



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
812

New York Board of Rabbis, 1951.

APRIL 9, 1951

BY

DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

one of the most exciting, revolutionary, baffling and belligerent periods in human history. It has also been one of the most remarkable periods in Jewish history, creative and catastrophic at the same time.

WRHS
his era men w
e free, natio

looking forward
dependent, w
70 years 1

In the 19th century, wrote Victor Hugo, war will be dead, the scaffold will be dead, hatred will be dead, frontiers will be dead, royalty will be dead, dogmas will be dead, and man will begin to live.

half way down
But here we are ~~in~~ the 20th century and war is not dead, the scaffold is not dead, hatred is not dead, frontiers are not dead, royalty is not dead, dogmas are not dead, but man is beginning to die. The vista which stretches before our generation today ends at the edge of ~~the~~ wilderness. For ~~35~~ years now men have lived in a world of mounting hate, intolerance and bigotry, of revolutions, invasions, war, ~~the rise and fall of empires~~, amidst the slaughter of millions of their kind. Great peoples have destroyed their liberties and enslaved themselves. Millions of men cower today in terrorized submissiveness. The wealth of nations is being drained in wars and in preparations for wars which will also drain the lives of ~~the~~ people. The mind of man, trained and sharpened by generations of scientific education, is now applied to the perfection of the war technique so that the discoveries which science records in our day in such great numbers no longer fill the hearts of men with pride or enthusiasm. They suspect that these things will not contribute either to their happiness or their security.

The human spirit stands today frightened, weighted down with apocalyptic foreboding as if awaiting the crash of doom. The thoughtful among men have accordingly begun to search earnestly for a road away from disaster. They are seeking desperately ~~hard~~ to rediscover that vision which was somehow lost amidst the brilliant pageantry of scientific achievement in the last century to the hurt and sorrow of the world. They understand now what the wise men of the earth have always known, that increased knowledge does not necessarily mean increased goodness or happiness, that facts are not in themselves blessings, that truth can make us mad as well as free, that the prolongation of human life is not the same as the improvement of human life, that the acceleration of a process does not always insure a finer product, that change does not necessarily spell progress and that democracy, as Lecky pointed out ^{more than} a half-century ago, may often destroy liberty. They realize now that the fault is not with science or education or democracy as such, but with the interpretation which men have put upon them, with the omnipotence and autonomy which they have ascribed to them and with their failure to understand that science, education and democracy are means not ends in themselves.

What has been tragically missing in our civilization is the compelling and unifying faith in the great human goals which religion and religion alone has set for mankind, and towards the attainment of which science, education and democracy should contribute if they are to fulfill their chief functions. Mankind lost sight of these goals; therefore, human progress today has no clear direction. Good material and good tools are not enough for the builder. The builder must have a plan. Every true ~~con-~~ ^{sanctuary} ~~temple~~ of man must be modeled after some heavenly archetype. To build a noble and enduring society it is not enough to have wealth and knowledge. Mankind must be possessed of ~~the~~ ^{all} architectural plan, and ~~not~~ ^{that} only the spiritual vision of man has designed. Mankind must also have the will and the loyalty to follow ~~that~~ ^{this} plan, and that the moral sense of mankind alone ~~has~~ ^{can} be provided. Without faith in God, the reality of the spiritual vision as well as the moral sense in man are quickly denied and rejected. ^{gains} ~~step~~ ^{ed} ~~in the world.~~ ^{Is there any doubt then about the role urgent and indispensable of the Rabbi and the teacher of religion in the days ahead?}

Jewish life, too, ~~three-quarters of a century ago~~ ^{seventy years} began in a high ~~mood of~~ optimism. Full rights of citizenship had been achieved ^{by Jews} practically everywhere in Europe. Even in Czarist Russia discriminatory measures against ~~the Jews~~ ^{them} had been relaxed. ~~The Jews were moving into the schools and the universities of Europe in increasing numbers and were beginning to make amazing contributions to the arts and sciences of Europe, to finance, industry, politics and literature. The forerunners of that astounding galaxy of men of extraordinary talent and genius who were to enrich the civilization of the Western world were already appearing on the scene. The Jews of Europe three-quarters of a century ago could see the open road ahead, the road which led away from the dark ages, from isolation and discrimination, to freedom and equality.~~ ^{out from segregation into full participation in the life of Western Europe. They were moving} ^{had} ^{beginning} ^{then} ^{invaluable} ^{making them} ^{and} ^{door}

