



## 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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Comment on "Jewry and Democracy", 1937.

June 10, 1937

Editor, The Christian Century.

Dear Sir:

Will you permit me to comment on your editorial "Jewry and Democracy" which appeared in your June 9th issue.

You charge the Jew with not bringing into good-will conferences between Jews and Christians "a fully candid expression of his own aspirations". As "a realistic observer" you find it difficult to believe that "Jewish participants in such conferences are searching for a common basis of unity with their Christian neighbors". May I request you, as a realist, to be a little more specific, and, instead of indulging in colossal abstractions concerning Jewish racial or cultural exclusiveness, and the requirements of a national culture in a dynamic society, <sup>to</sup> tell us just exactly what you want the American Jews to do? You have been belaboring this particular theme of yours - the resistance of the Jewish group to the "democratic process" - for some time. But I am still waiting to learn from you your concrete program of proposed action.

We assume - or shall we assume? - that your real motive is not to proselytize the Jews of America and to convert them to Christianity. You wish the Jews of America to retain their religion - or do you? But the Jewish religion, as you well know, is more than a creed. Like every other historic religion, it has expressed itself in modes and disciplines, in traditional customs, ceremonies, symbols, festivals and observances. It has built its own places of worship and its own religious schools. Like almost every other religion it has laid down certain requirements for admission into the faith on the part of those heretofore not belonging to it. In the liberal wings of Judaism these requirements do not call for the "drastic physical symbolism" to which you allude. Is it your thought that the Jews should give up these outward expressions and institutions of their faith so as not



to interfere with the mysterious workings of the "democratic process" which is moving us all to some glorious far-off divine event of spiritual trans-substantiation? Are the Protestant and Catholic churches of America prepared to do the same?

The members of the Jewish faith, like Catholics and Protestants, have built their own philanthropic institutions, hospitals, homes for the aged, orphanages, etc. Are these to be abandoned? They have also built seminaries for the training of Jewish religious teachers and ministers and for the study of the history and literature of the Jewish past. Are these to be sacrificed to the Moloch of "Cultural Gleichschaltung"? Jews have also had to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of fellow-Jews abroad who are the political and economic victims of racial and cultural bigotry and intolerance. They have had to organize in order to counteract anti-Semitic propaganda here and abroad. Are these the activities which you have in mind when you suggest that the Jewish group "deliberately removes itself from participation in the open process of social change?" Or is it inter-marriage which you advocate? Do you advocate inter-marriage between all races in a democracy? Is that a condition precedent to democratic life? You know, of course, that inter-marriage (and conversion) was widespread among the Jews of Germany, so widespread, that people prophesied the early disappearance of the entire Jewish group in Germany. Did that protect the Jews of Germany from the fate which overtook them?

You imply that the Jewish group in the United States is the only one which wishes to preserve its cultural and racial identity. Surely, you cannot be quite serious about it. You state that "the Jewish position in American democracy may be visualized, in principle, by imagining five million Germans....established in our democratic land as the Jews now are and determined to maintain their racial doctrine and their racial separateness." This seems to you an utterly preposterous notion. And yet, my dear Mr. Editor,



this is exactly what the German group is doing in these United States. If you will make a study of the number of newspapers and periodicals which are printed by the German group in the United States in the German language, and the number of schools and churches in which the German language is the predominant speech, and the number of German Vereinen - cultural, fraternal, charitable, sport and choral groups - dedicated to the mission of keeping German culture alive in the United States, and the closest contact with the Fatherland, you will find that the Germans are doing exactly that which you, in your innocence, assume they would never dream of doing.

And upon further survey, you will find that this is true of almost every other nationality group in the United States. In spite of which the mystical "democratic process" has not broken down in this country. The democratic process, my dear Mr. Editor, breaks down only when people become political, religious, cultural or racial totalitarians.

Whether you are aware of it or not, you are drifting into the "Nationalist" Front. You have begun to clamor for a national democracy in the same way as the "Volkist" Nazis clamored for a national socialism. In either case the ultimate emphasis finally falls not on democracy or socialism but on nationalism - an intolerant, truculent all-consuming nationalism. The fact that you are "generously prompted" and nobly motivated and that you speak with the sweetness and light of a liberal theologian does not make your position and thesis any less menacing in the modern world.

