



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
164

Box
59

Folder
906

Twenty questions - Answers to questions submitted on "What is
Judaism?", 1953.

TWENTY QUESTIONS

Answers to Questions Submitted On
"What Is Judaism"

October 25, 1953

My dear friends, the members of the Mr. and Mrs. Club last Friday evening met in various homes for a Sabbath eve meeting and invited to their meetings, at some thirty different homes, a mystery guest. This mystery guest was not "Eliyohu Hanovi", Elijah the prophet, it was Rabbi Silver. And inasmuch as I couldn't be the guest at thirty homes simultaneously I recorded a message which they requested which was then played in these homes and which served as the subject for discussion among these groups.

You know, Elijah traditionally was the man that was called upon to settle all difficult questions. When the Rabbis couldn't agree on the solution of a certain intricate problem, they left it to the prophet Elijah some day to answer it. Well, I'm not equipped as Elijah is, naturally, to answer all questions. Really, the only thing I have in common with Elijah is that on Seder nights he likes a cup of wine - so do I, in fact I have the advantage, I have four cups.

On the basis of the discussions of my theme, my address recorded to them the other evening, these men and women submitted quite a number of questions; subjects on which they would like further commentary and elucidation, and it pleased me at the amount of interest that was aroused because I spoke to them on a subject not really new, I spoke to them on, "What is Judaism." But evidently the subject was fresh enough and exciting enough to arouse great interest among them and to ^{evoke} quite a number of questions. I announced Twenty Questions - actually they submitted to me close unto forty questions and I'm sure that I will not be able to cover many of these questions this morning - I may carry them over to next week or some other Sunday morning.

One of the questions asked was - "Are the Opinions Expressed in this Address of Rabbi Silver the personal thoughts of Rabbi Silver or are they ^{based on} the Bible?"

Well, when I speak of Judaism and on Judaism, it's a very ancient religion, merely thirty-five hundred years old, whose teachings are recorded not alone in the Bible but in the Talmud and other rabbinic writings unto this time, I do not give my own private, personal opinions except when I indicate that they are private and personal. I seek the authority for what I say on Judaism in the sacred texts of our people, and they are all thoroughly documented. Of course, it should be borne in mind as I stated in that address on "What is Judaism", just as in the case with all other religions - so also with Judaism - ^{in it} there have been/ from time to time various schools of thought; the traditionalists and the reformers, the ritualists and the pietists, the rationalists and the mystics, the priests and the prophets. The talions, the views of one or the other predominated, but most often they interpenetrated and modified one another; but it was not difficult at all to discover beneath the surface of these movements and currents, the deep, steady and persistent channels which carried on throughout the ages and of the many changes of opinions and emphasis, and there have been such, it is quite easy to discern the outlines of the major trends, the key ideas, the enduring attitudes, the unfailing horizons of this historic faith we call Judaism. So that while on certain details there are sharp differences and always have been, not only today but for over 2,000 years among our people, there is a general consensus of the doctrines and the tenets which are fundamental, which are the sine qua non as it were, which are the characteristics of this historic faith which we call Judaism.

Another question was - "Is the General Agreement Among Reformed Jews ^{Jews} on the Doctrines Presented and Where Would the Conservative and Orthodox/Disagree?" Well, here again, on the general and fundamental, ethical and spiritual principles there is practically no disagreement between reform or conservative or orthodox Jews. What do I mean by these general and fundamental, ethical and spiritual principles on which there is nigh universal agreement? In this same address I