~~But~~ ^{however} Jewish emancipation which was a by-product of European liberalism in the 19th century, began to suffer abatement with the decline of liberalism in Europe shortly after the Franco-Prussian War. The national and social unrest which ~~began and which~~ ^{ensued} ultimately shattered the foundations of European liberalism, brought in its wake economic reaction, intolerance of minorities, and ~~with them~~ ^{and} organized anti-Semitism, ^{The} which

letter

culminated in the annihilationist ^{program and} activities of Naziism after the First World War.

Between the First and Second World War Jewish life was ~~completely shattered~~ ^{broken} in Europe,

~~and as far as Europe is concerned,~~ ^{high} this period of three-quarters of a century

closed with the almost total collapse of Continental Jewry, ^{The Freedom Road led} and with the physical

~~extermination~~ ^{To the gas-chambers where 6 million Jews were done} ~~annihilation of over six million Jews.~~
^{to death.}

Against this background of ~~almost~~ unrelieved gloom, two positive gains for Jew-

ish life stand out ^{to-day} in brilliant outline - the emergence of the American Jewish com-

munity as the largest single Jewish community in the ~~whole~~ history of our people, and

the establishment of the State of Israel. These two facts will determine the course

of Jewish history decisively in the future. (I need not dwell here upon ^{then} the import-

ance ^{tasks} of these two events. I should only like to indicate what ~~tasks~~ and responsibil-

ities they suggest to us as religious leaders ^{for} in the days to come.

^{Secured Positive Image} ~~everyone~~ ^{Am. J. com. as latent leadership - Center} The American Jewish community is a good community. It is inherently sound and

loyal. By and large it is not ravaged by any assimilationist or escapist tendencies.

It has demonstrated a remarkable sense of solidarity with world Jewry during the ^{last} tragic

three decades through which we have passed. It has been proud and eager to cooperate

in the upbuilding and the strengthening of the State of Israel. It has built and is

building many fine philanthropic and religious institutions, ^{in our own country it} and has been generous

in their support. There is good material here with which to ^{build} work ~~confidently~~ for ^{The future}

~~the advancement of Judaism.~~ ^{in the days to come.} ~~Scold - Grant Harn -~~

It is necessary, however, to bring about a re-direction of emphases. There is

a tendency ^{which has been} induced by the urgent ^{pressures} necessities of recent years to over-stress the im-

portance of the philanthropic motif in Jewish life and to assume that ^{it} they alone ^{can} will

insure the survival of Jews and Judaism in the United States. Our laymen have thrown

themselves most zealously and most commendably into all tasks of domestic and foreign

relief and in support of the State of Israel. They should not be discouraged from

doing all that needs to be done in these directions and for as long as it needs to

be done, ^{however} but they must be reminded time and again that the enduring foundations of

Jewish life the world over, ~~and~~ its glory and its "raison d'etre" is Judaism, its faith, its spirit, its ethics, its institutions which have been transmitted and preserved by the synagogue and by the Jewish school. Without religion, without Jewish learning, ~~without Jewish~~ scholarship, without Jewish schools and academies, without the inculcation of the Hebrew language and literature, Jewish life cannot be nurtured and will not hold the loyalty of the generations to come. *for how* *all, over* *of American Jews.*

In my address before the Central Conference of American Rabbis last year on "The Future of the American Jewish Community," I stated ~~that~~ ^{what should be common knowledge} the Jew survived in the Diaspora because he centered his life in the congregation, the school, and the synagogue. The congregation and synagogue came into being in exile as surrogate for Temple, state and government. It proved so accordant to their needs and so consonant with their character, that the returning exiles ^{from Babel, Persia} brought it back with them to restored Judea. It remained, of course, with those Jewish communities who did not return. Professor Moore correctly remarks, "The necessity of such an institution as the synagogue was even greater outside of Palestine than in it; for while at home the Jews had a religious center in the Temple and a bond of union in its worship, especially at the festivals, in foreign lands there was nothing of the kind."

