



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Prophet, Priest and Rabbi, 1950.



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PRIEST, PROPHET AND RABBI

Sunday, May 7, 1950

You may recall the opening verse of the Sayings of the Fathers which I read last week. Moses received the Torah from Sinai and handed it down to Joshua. Joshua gave it to the Elders. The Elders gave it to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it to the men of the Great Assembly. Implied in that verse is the fact that there was an unbroken line of tradition which began with Moses who received the Law at Mt. Sinai and continued until the time of the Rabbis. The authority of the Rabbis, according to this saying of the Ethics of the Fathers, stemmed from the revelation at Sinai, and whatever any authorized teacher in later times taught by way of the interpretation of the Torah or by way of emendation, found its sanction and was within the framework of the unbroken chain of tradition which was handed down through the centuries.

In other words, the unwritten law, the Torah, derived from the written law, the Torah, and was equally valid and equally binding because it was organically related to the Torah received by Moses at Mt. Sinai.

Now, there is yet another chain of tradition which it would be profitable for us to dwell upon. The chain of tradition represented by groups or categories of men who each in his own way and each group in its own way made essential contributions to Judaism and jointly have been responsible for the making of our historic faith. I refer especially to three groups - priests, prophets, rabbis - whose teachings make up the sum total of Judaism. These three groups do not follow each other in point of time - that is, the priest didn't come first and the prophet second, the rabbis last. There were priests in Israel at the time of the prophets and in the time of the rabbis. The status of the priests, for example, survived even the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 of the Common Era although their chief function at that time, that of being in charge of the sacrifices in the Temple, of course, ceased with the destruction of the Temple. The prophets, beginning with Moses, ceased in Israel, according to an



old tradition in the 5th century before the Common Era with the prophet Malaki - that is, in the period of the Restoration following the return from the Babylonian captivity. The rabbis/<sup>who</sup>were known by various names - sages, scribes, sopherim, hachamim - date from the period following the return from Babylon - the post-exilic period - and have continued to the present time.

Now, all these categories of teachers - these/<sup>priests,</sup>prophets and rabbis - have much in common. They all taught the religion of Yahveh, the religion of the one spiritual God, and they all worked to make His will the way of life of the people of Israel. They were all aware, deeply aware, that there existed a "brith kodosh", a Holy Covenant, between Yahveh and the people of Israel which defined a special status for the people of Israel and a special destiny. But these three groups differed, differed greatly in their emphases, in their methods, in their evaluations of what was primary and what was secondary in Judaism. Each one of these groups was a river moving along its own channel, but pouring itself ultimately into the universal sea of Judaism. Each made its distinctive contribution both to the content and to the survival of our historic faith.

Now, the priests - the Kohanim - may be said to have been the exponents of the idea of cult in Judaism; that is, the worship of God according to a specific ritual. The priests represented the ritual phase of Judaism, that which is institutional in organized religion. The rabbis later on took over most of this work of the priests and elaborated upon it and re-defined it. Now, priests are not peculiar to Judaism. They were found among all religions in ancient times. The time of their appearance in Israel as well as their original function are rather wrapped in obscurity. The Kohanim, the priests, originally seemed not to have been the people who officiated at sacrifices because every adult male, every head of a household, could perform in ancient Israel acts of sacrifices to God, and could bring his tithes and his offerings to the local sanctuaries which dotted the countryside of Palestine. Rather than sacrifices, the early priests in Israel seemed to have been the guardians of these sacred shrines and the interpreters of the oracles, the oracles of God at these shrines. The word, Kohan,



like the Arabic, Kahin, seems to refer to the sooth-sayer, to the man who interpreted the will of the deity, and the word, Levi - Levite - which was another designation of the priest, of the Kohan, means one who is attached - that is, one who is attendant at one of these local shrines and sanctuaries.

Now, in ancient times no important step was taken by a family or a clan or tribe or later on, by the people as a whole, without first learning the will of the deity, the will of God, and the priest was consulted to learn the will of God, and the priest used his instruments of divination, of consulting the deity - the Afod - later on, the Urim and Tumim, which were probably some form of sacred lot, to discover what God wanted this individual to do in this particular situation. In other words, the Kohan became early the instructor of the people in the will of God, in matters which had to do with religion and later on, with ethics, and what he taught was known as Torah. Torah is derived from the Hebrew word meaning instruction.

When disputes arose, for example, among people, legal questions, questions of right and wrong, they were brought to the priests at the sanctuary, and the priest accordingly became the judge of the people. As we read in the Book of Deuteronomy, "If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being a matter of controversy within thy gate, thou shalt come before the priests and levites... and enquire and they shall show thee the sentence of judgment."

