. What a compliment.

In spite of it we have survived. Their empires have crumpled and disappeared. It is in the nature of a soulless empire once it is shattered, once it receives a terrific blow that it can never recover. But if a people possesses a soul, faith, vision, can rise from its ashes and can be resurected over and over again and put its feet on the ground.

"Many kings have sat down upon the ground, but one that was never thought of hath worn the crown. That one had a dream and a vision.."

Weak in the hands of the strong. That is the situation in the world in 1839. The lot of the weak seems to be as tragic today as it ever was. Yet we Jews ought to ask ourselves even as Judah and his followers asked themselves, "Just how weak are we? Are we weak?"

Many see a doom-filled world about us, and see us finally broken.

Many see a nothing but doom. The Jewish people is being liquidated with fire and sword. And yet, my friends, by all the records of history, and all the destiny of history we are not week at all, but strong, so strong as to frighten the Antiochus of cur day the modern exponents of neopaganism. The Jews are today, even as they were before the Second

Century B.C.E., the principal adversaries of these who would be dictators of mankind. They are afraid, here again, not of our political might, for we have none, not our wealth, for we have some. What is they are afraid of?

Why have they directed their most powerful weapons against us? Ask yourself

this and try to answer it. Why they are afraid, even as Antiochus of old, of this non-conformist people which refuges to be overwhelmed by the rising tides of neo-paganism of our day. They are afraid of our classic and still vigorous ideas of freedom, rights of man, human brotherhood, peace. We are thwarting them. They want to destroy us because they want to destroy our spirit. If you think for a moment that this is merely the interpretation of a Jew primarily, let me tell you that it is also the thought of non-Jews who have also come to an understanding of this real basic issue.

I have before me a very thoughtful and stimulating essay written by the eminent Catholic philosopher Jacque Maritain. From this little provacative essay, I read you the following few sentences: It is called "The Spiritual Essence of Anti-Semitism".

"It seems to me that these considerations explain something of the spiritual essence of anti-Semitism.

"The diverse specific causes which the observer may assign to antiSemitism, all the way from the feeling of hate for the foreigner, natural
to any social group, down to religious hatreds - alas! that these two words
may be coupled - and to the manifold inconveniences produced by some waves
of immigration, mask an underlying spring of hatred deeper down. If the
world hates the Jews, it is because the world clearly senses that they will
always be outsiders in a supernatural sense, it is because the world
detests their passion for the absolute and the unbearable stimulus which
it inflicts. It is the vocation of Israel which the world execrates. To
be hated by the world is their glory, as it is also the glory of Christians
who live by faith.

"Thus hatred of Jews and hatred of Christians spring from a common

source, from the same recalcitrance of the world, which desires to be wounded neither with the wounds of Adam nor with the wounds of the Savior, neither by the goad of Israel for its movement in time, nor by the cross of Jesus for eternal life. We are good enough as we are, says the world, we have no need of grace or transfiguration, we ourselves will accomplish our own happiness in our nature. This is neither Christian hope in a helping God, nor Jewish hope for a God on earth."

So the battle has again been dermed in our day - the many against the few, the strong against the weak. Sanctuaries are again being defiled, altars defiled, lights extinguished, laws abrogated, and small nations when are again being martyred.

To whom belong; the victory? Ask these little tapors. They will tell you. The victory in 1939 and in yours to come belong; to those who can inscribe on their banners and say: "It is all one to God to help by afraid the many or by the few. The victory belongs to those who are not/to be small in vize, if only strong in spirit, and purpose. "The bee is little among such as fly but his fruit is the chief of sweet things." Victory, my friends, belongs to those who are ready to suffer for the things which make life worthy of suffering. Victory belongs to those who are prepared to hold their stationed watch upon the battlements of life in defense of these ideals which make life noble and death heroic. Victory belongs to those whose destiny is bound up not with conquest but with progress, with home.

Our friend, my ser friends, Judah the Maccabee ought to serve today to Jew and non-Jew as the model of when who refused to be intimidated.

"Where passed a great one's steps, there lies the road." And Judah the Maccabee has shownusthered, the road of sacrifice and suffering, perk ps,

the road of martyrdom, but the road of the whole of mankind, and the road for us Jews, particularly.

We have been attacked. Home the answer should be a counter-attack, determined, powerful - upon all kinds of wickedness, shareful unjustness in the world. Pull down the heathen altars. Don't be afraid. Don't hide yourself in the crevices and nooks hoping that the wrath will pass away. Life your spiritual banners eleft and summon there men to join you in this battle of the Lord. The victory, the tide of battle, as always will turn in our favor. The mighty hosts of the totalitarien, and the dictators and of the enemies of mankind they are trapped. Courage, challenge derives from this Festival of Chanukah: "The days of the life of man may be numbered, but the days of Israel are innumerable. So we read in our ancient texts. So it remains to the end of all days."

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