It was because in post-exilic times Jewish life in the Diaspora found a sustaining and nourishing center in the synagogue which was also the school - or rather, was primarily the school - that it was able not alone to survive, but to grow intellectually so sturdy, and spiritually so creative, that in critical times it was able to come to the aid of Judaism in Palestine. This was true in the days of ^{Ezra} ~~Ezra~~, and again, if the opinion of the Rabbis is valid, in the days of Hillel. 2025/1/2

"When the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it. When it was again forgotten, Hillel, the Babylonian, came up and established it."

In subsequent generations, too, the academies and scholars of Babylon were able to replenish the dwindling spiritual and intellectual life of the Jewish community in Palestine. In the middle ages it was Jews from the Diaspora who founded the great centers of mysticism in Safed and elsewhere in the Holy Land. Throughout modern times Rabbinic scholars from the dispersion founded academies in Palestine, even as other Jews founded colonies and settlements and reestablished after heroic struggle and with untold sacrifices the State of Israel.

What our people possesses today of cultural and spiritual treasures are not exclusively the creation of the Jews of Palestine, nor will those be of the foreseeable future. We are not warranted by nearly 3,000 years of experience to expect otherwise. Nor should we converge all our hopes for the future of our people and our faith on one center alone. The millennial drama of our people was enacted on more than one world stage. Some of its principal actors, from Moses to Moses, never lived in Palestine. And, let it be said parenthetically, if it need be said, that the State of Israel and the Jewish community of Israel are not at all synonymous. There are already tens of thousands of Christians and Moslems who are citizens of Israel. There will be more in the future.

If our reasoning is correct, if the synagogue is to become the institution primarily responsible for the survival of the American Jewish community, then it must drastically re-orient itself. It must shift its emphasis from a place of worship to a place of serious religious education, far more extensive and far more intensive than anything which we, at least we of the liberal synagogue, have so far achieved. Our Sunday Schools are simply not preparing Jews for the kind of an American Jewish community which we have in mind. This is not the time to discuss the remedy, but a frank facing of this fact is in itself the first step in the direction of finding a solution.

Failure to teach the Hebrew language in our schools is consigning the future American Jewish community, I am afraid, to cultural sterility. No Jewish community ever contributed culturally or scholastically to Jewish life which did not foster the Hebrew language and literature. No Jewish community ever survived for long which ignored Hebrew. This is an ineluctable fact of our experience. We cannot survive without Jewish learning. Our people perishes for want of knowledge. "An empty bag cannot stand upright." We have armor against everything but "am harazut".

Our people frequently employed other language media for their religious-cultural expressions -- Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, and many European languages. This was true especially in the fields of technical scholarship and philosophy. However, the language of prayer, poetry, ethics and Jewish law -- the deepest and most vital -- was nearly always in the Hebrew. In the philosophic field, too, only those books which were early translated into the Hebrew and became available to Jews everywhere exerted any influence upon Jewish life and thought. One simply cannot conceive of the great creative periods in our history, whether in Babylon, Spain, Italy, Northwestern or Eastern Europe without reference to the deliberate and extensive cultivation of the Hebrew language and literature in these centers.

The Hebrew language has been, second only to the Torah itself, the principal factor in our survival and our continued renewal. We are not at all times aware of this fact.

"The miracle is not always recognized by him who experiences it." I cannot conceive of a vital Jewish life in the Diaspora without an extensive study of the Hebrew language and literature among our people, without a knowledge of Judaism in its historic Hebraic manifestations. Furthermore, if we are thinking of any cultural link between Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora, between Yisrael and Tefuzot Yisrael, then we must be thinking in terms of the Hebrew language. We must raise a generation which will be able to read the language in which the future cultural creations of Israel will be cast.

