



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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

Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

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Is there an American Judaism?, 1920.

2012  
Is there an Am. Judaism?

1. Many a writer in recent years both Jew and non-Jew has challenged the Jews of Am. to stand forth and justify their existence.  
How is the Am. Jew to be justified?
2. It is not a difficult matter to meet this challenge — one need but say that no group — but whole that may satisfy.
3. Unfortunately Am. Judaism has not yet evolved a program of life. — at times — pale replica, feeble imitation — all in all it is a confused echo of Eur. Jew — we have as yet failed to introduce — Our Jew. has not yet reacted to its Am. environment — only in so far as it has become victim of Gen. rel. mess.  
In a word, we have not as yet evolved an Am. Jew.
4. In a sense there is no such a thing —
5. To be sure there divine interpf. were near — from environment to the embracing creches of the people where among them the Jew lived. Herein lies diff. of Jew. Mabel + Rachel.
6. What now will Am. Jew. be like? What will Am. life mean — & demand — just to Jew.



7. It cannot be the just. of Eastern or of Western Europe for both are products of folies. (1) In narrowing vision of prophets into a circus. group by all wall of disabilities threw them and Jew in physically but also spirit. ~~It~~ The shocking <sup>message</sup> ~~sent out~~ <sup>was</sup> ~~not~~ <sup>lost</sup> in the desperate need of bracing up a discipline of conduct in self defence..

(2) Jews rel. leaders became followers and imitators - we listen with lupidation to every new speculation opinion - afraid that one would some day undermine our faith. ~~Admission to show less very plausible~~ ~~irrational~~ we have become the slaves of changing philosophical judgments. We have lost power or courage of affirmation.

(3) Broken spirit of Jew. Loss of pride super-gratitude - yellow streak ulcers broken in souls of Jews & Christians.

8. Eastern Eur. just. - decidedly suffered from Golus. Refutation to principle legal & rel observance. The universe & social mission all but lost sight of. It was static. It ceased to be dynamic. ~~It~~ <sup>and</sup> when new events arose it was tragically slow in adjusting itself to them.

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F R E E   S Y N A G O G U E

Carnegie Hall  
New York

"IS THERE AN AMERICAN JUDAISM?"

- Delivered By -

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

April 25, 1920

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Reported by  
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1001 Faile Street  
New York, N. Y.



## "IS THERE AN AMERICAN JUDAISM?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

In recent years many a writer, both Jew and non-Jew, has challenged the Jews of America to justify their existence. The Jews, they maintain, for too long rested upon their laurels, they have been in the habit of invoking a glorious past of great achievement, of heroic martyrdom, to justify and condone a present of drab meanness. They ask and ask petulantly, "How can the Jew in America, a land that is supremely assimilative and destructive of all racial and national individuality, now can the Jew persist in maintaining his identity and his uniqueness?" Now, it is not difficult to meet this challenge. One need but say that an individual or a group that is alive and intense with activity need not justify itself. Life itself is its own justification. To ask ourselves why we live is really not a sign of health, but rather is it a sign of morbidity. And yet while this may satisfy our logical scruples, it may, I am afraid, lull us into a false sense of complacency. While it is true that we need not justify our existence, we ought, I believe, in deference to ourselves and to our historic destiny, ask ourselves prayerfully and seriously, whether we as Jews are making the most of our lives, whether we are actualizing the finest and highest potentialities of our being, whether we are utilizing the many colored experiences of our people to enrich and ennoble the content of Jewish life. In other words, what we should ask of ourselves is not why we live but how we live,



and what we should seek after is not a "casus vivendi" but a "modus vivendi" - not a justification but a program of life.

Now, unfortunately, American Judaism, to my mind, has not yet evolved a program for life. We have in this land a pale replica of Western European Judaism and a feeble imitation of Eastern European Judaism. All in all, we have a rather confused, foreign type of Judaism. We have not yet succeeded in evolving an American Judaism. Our faith here has not yet reacted to the American environment, to the American culture. It lacks the touch and the hue and the personality of American life.

Now, in a sense, there is no such thing as an American Judaism; there is no such thing as a German or a Polish Judaism. The basic principles of Judaism are universal, subject neither to the accidents of time or of place. But don't you know, basic principles and abstract ideas are subject to various emphases and interpretations? Each age leaves the imprint of its personality upon ideas and upon principles, and it is most certainly true of Judaism. You look back for a moment to the Judaism of the period before the Exile and you have a distinct type of Judaism, an ethnical, prophetic type; you look at the Judaism at the period of the Maccabees and you have a mystic, an apocalyptic type of Judaism; you turn to the Judaism of Babylonia and you have a legalistic type; to the Judaism of Spain and you have a philosophic and poetic type; to the Judaism of Poland a few hundred years ago and you have a sort of intellectual, disciplinary type of Judaism; and to the Judaism of Germany of a hundred years ago and you have a rationalistic, universalistic type of Judaism. In other words, every age read its soul, its life, its experiences into the body content of Jewish thought.



