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New Year message, 1928.

A Message For 5689

BY DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

Rabbi Tifereth Israel Temple, Cleveland, Ohio

The Census of religious bodies recently issued by the United States Department of Commerce gives the Jewish population in the United States as over four millions. This is an amazing and gratifying fact. A half century ago, our number did not exceed two hundred and fifty thousand. This has now been multiplied sixteenfold. The Jewish community of the United States now represents the largest in the world and its phenomenal increase has no parallel in our history. What is even more gratifying is that at no time did so large a number of Jews in any one place enjoy that measure of political equality and economic opportunity and that remarkable degree of prosperity which the American Jews are enjoying today.

The sheer size of the Jewish community justifies the belief that we are secure against immediate or even proximate assimilation. A community of four million souls does not and can not quickly assimilate. Even if all other preservative factors were wanting, the very inertia of the mass would conserve it for a considerable period of time. Inter-marriage and apostasy are more than offset by the normal birth rate. Of course a group-survival based upon inertia is a drab and inglorious affair. But nothing in the present status of American Israel actually points to such an eventuality.

It is well to keep the fact of our relative security in mind. By so doing we shall gain a new perspective on our position in this country. It will help us to turn our attention from hasty and desperate efforts at survival, which are no longer imperative, to a more patient long-ranged and cumulative program of national economy.

American Jewry is no longer in imminent danger of absorption. Nor does the American Jew manifest any alarming tendencies towards self-annihilation. Judging by the astounding number of synagogues built recently,—an increase of fifty per cent in the last decade—and by the hundreds of schools, community centers and cultural institutions which have sprung up and which represent Jewish energy, enthusiasm, and group-loyalty the American Jew is far from seeking self-effacement. In fact the American Jewish community today is the most alert and creative in the world,—Palestine excepted.

We may face our immediate future in hope and confidence.

But while there is strength in numbers, there is also weakness. Our numerical strength may delude us into the fatuous belief that we are permanently secure, and that our bulk insures our perpetuation. Nothing could be further from the truth. The relentless attritions of time have in the past worn down many a large and prosperous Jewish community, which did not provide in a heroic and deliberate manner for its preservation. Size has never been our people's armature. Our experience has furthermore taught us that there are no historic forces so inexorable in their corrosive operations upon our solidarity, so menacing because so subtle, as freedom and prosperity. . . .

Unless we develop a rational program of adjustment to American life, unless we perfect a technique which will on the one hand deliver us from the supremely assimilative forces about us, and on the other hand permit us to share fully and creatively in the spiritual and intellectual process of American life, we shall drift through

a longer or a shorter period of halcyon existence to a certain and ineluctable doom.

Our best thought should be devoted in the days immediately ahead of us to the integration of our community life, to the cultural adaptation of our people through Jewish education and to the upbuilding of Palestine.

The cessation of immigration has not been an unmixed evil to our people here and the Jewish historian is not unmindful of this fact. It is giving American Jewry a breathing spell—a chance to organize its own life, to make its necessary adjustments to the American environment and to develop thought-patterns more closely corresponding to the American scene. For one, it is enabling us to advance from eleemosynary engrossment to cultural and spiritual interests. The field of our group activities is no longer monopolized by charity and social service. In fact Jewish social service is now forced to look about for a new orientation and a new philosophy. Increasingly the problems of how to stimulate creative Jewish life and how to adapt the essential cultural values of our people to the essential cultural values of American civilization are claiming our attention.

The best minds of American Jewry should now be focussed upon Jewish education, not merely as a means of group survival but as a means of revitalizing our life for a splendid career of creative achievement in this land. It would be ignoble of us and unworthy of our glorious past were we, the most favored by fortune of all Israel, merely to live here, exploiting the material opportunities of this land, deriving no spiritual stimulation from its unique civilization and contributing not at all to its spiritual assets. Such has not been the way of our people elsewhere. Through Jewish education we must not only conserve that which the mind and heart of Israel achieved through the ages of truth and goodness and beauty, but we must also transmit them together with our precious racial memories to the generations to come in order that by their inspiration they might live worthily and add to the unfolding life of Israel and of America.

The near future should also achieve the final liquidation of the Zionist controversy which has disturbed American Jewish life for more than a generation. This controversy is already well nigh extinct, except where embittered doctrinaires persist in keeping it alive.

The report of the Joint Palestine Survey Commission recently published, its acceptance with some modification by the General Council of the Zionist Organization and the prospect of an early organization of the extended Jewish Agency should usher in a new era of unified and whole-hearted enterprise in behalf of the upbuilding of Palestine.

It would be an historic calamity of colossal magnitude were Israel to forego the millennial opportunity now afforded of rehabilitating our ancient homeland and of establishing there a vigorous and progressing Jewish commonwealth. The next few decades will indicate whether as a people we possess vision, courage, the faith of the pioneer and national sagacity or whether we have become hopelessly enfeebled, provincial, spiritually dowdy and demoralized, dead to an heroic challenge and a superb adventure.

Whatever motive may prompt the various elements of our people to enlist themselves in the cause of Palestine, the present hour demands unity of counsel and action and a splendid generosity of spirit and substance on the part of all. One may be moved by nationalistic aspirations, another by cultural ideals, a third by a humanitarian impulse, a fourth by a prophetic social vision, and still another by the dream of a new Palestine as the intellectual meeting-place of Europe and Asia, the entrepot of the spiritual values of East and West—whatever the particular appeal to the individual may be, there ought now to take place a pooling of interests, an exchange of ideas and a merger of resources for the one great objective—the revivification of Palestine.

For, in the years to to come, the Jewish communities in the diaspora will find themselves in ever greater need of that continuous galvanization of spirit and morale which only a homeland wherein Jewish life is indigenous, free and uni-cultured could provide.

Abba Hillel Silver.

Cleveland, Ohio, September, 1928.

To the Jewish community of Cleveland I send my greetings for the New Year.

The past year was fraught with events of tremendous significance for our people. Two events of particular moment arrest our attention as we take stock of the year which is now closing: the inauguration of the extended Jewish Agency for the upbuilding of Palestine and the wide-spread disturbances which took place in the Holy Land in the closing days of the year 5689.

It was my privilege to attend the inaugural meeting of the Jewish Agency in Zurich. I have never attended a more impressive gathering. I have seldom witnessed so much of Jewish intellect and greatness concentrated in one place. The best and the noblest in world Jewry were represented there. The mood which pervaded that assembly was one of exaltation. One felt that here, perhaps for the first time in two thousand years of diaspora, the scattered hosts of Israel were finally united, drawn together by a common purpose and ~~XX~~ an ideal mutually shared. A strong basis for cooperation, other than the need of relieving tragic distress among our brethren, was at last discovered - and that basis was Palestine.

That covenant into which Zionists and non-Zionists entered at Zurich was destined to be consecrated with the red seal of blood. Within a fortnight the bloody riots in Palestine took their toll of numerous Jewish victims, slain and wounded. It was the answer of the incited Arabs against the legitimate aspirations of our people to build its National Home in Palestine, sanctioned by all civilized nations of the world and under the mandatory control of Great Britain.

Much damage has been done to the homes and the settlements which our people built in Palestine in recent years, but none at all to the spirit which built them. The unbroken spirit of Israel will now proceed to repair the losses, re-build the ruins and intensify ten-fold the work of the upbuilding of a strong and populous Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.

This is the greatest task which confronts the Jews of the world in the coming year.