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Lincoln speaks to Hitler, 1941.

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LINCOLN SPEAKS TO HITLER

What the Great Emancipator Would Say to the Great Enslaver

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By Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

> At The Temple

On Sunday morning, February 9, 1941 When one marches too close up to a mountain, one cannot appreciate its true proportions. It is only from a distance that we are enabled to gain its true perspective. It is then that you wee the mountain in all its imposing outline and magnitude.

That is/with personalities. That is certainly so with Abraham Lincoln. The men of his day, his contemporaries, did not and could not grasp the full sweep and contour of his genius and of his rare, strange personality. Even his friends, with a few rare exceptions, failed to evaluate him properly. But many people, not only in the South, but in the North, disparaged, deprecated, contemned and despised him. No President was ever so bitterly assailed as was Abraham Lincoln.

And it is only with the receding years that Lincoln began to loom larger, ever larger on the horizon of his own country and of the world. Time has obliterated all that was inconsequential in his nature, in his make-up, and has revealed in sharper and more dramatic outline all that was genuinely great, elemental and eternal in him.

Lincoln had much to overcome in his generation. He was matched with his great hour, but only with the greatest difficulties. Neither his education nor his experience were all that they might be as a preparation for the great office which he came to occupy in the most critical period of the nation's history. He was a boy from the backwoods. His formal legal training was as rudimentary as was the rural training of most all of the lawyers of the middlewest of his day. His political experience was limited to a term in Congress, to membership in the Illinois Legislature.

Physically, he was far from being an attractive person. An Englishman who was not unfavorably prejudiced against Lincoln thus describes him: "To say that he is ugly is nothing; to add that his fugure is grotesque is to convey no adequate impression. Fancy a man six-foot high, and then <u>out</u> of proportion, with long bony arms and legs, which, somehow, seem to be always in the way, with large rugged hands, which grasp you like a vice when shaking yours, with a long scraggy neck, and a chest too narrow for the great arms by its side; add to this fugure a head cocoa-nut shaped and somewhat too small for such a stature, covered with rough, uncombed and uncombable lank dark hair, that stands out in every direction at once; a face furrowed, wrinkled, and indented, as though it had been scarred by vitriol; a high narrow forehead; and, sunk deep beneath bush eyebrows, two bright, somewhat dreamy eyes that seem to gaze through you without looking at you; a few irregular Hotches of black bristly hair in the place where beard and whiskers ought to grow; a close-set, thin-lipped, stern mouth, with two rows of large white teeth, and a nose and ears, which have been taken by mistake from a head of twice the size.

"Clothe this figure, then, in a long, tight, badly-fitting suit of black, creased, soiled and puckered up at every salient point of the figure -- and every point of this figure is salient -- put on large, ill-fitting boots, gloves too long for the long bony fingers, and a fluffy hat, covered to the top with dusty, puffy crape; and then add to all this an air of strength, physical as well as moral, and a strange look of dignity coupled with all this grotesqueness, and you will have the impression left upon me by Abraham Lincoln."

And this man with this limited equipment, at least on the surface, had to fight a great issue in a round about way, in a flanking movement. And that always creates additional difficulties for a leader, because it involves a leader in maneuvers and strategy which otherwise he would not have to resort to which often outraged his greatest friends and would be co-workers. Lincoln could not lead a frontal attack on slavery. He could not be an abolitionist. Lincoln, of course was opposed to slavery, bitterly opposed to it. He stated: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel." He calls slavery a "black foul-lie which can never be consecrated unto God Hallowed Truth."

He also wished to preserve the Union and he knew, as most of the men of

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his day, even in the North knew, or believed at least, that the Union could not be preserved without conceding the right of slavery to those where slavery was already established. He knew as most men in his day knew that this right of holding slaves belonged as a sovereign right in those states which was conceded by the constitution of the United States.

Therefore Lincoln was caught, as most men of his day were caught, <u>double</u> in the/dilemma of how to preserve the Union and how to abolish slavery. And Lincoln could not take the road which the abolitionists took, the straight road, the clear road. The abolitionists in his day, few in number and bitterly hated, took a clear cut moral position on the subject, a position which history has justified, namely, that it was wrong and that slavery should be abolished everywhere regardless of the cost.

