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World Crisis and Jewish Survival, reviews, 1939-1943.

Bk Rev.
"The Friend"
12-14-39

ARTICULATE JUDAISM
By
D. Elton Trueblood

Anyone who wishes to read a sober statement of Jewish thought in the present crisis cannot do better than to begin with "The World Crisis and Jewish Survival," by Rabbi Silver of Cleveland, Ohio. This essay is reprinted from the Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in an attractive pamphlet of twenty-two pages. Rabbi Silver amazes us by his ability to discuss the questions at issue with almost entire absence of bitterness, in spite of the sufferings of his people.

One of the chief merits of this treatment lies in its clear recognition of the widespread character of the present trouble. Governments may speak hopefully of localizing the conflict, but actually it is world wide. "The world crisis," we read, "is neither localized nor of short duration. It is the agony of a whole epoch, like the Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, or the era which preceded the American Civil War. The present crisis did not begin with Hitler, or Mussolini, or Lenin. It is not the result of the Great War. The Great War was a phase of it, just as have been all the wars and revolutions and depressions which have followed it."

Rabbi Silver, after showing that the present crisis affects all areas of experience, asks whether the Jew will survive. His answer is to point to history. The Jew has survived, in the midst of incredible hardship, and it is not likely that his destiny will be altered now.

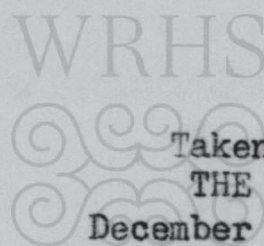
"We have survived - the one people that has come down intact from antiquity, that can trace an unbroken line of physical and spiritual continuity through thirty-five centuries, the one race that exemplifies in the modern world historical continuity and survival par excellence."

This amazing survival has not occurred in some sheltered spot, protected by mountains or sea, but in the "midst of the world's mad and murderous arenas."

We were invaded. We were attacked. We were exiled. We were driven over the face of the earth. We were scattered and broken, hounded and harassed, through long and weary centuries...Nevertheless we survived."

And so, we are told, the Jew is carrying on, with sadness and often with agony, but he is carrying on. He is giving magnificently to his less fortunate brethren. They know that salvation never comes except through suffering and they face it with courage. "They understand the world significance of their great tribulation. In all this there is balm and healing,"

Thus in our day the Jewish prophet understands his role and helps his people to see the hand of God outstretched to them even in a new exile. It is hard to read the words of Rabbi Silver without weeping, but, even so, we understand why Jews are proud.



Taken from
THE FRIEND

December 14, 1939



1G

PORTRAIT OF A LEADER

A Review of Dr. Abba Hillel Silver's New Book

By HENRY MONTOR

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American Jews have a right to examine the credentials of their leaders, especially in times when they must choose between the pined pipers of mirage and the trumpeters of reality.

Dr. Silver is not the fashionable physician prescribing pleasant pills to disguise ugly ills. His is not a Pollyanna faith but the factualness of the historian. In the first of his essays, summarizing the world crisis and its impact on Jewish life and inquiring whether the Jews can survive, he glosses over none of the bitter truths. He says:

"We were able in the past to adapt ourselves to all forms of economic life and activity -- the pastoral, agricultural, commercial and industrial -- and to all forms of political systems and arrangements. We adjusted ourselves to conditions of utter rightlessness, to restricted right and to equality of rights. If in the future, Jews will be faced with the necessity of adjusting themselves to new economic and political arrangements, to new forms of capitalism or socialism, or to new conditions of restrictions and disabilities, or if they will again be confronted, as many of them already are, with the necessity of emigrating to new countries and of establishing a new Diaspora, they will be able to make their adjustments in the same way as their people have done throughout the ages."

But what concerns Dr. Silver more is not whether the Jewish people will survive but how. In his definition of the manner of their survival lies the key to his leadership:

"Shall it be affirmatively and challengingly, as in the great periods of our past, holding our banners high in a day of battle and storm; or negatively, creeping into the nooks and crannies of the earth, waiting for the wrath to pass and grateful for the mere gift of existence and survival? We can do either. Apart from all else, apart from the mighty energies which the past has stored up in us, mere inertia and social lag can keep us going for an indefinite period. Many Jews, especially the more prosperous ones, out of fear and personal interest are choosing the latter course. But the Jewish people as a whole, I believe, will not, because it cannot, consent to such a role of passivity, abdication and escapism.

