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MS-4842: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, Series II, 1894-1985, undated.

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Rabbinical activities, reminiscences by congregants, 1993.

REMINISCENCES ABOUT A GREAT ZIONIST LEADER
ABBA HILLEL SILVER

by Bea Stadler

We slowly walked out of the small sanctuary after the Kabbalat Shabbat service, admiring the gorgeous stained glass windows designed and created by Arthur Szyk, the famous artist. We were the last to come into the huge hall with the marble floors--and there he stood--waiting. He shook hands with my little daughter, Miriam and said "Shabbat Shalom." Then he shook hands with Dona, the older one, exchanging a few words with her. As he turned to me to tell me how glad he was that we had come, Dona turned to her little sister and said in a whisper, "now you must never wash your hands again. A very great man just shook them." We both heard the whisper and he responded with a laugh that resounded throughout the long, high-ceilinged halls. As he turned to slowly walk down the hall to his office, the laughter could still be heard.

I was lucky enough to have been asked by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver to do some private work on the manuscript of the book WHERE JUDAISM DIFFERED. When I returned the first couple of chapters to his home, he ushered me into a huge study--the kind you dream about--with dark wooden book shelves on all four sides except for the windows and doors, floor to ceiling. He sat at an enormous desk and I sat in an armchair far too large for me, my feet dangling. "Well, what do you think?" he asked. This was my second encounter with him, the first having been briefly at his office in The Temple as they called Congregation Tifereth Israel. "Well," I answered, "it's all right, but the first sentence is too long."

"Too long!" he answered in his magnificent booming voice, and picked up the ms. and began reading. As he read, I slid further and further down in my seat and when he looked up through his small silver rimmed glasses,




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my nose was practically even with the desk top. "Well," he said again, his eyes dancing.

In a small voice I answered, "when you read it, it doesn't sound so long." He laughed and then we went on to other things. But later he did shorten the first sentence.

In all the ensuing months that I worked for him, he always had time to spend with me on questions that were puzzling me about the content of the work I was doing. Until then my Jewish background had not been too thorough. Our sessions always lasted at least two hours, with little actually being done on the ms., but much on the answers to my questions. Through these sessions his love for the Jewish people, for Israel, for Zionism and for his beautiful temple came through loud and clear.

He told me once about his childhood when Theodor Herzl had died and he, together with his brother, founded the Dr. Herzl Zion Club. It was the first Hebrew speaking youth group in America, and it was established at a time when most Jews wanted to become "Americans" as quickly as possible and the speaking of Hebrew and Yiddish was frowned upon by many. One day the Director of the Educational Alliance walked into the meeting room with an important benefactress. They were dismayed to find the meeting being held in Hebrew. The benefactress lectured them at length about them being Americans and the importance of speaking English. Twelve year old Abba Hillel rose to his feet. He quietly said that the Dr. Herzl Zion Club identified itself completely with the Zionist movement and would continue to use the language in which King David wrote the Psalms and the prophet ~~Isaiah~~ Isaiah delivered his vision for everlasting peace and unity. Later, when they wanted to put on a play in Hebrew, the director refused the use of the auditorium. The group sent Abba Hillel Silver with a small delegation to the publisher of the Jewish Morning Journal, who, in turn, got in touch with the director of the Educational Alliance, warning him that if he continued



to refuse permission for use of the auditorium there would be an article in the Jewish Morning Journal condemning the agency. The result was that "David in War" was presented--in Hebrew.

In addition to his Zionist work, Dr. Silver was instrumental in promoting the first unemployment insurance laws in Ohio; the first Child Labor legislation and the founding of the Community Chest, forerunner of the United Way. He advocated labor unions, believing that the working man should have decent working hours and pay, and he spoke about these issues from the pulpit of his temple, although many of his constituents were on the other side of the issue. He spoke in his thundering, charismatic voice but without histrionics.

Friends who had attended his temple Sunday school used to tell me that when his huge head would appear in the small window of the Sunday school classroom doors the children would whisper to one another, "God just looked in."

When Abba Hillel Silver decided to write his memoirs, he called me. "I want you to work on them," he said.

"Impossible," I answered. "It is close to the High Holy Days. I have a weekly column to research and write. I am going to school and working full time and incidentally have three children."

"The electric typewriter will be delivered tomorrow afternoon," was his answer. And it was. One did not say "no" to Abba Hillel Silver. I completed the Memoirs just before his death.