Lincoln contented himself merely with opposing the extension of slavery into the new territory, into the new states which were formed out of new territory. He accepted the fact of slavery in the Southern states. He preferred to accept slavery in the South if he could save the Union. He accepted the Fugitive Slave Law. It is clear therefore how inconsistent such a position was although technically and legalistically correct.

Lincoln realized this and it filled him with spiritual discomfort, with a vexation of spirit. Many of his friends who like him hated slavery, criticized him, denounced him for lack of sincerity, as shuffling and hypocricy. When Lincoln was President of the United States, he had taken an oath to uphold the Constitution and to preserve the Union, and that imposed on him grave responsibilities and sharp limitations on the free promptings of his heart. There was a hard frame within which his idealism had to operate. He did not feel free to express deep convictions. "I understand that in ordinary civil administration this oath even forbade me to practically indulge my primary abstract judgment on the moral question of Slavery. "I had to run the

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machine as is", said Lincoln. Even in that great Emancipation Proclamation issued in 1863, when the country was already at war, it was based not on any declaration of principle opposed to slavery, but purely as a measure of war. It was to weaken the slave-holding states who were fighting the Union. It left slavery untouched in states and parts of states which had not seceded, that is, in those areas where the decree could actually be enforced.

But this is the important thing to remember -- it was an Emancipation Proclamation, and it did set the slaves free, if only on the promise of a Union Victory. But the Union did win. And the slaves were set free. Through this long, devious, cruelly circuitous route, the desired goal was finally reached.

And it was this man who was summoned by destiny to accomplish these two seemingly irreconcilable tasks, the preservation of the Union, and the abolition of slavery. And it was this man who was summoned to be the leader in this long, tragic, and winding road, to suffer greatly for his leadership, and to die for it. And this double task which challenged the ingenuity of Lincoln, discovered in this man, beneath the surface of the inadequacies, the unpreparedness of the man for this task, the physical unattractiveness, enough of genius, rare human insight, profound mystic faith, an adamant will, an undefeated patience, an integrity of character which enabled him to be matched with this great hour, which enabled him to accomplish the two tasks to save the Union and to sen men free.

And men today, and for years now have been turning more and more to this man, Abraham Lincoln, for guidance and for inspiration. In our own day, men are turning more and more to him as to a wise counsellor and friend because many of the problems of our own day and many of the issues of our time were the problems and issues of his day. In fact, the same words, the same slogans used today were used in his day -- slavery, freedom, democracy, rights of man, superior and inferior races, appeasement, war. The pages of the newspapers in Lincoln's day resounded with these same catchwords and slogans as the newspapers of our own day..

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Lincoln found slavery and attempted to abolish it. Slavery had been in existence for twenty-five years. There were four million slaves in the United States in his day. And the country was rent asunder and in constant turmoil over this issue. Every issue was poisoned by it. Lincoln wished to abolish it because he knew slavery to be a rotten and corrupt institution which was rotting and corrupting the life of his people. And he led his nation for four bloody years of Civil War to abolish that institution.

That was three-quarters of a century ago. Hitler found a world in freedom and for years now he has attempted to re-enslave his people. His program is slavery. There is no doubt about it. The Nazis did not even attempt to camouflage their program. It is the enslavement of all peoples, nationalities to serve the purpose of a master race, or of one group within the master race. And wherever the Nazis come into power, they establish slavery. The only difference today is that this time it is white men who are enslaved instead of colored men. Men are robbed of all their possessions, driven into labor camps like slaves. In the case of the Jews in Poland, they were herded into slave pen ghettoes, and in order that they be distinguished from other people as the negro was differentiated from other people, a badge was put on him. He was branded.

The movement is to re-establish slavery in the world. And here Lincoln could tell Hitler a few things about slavery if Hitler would listen. In the first place, he could tell him from his own experience and from the experience of the American people that slavery can not last, that no civilization, no enduring civilization can be built on foundations of slavery. Slavery leads to war, civil war, international. He could tell him, if he would but listen, that those who enslave come to suffer in the long fun far more than those whom they temporarily enslave. The five hundred thousand men who were slaughtered on the battlefields of the Civil War were not colored men, but white men, because the divine law of retribution stated that "all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred

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fifty years of unrequited toil had to be sunk and every drop of blood drawn with the lash had to be paid by another drawn with the sword."

