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With our eyes toward the future, 1957.

Sunday Morning Service
The Temple
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WITH OUR EYES TOWARD THE FUTURE

by

DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

(The address which Dr. Silver delivered before the General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in Toronto, Canada, last Wednesday.)

This last week was a rather busy one for me. On Monday I was in the City of Philadelphia, having been invited to attend the Jubilee celebration - the 50th Anniversary celebration - of the founding of the Dropsie College for Jewish learning: an institution for higher Jewish learning which has made some important contributions to American Jewish scholarship and to scholarship generally. I participated that evening at Dropsie College in a Symposium, the title of which was "The Parting of the Ways", how Christianity came to separate from Judaism.

In that Symposium, Professor Enslin presented what may be called the Christian point of view on the subject of "The Parting of the Ways" and I presented the Jewish point of view. My presentation you will find in this week's Bulletin of The Temple and you may be interested in reading it.

On Tuesday evening I was in Wilmington, Delaware, the guest of the Jewish Community of Delaware at a very brilliant function and at that occasion the Governor of the State of Delaware made me an Honorary Citizen of the State of Delaware which I accepted with deep gratitude on the condition that I will not have to pay taxes to the State of Delaware.

On Wednesday evening I was in Toronto, Canada, attending the sessions of the Convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. This was a very largely attended Convention and an enthusiastic one. The representatives of the forces of

American Reform or liberal Judaism assembled at that Convention which had a very rich program of public meetings and workshops and at which men and women had an opportunity to exchange ideas about liberal Judaism, about the status of Reform Judaism in the United States and Canada, and generally to receive a mutual inspiration and stimulation for their work. Some three thousand delegates were in attendance, and our own congregation was properly represented. I had been invited to address the closing banquet of the Convention last Wednesday evening which was a gala occasion and I was grateful for the opportunity to exchange some of my ideas and share some of my ideas with Jewish men and women from all parts of this continent.

I spoke on the theme, "With our Eyes Toward the Future" and this is the address which I delivered that evening. I said that we may face the future with confidence because our people in America, the United States and Canada, are overwhelmingly loyal. They are not conscious assimilationists. They are not deliberately running away from their faith and - from their people - as was the case with certain Jewries in the old world, especially in the century before the two world wars. Our people have demonstrated a steady attachment and a most commendable solidarity with their fellow Jews in other lands during the supreme misery of the recent decades of collapse and disaster -- the blackest of our many nights. Their solicitude and generosity have been a source of reassurance to us and of amazement to the world. Our people have also built their communal institutions with a lavish hand. They have been remarkably responsive to the needs of their community life. And if the erection of many beautiful temples, and synagogues and schools in our country is an indication of loyalty to the faith of our fathers then we may be fully justified in our confidence for the future. We have good material to build with.

We may also look confidently towards the future because American Jewish life is evolving in an environment which is more than friendly to religion and not unfriendly to religious minorities. Religion is not proscribed on these shores, the religionist is not disadvantaged, and Judaism is not under attack. The world in which we live gives every encouragement to religion and Judaism is free to develop and to express itself. Government and people alike have profound reverence for the spiritual forces

in civilization, an attitude which is part of the essential pattern of their history. Judaism can thrive in such an environment.

Progressive Judaism may also look hopefully toward the future, because religious liberalism has always been a powerful factor in the spiritual life of America and has had a long and honored tradition. It is still a vital and vigorous force among important if not dominant sections of our population. Progressive religion does not have to fight for its position defensively on the American scene. Nor does progressive Judaism.

But just as there are factors which give us ground for confidence in our future, so are there factors which should give us ground for concern. The impressive facade of American Jewish life may be somewhat misleading. The Temples and Synagogues are there, but the worshippers are not, at least not in numbers comparable with the physical amplitude of the edifices or commensurate with the obligations - the real obligations of religious affiliation. It is not possible to serve our faith - to serve any faith - with token commitments. It was an ancient prophet of Israel who cautioned his people not to put their trust in deceptive words: "This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord." We build Temples and they are spacious and beautiful and modern and ultra-modern, but ~~w~~ are we building men and women whose worshipful feet will throng their courts eagerly and exultingly.

