



## 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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B'nai B'rith convention, Cleveland, 1937.

B'nai B'rith  
in Cleveland  
May - 1937

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I don't know what to say to you people at this time, not having heard the address which preceded my coming here. I had hoped to be in session with you yesterday but I was confirming the children at Bellefaire yesterday afternoon, and it was a great experience.

One doesn't realize the good work that a great organization like yours is doing from merely reading reports or statistics, but when one comes upon the living expressions in terms of young people, fine boys and girls, whom an organization like this has helped to grow up into fine young manhood and womanhood, and when one thinks of what would have happened to these young people but for the collective solicitude and love of a great organization like yours, one thanks God that there is such an organization in existence.

The B'nai B'rith has had a long and distinguished career but I don't know of any time in its history when it has been more alert and more enterprising and more helpful than at the present time. It's really a joy now to go into a B'nai B'rith meeting; at least it's so in Cleveland. I don't know much about the organizations in other communities, but I imagine <sup>that</sup> you have the same experience elsewhere. There has been a surcharge of new energy and new purpose in the organization, evidently due to the fact that your leaders are recognizing, that there is something great and momentous to be done in Jewish life at this time; and you, in your way, are attempting to do it.



There is just one thought that I would like to have with you this morning. It might sound a bit heretical, but I think it is something which should be said to a gathering of men such as this. We have gone through four trying and searching years, ever since official political anti-Semitism was established in Nazi Germany. We reacted to that challenge of official political anti-Semitism — programatic anti-Semitism — not sporadic or irresponsible anti-Jewish sentiment on the part of individuals or groups, but organized programatic and deliberate anti-Semitism on the part of a government — I say that we reacted to that in a rather intelligent way. While we have not been able to act as one, and while we have not had a well-thought out plan of counter-attack because we weren't really prepared for just that sort of thing, nevertheless, I believe that the Jewish people, as a whole, reacted to the situation in a very intelligent and to the degree that it could be effective, in an effective manner. We did not take it lying down. We did not cringe or cower nor did we become hysterical. I have heard that last charge made frequently. I don't think that it is justified. We reacted, by and large, as normal human beings who had been affronted, who had been attacked, and against whom every conceivable method was used to humiliate and degrade them would react, first in protest, then in action calculated to undermine the infamous regime responsible for it, <sup>and finally</sup> in extending relief to the men, women and children who were the innocent victims of that shameless iniquity.

I believe that the time has now come in our life in this country to turn our attention away a bit from this problem; not in the sense of ignoring it or making light of it, but in the sense of surmounting it, and devoting ourselves more assiduously and more



constructively to the task of building in this country the finest Jewish community we can build, and in doing all we can in this country to avert the possibility of some such thing happening here.

I believe that psychologically we ought to guide ourselves into quieter waters. I believe that the menace of Fascism is far less today than it was a year or two or three years ago, and Fascism, of course, by implication, means an attack upon the rights and privileges of every minority group and particularly the Jewish minority group. I believe that Fascism has reached and passed its zenith in the world. I believe that it has received what probably will come to be regarded as its death blow in Spain. Fascism had an easy time of it in Germany and an easy time of it in Italy because in neither of these countries was it resisted - it was a walk-over, there was no revolution. The one place where the forces of reaction encountered determined popular resistance was in Spain, and they were stopped in their tracks. Ultimately they are going to be defeated. From now on Fascist adventurers will hesitate before launching a Fascist adventure in any country, because it has been proved to be too costly and too bloody an affair for the privileged classes - too costly an affair to themselves and not merely to the forces which they seek to destroy. Consequently, I am inclined to think that the democratic forces of the world are going to grow stronger from now on rather than weaker.

The ideals which for a time came under a cloud in the world - the ideals of democracy and liberalism and tolerance and good will - which for a few years came to be looked upon as the small change of an antiquated and discredited epoch in civilization, these are now regaining their prestige and their currency in the world. Democracies have



finally learned how to organize to resist Fascist adventures. Fascist governments have failed to deliver the goods, and while they can terrorize their people for another year or another five years, they cannot keep their people in permanent subjection. They must satisfy their people economically. This they have failed to do and will continue to fail to do. This being the case, with democracy on the ascendant again and reaction on the decline, it behooves us Jews to reorientate ourselves from a psychology of crisis and tension to a more normal and deliberate way of thinking and feeling.

I think that a great organization like yours which has a history of constructive effort over a long period of years ought to lead the way in America to a tranquilizing, if you will, of Jewish life, to a quieting of its temper, and a slowing down of its emotional tempo. Specifically, I mean that in our speeches and in our meetings and in our appeals for new members, and in our appeals for funds we should lay less emphasis on and talk less about anti-Semitism and the danger to the Jew here in America and talk more about the positive and inspiring values of Jewish life and the constructive tasks in which we ought to engage ourselves.

