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Ten Greatest Moments in our History, 1947.

TEN GREATEST MOMENTS IN OUR HISTORY

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday Morning, May 4, 1947

In the long history of our people there have been great moments which mark certain transitions which in a real sense determined the course not alone of our history, but of the quality of our life and the quality of our experience. We may think of ourselves as of an ancient people on a long road which began at Ur and circled the globe, the road which winds its way through forty centuries and through many lands, the roads which cross many civilizations, perhaps the most amazing road in all human history. And this road has many milestones. There are stages along the road which are especially significant, certain places in space and certain places in time when something extraordinary occurred and certain great heights were reached and certain sharp turns were made. These milestones are the guide-posts on the road of our people's destiny.

Now of some of these great moments I would like to speak this morning. Thus, for example, on the very beginning of that long road of four thousand years stands a great new revolutionary idea which forever after was to lead our people along this hard long winding road of history. And that idea was so new that men have since called it a revelation.

The first great moment in our history, and that moment is identified with two names, Abraham and Moses, is called the Revelation. It concerned God. To Abraham, God was El Shadai. To Moses this God was known as Jehovah, Adonai. To both he was the one God, the spiritual God, the all righteous and the all loving God. This beginning moment in our history announced a new religion for mankind, and a millennial and unrelenting war on paganism, on idolatry and on all the Gods of the pagan world.

This is where our road begins, the first great moment, the road which was to lead to struggle, mighty and heroic and single-handed, bitter hate, persecution, the road which was to lead through the valley of the shadow of death for our people, but also to great towering heights. This was an exalted moment of creation not alone for our people but for all humanity, when Abraham left Haran to go forth as a proclaimer of this new faith and to become, as the Bible puts it, a blessing.

That moment was one of the greatest moments of world history in a real sense. Not only Judaism traces itself back to that moment, but Christianity and Islam as well and all the spiritual and ethical values of the modern world. And so this first moment in our history may be called, if you choose, the moment of revelation and prophecy. And that had a tremendously molding influence on all subsequent history of our people.

The second moment is when the road reaches Egypt. For four hundred years our people remained as slaves in the land of the Nile. And there our people learned what slavery means and what freedom means. And that experience of four hundred years inculcated itself, became indelibly impressed on the psyche of our people. Our people never forgot that experience in Egypt and they based their entire ethical code on what experience and their greatest contribution to mankind was based on that experience.

So, for example, in the treatment of strangers, there is a defined legislation which emanates out of the soul of the people. "The stranger shall be unto you as one who is native born. And thou shalt love him as thyself, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Out of that remarkable moment, out of that remarkable stretch of history our people learned what justice is, and what compassion is -- compassion for the weak, for the handicapped, for the slave, for the orphan, for the widow. And they came to evolve a kind of life which challenged the cruelty of the ancient world which crushed the weak and stamped on the handicapped. And that experience of Egypt forever has kept alive in the soul of our people the spark of revolution against tyranny and the great passion for freedom and emancipation.

And so the second moment of our history may be called the Moment of Freedom, Liberation, Emancipation.

And now the road leads to another dramatic moment to the foot of Mt. Sinai where a law is given to our people, when a covenant was made with God. And always our people remembered that moment or were admonished to remember it -- "the day

when you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, at the foot of Mt. Sinai." For there not only the ten commandments were given to our people, but ten digits of civilization, all that logically flows from ^{the} spirituality of the Ten commandments. They are the Torah given to our people, law of life, a way of life, a discipline of life, a discipline for a life of decency and justice and cooperation and brotherhood and peace, a way of life dynamically opposed to that of the ancient world.

And so that third moment in our history may be called the Torah moment. A discipline was evolved which continued to be evolved through subsequent ages by prophets, sages, scribes, rabbis to protect, to enlarge the scope of this way of life of a free people under God.

And that road leads from the moment at Mt. Sinai to the moment where the children of Israel crossed the Jordan and entered the promised land. That moment marks the beginning of a new world for our people where new great ideals enter into the life of our people -- land, kingdom, nationhood: "Hear, O Israel, thou art crossing today the Jordan. Thou art about to enter a new land, a new world, a new experience." And here the people began their long struggle to conquer the land, to settle it, to establish their national life. And here the people learned the fierce love and land attachment for which they paid so high a price. The life of the people became intertwined, bound up, as it were, with this goodly land, "a land of brooks, water, of fountains and depths, springing forth ~~in~~ from valleys and hills."

The land became of the very warp and woof of the people's life, the essential pattern, the theme of their song, the pride of their life and they fought savagely subsequently to defend it. And when they were exiled from it in the sixth century, they prayed for it in exile and vowed never to forget it...

And when exiled the second time, they kept alive the love of land and restoration and referred to it in prayer and song and ritual. "Bring our scattered ones from among the nations near unto thee, and gather our dispersed from the ends of the earth." And so this moment in Jewish history may be called the moment of Eretz

Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

And then the road leads to Babylon and to the first exile, and something strange and unforeseen happens to the people. They think of themselves as dead bones in the valley of dead bones. They had been uprooted and cast out and forsaken by God. And then something very strange happens to them. A new truth is brought to them by the prophets. The people are told: Ye are exiles driven from your ancient land. But in the ancient land you learned some great spiritual truths which mankind needs. "hy not teach those truths to other peoples in the world." "Let all the nations go by thy light and camp in the brilliance of your radiance." You have a mission. You are not broken and beaten slaves. You are children of the eternal God who revealed to you the Torah, a way of life...

