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Hebrew cultural mass meeting, 1950.

BUREAU OF JEWISH EDUCATION

HEBREW CULTURAL MASS MEETING
Sponsored by the
Histadruth Ivrit of America
Cleveland Chapter
April 13, 1950 - 9:00 P.M.
Temple on the Heights
Cleveland, Ohio

COPY OF ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

Mr. Chairman, honored guest Mr. Shalom, Rabbi Porath, and good friends all:

After such an introduction, it is indeed very difficult for one to speak. It's a little embarrassing. I am glad, however, that Mrs. Silver is in the hall to have heard it all. Set's one up in one's home, you know.

My dear friends, it is always for me and I am sure for you, a great privilege to welcome an artist of whatever people he may be. It is a privilege to pay homage to a great artist. I have always looked upon a creative artist whether in pigment or in stone or in word or in sound, as in a real sense, a *חכם גדול* ³ *אמנות*. An artist has that to me incomprehensible unfathomable gift of making us see what the physical eye does not see and hear what the physical ear fails to hear. The artist has a way of transforming the world in which we live so that while it remains the same world, it is yet another world altogether. Out of physical substances made available to him by accident, he is able to fashion enchanted new worlds for us human beings to live in and I am not indulging in mere lyrical expressions here. These are the fundamental realities of life. Out of the deep sources of his inner being, the great artist evokes some power as mysterious to him as to those about him and with that power he manages to fuse and fashion new worlds for us to live in -- the *עולם הזה* which our sages said would some day be available for human beings to dwell in.

So it is for me always an opportunity, a welcome opportunity, whenever I am invited to pay my tribute and my homage to a great artist. It is, tonight an especial privilege to us I am sure, and a special pleasure, to pay ^{(?) *for* *him*} an artist who has worked in our intimate world, a world very close to us and dear to us and within that world he has dowered us with new insights. He has made us see facets of our people's experience which would have escaped our attention. He has made us aware of these sweeping tides of forces at work in the

life of our people which in our humdrum every day existence we would not have become aware of it and therefore lost deep spiritual and intellectual experiences.

And so we welcome here this evening Mr. Sh. Shalom in his own right as a great creative artist. We welcome him also as has already been indicated, as the ambassador, as the emissary of the life and the culture of our people in Israel and as a welcome channel-- a conduit through which the stream of cultural influence from the people of Israel -- at home in its own land can reach us -- members of the Jewish people.

There is an inscription carved in the rock near the pool of Siloah near Jerusalem and there is a fine story connected with that inscription. In the days of King Hezekiah the city of Jerusalem was besieged and there was danger that the water supply of the city would run out and so the King ordered a tunnel to be built from the source of Dichon in the valley of Jehoshaphat right through the rocks to the waters -- to the pool of Siloah. This inscription which is, I believe, now in the museum of Istanbul written in Hebrew, carved out in the old Hebrew letters, tells how this tunnel was built and it says that two groups of working men began to dig the tunnel -- one from this end and one from the other end and they worked, cutting their way nearer and nearer to one another to build this tunnel. And soon they approached so close that the fissure in the remaining rock enabled them to hear one another's voices and finally encouraged and inspired by the close proximity of the two working groups, they struck, says the inscription /בִּזְכָּח וְ/בִּזְכָּח "Axe upon axe" until the last dividing rock was cut through. And waters poured, healing waters, saving waters, waters of salvation, poured from Dichon to the Siloah and the water supply of the city was assured. I always think when I meditate a bit on the situation which confronts the Jewish world today, that what is indicated, clearly indicated, is the building of a two way tunnel, a conduit, for cultural and spiritual and intellectual give and take and inspiration between the new State of Israel and the Jewish people in this country and the Jewish people all over the world. And the coming of this fine poet, this representative of the best in creative Hebrew culture in Israel is an indication to me that this channel is being built today. I hope that it will be built completely and speedily

for the salvation of ourselves and for the salvation of the people of Israel.