It is the easiest thing in the world, my friends, to stampede people into joining temples and societies and into giving money for relief by frightening them with anti-Semitism. It's the easiest thing in the world but, to my mind, it's the most dangerous thing in the world, because you undermine morale and ultimately you will give the Jew in America a feeling of being a hounded individual -- which he is not; of being in every sense different from every other citizen in the United States - which he is not. You will be forcing him, psychically, into



a self-made spiritual ghetto.

There is no warrant for it. If ever the time comes that we will have to face serious and active anti-Semitism in America we will face it. I don't think that that time is here. I hope that it will never come. But certainly we ought not to act as if it were ~~xxxxxxx~~ already upon us and voluntarily create for ourselves a mood of panic and fear and despair.

In other words, I would strongly urge upon you, as I have been urging upon Jews all over the country, to get down to the positive business of Jewish living; to devote yourselves constructively to the upbuilding of Jewish schools, <sup>to</sup> ~~of~~ raising your children into a fine sense of Jewish loyalty and a deep appreciation of Jewish values; to the strengthening of the Jewish home, the synagogue and of all Jewish communal activities and organizations. These are, these have always been, our instruments of survival. These have always been the agencies which have nourished and fed our lives, which have given us the positive satisfactions of Jewish life, and these must continue to be the foci of our attention and interest in the days to come.

Ours is the largest Jewish community in the world. We are close unto five million souls. There has never been a Jewish community of this size anywhere in the world unless you think of the old Czarist Empire, which is now split. There has never been a Jewish community comparable to the strength, the capacity, and the rich promise of the American Jewish community.

Let's think a little more of it. Let's think a little more of what we are going to do with this gre t community of five million souls. Let's try to work positively in this country for the preservation of the basic American traditions of freedom, liberty and human equality so that



our community, along with others in this gracious land will be secure and will be able to carry on its life in tranquillity and peace.

I conclude, therefore, with this one thought: I don't know that it's necessary to make it, but lest it be overlooked, I make it.. We owe as much to the American Jewish community in terms of our energies and interests and constructive thinking as we owe to any community across the seas. The time has come for returning to the classic highways of Jewish life. We have been diverted, unfortunately we had to be diverted, by the tragic events of the past few years. Now the time has come definitely to return to the highway of Jewish living which consists in positive efforts towards a richer and fuller and more satisfying Jewish life in consonance with the great American life about us. We ought to stop thinking of ourselves apprehensively as an isolated camp in the midst of a hundred and twenty millions of other people. If we do that we shall have given the anti-Semite his first and greatest victory. We ought to continue to think of ourselves, as we have every right to do, as being integrally and essentially part and parcel of this great America; that we are some of the strands which are woven into its marvelous tapestry; that we belong here like every other group. We have no apologies to make. We do not have to justify ourselves. We do not have to tell the world that we have earned the right to be Americans. We do not have to proclaim our virtues or to apologize for our shortcomings, all the time.

We ought to live normal lives as American citizens. The non-Jewish world is going to become tired of us if we continue constantly to rasp and irritate and complain. It will respect us far more if we devote ourselves to the things which make for a fuller and nobler total life of the American people. As you build finer Jewish homes, as you train your children into finer manhood and womanhood, as you make your



religious institutions more vital, as you build finer philanthropic agencies, you contribute to the sum total of American life and at the same time you are helping to enrich and to conserve Jewish life.

Hitlerism is going down to ultimate defeat. Hitlerism is not a new phenomenon. It is doomed. Unless you have lost all faith in human progress and civilization - and what right has a Jew to lose such faith, having back of him two thousand years of crisis and tragedy and the record of how he survived them? - I say, unless you have lost all faith in the capacity of man to redeem himself, to solve his most difficult problems, unless you have lost all faith in man's yearning for freedom and justice and brotherhood, you must believe that Hitlerism and Fascism and mediaevalism which are now having their day, because of the aftermath of war and depression, are doomed to certain and inescapable defeat. And if they are doomed to defeat, then Jewish rights all over the world are destined to be restored, and the Jew is destined to carry on his career throughout the world - including Germany.

Therefore, it behooves us to face our future courageously, hopefully, without panic, without fear, without suspecting anybody around us, to carry on as sons and daughters of a people to whom it was said long ago: "Al tirah avdi Yakov". "Do not be afraid, O, my servant Jacob." "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee!"