



## 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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Centrality of Judaism; Jewish education; Hebrew language, 1960.

As you know, I belong to that group of Jews who have been known, favorably or unfavorably, as Jewish nationalists. But I find few references in Jewish literature and history to ~~show~~ <sup>indicate</sup> that Jews strove and sacrificed at any time, to preserve their identity merely for the sake of preserving their identity, or for the sake of creating a great art, or a great literature, or a great science. It was always to preserve and transmit their rare, their unique spiritual heritage, which they believed was essential, not merely to themselves, but to mankind, that they strove and sacrificed and endured the persecutions and the hate of the long, weary centuries.

Never was religion peripheral in Jewish life. Never was the Jewish way of life divorced from faith. Those who attempt to construct a concept of Jewish life and a philosophy of Jewish existence in which religion is relegated to a secondary, tolerated, or insignificant position are, in my humble judgment, committing a grave error.

Nor will the establishment of the State of Israel, wonderful and miraculous as it is, serve to preserve the Jewish people outside of Israel, in the Diaspora. We shall not be able to live on borrowing. We all hope for the time when there will be the closest exchange of influence flowing between Israel and the Jewish communities outside of Israel. That will be conditioned, as far as we are concerned, on our capacity to receive the influence which will emanate from Israel. Our brothers in Israel may plow and plant and harvest the wheat and bake the bread, and our children, as the rabbis put it, may not even have the mouths with which to eat the bread that is prepared for them.

If the Jewish communities outside of Israel are to survive, they will have to draw their survival strength from within themselves, from those inner sources from which our people through all the centuries derived its sustenance and its nourishment.



This brings me to the subject which I want to discuss briefly this evening. In all our past those who wished to destroy Judaism and the Jewish people set about first and foremost to close down our schools and our academies, and to prohibit Jewish education.

We have lived by the power of our schools. We have survived through them. Torah means instruction, teaching. A characteristic of our religion has been the conviction that for a man to be truly God-fearing and pious, a certain spiritual maturity is required, <sup>a degree</sup> ~~the deepest~~ of insight, <sup>and</sup> ~~the profoundest of~~ knowledge. It accordingly placed the greatest of emphasis upon instruction; instruction in the home, instruction in the school, instruction in the synagogue; always instruction. The synagogue was primarily a place of study rather than a place of prayer. "Write them upon the doorposts of thy house and upon thy gates." "Teach them diligently unto thy children." These are commonplaces in the technique of Jewish survival.

Our enemies, therefore, who wished to destroy our faith and our people looked first to the destruction of our schools. Conversely those who wished to preserve our faith and our people looked first to the establishment of schools and academies.

That is what Ezra did in his day; a day of crisis and threatened assimilation. He turned the task of saving the people over to scribes and sages and teachers of the law.

Centuries later, exactly the same <sup>action was taken</sup> ~~thing was done~~ by a great rabbi, Joshua ben Gemala, of the first century, of whom the Talmud said:



" This man is to be remembered for good, for were it not for him the Torah would have been forgotten in Israel. For at first he who had a father was taught Torah by him, and he who had no father did not study Torah. It was then decreed that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem. However, he who had a father, the father would bring him to Jerusalem and have him taught, while he who had no father would not come to Jerusalem and study. It was then decreed that teachers of the young should be appointed in every district throughout the land. But boys would be entered into school at the age of 16 or 17, and if the teacher would rebuke one of them, he would resent it and leave. Thus it was until the time of Joshua ben Gemala who decreed that teachers of children should be appointed in every district and every city, and that boys of the ages of 6 or 7 should be entered.

Thus the Jewish people was the first people in the world to have founded a universal system of public school education to preserve and transmit the Jewish way of life. That, by the way, is one of the reasons why illiteracy has always been a negligible factor in Jewish life, from olden days to the present time.

This centrality of education in Jewish life seems to have been overlooked in our day. Fortunately for us, we are beginning to sober up to a new realization of this basic and ineluctable fact in all Jewish experience.

In our concentration in the last generation upon domestic and foreign relief, and civic defense, many Jews <sup>came to think</sup> ~~were persuaded~~ not only that philanthropy represents the essence of Judaism and of Jewish life, but also that it is the surest means of our survival. This is a dangerous illusion.



All the rich outpourings of generosity on the part of American Jewry for relief and for civic defense is most commendable. It is a welcome manifestation of the inherent strength and soundness of the American Jewish community. But these do not represent the roots of Jewish life. Jewish life will wither and dry rot will set in unless Jewish life in America sinks its roots deep into the rich subsoil of Jewish learning and Jewish scholarship.