Lincoln could tell Hitler that the Jews, for example, whom Hitler reduced to bondage will, in the long run, suffer far less than his own Aryan Germans whom he has, to all intents and purposes also enslaved, whose liberties he has robbed, whose wealth he has confiscated for the sake of glory, military glory, and which has finally plunged them into a war which will leave them far more frustrated and broken than the war of the Kaiser in the last war. "He who digs a deep pit for someone else, ultimately falls into the very pit he dug."

Lincoln was fond of quoting Scriptures. That was one of the verses which he would have quoted.

Lincoln would have warned Hitler that the world can not remain permanently half free and half slave, even as the United States could not remain permanently half free and half slave; that a house divided against itself can not stand; that the conflict between slavery and freedom is irreconcilable and that you cannot appease slavery. The people of the United States for more than a generation tried appeasement. There was the Missouri Compromise of 1820. There was Clay's compromise of 1850. Practical statesmen believed that they could work out a formula whereby slavery would be tolerated in the South and kept out of the North, whereby a balance could be established. Wise statesmen believed they could negotiate peace with slavery. Lincoln knew better. Wise statesmen also believed that somehow slavery would liquidate itself in the course of time if given sufficient time. Lincoln knew better.

(to a friend)

Lincoln said back in 1855, "You are not a friend to slavery in the abstract. In that speech you spoke of 'the peaceful extinction of slavery', and used other expressions indicating your belief that the thing was at some time to have an end. Since then we have had thirty-six years of experience; and this experience has demonstrated, I think, that there is no peaceful extinction of slavery in prospect for us. The signal failure of Henry Clay and other good and great met

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men, in 1849, to effect anything in favor of gradual emancipation in Kentucky, together with a thousand other signs, extinguished that hope utterly. On the question of liberty as a principle, we are not what we have been. When we were the political slaves of King George, and wanted to be free, we called the maxim that "all men were created equal" a self-evident truth, nut now when we have grown fat, and have lost all dread of being slaves ourselves, we have become so greedy to be masters that we call the same maxim " a selfevident lie." The Fourth of July has not quite dwindled away; it is still a great day -- for burning fire crackers!!!

"That spirit which desired the peaceful extinction of slavery has itself become extinct with the occasion and the men of the Revolution. Under the impulse of the occasion, nearly half the States adopted systems of emancipation at once, and it is a significant fact that not a single State has done the like since. So far as peaceful voluntary emancipation is concerned, the condition of the negro slave in America, scarcely less terrible to the contemplation of a free mind, is now as fixed and hopeless of change for the better as that of the lost souls of the finally impenitent. The Autocrat of all the Russias will resign his crown and proclaim his subjects free republicans sooner than will ouf American masters voluntarily give up their slaves.

"Our political problem now is, 'Can we as a nation continue together permanently -- forever -- half slave and half free?' The problem is too mighty for me -- may God, in his mercy, superintend the solution."

Lincoln today would have taken the position that President Roosevelt has taken and would have repudiated the position taken by such men as Lindbergh and Wheeler. Here is what Lincoln said some years before the Civil War: "What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence?

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It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling seacoasts, our army and our navy. These are not our reliance against tyranny. All of those may be turned against us without making us weaker for the struggle. Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prized liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors."

Abraham Lincoln could have admonished Hitler who speaks of having broght liberty and freedom to his people from foreign tyranny. Lincoln once defined liberty for his own people, and it is a very important definition for that word has been bandied about so much today. Lincoln said in 1864:

"The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. "e all declare for liberty but in using the same <u>word</u> we do not all mean the same <u>thing</u>. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleased with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name, liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and **xi** incompatible names -- liberty and tyranny."

The Nazis are seeking not liberty, but tyranny over the lives of others, and the wealth of others, the territories of others, and the rights of others. Lincoln might have advised Hitler about the use of another word, the word, "new". According to Hitler, democracies are old and decrepid. They are bringing into existence something new, something revolutionary. Lincoln might have warned him that what is new is only a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the principle that "all men are created equal". That is new. All else is as old as Pharoah and the taskmasters of Egypt.

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What is new is a new birth of freedom. A restoration of tyranny is not new. Re-enslavement of men is not new. The reconstitution of ghettos, yellow badges, hate bigotry is not new.