We should build beautiful Temples and Synagogues. It is fitting that we should worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, and amidst the holiness of beauty. Why should we dwell in houses of cedar and the ark of the Lord in a tent? But the beautiful structures which we erect will not of themselves insure the survival of our faith. They may even beguile us into dangerous self-delusions. It is we who are the Temple of our faith, or its whited sepulcher. It is we who are its girders and walls, its arches and domes, its symbols and ornaments. It is our loyalty which is the replenishing oil of its Ner Tamid (of its perpetual life). And the holy ark will forever remain empty and desolate if the hearts of devout worshippers will not abide therein.

Long ago, Sage and Psalmist warned our people against the tree of many branches whose roots were few. They taught us to look below the surface and to regard the roots. In their seasoned wisdom they knew that the winds of the world do often sweep down in violent fury, upon men and institutions and pluck them up and overthrow them if their roots are few. They also taught us that we must take root deep downward, if we are to bear fruit upward. (Hebrew)

How deep, dear friends, are our roots: Have we enough reserve of spiritual energy to withstand a prolonged crisis? Are we fast depleting the inventory which past ages have accumulated for us? Have we taken stock of our powers of resistance, not to affliction -- we have learned how to react to affliction -- but to the weakening influences of well-being and prosperity? Is it in the second or third generation that the process of drift and dissolution sets in, and why? What is our strength that we should hope?

And what were the strong and firm roots which enabled our faith and people to outride the many cyclonic storms of the past? Not every Jewish community was so successful, but where it was, it was due to the fact that it had sunk deep roots in Jewish learning and study, and what was learned was zealously transmitted. The injunction which our forefathers^{received, they} observed throughout the ages: "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children; thou shalt speak of them when thou sittest in thy house, when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." It was the unflagging cultivation of heart and mind in the rich unfolding of the Torah, which to them was a an inexhaustible source of living truth, which insured survival for our people.

These were the roots of our people's life in the past -- not alone the Jewish scholar, but the educated Jewish layman, the man for whom the Bible and later Jewish writings and the Hebrew language, which is the very key to the casket of our literary treasures, were not a sealed book. Professor Schechter recorded what is undoubtedly a cold historic fact when he declared that Hellenistic Judaism (that is the Judaism of the early centuries of the common era in the Eastern Mediterranean) Hellenistic Judaism was the only one known to history which dared to make the experiment of dis-

pensing with the Sacred Language altogether. The result was death. It withered away and terminated in total and wholesale apostasy from Judaism.

Is it well with us on the score of Jewish learning? Are our Sunday schools producing a generation of truly educated Jewish men and women closely familiar with the chronicles of our glorious years and the noble testament of their peoples' courage and sacrifices? Are they at home in the literature which the great minds and pious hearts of Israel have produced? Have they enough provision for the long journey ahead — or is their food, which came warm to us from our fathers, now dry and mouldy, to use a Biblical phrase?

I have a feeling that we have been growing satisfied with surfaces rather than with depths, with a minimum; or if not satisfied, then reconciled. And there are those who consider even this minimum as excessive. If that is the case then ~~is~~ there is ground here for deep concern for the future of our faith and the survival of our people.

I hear from time to time, voices raised in pathetic yearning for the dear old days of Classical Reform Judaism, now seemingly gone beyond recall. I do not know what is meant by Classical Reform Judaism. The founding fathers of Reform Judaism differed sharply among themselves on nearly every question of doctrine and practice. Only one thing they shared in common. They were no longer Orthodox. Reform Judaism always represented a movement within Judaism, not a party or a sect. Sects never thrived for long in Judaism. A party or a sect may stand still on a fixed platform but a movement must move, or it becomes petrified into a set of dogmas and so dies as a mighty cadence of dynamic principles. Even the framers of the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 recognized the progressive character of Judaism, and "were convinced of the utmost necessity of preserving the historic identity with our great past."

