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

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Reel  
174

Box  
63

Folder  
184

The democratic impulse in Jewish history, 1928.



Mr. Silver

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I am rather diffident, friends, about speaking this evening in the presence, first, of one who has been the prime mover in the great events which have transpired within the last eleven years, who has just spoken and who has delivered his statesmanlike, dignified, and so far as outstanding facts are concerned, a comprehensive statement.

I am diffident to speak this evening in the presence of this white-headed tribune of the Jewish people, who was my master and teacher and whose humble disciple I am proud to call myself - Rev. Masliansky.

Every great ideal, my friends, has its byproducts and its compensations. The outstanding compensation of a great ideal is the ideal itself. Whether we realize the ideal or not, the reward is by giving us a world of glory and splendor in which our spirit can dwell and thereby compensates us for all our labors and sacrifices in behalf of that ideal. Very few people are privileged to realize an ideal in their lifetime, and particularly if that ideal is an exalted one, for, the nobler the ideal, the less likelihood there is of realizing it. Our reach always exceeds our grasp, and when I think of this, I tell myself how extremely privileged and fortunate we are -- you and I -- who have linked our lives to a great exalted ideal and who have been privileged to see the realization of this ideal in our own lifetime. I think it is a glorious thing to see an ideal which is blood of your blood and flesh of your flesh become real. I think it is marvelous to see a life seed which you have sown take root and sprout and flower and yield fruit, and that is exactly what the Zionists have been privileged to experience within the last fifteen or twenty years. Think of it -- it is only fifteen years - fourteen years - twelve years ago -- that our ideal was deprecated as visionary and impractical by the men who seemingly ought to know. Many mocked us. Many derided us.



2

Think of it, it is only eleven years ago that the Balfour Declaration was issued. It is only eight years ago that it was made part of the international law of mankind at San Remo. Think of it it is only four years ago that the first non-Partisan Conference Pro-Palestine was held, and think of it, it is only eleven days ago that outstanding representatives of American Israel placed the seal of their approval off an ideal which we have been holding sacred and precious for these many years.

When I think, friends, how much our past has been a history of frustration; how the entire record of Israel during the past 2,000 years has been a catalogue of defeats and frustrations; how our highest hopes turned into gall and wormwood -- I think we are extremely privileged -- you and I -- to have been able in our own lifetime to see these revolutionary acts transpire.

I am not an old man and yet this coming year will be the twenty-fifth year of my formal identification with the Zionist movement. In 1904, the year of the death of Theodor Herzl, I in conjunction with a few of my young friends, organized the first junior Zionist Hebrew speaking society in the City of New York, and when I look back on those early years, what Zionism meant then -- the few small rooms which comprised the whole scope of the Zionist movement of America -- the whole Zionist activity consisted of the collection of a few shekolim and the sale of a few Jewish National Fund stamps-- when I look over this period of twenty-four years coterminus with my own developing and advancing years and realize how this movement has swept into the international horizon, how it has assumed status and standing in international council, how it has swept through the rank and file of Israel, I am grateful to a good God that it has been the privilege of my developing years, my own youth, my own developing and maturing mind, that it has been my privilege to see this ideal grow with me, because it made me grow as it made very Zionist grow.



There are perhaps one or two ideas that this occasion provokes in my mind this evening. There are two qualities, my friends, which have from the beginning of time been dominant and potent in Jewish life and thought. One was a quality which made for democracy in Jewish life, and the other is a quality which made for unity in Jewish life. I do not believe that the democratic impulse in Jewish history has received sufficient attention at the hands of the historians, or that people realize sufficiently what a marvelous contribution the democratic ideals of Israel have been to mankind. When our forefathers appeared on the frontiers of Canaan thousands of years ago, they had been molded and turned by countless centuries of desert life and desert tradition. Now, in the desert among nomads there are no kings and there are no potentates. The hard migratory life of a wandering people creates a sort of rudimentary democracy among them. They have no aristocracy of birth; they have no priestly hierarchy. They have a primitive or elementary kind of freedom. The leader and chief is only *primus inter pares*, the first among equals.

Now, our people lived that life of freemen for countless centuries, and that freedom became impressed upon its mind and soul. When they entered Canaan, for hundreds of years they lived during that turbulent formative period before the monarchy was established, they lived as free men. When an emergency arose, they summoned one of the outstanding figures to assume leadership, and when the emergency was over, the leader returned to the ranks of the common folk. The democratic instinct of the folk resisted monarchy, and in that marvelous chapter of the book of Saul which tells of the people's demand for a king in order that they might meet the menace of attacking invaders, you will find the whole psychology of the race most vividly and magnificently portrayed. Saul called the demand for a king, apostasy to the Lord, a mimicry



of the heathen, and in that struggle <sup>was</sup> ~~which~~ represented not merely the conflict between priestcraft and kingcraft but the democratic struggle of the spirit of the race against autocracy. The prophets of Israel were the monitors of this desert tradition of freedom, and it was in the name of that moral law higher than that of kings that the prophets of Israel spoke, that Saul was advised by Samuel, that Nathan denounced David, that Ahijah of Shiloh threatened Jeroboam, that Eliyahu imprecated Ahab, and that Jeremiah predicted doom upon Zedekiah for not listening to the words of doom spoken upon the land.