called attention to them. The great insights of Judaism are easily recognizable in all stages of its development. That God is one, spiritual creator and ruler of the Universe in dwelling with all nature and yet transcending it, nearer to man in all his needs and yet beyond man's comprehension; that man while fashioned out of the earth is nevertheless made in the spiritual image of God; that while he is bound by his physical and mental limitations, he is boundless in his moral aspirations, and he is free to determine his own spiritual progress through his own efforts assisted by the grace of God but both body and soul out of God, and that the whole of man, body, mind and soul is sacred; that all men are equal in their essential humanity and in the sight of God, and that there is but one moral law for prince and pauper, for ruler and subject, for native-born and the stranger; that life is good and is the gracious gift of God; that the evils which exist in the world can be overcome and in the overcoming of it lies the true meaning and the adventure of human life; that a golden age of universal justice and brotherhood and peace awaits the human race to be ushered in by the efforts of the human race; that there is rewards for goodness in time and in eternity, and punishment for evil which can be averted through repentance; that man's principal concern should be with life this side of the grave since the hidden things belong to God but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children that we may do all the words of the Law; these are the basic, the enduring ideas of Judaism, common alike to orthodox, conservative, or reform Judaism. Moses would subscribe to them and Isaiah and Hillel, the great Rabbi, and Maimonides, the great philosopher, and the reformer like David Einhorn, Kaufmann Kohler, or a conservative like Dr. Schechter, or an orthodox like the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. There are, of course, areas of disagreement between reform and conservative and orthodox; more so between the reform and the orthodox. There is a difference of belief, for example, with reference to Torah Minhag Semiam!

whether the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, were literally given by God to Moses at Sinai, revealed to him in toto, and therefore every law contained therein is eternally binding, subject only to such interpretation as great rabbis or sages will give unto those laws. On that there is sharp division of opinion. There is also division of opinion, for example, on the subject of the coming of a personal Messiah to redeem Israel and mankind. There is difference of opinion on the subject of physical resurrection of "Theot Omateem" although there is no difference on the subject of the "Hasarach Haleshet", the immortality of the same.

The orthodox Jew accepts all the laws as developed through the ages, finally codified in such a code of laws as the " " as binding in every detail. The reform Jews, more attracted, more selective, and reserves for himself the right to accept or reject ^{those} ~~the~~ laws which he finds frightful in the development of his religious life and those laws which he no longer regards as necessary. There is much less difference between the reform and conservative point of view, especially with regard to these matters to which I have just referred. The conservative Jew, however, has retained more customs, traditional practices than has the reformed Jew. He has laid more emphasis upon Hebrew in the prayer and in instruction. He generally emphasized more the ~~hysteric~~ *historic* continuity in tradition of the Jewish group and Jewish nationalism.

Another question asked was - "Are the Reform or the Orthodox or the Conservative Groups Growing Fastest Now?", presumably in the United States. Well, no accurate figures are available or available to the same degree for all groups. There has certainly been a marked increase in the number of synagogues built and in the increase in their membership, and to that extent it has been gratifying and it make very little difference really which is growing fastest. Whatever the gains, the gains are for Judaism. We are not in a competitive field here. We are in a cooperative field. But I sometimes wonder when I am in my

less optimistic mood, whether all this physical increase in structures and even in membership truly indicates a renaissance, of faith and piety and religious devotion among our people; I'm not so sure of it. I know that we build beautiful temples but we don't attend them. I have referred here, I believe, some time ago to the surveys which have been made recently about church attendance, among Catholics and Protestants and Jews in this country, and I regret to say that the Jews are way at the bottom. That does not show any renaissance of faith among our people. And building synagogues is no substitute for faith and worship. I'm not worried whether a man is a reformed Jew, or a conservative Jew, or an orthodox Jew; I'm deeply concerned that if he's a reformed Jew he be a good reformed Jew; if a conservative Jew he be a good conservative Jew; and the same thing for an orthodox Jew. And that he do not play merely lip service to his religion or the tribute of the check book; that's not enough. There's no action treatment in Judaism.