I have been thinking a good deal in recent months of this thought which I should like to share with you this evening: that our movement of national restoration is now entering its second phase. Now that Dr. Theodor Herzl's political program is being consummated with the establishment of the State and the apparatus of statehood and the ingathering of our people -- our movement may now well enter into the second stage or the second phase of it which is identified with another great Zionist, whose name is Ahad Ha'am. The ultimate objectives of Herzl and Ahad Ha'am are always the same, although at times in the field of practical politics, they seem to be almost in constant conflict. Theodor Herzl saw the Jewish problem as a physical political problem, statelessness, homelessness, persecution and saw for it but one solution -- a political solution -- the establishment of an independent Jewish state. Ahad Ha'am saw the Jewish problem as essentially a spiritual problem -- the disintegration -- the breakup of Jewish life in the Diaspora, and sought for that spiritual problem, as he saw it -- a spiritual solution -- namely, the establishment in Palestine of a spiritual and cultural center which would in the first place unify world Jewry and in the second place would replenish it and nourish it culturally and spiritually. It was fortunate for our movement -- most fortunate, that it was the sound political vision of Dr. Theodor Herzl which governed its course up to now but if during the critical years and decades preceding the establishment of the State, great emphasis had not been laid on the political phase of the problem, the practical phase of it, the diplomatic phase of it, I am afraid that the Jewish people would not have been prepared for the sudden fortunate emergency which arose with the conclusion of the second World War to seize the moment for the establishment of their State. Ahad Ha'am had discounted too much the importance of political work, the diplomatic work, and he had doubted too much even the capacity of Palestine to absorb large numbers of Jews. I say it was fortunate that up to now, it was Herzl's sound political thinking which guided the destiny of our movement and which lead to the establishment of the State. But now that Herzl's vision has been triumphantly realized, by its realization

it paves the way for Ahad Ha'am's vision, namely that of creating in Palestine a radiating and unifying center of Jewish culture -- Jewish thought. From this there derives a corollary -- that if Palestine is to perform this great service to the Jewish people from here on, the Jewish people outside of Palestine must be *מגן אפר* *נעלה*. It must be prepared to receive influence. Unfortunately, at least as far as the American Jewish community is concerned, we have not yet reached that point. In spite of the decades of labor, very thoughtful and consecrated labor, which has been put into the work of Hebrew education in the United States by many devoted people, we have not yet succeeded in creating in the United States a Hebrew reading public even of comparatively small size, not to speak of creative Hebrew writers in the United States indigenous to the soil. That is our task for the future and a task of which we need not despair. I for one do not despair of it, I do not despair of it because I know that the Jewish people in the United States is a sound people -- it is not an escapist group. It is not a group that is seeking to disencumber itself of Jewish allegiance or of Jewish responsibilities, it's a good people. I mean what has taken place in the last twenty years, the last thirty years, on the American scene in terms of the outpouring of interest on the part of American Jewry in all that befell their brothers overseas and in Palestine in the outpouring of generosity year after year which is continuing to this day for work of rehabilitation and of reconstruction and of saving Jewish life. All that has been going on on this soil in terms of building-- the building of synagogues, the building of centers, the building of community institutions, of a Jewish character -- all these are clear evidences that the American Jew is at heart very loyal Jewish -- wants to be a Jew -- ~~is~~ not running away from it. This is not an assimilationist people -- fortunately the Jewish people of America. One central thought, however, has escaped them. And from here on we shall have to work and belabor and propogandize this thought until it becomes a central thought-pattern of the American Jew. And that ~~has~~ already been referred to by I believe both of the preceding speakers, that the survival of a Jewish community depends ~~an~~ the last analysis,

not upon its philanthropic institutions, not upon its charitable institutions, nor upon its synagogues, nor its temples. In the last analysis their survival depends upon the cultivation of Jewish learning. They must sink their roots deep into the nourishing soil of Jewish thought, Jewish scholarship, Jewish literature. That is why it is said that while all mitzvohs are important - *אין אדם יכול ללכת אחר המצוות בלבד* A people perishes when it hasn't the knowledge. Now Jewish learning to be creative Jewish learning, to be able to sustain the life of a people, must be Hebraic learning. Hebrew is the native and the natural medium for the expression of the mind and the soul of the Jewish people. Always been that. Will always continue to be that. Of course, the Jewish people used from time to time other linguistic media -- not to mention the sister Aramaic language. Jews used Greek, Jews used Arabic, all European languages were used by Jewish scholars, but it is interesting that foreign languages were used by our people as a rule for technical scholarship or for philosophic discussion. The deepest and most vital experiences of our people, the prayers, the poetry, the law, the ethics of our people, were almost invariably written in Hebrew, even by the very great writers who used other languages. While an Ibn Gabriol could use Arabic for his "Fons Vitae", for his "Fountain of Life", his poetry was Hebrew. And Halevi could write his Khuzari in Arabic, but his poetry and his marvelous Songs of Zion were in Hebrew, and Maimonides could write his great philosophic treatise in Arabic, his Code of Jewish Law, his Mishnah Torah, was in Hebrew. And even these philosophic works came to influence Jewish life only through their Hebrew translation. And my dear friends - Hebrew -- the Hebrew language -- was not only the medium of expression for the mind and the soul of our people and not merely a bond of union and not merely a chain of continuity for our people -- it was actually a powerful instrument for progress among our people and for renewal in the life of our people. And interestingly enough, not only in the life of the Jewish people, when you study the History of the awakening of Europe, the development of humanism, the story of the Renaissance, and of the Reformation, you will be amazed what role the Hebrew language played in those decisive cultural, spiritual and religious movements of the non-Jewish world. One needs but mention names like Pico della Mirandola, Johann Reuchlin, Sebastian Munster, Erasmus, the giants of the humanist movements