Finally Abraham Lincoln might have told Hitler, though Hitler would never have listened to him, that all forms of prejudice and race hatred and religious bigotry, anti-Semitism are social dissolvents. They disrupt civilization. He could have told him that he had the same problem in his own day - the "Know-Nothing Party - which was anti-Catholic and anti-Irish. It was a powerful political party build on the same complex of intolerance as the Nazis have built their party, and Lincoln warned the American people aga nst it. In 1854 Abraham Lincoln wrote: "If the safeguards to liberty are browken down, as is now attempted, when they have made things of all the free negroes, how long, think you, before they will begin to make things of poor white men? ^Be not deceived. ^Revolutions do not go backward. The founder of the Democraticparty declared that all men were created equal. His successor in the leadership has written the word 'white' before men, make it read 'all white men are created equal'. Pray, will or may not the Know-Nothings, if they should get in power, add the word 'Protestant,' making it read 'all Protestant white men'?"...

Thus the Great Emancipator would in 1941 speak to the Great Enslaver of men. To whom does victory belong -- to the Great Emancipator, or to the Great Enslaver, to Lincoln, or to Hitler? Men question themselves about this issue during the Civil War. Men are questioning again today. Men of faith who believe in God and in man, who have a perspective of history, are confident that victory belongs to the spirit which was Lincoln -- Freedom, not Slavery. Victory belongs to free men, to free society and not to slavery -- "a government of the people, for the people and by the people."

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ABSTRACT OF ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER AT THE TEMPLE, ANSEL ROAD AND EAST 105th STREET ON SUNDAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 9, 1941

LINCOLN SPEAKS TO HITLER

Men turn to Lincoln today more and more. Many of the issues of our day were the burning issues of his day. Men were sharply divided then over the issues of slavery versus freedom, superior and inferior races, democracy, appeasement and war.

Lincoln found slavery and sought to abolish it. Hitler found freedom in Europe and has set about to reintroduce slavery. His program calls for the re-enslavement of nations and peoples to serve the interests of one master race. Like the planters' oligarchy of the South who rationalized slavery on the basis of fictitious theories of inferior and superior races, so Hitler is rationalizing his elslavement of the peoples of Europe on pseudo-scientific doctrines of race. H Lincoln could tell Hitler that such slavery can not last, that one can not build an enduring civilization upon it, and that it leads to war, civil or international. Those who enslave others come to suffer more than those who for a time are enslaved by them. It was not colored folks who were slaughtered in the American Civil War, but five hundred thousand white men. "Every drop of blood drawn with a lash had to be paid for with another drawn with the sword." This is the inescapable law of retribution. The Jews whom Hitler has reduced to bondage will suffer less, in the long run, than his own Aryan Germans upon whom he has forced dictatorship, whose liberties he robbed, whose substance he frained for military glory, and whom he has finally plunged into a war which will lay them lower than the Kaiser's war a generation ago.

Lincoln could have told Hitler that a world can not remain half free and half slave, that a house divided against itself can not stand, that the conflict between freedom and slavery is, in the last analysis, an irre pressible conflict. Lincoln could have warned Hitler that appeasement can go so far and no further. America tried to compromise with slavery in 1820, in 1850. There were statesmen in this country who believed that appeasement could go on forever. But it failed and it led the nation to the bloody battlefields **mx** of the Civil War, just as appeasement at Munich led to the Second World War. There can be no peaceful extinction of slavery, Lincoln knew.

Lincoln could have told Hitler that in a crisis the American people would follow the kind of leadership represented by President Roosevelt and not that of Lindbergh or Wheeler. He knew that "our defense is in the spirit which prized liberty as the heritage of all men in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors."

Lincoln could have told Hitler that all his talk about a "new" order in the world is spurious and a deception. I "new" nation is one that "is conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal". All else is old, as old as Pharaoh and the taskmasters of Egypt. What is forever new in the world is "a new birth of freedom".

Lincoln would have warned Hitler against the use of prejudice, intolerance, anti-Semitism, for he warned his own American people in his day against -Nothingism, Anti-Catholicism, Anti-Irish and Anti-German. All such forms of intolerance are forms of social dissolvents. They disrupt the unity of a people and sap its strength.

The Great Emancipator would have told the Great Englaver of the twentieth century that his hour of triumph would be brief.

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