There were certain searching questions about the doctrines of our religion submitted by the young people - I can only touch on some of them this morning. One of them was, "What is Meant by Saying that Man is Created in the Image of God -- the phrase which is used in the Bible, which we think would be used from the Pulpit?" And of course it can't be taken literally, that is not corporeal and no one can represent physically God. It is clearly a poetic, a spiritual figure of speech. It means man is made to be like in the spirit and in the soul approximating the spirituality which we ascribed to God. Man is made up of body and soul; in his body, his physical being, man is like an animal - shares all the attributes and accidents of animal life; fashioned out of the dust and returns unto the dust; having nearly all the appetites of all organic life. But man is something more, according to our faith. He has a soul which distinguishes him from all other living beings on the face of the earth; and mind. And as man cultivates this mind, this soul of his, he comes closer to his Maker

who is all-soul and all-mind and all-thought and the higher man reaches up in his ethical aspirations in the quest of justice, and of love, and of truth, the nearer he gets to his Maker. And this is the meaning of the great phrase which I read to you this morning out of the Book of Leviticus, Chapter XIX, "Ye shall be holy, ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Man images can in his own finite will naturally, and not God's nor angels nor human beings, but in his own constricted and finite way, man through his quest of holiness which that chapter proceeded to define in terms of ethical conduct, man approximates the quality of the divine. The Rabbis said, "How can man imitate God, be ye holy for I the Lord your God am holy." And the answer, "Just as God is merciful, be ye merciful - just as God is just, be ye just - just as God is the God of truths, ye seek the words of peace." That is what we mean when we say that man is created in the image of God - he is more than dust - he is more than parts of clay - and he is more than animal. There's an upreaching towards divinity in man.

Another question in doctrine submitted was - "What is the Jewish Concept of Punishments for Wrong Doing?" The question should have added, and what is the Jewish concept of reward for right doing, because right doing occupies a far more prominent place in our religion than wrong doing. Judaism believes in reward and punishment, though it does not know exactly God's way in meteing them out because His ways are not our ways always. Already in the Ten Commandments - there is a definition of covenants in terms of reward and punishment. God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation but says mercy unto the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. In other words, in this commandment God's quality of reward for goodness is two hundred and fifty times as great, using figures as a matter of speech of course, than the punishment for wrong doing. But even that third and fourth generation was not fully acceptable to the teaching

of our religion and they quickly defined it to mean God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation only when the children follow the evil ways of their parents, but if the children do not, that does not apply to them. It does not even apply to the sinner himself because always the way of repentance is open to him and as soon as a man repents, God repents whole-heartedly, sincerely, through contrition and change of life - his sins are forgiven and he can start out fresh again. No religion of mankind has laid so much emphasis on the concept of "kashilba", of repentance, of making a fresh start at any time unto the hour of one's death as has Judaism.

It is interesting, the sharp moral sense of our people that prophets like Jeremiah, like Ezekiel, dared to challenge the doctrine incorporated in the second commandment - of visiting the sins of the fathers upon children, and Ezekiel said - what shall the fathers eat, sour grapes, and the teeth of the children shall be put on edge? No, no man shall die for the sins of his parents. And that has been the accepted attitude of Judaism. But there is reward and there is punishment, and unless there is reward and there is punishment, then there is no point for the altogether and there is nothing but anarchy in the world. Unless you believe that good ultimately in some form or other use good and evil creates evil, then there is no point in morality and ethics altogether, or ^{to} religion for that matter.

Another question asked was - "What is the Jewish Idea of Heaven - what happens after Death?" Judaism believes in the immortality of the soul and in the survival of personality after death. Beyond that there is no authentic teaching whatsoever. There is very little, strangely, perhaps not so strangely, very little of what we call eschatology - that is, ideas of what will happen in the next world or the end of time. There is very little eschatology in the Bible; in the Old Testament. Man's privilege, according to our Bible, was to work with God in the land of the living; " " , here, on earth . And

the Rabbis of the Talmud cautioned people not to speculate too much on what was before, was before creation and what is after, after death. Such speculation frequently leads to all kinds of superstitions and to all kinds of obscurantism just as we trust in God here, so we should trust in a just and wise and merciful God in the hereafter. Some religions are preoccupied with the thought of death. Judaism is preoccupied with the thought of life. If you want to learn about the religion of the ancient Egyptians you've got to go to their pyramid tombs; to their Mashtaba shrines, because all their religion revolve around death; the tomb; the afterworld; the preparation of the dead man for his enduring in after-life in the grave; not so Judaism. If you want to understand Judaism you go to the Torah Hien, the Torah of Life, that will give you an idea of what Judaism is. Read Chapter XIX of the Book of Leviticus, that will tell you what Judaism is - nothing there about the dead, all about the living. Judaism believes that the soul of man being spiritual is indestructible and that the God who placed the soul in man will, in our faith and hope, preserve that soul in eternity.