I speak of that because one of the outstanding forces that appeal to me most magnificently in this Zionist movement is just this democratic character of both the philosophy and tradition of the movement, That same democratic passion, my friends, is evident in the economic life of the people of Israel. The whole social legislation of the Bible which was aimed to protect the individual against exploitation, against monopoly, against depredation was the result of this intense democratic passion. The whole marvelous literature of our people becomes incomprehensible unless we bear in mind this democratic law of our race. The prophet looked upon every human being, upon every human life as sacred and inviolable, as an end in itself, as a reflex of divinity, so that every act of wrong became not only a violation of social law but an act of ~~sacrilige~~ sacrilege, and it was in this mutual law of democracy that they wielded the scorpion whip of fury over all those who ground the face of the poor and turned aside the way of the humble, and it is this protection of the humble, needy and oppressed and despised of the earth, that is the philosophy of Jewish history.

My friends, one of the greatest contributions that Israel made



to mankind was, "Kol Yisroel Bnei Malachim heim". Every human being has a work and dignity comparable to the work and dignity of the highest of human beings, and that same democratic philosophy you will find in the ~~summit~~ forming of religious thought and religious progress.

Had I the time, I should love to trace for you the struggle between Priest and Prophet, that same struggle of the man of the people and the men of privilege. Prophecy in Israel, my friends, represented not only revolution against idolatry, not only rejection of cult; the prophets expressed not only the soul of the race for Malchus shumayim, the reign of perfection. It was the passionate cry of the masses for full lay participation in the religious life of the people. The priest may speak law, the masses may speak wisdom. The word of God may come to shepherds, traders, dressers of sycamore trees, to everyone and any one who prepared himself in the word of God.

In the struggle between the Pharisees and Saducees later on in history, you will find the same principle of democracy struggling to express itself and gain supremacy in Jewish life. The Saducees struggled to interpret the law. The Pharisees maintained that the law was given unto all -- "Lo Nitna Torah ~~el~~ <sup>le</sup> <sub>h</sub> kol omos". The Torah which Moses gave unto us for an inheritance for the whole house of Israel. That <sup>e</sup> <sub>h</sub>arks backs to that marvelous phrase of Moses when Joshua came and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the Camp", and Moses replied, "Art thou jealous?" "would that the whole house of Israel prophesy and the spirit of God upon them".

Had I time, I would love to show that all great movements in Israel - Karaism, Mysticism, Cabalism, have that same concrete, deeprooted passion of the race struggling to express itself against the tyranny of the ruling aristocracy, against the tyranny of Rabbinic aristocracy and intellectual formalism, crying for expression, for freedom of life in which every child ~~of~~



seeks to secure for his individual capacity and inner expressions of life.

Even the mission idea of Israel which for one reason or another many Zionist~~xxxx~~ friends refuse to accept but which to my mind represents the highest expostulation of Israel -- the mission of Israel which <sup>without</sup> ~~would~~ Palestine is incomprehensible, for he who gave most perfect expression to the idea of the mission of Israel was the intensest Palestinian of all -- I refer to the ~~Isiah~~ Isaiah of the Exile, and ~~his mission~~ what is the mission of the Exile but the application of the democratic principle to the religious life of the people. Among all peoples of antiquity only the priestly class were looked upon as holy men having exclusive sanctity and privileged moral status. Israel in its democratic fervor said, "No, if there is such a thing as sanctity in life, it belongs to all" -- "Memlochos Koanim Vegoi Kodesh.

Now, it is this democratic instinct of the race which struggled through centuries of the life of the Jewish people that I find expressed magnificently in Zionism. It is one of the reasons why this Movement appeals to me so strongly. Zionism is essentially a movement of the masses. My friends, the classes may come to Zionism, but the masses wanted it, longed for it and worked for it. Dr. Theodor Herzl himself had great doubts about launching a democratic Zionist movement as late as 1896. Just a few months before the convocation of the first Zionist Congress, Dr. Herzl was thinking and hoping of realizing an ideal through the instrumentality of a few rich and powerful people. He failed, as he was destined to fail, because while a few powerful or clever or cunning individuals may win a skirmish or two in international relations, ~~great~~ historic movements must be backed by the masses of the people, and it was only when Dr. Herzl turned from the few who failed him



and turned to the masses that the first true chapter in modern Zionism was written, and when Dr. Herzl made his appeal to the rank and file of Israel, it was then that he tapped reservoirs of invincible strength, it was then that the triumph of the movement was underwritten.

My friends, it is the masses of Israel that are responsible for the Balfour Declaration. It is the masses of Israel that will be responsible for the formation of the Jewish Agency. It is the masses of Israel which must continue to insure the success of our movement. We need the classes for their counsel and for their substantial aid, but if Zionism is to achieve that ultimate goal which it has set for itself, it must be able to draw continually upon the inexhaustible reserves for moral and spiritual enthusiasm which are in the great masses of Israel.

