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Recollections of Abba Hillel Silver, Solomon B. Freehof, 1967.

Freehof Memoir
TCL (1967)

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Nov. 10, 1980

RECOLLECTIONS OF ABBA HILLEL SILVER

A Memoir by SOLOMON B. FREEHOF

IN SEPTEMBER, 1962, the Congregation Rodef Shalom of Pittsburgh invited my classmate, Abba Hillel Silver, to speak at a celebration organized in honor of my seventieth birthday. A few months later, I went to Cleveland to speak at the celebration held by The Temple for Abba Hillel Silver's seventieth. This exchange of visits had become a sort of tradition; I had been going to Cleveland and he to Pittsburgh for our respective anniversary celebrations for a number of years.

At this seventieth celebration in Pittsburgh, Abba Silver spent the first part of his address talking of our school days. He spoke of the time when he had first met me, of the essay prizes for which we had competed with each other, the first of which he had won and the second of which I had won. Our student days, so long ago, were brought to living memory by his speech. It was worth discussing those days, because the unusual nature of life at the Hebrew Union College in those years explains much of his career and his relationship to his rabbinical colleagues.

The Hebrew Union College in those days had nine classes. The total student body was between forty and fifty, so most classes had only five or six students. It was an exceptional class that had ten students. It was therefore impossible for a person not to know his classmates well. It was evident at the very beginning that Abba Hillel Silver was different in temperament from most of us. We were often serious, but we were boys and rather lighthearted. We saw at once he was more mature, or at least much more adult than most of us. There were certain boyish or post-adolescent characteristics which he seemed to lack entirely or which he had outgrown. As young people, we were capable of sudden new enthusiasms, friendships, quarrels, excitement over matters which soon proved to be trivialities. He seemed already at nineteen to have grown away from the

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✓ excitability, the frothiness of youth. He never just babbled for the sake of self-expression. He would express a strong opinion, but would never excitedly snatch at passing ideas. He had, it seemed to us then, a premature reserve. He had the capacity, characteristic of mature leadership, for listening patiently and in silence. He could not or would not make sudden friendships and get into minor quarrels. There seems to have been no triviality about him from the very first time we met him. We were rather boyish and he was already in temperament a man.]

humor That does not mean that he was solemn or dour. He had a hearty sense of humor. He could tell and be delighted by some characteristic anecdote. He was capable of making some brilliant plays on words or twisting a well-known sentence or quotation into a new and charming idea. He could laugh heartily, but not giggle. He had humor but very little playfulness.

Much of his quiet maturity, his reserve, may well have been due to basic temperament or to the mood of the life of his family in New York; but certainly a great deal of it was due to the fact that when he came to Cincinnati to attend the college, he already had a serious goal in life, in addition to the rabbinate and his personal career. He was a strong and convinced Zionist. In the last ten or twenty years in American life, being a Zionist represents an almost normal or average Jewish attitude. But in those days, fifty-five years ago, it was an exceptional attitude, especially in this new environment to which he had come to study for the Reform rabbinate.

The general tradition of Reform Judaism had been anti-Zionist; or, more correctly, Reform Judaism, which preceded Zionism by two generations, had a world attitude which was bound to become anti-Zionistic. The Reform movement was an outgrowth of the universalistic hopes of the Enlightenment; it was rooted in the conviction that the future would bring a diminution of the differences between peoples. Therefore the new nationalism that arose in Europe seemed to the leaders of Reform Judaism to be a retrogression. Of all the literature of the Jewish past, they stressed the universalistic dreams of the Prophets. Therefore when Jewish nationalism arose in parallel to the new forces of modern history, it seemed to the leaders of Reform to be a grave error, a backward step, almost a denial of the idealism of the universalist-prophetic dream. Therefore anti-Zionism or anti-nationalism to the earlier generation of Reformers was a matter of principle, an idealism. It then developed into a sort of prejudice, for Jew-

ish nationalism seemed to them to be an anti-cultural movement, an anti-modern movement, a strange ideology springing from the mass of life of oppressed Jewry in eastern Europe.

Into such an environment compounded of ideals and moods, Abba Silver came with his warm and passionate Herzlian Zionism. In this he differed not only from the opinion of most of the faculty but from the average students who came from the Middle West. The boys from the Eastern Seaboard were often sympathetic to Zionism, but they were in this regard much less serious than he. If a student became devoted to some practical cause, it would generally be the cause of social service and social advance, for this was the logical expression of the traditional prophetism of Reform Judaism. Abba Silver was exceptional as a nationalist devotee, a Zionist activist.

