



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

Reel
183

Box
68

Folder
811

Jewish National Fund, 1951.

51-4

ADDRESS BEFORE THE JUBILEE CONFERENCE
OF THE JEWISH NATIONAL FUND
WASHINGTON, D. C.
January 21, 1951
By
DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

I was a very young lad on the East Side of New York when I first came to know the Jewish National Fund. It had been founded just a few years before, and was gently making its incipient way among our people. My contact with it was by way of its white and blue penny stamps which I offered for sale from door to door, at meetings and public gatherings, and in synagogues on the eve of festivals and holy days. I was an energetic salesman, coaxing and enticing the sluggish customers, often with unpremeditated eloquence which, with all its patent shortcomings, never lacked either fervor or sincerity.

When my sales for a single day grossed a dollar or two, I returned home all aglow and triumphant - - "as one that findeth great spoil." My commission was, of course, nothing more than a star-studded dream, but I always felt amply compensated. The stars which shone so brightly in my youth have accompanied me in later life, and the music and grace of those flowering years have remained. There can be no sweeter reward.

It took nearly fifty years for that little white and blue stamp which so modestly but tenaciously held its place on cards, inside letters or on the back of envelopes, as a tolerated but unrecognized symbol of a people's hope, to be acknowledged as the authentic symbol of a sovereign state. Today, colorfully arrayed in garbs of charming design, it proudly holds its authorized place on the face of all posted mail, and it traverses officially the highways of the world as one to the manner born.

We had faith in that little blue and white stamp. Behind it was an invincible idea. The idea made itself manifest at the very first Zionist Congress, though it did not receive the official sanction of our movement until the fifth Congress in 1901. We were then not only a state-less people, but a land-less people as well. We needed not only freedom and independence as a people, but land upon which our people could be settled, into which it could be rooted, and from which it could launch the offensive for political freedom when the time came.

Other people, too, were fighting for their sovereignty at the turn of the century in many parts of the world. But they were at home, on their own soil. Theirs was the problem of freeing themselves from foreign invaders and imperial domination. The Jewish people had not yet reached that stage. That was to come later. The preliminary stages had first to be passed. Jews had to be brought into Palestine, and land had to be acquired for them to settle. The land base for our political struggle had first to be built. Our people had not only to be brought to the land but to the soil as well. They had to be rebuilt through the soil. That was a central theme of our national renaissance movement. For a strong national base and for a national economic reorientation, we needed land which would be inalienably the property of the Jewish nation and which would be acquired by means of a national fund collected in small amounts from the masses of the Jewish people.

Like all great revolutionary ideas, this idea went back to ancient precedents for its inspiration. All revolutions are in a sense, restorations. Mankind frequently moves forward by going back to basic ethical concepts and insights from which it had detoured. The Humanism of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were kindled by the rediscovered classics of ancient Greece, and the French Revolution poured its new wine into the very old bottles. The land-laws of ancient Israel, which were promulgated at the time of the first settlement of Canaan and which decreed that "the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine, for ye are strangers and settlers with me" - was the inspiration of the idea behind the Jewish National Fund. The Fund was patterned after an old design and echoed a prophetic social vision of long ago.

The Fund went back to other precedents and the long experience of our people. It relied upon the masses of the Jewish people to redeem the land for the Jewish people. It did not put its trust in the benevolence of the wealthy few. In all history the privileged few have never served or saved the many. A people must redeem itself or it is unworthy of redemption. Our movement for national restoration was always a mass democratic movement. The rich, the favored, the comfortable, with some rare and laudable exceptions, rejected it or resisted it, almost to the very end. Fatuously, some are

still fighting it because of their bitter frustration and chagrin. You will recall that it was poor and often, persecuted men who sailed the unchartered seas to the American wilderness, who in hardship and struggle laid the foundations of the first colonies, and whose descendants fought the Revolutionary War for their national freedom. It was so with the settlement of Palestine and the subsequent war of liberation for the establishment of the State of Israel. Pioneers are moved either by an inner urge or by an outer spur. All others wait upon success or the prospect of success. They sit down at the table when the meal is prepared.

The Jewish National Fund had the large patience of a people, and its brave, common ways. It did not wait upon success. It created it. It plodded patiently along through the first lean and unrewarding years. Up to 1920 only 25,000 dunams of land had been acquired. But it carried on, undeterred, undiscouraged. In times of political disturbance or business recession, when the private acquisition of land declined, the Fund did not withdraw discouraged from the market. On the contrary, it increased its purchases. It was determined to fulfill its historic mission, come what may. It was braced by the will of a people. In turn, the will of the people was reenforced by the example of its own indefatigable efforts.

Today the Fund has come to be the greatest non-governmental land-purchasing agency in the world, and its contribution to rural and urban land development in Israel, and to the establishment of new colonies, settlements and villages for the absorption of the myriads of new immigrants are truly monumental.

In the course of nearly three quarters of a century since its inception in Hibbat Zion, our movement brought into existence many fine and noble institutions, agencies and instrumentalities, but none, I believe, surpasses the Jewish National Fund in popular appeal and in the affection in which it has been held through the years, and none expresses so admirably the essential genius and social vision of our movement, rising above party and partisan ideologies and serving the universal needs of an unfragmentized people.

We should derive much inspiration from the history of this Fund for the tasks which lie ahead for our movement. There was always a Sabbath mood about this Fund, a quiet sanctity which never left it. Its ideal was never lost in the hard realities of the work-a-day world in which it operated. Perhaps this was due to the fact that it never saw its ideal as ever fully accomplished. Its work was never done. Always there was more land to be acquired, more desert and wilderness to be reclaimed, more people to be settled.