The founders of so-called Classical Reform Judaism were scholars -- some of them great Hebrew scholars. Geiger and Einhorn and Adler and Samuel Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler -- among the most classical of the early Reformers -- were ardent students of Hebrew literature. They made significant contributions to the Science of Judaism. They wrote important books and published important periodicals in many

fields of Jewish knowledge. And their greatest wish was to disseminate Jewish learning among the Jewish laity - among their fellow Jews, young and old. Isaac Meyer Wise's proudest achievement and his deepest love, was the Hebrew Union Collage -- a scholastic institution for the training of rabbis and teachers who in turn were to train Jewish lay men and women. "Reform", Dr. Wise asserted, "Reform must begin with the spreading of light, more light, as much light indeed, as the age can bear. Instruction, more instruction, as much of it as the intellect is capable of receiving." They all hoped for and worked for an educated Jewish laity. They held, of course, that a man need not and should not pray in a language which he did not understand and that therefore prayer in Hebrew was not indispensable. The ancient rabbis had already asserted this self-evident truth. For even though they recognized that many Jews unfortunately no longer knew the Hebrew language, they hoped that Jews would learn it and would come to understand it. Not a single Reform leader ever declared that in order to be a hundred percent Classical Reform Jew, one must be an all-out, king-sized Am Ha-aretz!

The outstanding Reform leaders of the past did not conceive of Judaism as a mere "religious confession."

"The creed," wrote Dr. Kaufmann Kohler, who was formerly President of the Hebrew Union College, "the creed is a condition sine qua non of the Christian Church. To disbelieve its dogmas is to cut oneself loose from membership. Judaism is quite different. The Jew is born into it and cannot extricate himself from it even by the renunciation of his faith, which would but render him an apostate Jew. This condition exists, he said, because the racial community formed, and still forms, the basis of the religious community. It is birth, not confession, that imposes on the Jew the obligation to work and strive for the eternal verities of Israel, for the preservation and propagation of which he has been chosen by the God of history."

These men held that Judaism (these men, these Classical Reform leaders) held Judaism to be the world conquering faith of an eternal people. They were courageous and militant advocates of their faith, unafraid even in their day, to proclaim Judaism as the one true universal religion of mankind. They were doughty champions of Jewish

life and thought, valiant in attack and fierce in defense. They made no overtures for a theologic truce. They did not speak of self-effacing integration, which is a cover-up for complete assimilation. They knew that Judaism is bound up with the life of the Jewish people - the historic Jewish people.

Of course they were moved by the spirit of their age - that's what made them progressive - but they were also moved by the spirit of the ages, and they sought over-whelmingly to retain for their faith an identity a coherence and an integrity. For the temper of the times is not always the sole nor the best criterion of what is religiously desirable. The prophets often found themselves under the necessity of challenging the temper and the mores of their time. They confronted temporal predilections with eternal mandates

"Thus saith the Lord."

These early leaders of Reform Judaism may have misread, in some instances, the signs of their times. In their exuberant enthusiasm for the new day of enlightenment which had dawned for the world and for their people in Western Europe and in America, they believed that they were actually on the threshold of a wonderful new day - on the threshold of the Millenium. A hundred years ago, in Germany, mind you, one of the foremost leaders of Reform Judaism, perhaps the greatest of them, Abraham Geiger, told his fellow-Jews in Germany: "Cast off your rough coat of mail, there is no longer hostility abroad; undo the trappings that hide and disfigure you - frosty and icy winds no longer blow against you - love will blossom everywhere..." It was not Jews alone who shared this euphoria. At about the same time Victor Hugo wrote: "In the nineteenth century war will be dead, the scaffold will be dead, hatred will be dead, frontiers will be dead, royalty will be dead, dogmas will be dead, man will begin to live!" They saw the brilliant lights of their century and ignored the dark shadows. These Reformed Jewish leaders readily paid the excessive price of national self-denial for a political emancipation which finally ended in total rejection, in disfranchisement, in exile and death for many of their people. They believed that anti-semitism and discrimination would rapidly disappear and that all the political problems which confronted the Jewish people would find a

rapid solution in the universal brotherhood which was fast approaching them. They, accordingly, regarded all talk about finding a national solution for the Jewish problem, or any action for the establishment of a national homeland and a place of refuge for their people, as impractical and even reactionary. And those who advocated such action were pessimists who despaired of human reason, the progress of humanity and the solidarity of mankind." These were the halcyon days, you will recall, before Hitler, before Naziism and Fascism, before the gas chambers, before the night total annihilation of Jewish life. Their timetable hand unfortunately gone awry -- like that of many hopeful idealists who try to rush the Millenium (to use the rabbinic phrase) to force the End

There was another great Jew who, in his day, misread the signs of the times, and grew impatient with those who were not convinced that the Kingdom of God was at hand.