"According to the Torah which the priest will teach you," according to the instruction which they will give you.

"And according to the judgment which they will declare unto thee,"

"thou shalt do,"

"thou shalt not depart from what

they will tell you either to the right or to the left."

Now, because these priests dwelt in or nearby these sanctuaries, later on when all the sanctuaries in Palestine were declared to be unlawful and only one sanctuary was proclaimed to be sacred - only the one in ~~Jerusalem~~ Jerusalem - because the priests dwelt near or in these sanctuaries, they became in the course of time the exclusive individuals



to supervise all sacrifices. They became the guardians of the cult, of the mode of worship of Yahveh. They became the supreme authority in all matters of ritual, the conserver of the forms of Judaism. Their office was hereditary and unlike the prophets and the rabbis, they were the professional religious functionaries of Judaism.

Now, we owe to this first of the three groups, to the priests, we owe first of all the development of the early law in Judaism, the basic Torah, of which our present Torah is a compilation. We also owe to the priests the fact of organized worship in our religion, which preceded by far the synagogue which was established during the Babylonian exile. We owe to them the idea of the institution in religion, the cult, without which no historic religion can survive and without which no spiritual religion can be dramatized or taught or transmitted. And we also owe to the priests, which is very important, the concept of Kedusha, of holiness. The priests came to represent the higher level of human existence. His life was to be of a higher plateau of purity, free from all forms of defilement, and it was to be a life of dedication. Now, in the olden days that concept of holiness was ascribed exclusively to this caste of class of priests, but in the course of time the priests themselves developed the idea that the whole people of Israel ought to lift itself to a higher level of holiness in living. "Kedoshim ti yu." "All of you shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am Holy." And they projected into Jewish life a revolutionary concept; namely, that the whole people of Israel, not merely the exclusive hereditary caste - the Brahmin caste, say - of priests, but the whole people of Israel shall be "a kingdom of priests" "and a holy people". They democratized, if you will, the concept of sanctity and holiness and applied it to the whole people. And that was a revolutionary concept and a tremendous contribution to the totality of religious concept in Judaism.

We come now to the second group, the prophets. The Prophets whose classic period was from the 8th to the 5th century before the Common Era, although some great prophets like Moses and Elijah, lived before that period - the Prophets as a class were laymen, inspired religious teachers who laid the major emphasis not upon cult and not upon ritual



but upon morality in religion. The way to worship God, they maintained, is not so much through formal ceremonial or observances or sacrifices, but through the doing of justice and the loving of mercy and the walking humbly with God. Judaism is primarily a matter of loving God and loving your fellowman, of seeking peace and brotherhood.

And these prophets, like Amos and Hosea and Isaiah and Jeremiah and many of the others, found themselves in frequent opposition to the priestly over-emphasis of rite and form and observance and sacrifice, the externals of religion. They warned the people against placing their hope of salvation, in Temple buildings, in structures, in observances or in sacraments, but in the reformation of the inner life of the individual and of the nation.

In the Dudlian lecture on the Prophet and his People which I delivered some years ago at Harvard, I wrote the following about the Prophets. I'll read the paragraph to you, summarizing the role of the Prophet in Jewish history.

The prophets thought in terms of men and not of institutions, whether sacred or secular.

....While the prophets did not believe in infallible institutions...and were fully aware of the dangers of what we call institutionalism, they were not hostile to them as such, either to the Temple, the priesthood, the state, the cult, the ritual or the Law. The prophets were not revolutionary in any organizational sense, political or economic. They did not preach community of goods, or socialism, or non-cooperation with civil or religious authorities. They were not pacifists. But they subordinated institutions to the purposes to which they were devoted. Institutions were means, not ends. Whenever an institution thwarted its purpose, it was to be reformed, or if necessary, abolished. The Temple, for example - the Temple as a spiritual center to which all nations will go in order to learn the ways of God and from which will go forth the Law and the word of God, excites the prophet Isaiah to exaltation. But the Temple as a den of robbers, to which unrepentant malefactors of society flock in order to derive reassurance and deliverance in spite of their abominations, arouses Jeremiah's wrath and forces from his lips an imprecation and a prophecy of doom. Similarly, the priest is not condemned because of his office but because of the abuse of his office. Ezekiel, the prophet, was a priest; Jeremiah was the son of a priest. Prophecy and priesthood, though frequently in conflict with one another, are essentially complementary functions in religion. One represents the spirit, the other the organization;