In this connection it might be well to point out that <sup>government</sup> ~~the state~~ is steadily moving in on all of our social services, and the importance of the denominational agency in the field of relief is <sup>relatively</sup> diminishing on the American scene. Little which will be specifically Jewish in the fields of organized social service will remain. Our large-scale campaigns will also not be able to keep Jewish life permanently alerted and mobilized. Without a vital faith and without a replenishing Jewish education and scholarship, Jewish life will linger as a waning and decaying residue of the past, in a twilight zone of drift, until some unforeseen storm breaks over it, attacks its weakened frame, and shatters it beyond repair. This must not happen.

There is a fine human material in this Jewish community of America. It is a fine community, one of the noblest communities in the whole history of our people. Rabbis are frequently given to criticize their people, and I suppose that is one of their functions. It is necessary to safeguard our people against the sin of complacency. Nevertheless, there come moments, when it is perfectly proper for the spiritual leaders of our people to compliment them for great things done in a great manner.

It is gratifying to know that a great hour did not find our people a small people. Our people knew how to rise to the challenge of a historic hour, how to organize skillfully, how to maneuver intelligently to achieve their just rights in the world. They knew how to pour out sacrificial giving for years



on end in order to keep Jewish life from breaking down utterly as a result of two disastrous world wars, and how to pour out of their substance and their spirit to help rebuild the State of Israel.

There is a fineness and strength in this Jewish community of America. There is no mass escapism here. There is no serious trend toward assimilation. There is a commendable sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility. What is called for now is the kind of statesmanship which will utilize these fine qualities inherent in this <sup>the</sup> numerically <sup>largest</sup> ~~greatest~~ Jewish community of the world, for those spiritual and cultural tasks and responsibilities which must claim priority in the future if we are to survive and survive worthily on the American scene.

Survival itself is no great virtue. A people can hang on by the sheer force of inertia. When I speak of survival, I have in mind our survival as a creative and dynamic people resolved to make the contribution which destiny has summoned us to make to the greatest democracy in the world, the United States of America, whose citizens we are privileged to be, and to mankind as a whole.

We have something to give. Ours is a glorious spiritual heritage. We have prophetic, messianic values to give to this blessed land and to the world. But we can give them only as we inform the rising generation of the meaning and mandates of the Jewish way of life, its code, its traditions, its standards, its demands. We can inform them only through the school, through teachers, through books, through study and by habituating them in the practices and customs of Jewish life. That, in my humble judgment, is the task to which Jewish leadership ought to address itself in the days to come.



Not that the work of philanthropy is over; not that there will not be need for years to come to succor the needy, to care for the poor and the aged in our midst, or to help our fellow-Jews overseas, or to assist for years to come the glorious thing which we have helped to create, the State of Israel. There will be need for all that, of course.

But let us not lose sight of the first things. The first thing is the maintenance of a wholesome, spiritually sound Jewish community in order that it may do all those things which we all believe should be done. That means educating the rising generation of Jewish boys and girls into a wide knowledge of and a proud loyalty to all that is essentially Jewish.

This brings me to my final thought. If what I have said is true, and it is not a new idea which I have expressed, then it is clear that we shall have to re-orient drastically our entire system of Jewish education. The Jewish school in the United States is not all that it should be; not the Hebrew school and certainly not the Sunday school. Jewish education will have to be far more extensive and far more intensive to do the job which it must do.

I am deeply concerned, for example, about the inadequate instruction in Hebrew which is being given to our children. We are consigning the Jewish community of tomorrow to cultural sterility by not cultivating more intensively a knowledge of the Hebrew language and literature among our people.

Not a single Jewish community in the world, at any time in our history, ever contributed anything creative to Jewish life which did not foster the Hebrew language and culture. No community ever survived for long which neglected Hebrew. That is one of those ineluctable facts of our experience. One simply cannot conceive of the great creative periods and centers in Jewish history,



whether in Babylon, Spain, Northwestern Europe, Poland or Russia -- and these made monumental contributions to the sum total of Jewish life; <sup>for indeed you,</sup> what we call Jewish culture is not exclusively the product of Palestine, many streams poured into it -- one cannot conceive of a single one of these great centers without their energetic fostering of the Hebrew language and literature.

The Hebrew language, second only to the Torah, was a principal factor in our survival and renewal. We do not always realize this. "The man who is the beneficiary of a miracle does not always realize that a miracle has happened to him." But the Hebrew language did perform a miraculous service in the preservation of our people. The Hebrew language has not only been the native and natural vehicle for the mind and soul expressions of our people, the repository of its most glorious cultural trophies, the bond of union and the chain of continuity, but also a powerful instrument for progress and renewal in Jewish life.