And this new moment in history may be called the moment of Mission, of Mandate which remained with our people throughout all the subsequent years.

Then began another significant moment, when the exiles returned to Judea. Those who had remained there, who did not remain in exile, had become assimilated with the people there. They lost their identify as Jews. They took on the religious practises of the the people. The people of Israel were in danger of being absorbed, assimilated. Something extraordinary happened. Ezra arose, another great teacher, who told the people thattheir destiny is not to be absorbed, and not to be assimilated, but to remain pioneers, pathfinders to new great ideas entrusted to them. They must not assimilate. They must retain their integrity. In the 2nd Century, at the time of the Maccabees, our people wereagain in danger of assimilating -- this time to the attractive way of life of the Hellenic culture of the Near East, and the Jews had become to forget their Torah and to degrade the purity of Jewish ethical life. They had begun even to change their names in Judea and to imitate the ways of the Greeks. Then again the same phenomenon occurred. A spiritual revolution, headed by the Maccabees, which in so many ways told the people again that their destiny is not to become assimilated to

alien cultures and civilizations. They must keep their hebraic culture not only for the sake of the Jews, but for mankind. This moment of Ezra, the Maccabees, may be called the Moment of Survival in our history. And subsequently in modern times we were faced with the same challenge, the same moment of survival re-asserting itself.

And there were other great moments in Jewish history. The long struggle against the Romans which ended disastrously for our people, first in the destruction of our Temple in 70 C.E. and in the revolt of 135 C.E. This long desperate struggle left its mark upon the people. It was perhaps the fiercest struggle that the Roman Empire faced. Before the Romans could finally subjugate the hard unrelenting people of Judea, they had to bring in some of their legions from the farthest corners of their empire. And out of that century of struggle against the most powerful empire on earth, the Jews learned inspite of defeat, resistance, to remain the toughest among the nations of the earth, not to yield to persecution and force, to resist not always with arms -- that is the most primitive form of resistance. But to resist with the spirit, to die upon the rack, the autodafe, to choose, wandering which is poverty, danger, rather than give up that most sacred to the person, the individual in spirituality and moral convictions. So this moment in Jewish history which re-asserts itself time and again in history to this day, is the Moment of Resistance.

There is then a long dark stretch of road which descends into the Dark Ages, into persecution, martyrdom. It is a long road, hearly twenty centuries and iron entered the soul of our people. Scars were left. Our people was compelled to live in many parts of the world as outcasts, pariahs, wear yellow badges, live in ghettos facing exile, m ssacre, pogroms. No people on earth suffered as much for as long. Yet of all the people, here was the one people which though broken, nevertheless retained its spiritual integrity, never lost its will to live, its zest for life, demonstrated an amazing recuperative power. That experience of nearly two millenia shaped, fahsioned the life of our people. And that moment is the Moment of Exile.

The Nineteenth Century is another great moment of history. Beginning with the

French Revolution the Jews were granted in one part of the world, then in another part of the world, the rights of citizenship. They were emancipated, permitted to leave the ghettos, enter the life of the Western World. The Jews poured out of the ghettos with great avidity, eagerness, to unleash the powers which were held in check by the prohibitions of centuries and they advanced most astoundingly in the sciences, art, literature. They poured into the universities, schools, and gave their rich gifts to mankind. They became leaders in wars for liberation of in some of the countries nations in the world, empire builders. They led most of the movements for social reform, social justice. It was a great satisfying moment. That moment in history we call the moment of citizenship in the world.

Then the long road detoured sharply again in to the valley of the shadow of death, into anti-semitism, into scientific Jew hatred. His citizenship is mocked, his patriotism is rejected. The citizen becomes the alien again. Hate movements against him were organized in all parts of the world -- Nazism, Fascism, culminating in the tragedies of the last decade of our own experience in this end of the road -- that moment may be called the moment of modern anti-semitism. And that left its mark on the life of our people. And they took its frightful toll in six million dead, butchered.

Here are the moments, revelation and prophecy, freedom, Torah, land, mission, survival, resistance, exile, citizenship, anti-semitism. And this long road is far from being ended.

And this is the last moment which is being enacted before our eyes -- the moment which began in 1895 when a certain Viennese Jew wrote a book called "The Jewish State and the call went forth to the people on the long road to think again of national restoration and rebirth. And before our very eyes today, in spite of the graveyard of Europe for our people, in spite of the abhorrent tragedies which have overtaken our people, our people again as in the days of Zerubabel, are rebuilding their national life and national future beautifully, heroically, in the ancient land of Israel. And so this last moment in our history may be designated

quite hopefully the Moment of Resoration and Rebirth... All these Moments, most of them spiritual, some of them economic, helped to determine, to fashion this amazing people, this extraordinary people called the Jewish people, the people which has walked a long long road, through darkness, through sunshine, down deep valleys and up great climbing heights, this people which is determined to march on the road to destiny eternally. For it is an Am Olom, an eternal people.