One more word, and I shall be through. I said that there is a second quality in Jewish life and thought and which since the beginning of time made for unity. Those acquainted with Jewish thought will know that Jews ~~xx~~ have always devoted themselves to finding <sup>in</sup> diversity of phenomena unity of purpose, to bind together those scattered fragments of reality, to organize and integrate them though they seemed unrelated and scattered to the world. The Jew has benefitted because his mind was philosophical, because he has a unifying mind -- the one God, the one moral law, the one mankind.

There is a beautiful phrase of the Rabbis -- "Elohim nikro b'shivim shemin" -- God is called by seventy names, that Israel is called by seventy names, and that He gave them the Torah which is called by seventy names, and their ultimate goal being Jerusalem which is called by seventy names -- peculiar and difficult names to understand. A name is an attribute, a description, a point of view. Israel recognized that concerning the major facts of life there will always be numerous points of view, numerous conceptions, so that it set about organizing



these conceptions into one. Whatever your idea of God may be, just so you believe in a creative intelligence, you believe in God. Whatever your conception of Jewish life may be -- and there are many -- so long as you believe in ~~the~~ loyalty ~~to~~ to Israel, you are a Jew. One does not say, "Reubeni ani, Shimoni ani". One says, "Yehudeni ani". There are many conceptions of the Torah -- literary, Rabbinic, Mystic, Eclectic, liberal -- just so you believe in the faith, the Torah as the primacy of the moral law, as the ~~in~~ rule of life, you are a Ben Torah -- unity and diversity.

Now, Jerusalem, my friends, is called by seventy names, sought by seventy different types of people for seventy different types of reasons. Jerusalem is ~~coming to unify Israel~~ going to unify Israel. A man may want Palestine as a haven of refuge, another may want it as a great centre, a third in order that the Hebrew language and literature may have a new birth of life, another so that in Palestine he may have a life in consonance with the prophetic ideal of the race. Whatever your approach to Jerusalem, by whatever name you may call your adherence to Palestine, just so you believe in the rehabilitation of the land, you are of us and you belong to us.

I have always believed -- it has been an article of my creed -- that Palestine has been destined to win out. I have a mystic, almost cabalistic faith in Palestine. Palestine is not the ~~man~~ sculptor which creates a statue formed and and then can leave that statue. Palestine has so modeled the Jewish people that 2,000 years ago it was able to let them go away but not dissociate themselves from ~~the~~ Israel. Palestine read itself into the life of Israel, into its thought, into its literature, into its liturgy, into its prayers. It is a symbol. It was always there, never wanting. The physical Palestine may not have been with the Jews, but the "Yerusholim shel Meilu was always with them and the Shechinah wandered with them into the Exile. Palestine was destined to win out. Palestine gave us Prophets. Palestine gave us Pharisaism. Palestine gave us Mysticism. Palestine



gave us the philosophy of ~~the~~ Jewish nationalism, and Palestine is today giving us unity.

What was said eleven days ago at that historic conference -- and I believe that that conference is destined to be a historic one -- that we are no longer Zionists and non-Zionists, but Jews, is a vindication of ~~the~~ just this. That Conference eleven days ago was not merely a vindication of Zionism, not merely a vindication of that handful of leaders, that group of irreconcilables who for the last twenty\*five or thirty years have stood Gibraltar-like for that ideal -- that conference was not merely a vindication of that little organization of fifteen years ago which we tried to nurture upon ~~the pennies and dimes~~ pennies and dimes -- not ~~ax~~ merely a vindication of what this white-haired sage of Zionism *who* gave of himself unstintedly. That Conference was a supreme symbolization of Palestine, of the unifying and integrating power of that marvelous and mystic land of ours which we call Palestine.

The Jews of America have finally discovered a common denominator -- a common basis for cooperation - Palestine. You tell me what you do for Palestine. I point to what Palestine is doing for us here. Nothing has been able to merge us, nothing has been able to draw us together. The elementary giving of charity to the needy and poor is something, but nothing is able to draw <sup>us</sup> together except Palestine, and Palestine is doing it. "Hoyu beyom hahu veyetzu mayim chaim m'yerusholoyim ketzun lyom hakedem v'hetzyun l'maariv". How marvelous are those words, "And it shall come to be in those days, the ultimate days, the Messianic days, our days, these days, that living waters, fructifying, healing waters, shall out of Jerusalem, half to East and half to West, throwing arms of love around all groups of our people, unifying us and strengthening us, refreshing our spirits needy of refreshment, stimulation and inspiration.

We ought to be grateful to night, my friends, thankful to a kind God



that Israel, scattered over all the world, <sup>has</sup> a Palestine upon which to center its affections and devotion and concentration, has a Palestine which can heal and make whole and bring together the East and the West, the North and the South into one Agudah Echod, one consecrated and devoted land of faithful men planning for the future and building the great day which is yet to come.





The Democratic Impulse In Jewish History  
as given by Rabbi Silver in N. Y.  
at Balfour Celebration Nov. 1928



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