



## 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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Our Debt to Moses; Passover, 1939, 1945.



## "OUR DEBT TO MOSES"

Abba Hillel Silver.

Moses is the first great religious personality which appeared on the scene of history. Up to his time all religions were folk creations. They were anonymous. They were not the achievements of outstanding individuals.

*omit* The ancient religions of India, Babylon, Egypt or Greece were the <sup>products</sup> precipitates of impersonal and unconscious spiritual forces. They were early man's pragmatic adjustments to his world.

With Moses the prophetic personality enters the arena of religious thought. The great One-Man arises who consciously and quite deliberately re-interprets the social beliefs and customs of his day and gives them a new and definite direction. This marks the beginning of religious progress; for religious progress moves in the channel of personality.

Students of religion have been impressed by the amazing "personality" of the God of the Bible. Jahweh is not a pale, metaphysical abstraction or a catagorical imperative. He is intense Life and Will, and Power. "I am that I am." He moves through the history of Israel as an overwhelming Presence.



*ant.* It is not unlikely that the abundant personality of Moses first endowed the God concept of the ancient Hebrews with that unique quality of masterful personality which from then on He possessed in the mind of Israel.

Who was (this man) Moses? (Very little is known of him that may not be regarded as legendary. The great mists of history envelope him. Yet through the clouds of legends and <sup>through</sup> the dusk of the centuries the massive outlines of the man who stood at the dawn of Israel's national life and who fashioned its destiny, are discernible.

Moses is identified with the heroic epoch of the Exodus which took place some thirteen hundred years before the <sup>our</sup> common era. (A number of wild Semitic tribes) <sup>Jacob and his people</sup> had migrated into

the delta of the Nile and settled there. For a time they were prosperous and free. A change of dynasty occurred and these <sup>descendants of Jacob</sup> tribes were subjected to oppression and tyranny. They were made to do the hard tasks of the Egyptians, to build their fortified cities and their pyramids. They were enslaved. The love of freedom, however, the wild freedom of the desert, which these tribes once experienced and never completely forgot, remained with them, smouldering, until the time when oppression waxed so great that the fires of rebellion seethed in the souls of these men, and Moses appeared on the scene.



(We are told that) Moses was doomed to death as were all the male children born to the Israelites in Egypt. His mother, however, placed him in a little ark of bulrushes, among the flags by the waters of the Nile. The man who was (destined) to be the deliverer of his people was himself delivered from death by the daughter of the Pharaoh. And Moses grew up a prince in the palace of the king.

Amidst the splendor of the courts of the ancient Pharaohs Moses was raised, an Egyptian. But "when he grew up he went out to his brethren." From the palace he descended to the hovels of the slaves. Between pride and loyalty Moses chose loyalty. Day by day he beheld the heaving multitudes toiling under the burning Egyptian skies, slaving for Pharaoh and groaning under the yoke of the Task-masters. *And his spirit grew hot within him.* (Moses knew then what his mission in life would be. Some day he would become the emancipator of these people.)

There came a day when Moses, seeing an Egyptian brutally attacking a Hebrew, arose in his wrath and in the passion of youth and slew him. A day later he was betrayed by a fellow-Jew, and was forced to flee from the land of Egypt. He became an exile. For many years he lived in the wilderness of Midian. During those quiet years in the wilderness Moses had time to think and to dream and to store up that vast spiritual energy which enabled him later on to become the leader of his people and the teacher of mankind.



*Must*

Three great religions have come out of the wilderness. In the wilderness, the Arabs say, there is nothing but Allah. The wilderness is very rich soil for the spirit of man.

Moses lived in the peace of that wilderness for many years. He was a shepherd. He learned, the Rabbis say, how to be a shepherd of a people by being a shepherd of a flock. He tasted, too, of that sharp freedom which the desert proffers its children. None is so free as the nomad in the wilderness.

Then one day his long period of spiritual gestation was consummated. A voice, imperious and undeniable, called him to his life's work. God revealed Himself to him, as God always reveals Himself to men, as a consuming and unconsumable flame, as an overpowering and burning conviction. Moses <sup>was called to</sup> (realizes that he must) leave the quiet and peace of his desert world and return to the teeming world of the Nile, to (the harsh and troubled world of master and slave, and) begin the bitter struggle of emancipation.

Moses hesitates. He know<sup>d</sup>(s) <sup>e</sup>(beforehand) the martyrdom which awaits the prophet and leader. He recoils <sup>ed</sup> from his mission. "Who am I?" "What shall I say unto them?" "They will not believe me." "I am not a man of words." (The anger of the Lord is great. A conviction once it becomes strong in the soul of a man is a devouring fire.)

*But God answered him, and showed him what he was to do*



(It cannot be quenched.)

So Moses leaves the wilderness and returns to Egypt.

