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Reel  
171

Box  
62

Folder  
43

The battle hymn of America, 1918.



Spring 1918  
18-4

"THE BATTLE HYMN OF AMERICA"

By Abba Hillel Silver

This is an address delivered by Abba Hillel Silver,  
Rabbi at The Temple, Cleveland, before the members of the  
Cleveland Advertising Club. - Editor's Note.

I listened to the singing of the song, "Somewhere in France".  
The beautiful voice of the singer touched me deeply, though I regret  
to say the spirit of the song did not appeal to me. It had a touch of  
the spirit of depression about it; a spirit which must remain foreign  
to this war.

While there is no occasion for exultation, and surely no oc-  
casion just at the present moment for a triumphant expression of jubila-  
tion, it is equally true that there is no occasion for thoughts of sor-  
row, because while it is true that thousands of our dear boys are shed-  
ding their blood in France, it is also true that their blood is at this  
moment watering the ground whence shall spring the beautiful flowers of  
a new civilization, and while it is true that thousands of mothers are  
shedding tears in France to-day, it is also true that their tears are  
at this moment fashioning themselves into a new rainbow of human glory.

As I read the newspaper this morning, which brought the news  
of a still further German advance, a friend of mine turned to me and  
said:

"Rabbi, does not that make your heart ache?" I said, "Friend,  
that should not make your heart ache,- that should make your jaw square."

He said to me, "Don't you at all entertain a thought of de-  
feat, the probability of a German victory?" I said to him, "Friend,



any man who thinks of our enemy as victorious is either a fool, an unbeliever, or both."

He is a fool because his eyes are dazzled by the display of pomp and power, of cunning and cruelty, of warily laid schemes, of efficiency. He does not know that though all these things may win battles, many battles, yet they cannot win ultimate and lasting victory, for—"Not by strength and not by power, but by My Spirit, sayeth the Lord."

My friends, I wish that you could see it all as I see it. All this blazing heroics of armament, all these imposing knickknacks of force, all these stupendous instruments of destruction are after all but so many sandpiles built by little children when the irresistible waves of the human spirit begin to beat in upon the shores of Life.

If you and I could think in terms of centuries instead of days, - if we had that vision, and if war were not so tragically sad, then you and I would come to regard these men who strut about in their importance, these kaisers, and these Hindenburgs and these Ludendorffs, I say that we would come to regard them for what they really are, - charlatans, and mountebanks, - fools, and we would laugh at their gay antics, their futile, childish attempts to stem the floodtide of human progress with a sword or with a bayonet.

We cannot be defeated, because Truth may be defeated temporarily, but never permanently; Righteousness may be defeated temporarily, but never permanently. We cannot be defeated, because with us are the indomitable spirit, the eternal hopes, the undying aspirations, the holiness, and the sanctity of the human soul. We cannot be



defeated because with us are Truth and Righteousness. We cannot be defeated because Life is greater than the living, and Mankind is stronger than man. We cannot be defeated because we have identified ourselves with the enfolding purposes of God, because we have joined our destinies with the great, glorious destinies of humanity.

We have not placed a spiked helmet upon the Almighty. We have not taught the angels and the hosts of heaven the goose-step. We have not made of Heaven an exclusive suburb of Berlin, with a "verboden" sign upon it. We have not monopolized the Deity.

But, men, I believe, and it is my earnest conviction that God is with us in this struggle, because it has always been my earnest conviction that God is with every individual and with every people that sacrifices himself or itself for righteousness' sake,- that hungers and suffers and sorrows for the sake of an ideal. And we are in this war for the sake of ideals and ideals only.

I don't know whether you have thought of it, men, but when our boys return from France after their work shall have been accomplished,- and they will not return until their work is accomplished,- I say, that when our boys return from France they will bring back nothing, nothing but a Glory in their hearts and the Benediction of humanity on their heads.

They are going there, not for the sake of gaining power for this country, not for the sake of increasing our territorial possessions, not for the sake of gaining additional spheres of influence - they are going there simply and solely for sacrifice- to give, to create a new beauty, a new glory, something sweet, something holy in life. Not to take, but to give! Not to hug unto oneself some possession, some treasure in life, but to give out of the fullness of



their souls, out of the all-encompassing, all-embracing life, to give, to give, to give to others! And because of that, because of the spirit of sacrifice which is the dominant note of all our efforts, I believe that God is with us, and I say this in a spirit of humility, in a spirit of humbleness, and prayerfulness.

Friends, God loves sacrifice. Sacrifice is a law of life. The record of evolution is a record of sacrifices of one species for another, of one race for another.

The whole world is a graveyard of races and people and species that have passed to make room for the higher and the more fit, and as far as man is concerned, why, man's history is a history of sacrifice. Through your eyes and mine, ten thousand generations look out; through your voice the voices of millions of forgotten peoples are speaking at this moment; through your thoughts the thoughts of myriads of God's children of the past are surging. You are to-day what you are because of others who have given themselves to make you possible.

They speak of the heroism of the battlefield; they speak of young men who give up their future, their lives, for the sake of an ideal; they speak of the suffering of the men in the trenches. I tell you, men, that they are as nothing, compared with that silent suffering of the mothers of men, who watch and wait through the silent watches of the night; who suffer in silence. I tell you, men, the sacrifice of motherhood in this struggle is the holiest sacrifice that humanity has known.