The great crucial question in your mind is: "Can democracy suffer a hereditary minority to perpetuate itself as a permanent minority, with its own distinctive culture sanctioned by its own distinctive cult forms?" You feel that this question would be fairly embarrassing to both sides (a rather queer way of dividing America) and you suggest over and over again that



Jewish spokesmen have hesitated to grapple with this question and are afraid to face it. This is not the case. Over and over again that question has been faced and answered by Jewish spokesmen and answered unhesitatingly in the affirmative. In fact, it is our conviction that this is one of the real tests and criteria of democracy. In a real democracy the "democratic process" sets out to obliterate no racial or cultural group. Witness England, France, Switzerland, Canada. This is <sup>true</sup> even of non-Fascist dictatorships. Witness the Soviet Union. It is only political, economic or religious Fascism that is unhappy about cultural and racial diversities in its midst. For it is clear that the cultural or racial identity of any group in a democracy is harmful only in so far as it prevents that group from participating actively and eagerly in the total life of the democracy.

Again, I call upon you, my dear Mr. Editor, to indicate specifically wherein the Jewish group in the United States has refused to participate actively and eagerly in the common life of the American democracy. Do you know of any city in the United States where Jews have not sent their children to the public schools, or to the secular institutions of higher learning? - and our schools are certainly the great solvents of particularism and the most powerful agent of the "democratic process". Do you know of any philanthropic, political, economic, social or artistic movement in this country in which the Jews have refused to share? Do you know of any American social, fraternal or labor organization or cultural and professional society which opened its doors to Jewish membership which Jews refused to join? Specifically, how has the Jewish group isolated itself? Jewish temples and synagogues have welcomed to their pulpits representatives of the Christian faith. Forums held under Jewish auspices have welcomed the outstanding spokesmen of the non-Jewish world. The Jews of America have been among the most avid readers and students of all that is said and written on the social, economic and political problems of



our day. They are also among the most prolific contributors to the discussion of these subjects in books and periodicals.

In view of all these facts which are apparent even to a most casual observer, aren't you, my dear Mr. Editor, guilty of bearing false witness against your neighbor, when you persist in charging the Jewish group with "deliberately removing itself from participation in the open process of social change?"

In conclusion, let me say that it is nothing short of theologic romanticism to attribute the persistence of the Jew in the world to his "immemorial and pertinacious obsession with an illusion that his race, his people, are the object of the special favor of God, who requires the maintenance of their racial integrity and separateness as the medium through which, soon or late, will be performed some mighty act involving human destiny." This is certainly a new approach to the science of sociology and history. The "illusion" concerning the election of Israel is, of course, orthodox New Testament doctrine as well as orthodox Old Testament, just as the restoration of the people of Israel to Palestine is classic Christian messiahism even as it is Jewish. But to conclude therefrom that the Jewish people has survived and is surviving today because of this "illusion", or that the modern Zionist movement is a product of this messiahism is, ~~xxx~~ to say the least, amazing naiveté and "thinking the thoughts of dead men".

You confuse, my dear Mr. Editor, two realities - the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. The two are not synonymous. Let me assure you that the sixteen million Jews in the world today are not very much worried about the election or the mission of Israel. Many of them have never heard of it. Need I assure you that Freud, Blum, Trotsky, Einstein, Brandeis or Bergson are not groaning under the yoke of this "immemorial and pertinacious obsession" which seems to bother the editor of "The Christian Century" far more than it does



the Jews of the world of today.

You have overlooked the simple fact that the Jews are a people and not a church, a people like any other people, fashioned by the same historic forces which fashion and maintain other peoples. The only difference which exists between the Jewish people and any other people in the world today is that the Jews do not possess a national home. This lacuna many Jews are endeavoring to fill today. In other regards, the Jewish people is like any other people. Many Jews are religious and many others are non-religious or anti-religious. Some believe in the election and the mission of Israel and employ that concept, as the prophets and Rabbis did, not as a badge of arrogant exclusiveness but as a challenge to humble and sacrificial service to God and men, and others have rejected it. There are Jews who are communists and others who are capitalists, and still others who are adherents of all the economic philosophies in between. There are nationalist Jews and anti-nationalist, Zionist, non-Zionist, and anti-Zionist. There are Yiddishists and Hebraists and assimilationists. In fact, a more diversified and sharply individualistic group of people it would be difficult to find anywhere on the face of the earth. To state that this variegated people is "obsessed" with this "illusion" and that this keeps it from free communion and contact with the rest of the world is truly bizarre and fantastic. And furthermore, to posit that this is "the root cause of the Jewish problem" and the real cause of anti-Semitism, when active anti-Semitism throughout the world is today endeavoring to eject the Jewish group from the total life of the nation and to force him into an involuntary and unwanted separateness and isolation - is truly astounding.

May I close, my dear Mr. Editor, by suggesting that you take stock of yourself and your ideas, lest you find yourself driven by your idee fixe, against your will, to hunt with the pack of Fascist Yahoos who are running



wild over the world today and are trampling under foot the inalienable rights  
and the sacred values both of individuals and of groups.

Sincerely,

Cleveland, Ohio