one the explorer, the other the settled. The priest is the "messenger of the Lord of hosts," declared Malachi, and people "should seek the law at his mouth". It is only those priests who wait for a man "as troops of robbers", who "teach for hire", who scatter and destroy their flock, that are the targets of the prophet's attack. The celebration of festivals, new moon, Sabbath and the holding of convocations are not condemned as such, but only when the hands of the worshippers are full of blood. God "cannot endure iniquity along with the solemn assembly". The prophets are least sparing in their attack on sacrifices, but even here the dominant thought is that they are a burden unto God, because, as Deutero-Isaiah put it, the sacrificer is burdened with sin. In the same way, the prophets did not attack wealth as such, but greed and exploitation; not power, but its abuse; not customs and ceremonies, but their assumed sacramental character; not ritual, but the dogma of "opus operatum", that is - the act itself. They did not spend themselves in fighting external forms. The inner intent - the harmony of act and motive, the inner illumination - the harmony of purpose and destiny; the heart of man responding to the will of God - these and these alone concerned them. They believed in human equality, in every man's inalienable worth and spiritual dignity - every man having been fashioned in the image of God - in every man's right to be free, under God, from oppression and exploitation, and in every man's duty to obey the universal moral imperatives.

These were the prophets. They lifted Judaism above the level of all the ceremonial religions of their day by giving to Judaism a supreme ethical content and purpose. They gave new definitions. That's the originality of their genius. They gave new definitions to old concepts - to God, to people, to Temple, to kingship, to property, to slavery, to labor, to the rights of the stranger, to brotherhood, to war and peace. And they rose to the majestic conception of a world-wide moral mission for Israel. That was a tremendously new doctrine.

Priesthood reached its great ethical climax in Judaism when it democratized the concept of holiness, as I said a moment ago, when it said that the whole people of Israel was holy. The prophets' supreme ethical contribution was that they conceived of this holy people as having a mission in humanity, that because of their peculiar position and equipment, they are duty bound to become the servant of God, to go out into the world and to convert the pagan idolatrous world to the conception of the one spiritual God.



This was the second of the three groups - priests, prophets and rabbis. Now, the rabbis, living in later times under different political and social conditions, read the needs of their lives and the experiences of their own lives into Judaism and made distinctive and significant contributions to it. The rabbis, whether they be known as the sages or the scribes or, later on, the rabbis, lived at a time when the Jewish people was coming into closer contact with the non-Jewish world, the outside world. They came in contact with alien cultures and alien civilization, particularly with the very intriguing and fascinating chanting civilization of the Hellenic world, of the Greek world, and there was real danger of assimilation for the civilization of the Jews in Palestine, other than their unique religious insight, was in many ways inferior to the civilization and the culture of the Greek peoples of the ancient world. And there was real danger of assimilation, of imitation, of adopting the Greek ways of life and thought, and therefore, of the submergence of the pure ethical monotheistic faith of Israel into the moral corruption of idolatrous paganism.

And so, the first duty of the rabbis in those desperate centuries, when actually a struggle for life and death for Judaism took place, at one period culminating in the great war of the Maccabees in the second century before the Common Era - the first great task of the rabbis is to do what they called "build hedges around the Torah", build fences around the Torah, protect the distinctiveness and the uniqueness and the purity of Jewish life which in many ways was like a little island in a vast sea of paganism and idolatry. And so they began defining a more intensive and a more elaborate regimen of living for the average Jew, to keep him from defilement by the surrounding world and to keep Jewish life integrated and strong within a citadel of religious discipline. That was perhaps the major contribution of the rabbis through the centuries. They made possible Jewish survival in Palestine, and later on when the Jews were exiled from Palestine, in the entire Diaspora.

Another major contribution of the rabbis was the emphasis which they placed upon study. They made of the Jewish people a people of learners and students and scholars.



There is no comparable experience in the whole of humanity where a whole people was completely converted to book people, as was the Jewish people. When they said, "the study of the Torah above all the mitzvahs and all the commandments", they meant it literally. They were the first to build public schools in every town, village and hamlet in ancient Palestine. They made it obligatory to eradicate illiteracy, to teach every child, and it was their duty to teach the orphan; it was considered a mitzvah to teach an orphan. "One who teaches an orphan," said the rabbis, "it is as if he gave him birth."

Study, the Book, the most distinguished person in the Jewish community became not the rich man and not the warrior, but the scholar, and study for its own sake - Torah lishma. We talk about art for art's sake; the rabbis were the first to define the concept that a man should study not to be exalted, not to boast of a crown of learning, nor in the hope of receiving reward, but "you were born for that purpose". A man was born to learn, to increase his knowledge, to extend the horizons of his intellectual and spiritual life, to grow. That's the destiny of human life.

Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward; be like servants who serve their master without any expectation of reward. They applied that as far as moral life is concerned, particularly as far as self-culture and self-maturing is concerned. And I must say in passing that they had the sound philosophy and understanding of Jewish life and the problems of its survival that no Jewish community in our long history/<sup>which</sup> had ever relied upon philanthropy or upon organization for its survival ever succeeded. They perished. It is only those communities who laid emphasis on the school and the Book, who sank the roots of Jewish life deep into the nourishing soil of knowledge, of replenishing learning, who survived all the vicissitudes of fortune.

That was the second great contribution which the rabbis made to Jewish life, and there was a third. The rabbis lived in times of persecution frequently and of tyranny whether it was the Greek tyranny under the Syrian Greeks of Antiochus, or later on,



under the long and terrible tyranny of the Romans. They had to prepare the people for perseverance under suffering and persecution, and they did. If we have survived to this day, it is due to the teaching and the training of the rabbis. They exalted the concept of martyrdom. They raised to the supreme height, "kiddush ha-shem", when a man suffers or dies for the sake of glorifying the name of God. That is a supreme tribute. They exalted the concept of - suffering out of love, to suffer for the thing you love, to suffer for God, to suffer for Israel, to suffer for humanity. And because of that, they taught our people how to survive in exile, how to endure the wanderings, the ghettos, the inquisitions and the pogroms right through the long and terrible centuries.

The rabbis made many other contributions - not only the rabbis of the days of the Talmud, but the rabbis of the Middle Ages, the rabbis of modern times - unfolded and expanded and enriched the great doctrines and concepts of Judaism. In the medieval days, for example, the great rabbis like Maimonides and Halevi and Sadya met the philosophic challenge of their day in terms of Mohammedan philosophers, and showed the inter-play of revelation and reason, and how Judaism is justified on the basis of the highest rational principles of human thought.

There were rabbis in the Middle Ages who were mystically inclined, who opened up new worlds for the believer, new mystic worlds, new worlds of religious romance, if you will. They taught people what real piety is and real worship. They taught what was meant by "religious enthusiasm" and "the outpouring of one's soul" to one's Creator. And the reform rabbis of the last 150 years also added to the sum total of Jewish life. They substituted scholarship for scholasticism, and liberty for authority in Jewish life and re-discovered for the Jewish people our ancient prophetic concept of the mission of the people of Israel in the world.

And so, when we speak of Judaism, let us have in mind this noble chain of tradition over a period of more than 3,000 years, the tradition of priest and prophet and rabbi, spiritual leaders of different types, different attitudes, meeting the needs,



the differing needs of their age, but all of them making their distinctive contribution to the heroic and to the immortal spiritual faith which we call Judaism.

In closing, let me say that one of the secrets of Jewish survival is just this. That it is always progressive; it never permitted itself to become hardened into one mould, incarcerated within the walls of one doctrine or one concept or one philosophy, but it permitted the free play of inspired minds and souls within this great area of religious adventure which we call Judaism. The man who wanted to emphasize beautiful form in Judaism, ritual, ceremony, custom, practice - and they have their significance and importance in religion - found play, room within this great religion to express himself. The one who sought to emphasize ethical idealism, conduct over and above ritual - he, too, was welcomed within the bosom of the faith. And the one who, like the rabbis, found it expedient or imperative to build hedges and fences around Jewish life and to stress those great concepts which make for survival of a minority religious group in the world, that man, too, was looked upon as an authentic teacher in Israel. For all of them stem back to an original inspiration "a faith and a way of life which was revealed long, long ago in the dim distant past to a people, to a great religious leader, so strong, so true and so potent that it has continued in varying manifestations and forms right through the centuries. It is as vital today and will continue in the days to come.

I want to say a word to you, young men and women who have graduated this morning from The Temple High School. You have continued your studies in the faith of priest, prophet and rabbi. I pray that you will carry on your studies right through your lives. There is no end to learning. There are no fixed boundaries to Judaism. Be true to the noble tradition of being members of the people of the Book. Be Book men. "It is a tree of life to those that lay hold of it, and the supporters thereof are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace."



I don't know what fortune will hold for you in the days to come, ~~but~~ what professions you will follow, how fate will treat you in the years to come. I don't know where you will be in the years to come, but this I know, that if you will in the years to come remain true to this great principle of Jewish life - to be a learner, to be a student, to be a seeker after knowledge, the knowledge of God, the knowledge of humanity - if you will keep your minds always open to new and true ideas, that your lives will be rich in content and deeply satisfying, and that is, after all, all that a human being can expect in this world.

Amen.