I say God loves sacrifice because it is through them that we grow, and it holds true of nations as well as of individuals. America has caught a vision, it has learned to sacrifice, and America is growing greater in spirit, nobler and stronger, because of this note of



sacrifice which has come into its life.

That is the first reason, my friends, why I believe that we should have absolute faith in the outcome of the struggle.

The second reason is this; somewhere it is said, "Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God."

"Blessed are the peacemakers", and we are peacemakers. We are not peace prattlers, or peace praters, or peace babblers, but we are peacemakers, because we are ready to shed our blood, to make peace possible- because we are willing, nay anxious, to give of our souls, of our tears, of our sorrows, to establish forever, and for all time, the great gospel of Human Brotherhood, and the rights of peoples. That is the only true type of peacemaker that we ought to respect.

It is easy to prattle about "peace, peace, peace", when there is no peace.

The seers of my people twenty-six centuries ago have visioned the glorious day when "people shall beat their swords into plowshares and their knives into pruning shears".

And that vision is dear to my soul. That vision is dear to the soul of every American, but we are convinced, nevertheless, that the vision of Isaiah, the vision of Michah will never be fulfilled, will never be established on earth, until the vision of that other prophet is first realized, the vision of the Prophet Joel:

"Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning knives into spears! Gather yourselves, ye men of valor! Gather yourselves into the Valley of the Decision, for this is the day of the Lord."

The Valley of the Decision to-day is "Somewhere in France", and the thing that is to be decided is the most vital, the most intimate thing of human life.



It is a question of creating a new heaven and a new earth. I hope by this time, men, that you have come to realize that the issue of the struggle is the issue between two civilizations, or between Barbarism and Civilization, between Light and Darkness; between the glory of to-morrow, and the ugliness of yesterday, between the wilderness and the Promised Land. It is a struggle of fundamental things, a struggle of essentials. A new world is being created!

A rather amusing thing happened to me a few days ago. Very early in the morning, about six or seven o'clock, the 'phone rang in my room. I answered it, and heard a woman's voice saying, without much introduction, "Rabbi, do you think the world is coming to an end?"

I said, "Well, what makes you ask this question so early in the morning?" and she said she had read the Bible last night and had had a terrible dream.

I said, "That is very likely."

"Rabbi", she said imploringly, "you have read the Bible, don't you really think that the world is coming to an end?" And just at that moment it flashed through my mind that really the woman had spoken better than she knew.

The world is really coming to an end- this world! And if our multitudinous sacrifices shall not have been in vain, and these millions of God's children shall not have been mutilated in vain, if the tears of our mothers shall not have been shed in vain, then this world of ours must come to an end - this world of lies, and compromises, this world of injustice - this world of misery and suffering - this world of oppression - this world of lack of opportunity for God's children, this world must come to an end.

The world is being purged in the fires of the battle front at



this hour, a new world is being created, yes, and a new type of man, for the man of to-day and of yesterday will be another man to-morrow.

The man of pettiness, and the man of meanness, the man who sees the goal, the be-all, the worth-all of life as material possessions, the man who would not entertain a new thought because it is so disconcerting, the man who lived enclosed in the great Chinese wall, that man is disappearing in the fires of this fateful struggle and a new type of manhood is being evolved. A new type of mind, a new ideal is coming into the hearts and the souls of men, and I believe, men, I believe that it was given to America, the nation that never hesitated to make sacrifices, and the nation that loved peace, to hasten the day when this new world and this new Humanity will be established. That is my firm conviction.

What is the Battle Hymn of America? Friends, it is not a Hymn of Hate! That is unbecoming the dignity of America. It is not the Hymn of Vengeance, tipped with gall! It is not a Hymn of Conquest, for unto Germany and its conquest, proud America says, "I had rather be a dog and bay at the moon, than have the conquests that you have to your credit, or discredit."

We are not out for conquests. We are out to conquer the world for an ideal. Our Hymn will be a hymn not of hate, but of love, a hymn of Salvation and Redemption, a hymn of Humanity exalted and purified, a hymn of Sweetness and Light, a hymn of greater opportunities for every child of God. a hymn of Democracy. That to my mind is the Hymn of America in this struggle.

And were I to make an appeal at this hour, what shall I say to you men? You have been asked to make great sacrifices. You are now



called upon to make lesser sacrifices.

The Government has come to you appealing for the things that our men need at the Front, the wherewithal, the financial aid that you can give, and unto you I say: "Men, you have no choice. It is either American Liberty Bonds or Prussian Slavery Bonds, and what man, nurtured in this land of freedom, can hesitate for a moment?

The trumpet has sounded in the land. The call has gone forth to every American to do his duty to give not only himself and of himself, but to transform himself, and that is the keynote, that is the thought that I would leave with you this noon. The real message of this struggle to the thinking man and woman is the message of transfiguration, of transformation, of changing our whole mode of thinking and living, of growing bigger with the bigness of life, of throwing off that crust of selfishness and smallness which has cramped and confined our souls hitherto.

The world is changing, the world is suffering, the world is making a new ideal, a new God, and you men of America, I say unto you that unless this message enter into your souls and you become transfigured in the greatness of purpose, nobility of aspiration, unless you reach out your hand to touch the robe of God's glory, unless you become great with the nobility of the new American purpose and motive, you are missing, you are losing the real significance of this struggle.

A New World is in the making, a new Mankind is in the making. Would that every one of us become conscious of this tremendous truth!