Another question asked was - "Maybe People Think Jews are More Materialistic Than Gentiles - Does the Emphasis on this Word in Our Religion Encourage This?" Well, I question the very premise of the question. What is meant by being "more materialistic"? The Jews place less emphasis on character than do Gentiles? Are Jews less charitable than Gentiles? Were Jews less ready to sacrifice for their convictions? The Jews gave the first martyrs to mankind for faith and conviction. And Jews have died on the battlements of every great war of human liberation. No, I think this talk about Jews being more materialistic is very much in line with this talk about the God of Judaism being the God of justice and the God of Christianity being the God of love, and much else of this theologic and nation-competitiveness and prejudice; There are plenty of materialists among Jews, just as there are among any other people on the face of the earth; too many. There are too many Jews, as there are ^{too many} non-Jews, who are

concerned with material things almost exclusively, with their economic success, with their pleasures, with their social climbing. We have them among our people and we have them among all peoples. And if we have them it's because Jews ignore their Judaism. Judaism asks people to be idealistic in this world and not to have their idealism reserved for the next world. The way of life which Judaism prescribes for its people which might be defined as doing justice, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, is certainly not calculated to make people materialistic. And I must say too that the fear of the hereafter, the fear of the fires of hell, has never made a human being an idealist - never. Love of God has, love of man has made a human being an idealist. Idealism stems not from fear of what's going to be later on but from an overwhelming love for the beautiful and worthy and noble things in life, and for the vision of a great and wonderful society that mankind can create here on earth for human beings, where each man can live under his vine and under his fig tree and none need make him afraid.

Another interesting question asked was - "Does the Emphasis on Social Justice in Judaism make Jews more Susceptible to Communist Propaganda?" I don't think so. Social justice which is a core doctrine in Judaism is always linked up with another core doctrine in Judaism, namely, freedom - liberty. "You shall proclaim freedom throughout the land and unto all the inhabitants thereof." Judaism never had any tolerance for dictatorship whether it is the dictatorship of kings or priests or the dictatorship of the State, or of any party. No, I don't think that it is the emphasis on social justice which ^{have} made certain Jews susceptible to Communist propaganda. I rather think that it is mutinous and resentment and centuries of persecution and the hatred of the persecuting authority, pogroms, these may have driven some Jews into the Communist ranks, and Jews who live in countries that are free and who are captivated by Communism ^{either} are ~~even~~ suffering from an unconscious carry-over of this historic grievance, or they turn to Communism for the same reason that millions of Frenchmen and millions

of Italians and millions of Germans turn to Communism; thinking that that is a proper economic arrangement for society.

I have time just for one or two more - I see I am going to carry over these questions for next Sunday, they are very intriguing, and I'll be able to dash them off with a sentence or two.

Some questions had to do with worship. One was - "Who Selected the Contents of our Union Prayer Book - and Could Responsive Reading be Improved?" That's a good question. The Union prayer book as we have it today is, I believe, the third revision of this Union prayer book, edited and arranged by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the Union prayer book itself is a revision of still older prayer books going back, of course, to the traditional

"sedurim", the traditional orthodox prayer book which has been in use by our people for hundreds and hundreds of years. The structure of the service in the Union prayer book, the structure, the outline, is practically identical with the prayers in the "sedurim" in the orthodox service. The responses referred to in this question are nearly all taken from the Book of Psalms and from the Bible, and they have been in use among our people for a long, long time and many generations found these psalms and these responses quite adequate. The tradition of the Jewish synagogue is to have a fixed order of prayer, a " " , a prayer of " " and there are some denominations, some Christian denominations who have no prayer books at all. Their service consists of hymns, songs, reading from scriptures, and improvised prayers on the part of the minister or preacher, and a sermon. The tradition of our people is to have a " " , an order of service. If I felt that having a fresh service every Sunday morning would inspire our people to great devotion, I would have a special order of service every Sunday morning. But, really, that isn't the core of the problem, is it? The real prayers are what we read into these prayers. Shall we put ourselves into the prayers? The

prayers are in a sense but the settings into which we alone must place the jewels of all the longings and the desires and the upreachings of our souls.