For many of our people the establishment of the State of Israel appeared to be an ideal fully realized, a task finally completed. There was proper rejoicing in their hearts, an exalted Sabbath mood, a pride and a contentment. And who would begrudge them or ourselves this hour of rejoicing, when "the mouth is filled with gladness and the tongue with song" ^{after} -/the long-deferred hope and the desolation of the years? Should not those who ~~saw~~ in tears reap in joy?

But many of our people mistook this day of triumph for a perennial Sabbath -

"a time which is an unending Sabbath and one which brought rest with it forever more." Such lyrical hopes unfortunately are in the nature of a

- a song for the distant future in some ultimate cycle of time. They are not intended for the perilous times in which we find ourselves and in the midst of the massive burdensome tasks which still await us. These people failed to recall that among our people, even as the Sabbath day was ceremoniously ushered in, so was the working week ceremoniously ushered in with the blessing of wine and light and incense, and with the singing of songs. The mind of man was invited to turn back again to the work of the world which must be done, and the blessings of God were invoked upon the willing hands of labor. "Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field. The Lord shall command the blessing in all that thou puttest thine hand to."

There is yet much work to be done by us before the young State of Israel will become strong, stable and secure - and we must put our hand to that work with a will. Israel is still surrounded by unreconciled enemies who refuse to make peace, who dream

of a second round, and who are rearming themselves for a propitious hour of renewed hostilities. The status of Jerusalem remains undefined and the United Nations has again evaded its responsibility for a final decision. The resources and economy of Israel are being seriously drained by the dire needs of military expenditures. Dark clouds of a new world war are moving ominously over the face of the earth, and are lowering over the Middle East. The economic problems of the new state are increasing in intensity. They will not be solved quickly or easily, and for several reasons into which we need not go here - principally, of course, for the reason of the large immigration which will continue to come into the country. We must not recoil from these hard week-day and work-day realities of building a state, fusing its people, defending its borders, developing its economy, and absorbing endless waves of impoverished immigrants all at the same time. We should not wish to cover up these unpleasant realities, the unavoidable vexations and the discords, nor apologize for them, nor resent criticism of them. They should be faced by those inside and outside of Israel frankly, and ways of improvement and amelioration should be sought without pride of opinion or partisanship or dogmatism. No ready-made, ideologic garment, fashioned in the doctrinaire schools of the East or the West, will suit the unique and extraordinarily involved political, economic, social and cultural complex which is present-day Israel. The garment will have to be cut to measure.

The citizens of Israel are making heroic efforts, in sacrifice and in austerities, to meet their and our problems, while at the same time continuing to build their national life on a scale which is amazing the world. They know that their battle-days are not over.

I am afraid that we here have begun to relax both in our political and economic responsibilities. There is danger in this for the hard-pressed State of Israel. Political demobilization on the part of American Jewry in these days of strange political alignments, when former enemies are being wooed and erst-while allies are being alienated, is to encourage unpredictable and possibly dangerous policy shifts and reversals under the plea of military necessity. We experienced such reversals in the past,

though fortunately sounder and fairer judgment ultimately came to prevail. Economic relaxation on our part at this time will dangerously undermine the economic stability of the State of Israel, and therefore, also its political position and its security. We cannot allow it. What we have helped to build, we must now make secure. Now that the tides of the world have finally carried our storm-tossed ship into port, we shall not suffer it to be shipwrecked then. We who were one with the valiant sons and daughters of Israel in the glorious comradeship of struggle will remain with them in an enduring fellowship of labor until peace and security will come to be abidingly theirs.

One of the great services which we can render Israel in these critical times is to appeal to our government to give as large a measure of support as possible to it. We should urge upon our government, which was the first to extend recognition to the newly-established State of Israel, to bring the great weight of its diplomatic influence towards hastening the conclusion of peace between the neighboring Arab states and Israel. This would be a major contribution to the pacification of one of the most strategic areas in the world today. It would restore normal economic life to a part of the world towards whose economic rehabilitation the President of the United States has more than once drawn the attention of our country. It would facilitate the exchange of goods and service, and mutually helpful cooperative economic enterprises among the peoples there who, at this moment, are separated by walls of steel and barbed wire and by bitter recriminations. It would usher in a new day for all the nations involved. For Israel, sorely pressed as it is by the necessity of pouring so much of its limited financial resources into armament and military defense, it would be a blessed relief and would enable it to devote itself ~~entirely~~ to the constructive tasks of peacefully building its new life.

Economically our government should support the new State of Israel, at least with that same measure of generosity with which it has aided other countries, none of which is facing the crushing burden of absorbing hundreds of thousands of homeless and impoverished refugees. If the aim of our government is to strengthen democratic nations

everywhere, what country is more entitled to such aid than the State of Israel, which is a veritable stronghold of democratic faith and idealism in a part of the world where democracy is little known and little practiced. A strong and free Israel will stand as a bulwark against all forms of aggression and domination. The people of Israel have evidenced their fierce independence and their love of freedom through years of relentless struggle and warfare against powers both great and small. The economic strengthening which American financial support would bring to Israel will guarantee not a base for military operations, which Israel cannot and should not become, but a base for the cultural and spiritual propagation of those fundamental ideals of freedom and the inalienable rights of man which are as much part of the fundamental Jewish tradition as they are of the American. The economic support of Israel will give America not a military ally. Its great service to the cause of a free humanity will lie not in its military prowess, but in the quality of life which it will collectively demonstrate, propagate and resolutely defend. No attempt should be made to force either an Eastern or a Western orientation upon the government or the people of Israel. Theirs is an older orientation - towards Sinai, where long ago the eternally valid mandate was announced: "And ^{ye} ~~thou~~ shalt proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof...."

Israel can be a friend even when it is not an ally. To help friends in need is part of a larger wisdom and statesmanship.

I believe that our government and our people can come to appreciate all this if we earnestly and energetically bring it to their attention.