of Europe and their love of the Hebrew, their desire to study Rabbis in the Hebrew and Kabbala in the Hebrew. You will get an idea of what an instrument for human progress this amazing language, which Reuchlin called the Matrix Linguarum - exercise in the world. And when you come to Jewish life, why, in battering down the walls of our intellectual and spiritual ghetto, Hebrew was the weapon. The whole Haskalah movement beginning with the Maasphim under Moses Mendelssohn and passing from Germany into Galicia and Eastern Europe their tool for putting an end to medievalism to obscurantism, their weapon to bring the Jews out from the constricted world in which they lived into the world of enlightenment and emancipation, intellectual and cultural, was the Hebrew language. The Hebrew language is the battleground for that struggle, or if you will, the highway down which the Jews moved from the past into the present and will move into the future. And of course when you come to the whole seam of our national restoration -- when you come to the Chivat Zion movement, you simply can't dissociate that from the Hebrew. It has saturated -- the whole movement was inspired, completely dominated by the love of the language. How can you ever dream of dissociating the reestablishment of the Jewish State, the whole Zionist movement which long preceded Theodor Herzl? How can you dissociate that from Mapu and Smolenskin, Ahad Ha-am, Ben Yehudah, Bialik, Tschernichowski and so many others? A whole galaxy of inspired poets and writers and essayists who educated a whole generation and two generations of Jews to understand their position in the world, to become dissatisfied with their position in the world, to reach out for something finer and nobler in consonance with the great destiny of their people. A whole generation of writers and artists who kept the morale of the people alive, undefeated during the catastrophes of two world wars and numerous revolutions -- the practical destruction of Jewish life in Europe. How can you dissociate the establishment of the Jewish State from that amazing group of artists in Israel who sang the songs of Zion not *וְעַל אֶרֶץ חַיָּל*, but there, in Israel, who cast their vision over the soil, over the labor of the pioneer, over the sacrifices of the Chalutz, who gave the spiritual interpretation to what was being done and so ennobled it and so elevated it into a great epic drama of a people. The men and women who sang those songs which sent our young men into the struggle and the

conflict and the battle in the last immortal years and months which preceded the proclamation of the Jewish State. Shimonovitz and Karni, Uri Greenberg, Rachel, Lamdan and our own Shalom. I cannot conceive this magnificent drama of our national rebirth without the Hebrew language.

And so I say good friends, that the Hebrew language like the Torah itself, has been a principal factor in our survival as a people and in our periodic renewal as a people. And I am hoping, and this is my closing word, I am hoping that it will continue to be that in the future.

The reestablishment of the Jewish State may be a signal for one of two things. It may be a signal for our severance from the State of Israel. The State is there -- an independent political unit -- has its own flag. We have no political allegiance to it, it's there, finished. Oh, we'll help it philanthropically, we'll do all we can to assist it, but from here on our lives here, culturally, spiritually, are independent ^{is} as their life over there. And let me tell you, there are quite a number of Jews in the United States, who would like to popularize that kind of a philosophy. The philosophy of complete severance and separation. There are Jews in the United States who would like to intimidate the Jewish community in the United States to accept this false and misleading interpretation of the status of the Jew in the world today and tomorrow. On the other hand, the reestablishment of the State may be the signal for a revitalization of Jewish life everywhere, for a revival in the study of the Hebrew language, and literature and in a revival of Judaism in terms of its historic, and classic Hebraic manifestations. I am hoping and praying for this latter form and the coming of Mr. Sh. Shalom to our midst and the welcome which is being extended to him in this country, is to me an earnest indication that the Jews of America intend to adopt the second attitude, namely, that we are determined to build this two way channel of communication between Israel and *העם היהודי*. Between that segment of our people which has achieved political and sovereign independence in the ancient land of Israel and the rest of the Jewish people who share the same traditions, who are heirs of the same culture, the same faith who are proud of the same historic associations, who together with them are determined to move forward creatively, dynamically into the future.

BUREAU OF JEWISH EDUCATION



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CLEVELAND 6, OHIO

April 16, 1950

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Dr. Abba Hillel Silver
The Temple
Ansel Road and East 105
Cleveland 6, Ohio

Dear Dr. Silver:

A copy of the address which you delivered so wonderfully Thursday evening is herewith enclosed in the event you may want to retain it for your files.

In response to Mr. Samuel Borowsky's request, a copy has also been mailed to him.

Sincerely yours,

Irving Rabinsky
Administrative Assistant

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