One or two of our schoolmates came from the same group as he did, and his brother Maxwell came to the college the next year; and we learned then of the background of his strong and convinced Zionism. His father was one of the earliest Hebrew teachers making use of modern Hebrew, and he influenced his sons and his pupils in modern Hebrew conversation and Herzlian Zionism. He was a pioneer in this new method of Jewish education, which later became almost universal. We learned how these pupils founded the Herzl-Zion Club from which many of the later leaders of the Zionist movement came; how they wrote plays in Hebrew and gave them in a public hall; how Abba went to the meetings of the various lodges and unions to persuade the organizations to buy tickets. All this early pioneer Zionist enthusiasm gave a direction to his life from which he never deviated.

Many of us had come from families which were Zionist or in which there was a member who was interested in Zionism; but Zionism was a minor movement in American Jewish life in those days, so there were none of us whose whole family life was organized in so firm a Zionist devotion as his was. Certainly our Hebrew education at home was then of the cheder or the Talmud Torah type of those days, without the many changes which the use of conversational Hebrew later brought about.

I think it was in the first year that Abba Silver was at college that a famous Zionist world leader came to Cincinnati and was invited to address the students at the chapel service. I am no longer sure who the speaker was; it may have been Nahum Sokolow. After he spoke, Abba was asked to give a response and thanks on behalf of the students. To our astonishment,

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*Silver &
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this new student from New York made the response in fluent, modern Hebrew. I know that very few, if any, of the other students could have done that. We recognized at once that Abba Silver had a new type of Jewish background, different from ours, and that his interest in Zionism was much more single-minded and devoted than ours.

Perhaps this was one additional reason for his quiet thoughtfulness. He had some very strong thinking to do. Those of us whose sympathy with Zionism seemed at variance with the non- or anti-Zionism of most of our teachers had only to adjust a sentiment to a doctrine. But he had two strong doctrines to adjust and to harmonize. He must have spent a great deal of quiet time weighing the two points of view and seeking an inner harmony.

Being reserved in mood and having much to think about, he could easily have kept aloof from his classmates and schoolmates and gone on alone on his chosen road through life, except for contact with his family and intimate co-workers. But this was the Hebrew Union College, the school in which forty to fifty young men saw each other for hours every day and for many years. We were a family in which temperamental differences were recognized and generally respected, and yet in which all the members knew that they belonged together. So Abba Silver, the devoted Zionist, the serious, reserved, thoughtful man, never withdrew or could withdraw from his classmates or his colleagues. He became an intimate part of our college life, participating in the concerns of our student meetings and playing an active part in our college enterprises, except athletics. Sports never interested him at all.

In our meetings, he rarely argued about procedural matters or the trivia of organizational politics. He would therefore not speak frequently but, as might be expected of a man of his temperament, he would wait till a thought was matured in his mind (a patience not easy for young people), and then when he knew precisely what he wanted to advocate and how to advocate it, he raised his hand for the floor, slowly unfolded his tall, lanky frame, and began to speak. We had never before heard such eloquence at our student meetings. We had plenty of good men, bright men, who could express themselves; but none of us could speak in his particular way. Heaven knows where he learned these secrets of eloquence! He did not throw away emotion by hot, excitable speech; but quietly, with steady march, and in his magnificent clarion voice, expressed his ideas with firm tread, giving weight to every sentence.

Abba had decided that what the student body needed was a literary

Convivial
at HUC, but
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in sports

Already an
extraordinary
speaker at
HUC

Literary
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Editor

magazine. He advocated the idea and we all adopted the enterprise. He became the first editor of the *Hebrew Union College Monthly*, the magazine which has continued for over fifty years with only occasional interruptions.

The intimacy which kept this reserved and thoughtful man close to our college life and activity continued as it did with all of us in the Central Conference of American Rabbis, for when we entered the Conference almost half of the membership were former schoolmates. He could easily have kept his membership in the Conference down to a nominal, professional affiliation, much as a busy physician might belong to the American Medical Association without taking part in its organizational activities or even attending its conventions. If that had happened with Abba Silver, it would have been understood—regretted but forgiven—because very soon he became deeply involved in significant Jewish work outside the scope of our direct rabbinical professional concerns. He became very quickly the outstanding young man in the Zionist movement in America, soon one of the coming leaders, and after a while, the leader. He contributed more than any other American Jew to the establishment of the independent State of Israel. All this work of his involved him in endless political battles in the Zionist organization, constant involvement with the raising of money, frequent visits to Washington for discussion with government officials, great rallies and protest meetings all over the country, and participation in the World Zionist Congresses. This could understandably have taken away from our professional organizational contacts. Yet he never permitted it to do so; the rabbinate meant too much to him as a life calling, and the intimacy of our family life at the college put the impress of brotherliness upon him. For very many years, he always managed to come to our Conference, if only for a day or two. He never failed to give a paper or a sermon or a lecture when the program committee asked him to do so.