"There is too much leaven in its spirit, too powerful a dynamic in its faith and too much of the unquenchably prophetic in its traditions. When dangers threaten, when the enemy appears on the horizon, then the Ark of the Covenant begins to move the Ark which 'carries those who carry it,' the Ark which rests with the people, and marches with the people -- and the cry goes up: 'Arise, O Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered!' and a militancy, a bitter stubbornness, a sharp defiance comes into the hearts of our people, and they are ready for battle. . . ."

A mighty struggle is now fermenting in American Jewry. Mastery of the Jewish spirit is the prize. Shall it be wrested by those who would have Jewry "creep into the nooks and crannies of the earth" or shall it remain in the hands of those who have immemorably held aloft the torch of Jewish dignity and integrity?

No mystic antiquarian is Dr. Silver. In Jewish spirit he is traditional. In the realm of the practical he is the militant liberal. He wields his sword with vigor in defense of justice for all, in affirmation of the fundamental rights of Jews, in espousing the political and social ideal involved in the restoration of the Jewish National Home in Palestine. At a time when he might be justified in concerning himself exclusively with the woes of his own people, he raises a stirring cry on behalf

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of the Negro. When to speak sympathetically of the basic ideals which animated the U.S.S.R. is to risk calumny, he understandingly evaluates that which is permanent and just in the Soviet structure. While rash predictions as to the Jewish future are being made by those who have erred in the past, he contents himself with a recital of the eternal recurrence of Jewish history.

Writing in a prose as resonant as his voice, Dr. Silver demolishes the idols which even in 1941 find numerous worshipers among Jews. He deals with particular effectiveness with one aspect of the fundamental struggle now gestating in American-Jewish society. Once again it is fashionable to insist that the Jews are only a "religious community." The phrase is invoked as though its magic would ward off the demons threatening Jewish life. We witness the beginning of an era similar to that in Russia before the 1881 pogroms when one first heard of "Russians of the Mosaic persuasion." In 1885 a group of reform rabbis gathered at Pittsburgh wrote a declaration asserting that "we consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community." It is noteworthy that the same declaration saw "approaching the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice and peace among all men."

After reviewing the experience of Jews in France, Germany and Russia during the past century to emphasize the bankruptcy of assimilation, Dr. Silver stresses that Jews "never had a uniform plan or formula for survival." But "Jews have faced the two-fold task of adjusting themselves to their given political and cultural environments and at the same time remaining loyal to themselves, as Jews. Because of this two-fold responsibility there was always an element of stress, tension and conflict in Jewish life in the Diaspora."

If Jews are solely a "religious community," what of "the fact that following the last World War millions of Jews were recognized by the law of nations as national minorities in Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, millions more as a distinct nationality in Soviet Russia, and hundreds of thousands in Palestine, where a Jewish homeland is being created . . . and what of the myriads of our people who are non-religious or anti-religious, who can accept neither the theology of Judaism nor its code of religious observances, Orthodox or Reform, and who are yet very loyal and active Jews? Is there no room for them in the household of Israel? . . . But being a nation, and not a religious community, there is room in Israel for all Jews, except for those who do not wish to be Jews. . . Should we not rather regard it as providential that, in these days when formal religion is losing its hold upon great numbers of our people, the national and racial sentiment has been rekindled among many of them so that they wish to remain Jews and to link up their destiny with the destiny of Israel in some if not all of the spheres of its creative life?"

In his leadership Dr. Silver has exhibited faith and courage, the two indispensable virtues of a people's guide. He has challenged powerful groups within the Jewish community and witch-hunting reactionaries in the American community. A man whose breadth of spirit is reflected in his participation in the American Civil Liberties Union, in the Zionist movement and in many causes to further social and economic justice for all has sufficiently indicated the universality of his interest to confound those who know only one facet of his labors because of their own restricted domain.

The type of leader that American Jewry needs must believe in the survival of the Jews in their historic channels. He must be prepared to risk unpopularity in exposing false prophets. He must be tenacious in clinging to the ideals which seem too burdensome for the mass to accept. He must have the capacity to stir confidence in himself and courage in others. "The World Crisis and Jewish Survival" offers a key to these requirements.