Now, it is true that these are reactions to environment. It is true that these are reactions to the embracing culture of the peoples in whose midst the Jew lived, but that is really wherein the originality of the Jew is to be found. The originality of the Jew is to be found not in creating something out of nothing, "Ex nihilo", as it were. The originality of the Jew is to be found in his unique capacity for absorbing all cultures and all civilizations and transmuting them, subjecting them to his own interpretation and to his own convictions. The originality of Judaism is the originality of the artist who takes the cold, crude clay and forms it into an image bodying forth some divine ideal. It is to be found in the originality of the sculptor who can take a mass of marble, and by the power of his own idea, chisel it into something manifesting sublimity.

Some years ago, you will recall, there was a fad amongst scholars. People said, "The Jew is an imitator, the things of the Bible which we had admired were taken over bodily from Babylonia; the Jew has given nothing intrinsically real or original to the world, 'is not a creator but is an imitator'". But we know how the Jew borrowed from Babylonia and what he did to the things which he borrowed. He took the seventh day, which was a day of taboo, and transformed it into the Sabbath of rest, commemorating the covenant between man and God. He took the Passover, which was a simple festival, and made it commemorative of a great historical event. He took the Shabuoth, which was a family festival, and made it a holiday, celebrating the giving of the law to mankind. And so by a spiritual alchemy, the Jew refined and beautified everything that life gave him and that his environment presented to him.



Now, if that is true, if the Jew has reacted to his environment at all times, how will he react here in America, what will American Judaism be like? It will certainly not be like Western European Judaism, so-called Reform Judaism, or Eastern European Judaism, Orthodox Judaism. And why? Because both of these types are the products of the "Golus", of the exile. Now, "Golus" literally translated means exile, but as spiritually interpreted, it means infinitely more. The real tragedy of the "Golus", my friends, you will find not in the physical disabilities, not in the expulsions and the inquisitions and the "autos-da-fé" and the massacres and the blood accusations; the real tragedy of the "Golus" is to be found in the narrowing and the confining of the great prophetic spirit of our people, in the chilling of the ardor of the great seers of Israel, in limiting them to a narrow group loyalty and a group discipline. The real tragedy of the "Golus" is to be found in the fact that we are fast losing our position as the religious leaders of the world, that we have become followers, that we are today timid and apprehensive of every new philosophic opinion and belief, fearful lest it undermine our faith, that we have become the slaves of every changing philosophic notion, that we have lost the courage and the strength of the great affirmation and have, therefore, ceased to become the religious leaders of the world. And the real tragedy of the "Golus" is to be found not in the yellow badge which your forefathers and mine were compelled to wear upon their shoulders but in the "yellow" streak which their descendants are compelled to wear within their souls, in the loss of the sense of dignity and pride in their faith and in their people and in their culture, in the tragic spectacle of these descendants of the early Maccabees, descendants



of a people that defied the whole world arrayed in hostility against it, cringing and fawning for places where they are not wanted, currying favor with those who can least give favor to the heirs of a great tradition.

Now, Eastern European Judaism has the stamp of the "Golus" very definitely imprinted upon it. With all our sympathy for it, we cannot hide the fact that it is narrow, that it is circumscribed, that it has limited the onrushing and onsweeping social and universal vision of the Prophet to a narrow group loyalty and a code of religious observances. The wall of disabilities which life erected around the Jew incarcerated him not only physically but spiritually. Eastern European Judaism all but lost the prophetic vision of our people. But so is Western European Judaism a product of the "Golus". German Judaism, so-called, denuded the content of Jewish life. Reform Judaism began in Germany a hundred years ago not as a religious revival, not as a movement to intensify faith or fan the flames of piety in the souls of Israel. It began as a political expedient. It began as an intellectual criticism. The Jews were anxious to gain equality, to gain the prerogatives of citizenship, and they could not because men said unto them, "You are so different, your speech, your manner, your organization, your conduct of life is so radically different from that of ours". And so the Jew, in order to justify his claim for citizenship and equality, began to strip himself of those characteristic things that differentiated him from his neighbor. At first only the unessential were discarded, but in a relentless process, soon the essential and the real and the important began to be sacrificed, and Judaism soon became a sort of starved Mosaic Judaism, which proved a tragically incompetent, prosaic Reform Judaism.