I wonder though, if these spiritual leaders, so wholly dedicated to the highest interests of their people, were they alive today, in these days following the great disillusionment and the appalling catastrophes, were they alive today, would they have regarded the establishment of the State of Israel and the rescue and sheltering of more than a million Jewish refugees, for whom the rest of the world could find no room, would they not have regarded these facts as a blessed and providential act of God. Or, would they have, like those who presume to speak in their name today, resented this historic achievement and would they have impugned the loyalty and ceaselessly harassed by base and groundless charges and innuendoes those Jews who seek to strengthen this young State of Israel economically and defend it politically, as far as they are able, against imminent or threatening dangers. Would these great leaders of liberal Judaism have chosen to prolong a controversy whose day had passed or would they rather have striven to lay the dust of needless strife and the din of semantic battles in the Household of Israel?

I should be less suspicious of the motives of these so-called "classicists" (and they go by various names) If they were dedicating more of their zeal and energy and publicity to the other positive interests and enterprises of those early Reformers,

to the encouragement, for example, of Jewish learning among the laity; the support of Jewish scholarship, the cultivation of the Hebrew language; the intensification of their religious school programs, rather than to skillful exercises in curricular excision and diminuendo... how little of Judaism they can afford to give to their children.

It is, my dear friends, the inadequacy of our training and our religious self-discipline which should give us serious concern even in the very midst of our gratifying growth and outward prosperity which delight us all -- our inadequate teachers -- their inadequate training -- the inadequacy of the time set aside for instruction -- and our own insufficient personal commitments even to those few disciplines which we have acknowledged to be valid and vital for the survival of our faith.

(I am fond of quoting this statement of Heine)
Heinrich Heine, in one of his letters, writes/that he once stood with a friend of his before the Cathedral of Amiens. His friend asked him: "How is it that we can no longer build such an impressive pile?" And he replied: "Men in those days had convictions, we moderns have opinions, and it required something more than an opinion to build a Gothic Cathedral."

We modern Jews have a good opinion about our Judaism, but not strong enough convictions. We need a renewal of that massive religious earnestness - we need a renewal of that massive religious earnestness - which gave to our ancestors their patent of nobility. It is not a matter of how much - but how earnestly, how inwardly, how sacrificially!

It is upon the inwardness of Judaism, upon the intellectual quest of God through the time-honored techniques of Jewish life, through learning and study, through the disciplines of the devotional life, that we shall have to concentrate in the days to come. It is with these grave obligations that we must confront ourselves.

There is no longer any nourishing food for the coming generations of Jews in any program of revision of surface customs and practices. We are really down to the bone already. Nor will a warmed-over campaign of anti-nationalism -- a German-Jewish importation, and a dismal failure even in the land of its origin, meet the situation. If, however, at the behest of a faith of boundless horizons, and of a tradition

which gave primacy to study and scholarship, we resolve to carry on, not catering to modernity, but seeking renewal, not reaching out for discarded paraphernalia, but for depth and inwardness, we shall, I am confident, be able to move into the inscrutable future, knowing that the jar of meal shall never be spent, ^(using a Biblical phrase) neither shall the cruise of oil ever fail us.....

My friends, the future belongs to Judaism! Judaism, in my humble conviction, is the faith of tomorrow! Not its forms or its rituals -- these are intended, and these are important only for us as Jews so as to discipline and alert ourselves for our covenanted tasks and our appointed destiny -- but Judaism's spiritual message and program -- a message and program designed to sustain and advance human life on earth. Judaism is a reasonable faith, responsive both to man's soundest instincts and to his noblest aspirations. It offers mankind a gospel of social progress and it summons men to social action, to the building of the good society in justice, in brotherhood and in peace. It is a faith built not on salvationism - not on resignation - not on other-worldliness - not on asceticism. It has confidence in man's inexhaustible spiritual resources. It teaches a boundless reverence for life and for all that contributes to its noble fulfillment and enjoyment.

All these are original ideas of Judaism and they are as valid today, in the atomic age, as they were in the days of the Patriarchs and the Prophets and the Sages. They are from everlasting unto everlasting, for they emanate from the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, and, in vouchsafing unto us this Torah of Life, for the blessing of mankind, God has implanted eternal life within us

This Torah - Life - is, in very truth the Tree of Life. I began with the simile of the tree - its branches and its roots -- let us make sure that the roots of this tree are set firmly and securely in learning, in study, in discipline and in loyalty.

If so, then our eyes can look toward the future with supreme confidence.