" , the imprint is the important thing. The words are merely channels.

And finally - "Why Don't We Encourage Audience Participation in Hymns and Readings?" Why don't we encourage? We do - they don't. And the key to this question is really the word "audience" because many people come to worship as though they were an audience instead of being worshipers. When I ask you to rise and join in a hymn - sing - you become self-conscious; you look around to see whether anybody is watching you. You're afraid to sing out. I step into a non-Jewish church very often and when they're called upon to sing they burst forth in song. We take out our songs and our prayers in very muted form. Our entire service is really one of participation if the prayerful individual participates. So next Sunday when I ask you to sing, please sing. I'm not much good at it myself, but I try, and you'd be surprised what a great singing congregation does for the individual - it gives him a lift of soul. Sing then to the Lord, a new song; I wish it was always but a song but you can't sing without opening your mouth.

And finally - "Is the Rabbi just an Intermediary Between the Praying-Jew and God or Does He Pray for the Congregation?" The answer is neither. No man is an intermediary in the sight of Judaism between man and his Maker, and no Rabbi prays for his congregation; a Rabbi prays with his congregation. A layman can stand here and lead the congregation in service. The whole synagogue is a layman's institution. Ten Jews reading anywhere can organize themselves into a congregation and call upon any one of their members to lead the congregation in worship. We have no priestly hierarchy in Judaism; we haven't had it in two thousand years since the destruction of the Temple.

There are many other questions - "If Judaism is a Religion that Stresses

Individualism - Why the Emphasis on Group Worship?" Many questions, penetrating questions, on doctrine, many on how to speak of God to young children, - how to teach them the stories of the Bible - how to tell them about God - questions about home ceremonies - questions of why the Jews are not a missionary people today - many other questions. I'll talk about them next Sunday.



1) Mr. & Mrs. Mystery Guest - (1250) 10/11 - I was ~~11/11~~ ^{record} ~~11/11~~ ^{82?} ~~11/11~~ ^{82?} ~~11/11~~ ^{82?}
- not equivalent as El. is - to answer all questions - only thing in
common. He likes a cup Wine on Sabbath - and I = 4 cup.
more my clerk question or answer

2) Submitted many more > 20 letters - Interest aroused -
Spoke on - "What is Judaism?". not a new subject - Certainly
not a new Religion - 3500 yrs. old - But evidently - fresh enough
and exciting enough to arouse great interest there presently.

3) Are the opinions expressed - the personal thoughts of R. Silver
or are they found in the Bible?

When I speak on Judaism - an ancient - whose teachings
are recorded in written form - not only in Bible -

I do not give my private views & opinions -
I seek the authority for what I say in texts -
- documented -

Of course (Just) -

4) Is there general agreement amongst Reform Jews on the
doctrines presented - Where would Conservative and
Orthodox Jews disagree?

On the general and fund. ethical and spiritual principles
no disagreement at all -

(Just) Moses - Isaiah - Hillel - Uraimovides - Eichorn
Kohlen - Schechter - Chief R. Herzog -

① Areas of Disagreement ① opinions on ethics - Moses
② all laws binding - as devel. by Kohlen
③ Personal Morals ④ Phys. Reverence

There is much less diff. - of any on the score, this of
bet. Conserv. & Reform - (2)

Conservative - retained more customs > Reform

- Sounded more Hebrew -

- Generally more emphasis on hist. continuity
and on g. not violence.

5). Are the Reform or the Orthodox or the Conservative groups
growing fastest now?