Of course, in his attendance at the conferences, he could frequently serve the Zionist cause which was so dear to him. Every year we had resolutions which tried somehow to balance the traditional anti-Zionism of the older generation and the growing interest in Zionism of the younger. We constantly had debates on the wording of our resolutions on Palestine and Zionism. All this was important to him, but that was not the reason for his attendance at conferences. He never regarded the Conference as merely or primarily one more institution which he could use to further the Zionist cause. The Conference itself was precious to him as a professional

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organization of the Reform rabbinate, his beloved calling, and also because of the boyhood friendship and comradeship which our college life instilled in him and in us all. Therefore he continued in his attendance and his service to the Conference and, when the time came, became our president and served magnificently as the leader of our profession.

Abba Silver entered into a career in which he delivered a new address twice (or at least once) a week. An ordinary lecturer may prepare two or three lectures for a year, and go around the country repeating them in city after city. Of course, in his rabbinical life, from the very beginning, he had to travel throughout the nation to speak for the Zionist cause and for other causes. This experience of nation-wide lecturing came to him earlier than to most, because he entered the rabbinate already in command of a grand eloquence. But in addition to the two or three lectures which could be given over and over again in different parts of the country, as all traveling speakers must necessarily do, he was an active rabbi and had to speak to the same congregation once or twice a week. A man can prepare two or three lectures as an objective task. He has a theme to express and he expresses it. Some of his personality, though not necessarily much, will be revealed in these lectures. But a man who has to speak to the same congregation week after week cannot possibly be entirely or chiefly objective. Inevitably he will soon begin to reveal his deeper attitudes and his own basic temperament. A good selection of Abba Silver's lectures and addresses is more than an exposition of his ideas; it is a revelation of his personality.

Thus there can be no secret of what Abba Silver believed, thought, and advocated. And when we put together his thoughts from college days with the thoughts in his writings of later years, it is astounding how consistent his personality and his ideas are. There is, of course, growth and broadening with greater knowledge, and deepening with the richer understanding which the years bring to a fortunate person. But the basic principles and the basic moods remain the same. It is not that the set of ideas which he brought to the Hebrew Union College remained fixed all through his life. They were, of course, always there, but were deepened and enriched and were taught, as it were, to stand side by side with certain convictions and life attitudes that came to him at the Hebrew Union College and with others which came to him as he lived and worked in Cleveland and became a leading force in that great metropolis. He brought from New York a powerful, deep-rooted Jewishness. He added to it in Cincin-

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nati an idealistic Judaism, and expanded it in Cleveland to an active, practical vision of social betterment. All these ideas were interwoven into his personality because he, in his deliberate thinking and meditation, had himself woven them into a consistent unity.

And a unique unity it was! He came, as we have said, to the Hebrew Union College with a powerful sense of Jewish nationalism which was some day to be translated and realized in a Herzlian sense into a Jewish State. In Cincinnati he came into contact with a third generation of leadership of the Reform movement (our president, Mr. Kohler, was a pupil of Geiger), and he saw the world idealism which breathed through it. He always appreciated and never mocked that prophetic idealism. In his own thinking, he made an extraordinary merger of both moods, one inward toward Jewish concentration and the other outward toward world brotherhood. He achieved it through his re-thinking of the prophetic message. Whereas the early Reformers emphasized only the vision of world unity, he saw in the prophets the vision of Israel's redemption as an instrument for human brotherhood. Therefore his first constructive thinking was in the realm of Messianism, the redemption of Israel leading to the redemption of the world. His first book was in that field. Herzlian Zionist though he was, and convinced that nationalism was indispensable for the redemption of the people of Israel, he nevertheless looked forward to the time when the nationalism of each separate nation would outgrow parochial self-worship and become a force towards world unity. What the early Reformers dreamed of for the world, he dreamed of attaining through Jewish nationalism, a redeemed Israel, as a servant and exemplar to the world.