And it did yet another thing. Reform Judaism was born as the rationalistic incantation of the eighteenth century. It was intellectual. The early founders of the faith struggled hard to show that Judaism was sane and sober and rational and intellectual, and they began to tear down every pillar of mystic grandeur in the temple of Jewish life. They reduced Judaism to a code of moral platitudes, to a system of ethical proprieties. Judaism became an exalted philanthropy with God somehow timidly hovering in the background. And it was a "Golus" product in yet another way. It destroyed the discipline of Jewish life, the fences that our sages built around the faith, it lost sight of the fine strategy which our people developed through the ages as a means of self-preservation. The fences were destroyed and the gardens were trampled upon and religious anarchy reigned right in the folds of Israel so that every Jewish layman became an authority on religious matters all by himself and every Rabbi became a law unto himself.

Now, American Judaism, to my mind, will be neither Western European nor Eastern European. It will react to the spirit of America, which is freedom and democracy and broad humanitarianism. Because it will react to the spirit of democracy, it cannot, it must not be narrow, it will not confine the pulsating and throbbing spirit of the Jew in any stultifying discipline that keeps the Jew from reaching out and touching all peoples and all movements influencing them, propelling them and inspiring them. We are going to lay emphasis in the future, as we have in the past, upon the prophetic and the universal elements in Jewish life. But we are also going to have a Judaism that is intensely, richly Jewish. We are not called upon here to sacrifice any of the cultural individuality of our people in



payment for privileges.

Our citizenship here in America is not a gift bestowed upon us by gracious and tolerant first citizens, but it is something purchased by us with our blood and our tears and our efforts and our sacrifices. America belongs to the Jew even as it belongs to every group and every man who labors honestly and gives of his loyalty and devotion to America. When the feet of the first white man settled upon these shores, the Jew was there. And when the eyes of the first white man scanned the shimmering outlines of the shore of the Western Hemisphere, the Jew was there. And when the first challenge was hurled to a tyrannical power, the Jew was there. And when the peoples of America waged a Revolutionary War to break the yoke of foreign oppression, the Jew was there. And when this land was engaged in a terrible struggle to emancipate the millions of men who labored under slavery, the Jew was there. And when in the last and greatest of wars, this nation went forth as the champion of a new ideal, to bring a little more sweetness and a little more light into the habitations of men, the Jew was there supremely and superbly. And when the last sunset will set upon this glorious continent in the ultimate cycle of time, the Jew will be there.

We resent toleration. We ask for participation and co-operation as equals among all who are here. And so we shall not, as did our fathers in Germany, in a spirit of super-gratitude begin to sacrifice those things which are distinctively and essentially Jewish in order to please our neighbors. America is an experiment not in racial unity but in spiritual unity. America does not ask for uniformity of cultures. It asks for a harmony of cultures. America, to my mind, is a beautiful mosaic made up of many blocks of



many sizes and many colors, all blending into one glorious pattern, the pattern of American democracy. It is like a beautiful rainbow of many colors but all merging into one unique splendor. And the Jew can serve the ultimate interests of America best not by destroying his identity, not by assimilating himself to his environment (which is as yet something formative and nothing static), but by developing the rich heritage of his people, than which no heritage is older or finer, that aged and seasoned civilization of his people, crystallizing it, refining it, enriching it, and then laying it upon the altar of American life. America is a democracy, and the triumph of democracy depends entirely upon the development of individualities, and the Jew can serve the ends of democracy and the ends of America best by developing the uniqueness that is within his soul.

And so American Judaism must be rich and full of content. It must not be starved, it must not be pauperized. And it must also be this;-it must be a religion of mysticism, which is really the religion of democracy, it must be a religion of glow and fervor and ecstasy. Do you realize, friends, that we move through life not ~~by~~ <sup>to</sup> the rhythm of the logical syllogism but ~~by~~ <sup>to</sup> the mighty cadences of emotions? We are stirred to depths of infamy or lifted to heights of sublimity, not by the power of an idea but by the plangent waves of emotions and sentiments. Our course through life is determined less by the pilot, reason, than by the rush and the onslaught of the irresistible waves of passions and emotions and longings and the cravings of the human soul. And the regeneration of society, if it ever comes, will be brought about not by an increase in knowledge but by a purging of human passions, by the purifying of human emotions, by the crystallizing of human ideals. And the function of



religion is not to enlighten men but to reach the volitional springs of human conduct, of human nature. The function of religion is to be the urge that forces men to reach up and touch the robes of the "Chachena", of God Himself.