The revival of Greek and classical Latin in the 15th Century brought to a close the scholastic age in Europe and ushered in the new and emancipating age of the Renaissance. The New Learning which closed the Middle Ages was, in fact, the learning of ancient Greek and Latin. These languages, which enabled the Western world to rediscover its great past, made possible progress towards an even greater future.

In the same way did the rediscovery of the Hebrew language affect the progress of Jewish life. And not only of Jewish life. Both Humanism and the Reformation felt the impact of a revival of Hebrew learning on the part of Christian scholars, led by Pico della Mirandola in Italy and Johann <sup>Rendelin</sup> ~~Reuchlin~~ in Germany, who did for the revival of Hebrew what Manuel Chrusoloral had done for Greek. But while its effect on European trends towards new ways of life and thought were secondary to that of Greek and Latin, its effect on the modernization of Jewish life was primary and decisive.



The Hebrew language served as the weapon with which to batter down the spiritual and intellectual walls of the ghetto. The Haskalah movement which began with the Measefim under Moses Mendelssohn and which passed over to Eastern Europe, Russia, Poland and Galicia, employed Hebrew as the weapon against obscurantism and medievalism. It served as a revolutionary solvent of antiquated forms of social life. It made possible a fresh advance towards a better and freer way of life. Hebrew was the highway along ~~which~~ which our people moved into the modern world.

And of course, it is difficult to overestimate the role which Hebrew played in the movement for <sup>the</sup> national <sup>renaissance</sup> ~~revival~~, which culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel. One cannot think of the restoration movement at all, from the early Hibbat Zion days to the recent crowning days of struggle and victory, without at the same time thinking of the brilliant galaxy of Hebrew writers, poets and essayists who inspired it and sustained it.

It is not easy to cultivate the Hebrew language and literature in these United States. In fact, it was never easy. It was not easy even in Palestine. The preservation of Judaism and the preservation of the Hebrew language was not an easy task even in ancient Palestine, ~~as the events of Chanukah demonstrate.~~ <sup>Hebrew as Judaism itself</sup> The survival of ~~Judaism~~ has always been a matter of struggle, the few against the many, the weak against the strong.

Certain American Jews are giving up the struggle. Some are giving it up through indifference; some are giving it up on the basis of a new pseudo-philosophy of Jewish life which they call "integration in the American scene". That is the latest slogan to justify or rationalize a minimalist type of Judaism which is stripped of its Hebraic character, which abandons Hebrew both <sup>relig.</sup> ~~in~~ the school and in the synagogue, ~~and which rejects the concept of Kelal Yisrael, of the universal community of Israel.~~



True integration was never a problem for the Jew. Jews were always eager to integrate themselves in the life of a country if given the least chance and the least opportunity. The Jew was always a good and loyal citizen, and the deeper his full-orbed Jewish loyalties, the finer citizen he made.

The Jewish problem has always been the problem of self-integration. That was a less difficult problem when the Jew lived in a ghetto as in a beleaguered city, isolated, quarantined. It has become an extremely difficult problem to live ~~a self-integrated~~ a spiritually intact Jewish life, in a free and open city, as it were, in a tolerant and democratic society.

Nevertheless, this is exactly what must be done. The difficulties should not discourage us. ~~The weak against the strong! The few against the many!~~ They should prove an additional challenge to all that is

fine and strong in us. *This being at home with ourselves will contribute to our own peace of mind. It will also help us to carry on a vital tradition and mission which*

Does the world need us today? Does the world need our faith today? Does the recrudescence of paganism in our day, of brutality, of war, of moral decadence, indicate that the message of our faith is no longer needed

or relevant? Or do they not rather call for a revival of the glowing Jewish ideals which have in the past kindled the torches of other great religions of mankind? ~~Does the world need our vision today as it needed~~

~~it in the days of the Maccabees?~~

I believe so. I believe that it desperately needs it. And because of that, and for many other reasons, I should like the Jews of America, more fortunate than any other in our history, materially, politically, and in so many other ways, to reinvigorate their spiritual and cultural lives



and especially the lives of their children, ~~their children~~ who are entering much more serious times even than those through which we have passed.

Because I believe in this, I am eager to see ~~Jewish schools,~~  
<sup>Jewish</sup> more schools and better schools; <sup>more</sup> Jewish teachers, ~~more teachers~~ and  
better teachers; <sup>more</sup> Jewish books, ~~more books~~ and better books. I am eager  
for a cultural and religious renaissance among the Jews of America.

Will we have it? ~~You and I will give the answer.~~ Being a man of  
faith, I think that we will ~~give the right answer.~~