There is a constant danger in eloquence. The ability to move an audience by the pageant of stirring mental pictures can become an intoxicating joy to the speaker, until he begins to rely more and more on the success of a technique. This never happened to Abba Silver. Perhaps it was his father who first trained him to honest study. At all events, from his college days he was an earnest and devoted student and remained so all his life. The content of his addresses and sermons was always more important to him than the manner in which they were given. The Jewish content, in addition to the ideas from a general world culture, was rather extraordinary and surprisingly original. From some semi-obscure cabalistic work, from some medieval Jewish historical chronicle, he would produce an illustration that was enlightening and brilliant. Perhaps more astonishing was his use of Scripture. Innumerable men know the Bible well and

*Synthesis of
classical
Reform &
Zionism
through
his
interpretation
of the
prophetic
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*Silver's
unique
use of
Scriptural
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in
preaching*

can quote it aptly; but it might well be said that he never actually quoted Scriptural verses, or rarely did so. He had absorbed Scripture so completely through constant and thoughtful and receptive reading that Scriptural verses or fragments of verses appeared interwoven into the texture of a sentence, to produce a most original and, to those who knew the Bible, a stirring effect.

The only analogy that comes to mind to illustrate his absorption of Scripture is the way William Shakespeare used the Bible. Shakespeare almost never quotes a verse from Scripture as it is, but Scriptural phrases suddenly loom up in the texture of his language. The Book of Proverbs speaks of the soul of man being the candle of the Lord. The Psalm speaks of man's life as a moving shadow. Shakespeare had these verses in mind and he also saw before him in his daily experience the footlights of the stage, which in those days were lighted candles casting the shadows of the moving actors onto the stage floor; and he embodied Scripture and experience into the words in *Macbeth*:

"Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. . . ."

In some such way, Abba Silver made Scripture part of the texture of his public speech and turned the letter of the Bible into the living word. All of which indicates that he was a constant student. He believed in the discipline of study, and often when he spoke on education, he referred to the primary duty, almost the moral duty, of teaching students early the discipline of concentrating the mind on a problem and not relaxing until the problem is solved.

It was certainly the Biblical influence which led to his great emphasis on social justice. He was a fearless advocate of the rights of Labor and that, too, in his original way. He did not make his social ideals the reflection of a political or doctrinal radicalism. I do not remember ever hearing from him, even in our student days, any expression of an idea that could properly be called Marxist. Somehow political radicalism did not attract him. It may be because he was a strong Herzlian Zionist, and in the environment of his boyhood Socialists were anti-religionists and anti-Zionists and frequently mocked the intense Jewishness of their fellow Jews. This was long before a merger was made between Socialism and Zionism in the Labor Zionist movement. So in his original and independent fashion, he could combine political conservatism with social reform. He believed that

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religion should never be an apologist for any social system, but should always, through the terms of its own inner mandate, work to allay the injustices of the world.

So Abba Hillel Silver was his own man. His opinions matured and developed from within; and once they developed, they received the superb advocacy of his magnificent eloquence. Because his opinions developed from within, being the outgrowth of syntheses which he himself created through his thought and study, he was firmly rooted; and when he spoke, he spoke from a firm conviction. This must be considered his most conspicuous characteristic. It was noticeable in his boyhood at the college and apparent all through the years in his public career. If there was an issue upon which he was not convinced, he would not speak upon it. I do not ever remember him, in any of his speeches, weighing one alternative against the opposite and trying to arrive at a conclusion while he stood upon his feet. When he was not yet convinced, he would either dismiss the subject as one on which he had no opinion, or else he would weigh the matter in silence until he achieved an opinion. When he achieved it, he believed in it and advocated it with power. I never heard him give a trivial or a shilly-shallying speech. He always gave the impression of strength, of fearless strength.

It is not the purpose of these few words to enumerate Abba Hillel Silver's many achievements—some of them unforgettable—or to list his books, or analyze his addresses, or try to find the secret of his remarkable eloquence. These lines are meant to convey the impression he made upon a classmate and colleague and to tell what his personality meant to his friends and colleagues in all these years. He was an original. Whatever thoughts he had learned from people or books were reworked and remade into new forms and ideas. He was an embodiment of the best of our Jewish literature. He was a man of ideals and powerful conviction. While he lived, he was a tower of strength to us all, and his honored memory will, we pray, remain to enhearten and to bless.