Why, you know all Judaism has been doing in the past few generations, to a world that has been hungering for a living God, to a world that has been lost in the maze of perplexities, to men and women who have been groping in the dark seeking amidst the variety of human experiences the unity of some steadfast purpose, to men and women of tortured souls and the doubts and the perplexities of life, Judaism has given what? A system of sociology, a set of moral formalisms<sup>and proprieties</sup>, in place of a faith that is rich and colorful, that holds out the promise of wonderful revelations to anyone that seeks communion with God. In place of a faith that promises the thrill of divine intimacy, we have given a sublimated system of philanthropy. We have emphasized, and truly, the great Micah's definition of religion, "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy". We have emphasized the "doing justly" and the "loving mercy", but we have somehow forgot to emphasize the concluding phrase, the all important phrase, "And to walk humbly with thy God".

Religion, my friends, is a walking with God, ( Hebrew ) - "Walk before Me and become thou perfect". Religion is a matter of <sup>hisdabkuth</sup> the (Hebrew), of the mystic, the clinging unto God. The true faith is the one that will bring the song to our lips and make us exclaim ( Hebrew ) - "I belong to my beloved and my beloved belongs to me". The true faith is the kind of faith that will stand by you when you stand by the brink of the grave of some dear one or some beloved



hope, or when you are on the charred and scarred battlefield that will whisper in your ears the eternal words of hope that will keep your heart from breaking, that will send you forth into the world of men determined to continue your task and your duties in life because with you, by your side, is God, a sort of faith that will make you feel that God goes singing by your side throughout your life.

Why, look what we have made of our faith:- cold, sombre, sad, frequently a tiresome bore. And why? Why, religion, friends, is not a matter of solemnity and sadness. Religion is the supreme joy and the supreme happiness of life because it means the supreme freedom of life. The Psalmist sang (Hebrew) - "I will sing unto the Lord" - (Hebrew) - "God is my strength and my song". Why, think of it, your fathers and mine, when they were racked and torn on the universal hate of the world, when they faced a whole world of phalanxes of hostility, in the midst of their deepest gloom, they sang (Hebrew) - "How blessed are we, how goodly is our portion, how sweet is our lot, how beautiful is our heritage". And we, their descendants today, living amidst plenty and prosperity, become resentful and embittered if perchance we are denied a certain social preferment or a certain position in life. We have lost the gift of song in Jewish life. We write treatises and scholarly dissertations and give lectures, but how few are the hymns that we write.

American Judaism must restore God into the central position of Jewish life. In other words, - and with that I shall be through - American Judaism must be, it will be prophetic and mystic. And in order to preserve our faith, American Judaism must insist, as it shall insist, upon a certain discipline in Jewish life, a certain mode of conduct. The soldier knows why he is subjected to an un-



pleasant and irksome discipline. The soldier knows why he is compelled to do things in a certain way when doing them in another way is more convenient and simpler. Because the soldier knows that without discipline, there can be no morale, and without a morale there can be no victory. The time has come for the Jewish layman to realize that if we actually are to continue our great work in the world, fighting the battle of the Lord, ultimately establishing those fundamental principles of justice, of human rights, of the sanctity of home life - which the world is just now beginning to acknowledge - we must preserve our morale and we must preserve our discipline. You must submit yourselves to a certain discipline in conduct. Certain observances and practices and symbols and ceremonies, which in themselves are of little significance, but in their totality, inasmuch as they strengthen and altogether create an "esprit de corps" of life, are infinitely important. I am not advocating a return to traditional, old-fashioned, narrow Orthodox Judaism. Life has out-reached it and gone far beyond it, but I maintain - and I am quite confident that you will agree with me - that abstract principles must have a local habitation and a name, they must be symbolized and expressed so that the eye of him who is not a critical student may be attracted, so that the symbols of these ceremonies may spiritually draw us into the higher mood and remind us of our responsibilities to our faith and to our people. We need, oh, how badly we need a discipline - a minimum of discipline, if you please - a discipline in Jewish life.

My faith is, friends, that we shall produce in this gracious lands of ours, blessed by God, a type of Judaism such as the world has not yet seen, finer and nobler than in any other period in our



experiences in the Diaspora. But we shall do it not only for our  
sakes but for the sake of our children. How many of them today are  
seeking God in strange cults and foreign faiths? How many of them  
are looking for God, for the waters of salvation somewhere else be-  
cause they cannot find it in Judaism? Hasn't the time come for us  
to say ( Hebrew ) - "With Thee, O God of Israel, is the fountain of  
life" ? Hasn't the time come for us to say to all this world, hungry  
and thirsty, "Come unto the faith of your fathers, which must also be  
the faith of your children" ? Shall we not say unto them that  
Judaism holds within it every truth that can inspire and elevate the  
soul of man? We shall say it so that in the days to come, your  
children will suddenly realize ( Hebrew ) - "Verily God is in this  
place and I did not know it".