It will not be easy to cultivate the Hebrew language and literature in the American Jewish community of tomorrow. It was never easy. Nehemiah, you will recall, singles it out as one of the three grievous failures of the Jews of his day. The cultivation of Hebrew always involved struggle, not so much with forces without as with forces within. The survival of Judaism itself has always been a matter of struggle not only in the Diaspora, but also in Palestine.

I believe, too, that our people in Israel, after the first flush of national redemption and state-building is past, will increasingly come to realize the need for the centrality of religion in their own life, religion in such forms and manifestation in such forms and expressions as will be best suited to their specific needs and aspirations. In ancient days when state and language were commonplaces in the life of our people, there was nevertheless need for the prophetic religious message to guide and direct the people and for Temple and synagogue to conserve and transmit the essential spiritual genius and values of the people of Israel.

Now that Herzl's political objective has been triumphantly consummated in Israel, our renaissance movement may well move into the spiritual and cultural orbit which is identified with the name of Ahad Ha-am. The ultimate objectives both of Herzl and Ahad Ha-am were never in any real opposition though in the practical life of our Movement, they clashed furiously from time to time. Herzl was impressed primarily with the physical and political problem of the Galut and sought a political solution for it in the creation of a Jewish State. Ahad Ha-am saw the spiritual problem of the Galut in terms of the threatened cultural and spiritual disintegration of our people, and sought a spiritual solution for it in the creation of a spiritual center for our people in Palestine.

It was fortunate for our people that the sound political vision and program of Theodor Herzl governed the course of our Movement until the State was established. A premature over-emphasis in our Movement of the concept of a spiritual center would

have found us unprepared for the final political and military struggle without which the State could not have been established and the in-gathering of myriads of our people could not have been accomplished. Ahad Ha-am discounted too much the value of practical work in Palestine and of political and diplomatic activity. He was too skeptical of the capacity of Palestine to absorb large masses of Jews and to absorb them quickly.

But Herzl's political triumph now paves the way for the vision which was Ahad Ha-am's - a radiant cultural and spiritual center in a reconstituted Jewish State which would serve as a stimulating and unifying influence throughout World Jewry.

The Jewish communities of the Diaspora will look eagerly for such influences to emanate from Israel. But Diaspora Jewry need not remain a mere passive recipient of outside cultural influences. On the other hand, it must be prepared to receive these influences.

In 1909 Ahad Ha-am wrote in the Hashiloah, "it is necessary to improve and deepen our life as a people to the utmost possible degree in the Diaspora and, at the same time, to seek the complete and perfect solution beyond the Diaspora in Palestine."

This is a good doctrine for Jewish survival for all of us from here on. Israel and the Diaspora will continue to be inter-dependent, spiritually inseparable. Both should be helped to become strong and creative.

In the days of King Hezekiah, when the Jews of Jerusalem anticipated the siege of their city by the Assyrians, they built a tunnel from the Spring Gihon in the Valley of Jehosaphat to a reservoir called Siloah, in order to secure a water supply for the city. In 1880, an inscription was discovered hewn in the rock not far from this pool of Siloah, written in ancient Hebrew characters and describing how the tunnel was hewn through the rocks in order to bring water to Jerusalem. It is the famous Siloan inscription which is now in the museum of Istanbul. "This is the story of the tunnel," reads the inscription. "The axes of one group were opposite to those of the

other. When they were but three cubits apart, it was possible for one to call to the other for there was a fissure in the rock to the right and to the left. On the day of the completion of the tunnel, the diggers struck, facing one another, axes facing axes, and then the water flowed from the spring to the pool Siloah for a distance of 1200 cubits."

Moving from opposite directions but facing one another, axe facing axe, thus concerted we shall strike through the rocks of separation, and thus we shall build the connecting spiritual and cultural conduit which will cause the waters of life and healing to flow uninterruptedly for the salvation of all our people.