The long period of conflict begins. His task is to convince not only a harsh ruler to mitigate his hardships, but also a people which for four hundred years had been steeped in slavery, to want freedom and to strike out for it. His mission at first fails. Far from easing the burdens of his people, additional burdens are superimposed upon them. Pharaoh will see to it that no meddler will "incite the people to break loose from their work." Their burdens must be made still heavier and their spirits broken still more. The slave-people soon begins to grumble against Moses and Aaron, his brother: "The Lord look upon you and judge because ye have made our savour to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us." But Moses persists. Between resentment at their ingratitude and love which understands and forgives he chose love. He exhorts his people. He teaches. He persuades. He challenges. Soon the ancient hunger for freedom is aroused again in the hearts of the slaves and the ancient memories and the ancient pride. The fires of rebellion are kindled. The people arise, They break through the confining walls of Egypt, Out to the open stretches of the free desert they march, on to the Promised Land. (The Exodus takes place.)

*the way being opened for them by God's intervention*



But Moses <sup>2</sup>knows that it is not enough to emancipate <sup>was</sup> a people from physical slavery. If Israel ~~is~~ to become a great nation it must be emancipated spiritually as well. He must give Israel a law. For there is no freedom without law. Accordingly, soon after the Exodus, he leads the people to the foot of Mount Sinai. <sup>On the Mount God gave him laws for the people</sup> (There he instructs them in the ways of life.) <sup>So was</sup> He formulated for them a minimum code of social legislation - The Ten Commandments - which have since become the digits of civilization. These Commandments hold within them the germinating ideas of all the rich, spiritual harvest of later prophetic Judaism.

At the foot of Mt. Sinai Moses <sup>fold</sup> <sup>it</sup> covenants his people <sup>that</sup> <sup>was called</sup> to its destiny. Israel ~~is~~ to be a unique people among the peoples of the earth, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The heavy burden of an historic mission is placed upon it.

But while the people, the "mixed multitude," readily accepts the mandate, it is scarcely prepared for it. The taint of Egypt - the age-old brand of serfdom - is still upon its soul. The Golden Calf becomes the tragic symbol of a generation that is not fit for freedom. Moses realizes that one generation can not bridge the vast gulf between the slave-pens of Egypt and the Land of Promise. A free people can not be forged out of men who continually hanker



after the flesh-pots of Egypt and prefer the security of servitude to the perils of freedom. Such men must die in the wilderness. A new generation, which did not know the lash of Pharaoh, must arise ere Jordan can be crossed.

So, after many years of wandering, Moses brings the new generation to the threshold of Canaan. There the saga of his life ends. His work is done. He, himself, does not enter the Promised Land. A leader must die with his generation...

*The Bible records that along his life but. There is brief. Legend adds to the*  
(Upon Mount Nebo,) the legend says, the Angel Gabriel *suppl. story.* spread out his couch and the Angel Michael spread a purple robe upon it and the Angel Zaggazel placed a woolen pillow underneath his head, and *dat* God, Himself, descended, and with a kiss took Moses' *through and out* soul to heaven. (And so) Moses died, and "no man knoweth his sepulcher unto this day." (For man must not be worshipped by men, only the God in man....)

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Moses was the first great emancipator of the human race. He was the first revolutionist of history. This thought remained with Israel always. It never forgot that its national life began in a revolt against tyranny. Freedom became the keynote of Israel's aspirations, - political, social and economic freedom. This is the very heart of Hebraic prophecy: "To bring the prisoner from the dungeon and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house."



Moses, Jewish tradition maintains, was the first and greatest of the prophets. ("There hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses.") Unlike some other of the great religious leaders of mankind, Moses was not a mystic or an apocalyptic dreamer. (He was not a revealer of heavenly arcana, though he did "draw near unto the thick darkness where God was.") He was a social prophet, the architect of a social order built upon the durable foundations of righteousness.

Moses was a great law-giver. The Torah is the Torah of Moses. The Five Books are (his, not of his own writing) but of his (own) essential inspiration. Both the Written and the Oral Law of Israel trace their lineage to him and to the authority of his personality.

Moses was a true leader of men. He knew the agony of leadership. How often did the slaves whom he led on the long, hard trek to freedom turn upon him in rage, seeking to destroy him! How often did they vent their mad discontent upon him! But he pitied their blindness. He forgave their faithlessness. He loved them. But he never yielded to them. (He led. They followed. About him streams the oriflamme of a mighty courage.)

Moses was the founder of the Jewish nation. In Abraham we have the story of a wandering tribe. With Moses, the history of the Jewish nation begins.



And fittingly enough this rugged leader of a rebellious host, this nation-builder and law-giver, this prophet whom "the Lord knew face to face" was in all his ways crowned with humility. "Now the man Moses was very humble, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth."

The heart of his people, knowing his humility, was never awed by his greatness. They lovingly turned to him. "Beloved of God and men was Moses." They called him "The Faithful Shepherd."

And the Shepherd of Midian would have asked for no greater reward....

WRHS