~~no accurate~~ figures available for all groups. - A marked increase
in no. of Syn. built - & in their membership

To that extent - it is patently - makes little diff. -

which is growing fastest - Whatever the gain -
the gain is for Todai -

But I, now - times, wonder whether - this sharp increase
- remains, for the fastly identifying many people

Beautiful Temples - don't go there! - Allen Davies

states this -

6). Questions about doctrine.

① What is meant by saying that "man is created in the
image of God"

Body and Soul - God is supreme Moral - Thought -

As man cultivates - he comes close to his Maker

The higher he reaches - further & love - for all

(2) What is Jewish concept of punishment for wrong doing
should also include - reward for right doing
J. believes in Reward & Punishment - tho it does not know
God's ways in meting them out. - ~~that is God's~~
with Ezekiel & Jeremiah -

2/8/84
 10 Commandments - 3-4th - Ezekiel & Jeremiah -
 Sam. Profes. - Each man stands on his own
word
 But unless there is no point to morality at all
 - anarchy.

③ What is Jewish idea of Heaven? What happens after death?

J. believed in immortality of the soul - Survival of personality after death

authoritative teaching -

after death?

J. believed in immortality of the soul - Survival

permanently after death -

Beyond that there is no authoritative teaching, -

Very little eschatology in OT. More in apocryphal books, 12

Rabbi's - cautioned not to speculate too much -

- may lead - Superstitions - obscurantism -

Trust in God - Here and Hereafter

Some religions preoccupied with death - Ind. with life

Es - Souls ^{Pyramid} ~~most of them~~

(4) Many people think Jews are more materialistic than Gentiles? Does the emphasis on this world in our religion encourage this?

- I question, g-Cover, the premise! Less charitable?
less emphasis on Character? less ready to sacrifice.

live in convictions ~~of~~ ^{for} Justice! Just - live - 14
Either theologic or moral bias. - (Pent. Mat. Jew + Gentile)
Jvd. asked people to be idealistic in this world and not
to leave their idealism for the next world -
way of life which J. presented - 'do justice - love mercy and
walk humbly' - How can one be a materialist =
Fear of the Fire; Hell has never made an idealist,
any man - But love, [id] than humanity - have!

⑤ Does the emphasis on Soc. Justice in Jvd. make Jews
more susceptible to Comm. Propaganda?

I don't think so! Social Justice in Jvd. always
linked up with Freedom Human Liberty
J. never had any tolerance for Dictatorship - in this, least
- in State, as in Party.

Jews - champions of human liberation
Antithesis, Resentment, Centuries, Persecution shocked of
persecuting authority - Czarism! Potemkin
may have driven some Jews into Comm. ranks -

~~But~~ Jews, who are Com. in complexion that as free, are
either suffering from an ^{unconscious} early - or of his two premises.
- a free Com - for two reasons as free same Gentiles do.

7/ There were questions about Workshops

① Who selected contents of Union Prayer Books? Could the respondents reading be improved?

U.P.B. - 3rd revision of C.A.G.R. - Revision of 2/30 - Finishes

Responses - color - 2000s -

Some denominations have no - An Tradition - Revised from time to time
The real prayer is what we read into them. I think

② "Why don't we encourage audience participation in hymns, readings" - We do! They don't - "Audience" instead
"worshippers" - Non-Jews sing! - Self conscious -

③ "Is the Rabbi just an intermediary bet. the praying Jew and God, or does he pray for the congregation?"
Neither! No man is an intermediary bet. man & God.
No Rabbi prays for the congregation - but with the congregation
Prayers inter pares - Lazarus can lead Cong. as worship.

+ ④ "Why do we have services only 9 months, the year?"
What he meant is Sun. morning services.
We have Friday Evg. services 12 mos. in the year.
For any one who wishes to worship - Temple is open the year round

Praying services on Sunday 9 mo - I feel highly
flattered to know that there is at least one for
whom 9 mo. of praying is not enough - 12 mos
I'm glad too - Rabbi preached twice a year!