BOOK NOTES

New Palestine
8-14-42

The Jew Faces a New World, by Robert Gordis. (Behrman's Jewish Bookhouse)

The World Crisis and Jewish Survival, by Abba Hillel Silver. (Richard R. Smith)

The two volumes under review are from the pens of two outstanding leaders in American Jewry. Abba Hillel Silver is well-known among Zionists as the man who has been carrying the burden of the United Palestine Appeal for a number of years, as a brilliant orator, as an outstanding Rabbi, and as a thoughtful student of the Jewish scene. Robert Gordis is one of the younger men of distinction on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary who, in addition to his rabbinical work, lectures throughout the country. He has also served as chairman of the Long Island Jewish Educational Council.

Dr. Silver belongs to the Reform wing, Dr. Gordis to the Conservative. But in their basic thinking and convictions they show a striking similarity in these two books. Both are avowed, militant Zionists. Both have a deep faith in the possibilities of a creative Jewish life in America as opposed to mere survival. Both castigate the Jewish secularists, whether of the right or of the left, holding that Jewish life without a sound religious base has little meaning to the Jew, to America and to mankind. If any great difference in their views is at all discernible in these two books, it is that Dr. Silver speaks of the mission of the Jew in the world, while Dr. Gordis does not use the term. Another similarity between the two volumes is that they are both collections of essays. This makes it possible for the reader to read whatever chapter happens to interest him at any particular time.

The five essays of Dr. Silver touch upon every sphere of American Jewish life—religion, Zionism, anti-Semitism, Christian-Jewish relations, Jewish education, and upon the forces of democracy, fascism and communism as they affect mankind in general and the Jews in particular. The author pleads for the Jew to understand himself and the basic teachings of his Jewish heritage. He must understand that "the door of escape from Jewish destiny has been shut", and that the choice facing the Jew is "between burden and mission". Throughout, the principles of the Jewish faith and way of life as taught by the prophets and interpreted by later generations, are expounded with vigor and clarity. Zionist workers will find Dr. Silver's arguments to anti-Zionists most helpful when going out for members or for contributions to Zionist funds.

Dr. Gordis' canvass of the Jewish scene is the larger of the two and the more detailed, for it is a large book of eighteen chapters packed with information, analysis and constructive thinking. The first section analyzes the main problems and forces facing the Jews in their struggle for survival. The second third of the book discusses the various points of view and movements in American Jewry, and concludes with an outline of Conservative Judaism, which the author advocates. The third and last section deals with religion and democracy as they affect the world in general and the Jew

in particular. Zionists will be especially interested in chapters on the Jewish community, Prospects for Survival, Jewish Distinctiveness, Proposed Paths to Freedom and A Program for American Judaism, although they will find every other chapter well-worth not only reading but also pondering.

—BEN M. EDIDIN.



Dr. Silver's "The World Crisis and Jewish Survival" consists of five essays on a variety of subjects evoked by the present crisis and their contents are well reflected in the title which the book bears. While there is no unity of theme, yet there is "a unity of spirit and outlook" in these pages since they mirror the keen insights of a gifted and sensitive Jewish mind and they are the eloquent expressions of a talented writer.

The first essay, from which the title of the book was taken, presents a penetrating analysis of the present world crisis and pictures its

ruinous effects upon Jewish life. The question is raised, "Can the Jew survive this crisis?" The answer is given in the affirmative because the Jew has developed throughout his history remarkable powers of adaptability. The real problem however is: "How shall the Jew survive?" The author then calls for an affirmative and a challenging program of Jewish living which is summarized in the cry, "Let the Ark of the Covenant begin to move again!" The chapter which follows, "The Rediscovery of Judaism," attempts to point to a positive program which will make for Jewish survival and stresses the need for Jewish education.

The central essay in the whole book is entitled "Israel" and offers both a powerful refutation of the long-standing doctrine in Reform Judaism that the Jewish people are "no longer a nation, but a religious community" and a clear reformulation of the mission idea in Judaism. Without question, this essay will long endure as a classic land-mark in the literature of Jewish religious thought. In the chapter which follows there is an illuminating discussion of the age-old problem of "Yisroel Bo-amim," in the solution of which the author urges among other things the need of Palestine as a home for the Jewish people. The closing essay, "The Prophet and His People," while not outwardly related to any phase in the present world crisis, still has much pertinence to the crucial circumstances of our time. After all, much of the present tragedy is due to the fact that so large a portion of mankind is enslaved by the tyrannical "Fuehrerprinzip." In sharp contrast to such pagan ideology stand the Jewish concepts of the prophet and his relationship to his people. Here is a significant book for current reading. All who are engaged in Jewish work will find their minds and their hearts quickened by it.

ISRAEL M. GOLDMAN.