He did not believe in merely mouthing objections, but in action. He organized an anti-nazi boycott during the nazi era. He organized mass rallies in Madison Square Garden with 250,000 demonstrators. He assumed the chairmanship of the United Jewish Appeal so they could raise money to bring the Jews out of Europe. He censured British foreign policy and had many tense meetings with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose

attitude toward the Jews in Europe and the Yishuv in Palestine he found unacceptable. He once said "the tragic problem of the Jewish people in this world today cannot be solved by chiefs of government or prominent officials sending us Rosh Hashana greetings." He continued: "When all the doors of the world will be closed to our people, the hand of destiny will force open the door of Palestine. And that hour is rapidly approaching." What a prophet he was as he spoke about "the inescapable logic of events."

He fought against Chaim Weizmann who was a supporter of British Foreign policy. Weizmann believed Jews should not physically resist Arab and British strongarm methods in Palestine, no matter how viciously they were attacked. He called this resistance "the heroics of suicidal violence" and encouraged instead "the courage of endurance, the heroism of superhuman restraint." Silver believed in resistance and encouraged it in every way he could. He also opposed British policy, understanding devious British machinations and realizing it would mean the demise of a dream for a Jewish State, and the death of thousands of more Jews, both in Nazi occupied Europe and British and Arab occupied Eretz Yisrael.

But his most important lifework was his role in the establishment of the State of Israel through his eloquent speeches and round-the-clock labors at the United Nations. When on November 29, 1947, the General Assembly of the U.N. by a vote of 33-13 gave international sanction to the establishment of a Jewish State, Abba Hillel Silver went out in the hall and wept.

On May 14, 1948 the State of Israel was proclaimed. President Truman recognized its existence almost immediately. On that day, Abba Hillel Silver at the U.N. said "At ten o'clock this morning, the Jewish State was proclaimed in Palestine... Thus the age-old dream of Israel, to be re-established as a free and independent people in its ancient homeland has been realized... The Jewish State will strive to be worthy of the confidence which has been placed in it by the nations of the world and will endeavor to realize, as

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far as humanly possible to carry out those ideas of justice, brotherhood, peace and democracy which were first proclaimed by the people of Israel in that very land thousands of years ago."

Abba Hillel visited the Land many times and I recall his sermon after his last visit. He spoke from the huge pulpit of his temple, with the slightly faded maroon curtains and the medieval Eternal Light. But it was dwarfed by this man with the enormous shoulders and the large head of silver hair. He spoke about what he had seen and then almost in awe, he said: "My wife, Virginia and I were riding in a jeep through the desert, when suddenly from out of a little dirt path came running a small girl. In her arms was a bunch of roses. She shyly ~~hand~~ handed them to Virginia." He paused and whispered: "Imagine--roses growing in the desert."

When Rabbi Silver walked into a room it was as though an electrical current ran through. I remember once being at a meeting where a prominent Israeli official was to speak. There were hundreds of people present and suddenly I noted that from the back of the room everyone was standing. I thought it was the guest speaker, but no--Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver had walked into the room. He sat down in front of us and turned to shake hands and say hello. His presence was commanding of respect and awe.

Abba Hillel lived to see an agricultural school in Israel named in his honor--streets in almost every city in Israel bear his name. And now Israel has seen fit to honor this man who played such an important part in its establishment, with his likeness on a stamp. A more fitting tribute could not be devised.

Abba Hillel Silver died on Thanksgiving Day in 1963. He was seventy years old. Eulogized before 5,000 mourners, one speaker cried, "Abba, Abba, why hast thou forsaken us?" And another called him "the Architect of the Jewish State, crowning his life with an aura of immortality." It may be added that, during his lifetime, though silence may have been golden, speech was Silver.



"I remember," "I remember" my very first day of Sunday School. The year was 1927, I was only 5 years old, and very tiny for my age. My mother took me by the hand and registered me into my classes. I met Mrs. Pikkel and Mrs. Goldstein and Miss Wertheim - my soon to be teachers of kindergarten and first grade.

I, of course, was in awe of this beautiful building, now called the main Temple, which was then very new and gorgeous. As we walked through its lovely halls, my mother walked me up to this tall, awesome man standing in front of the beautiful stain glass window of "Moses" in the front of the old library. She introduced me to Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver who looked a great deal like "G-d" to me. This very kind man bent down to shake my hand and his first words to me were,

"Why you're no bigger than a little dew-drop!"

I continued for many years at The Temple - kindergarten, elementary school, junior high, high school and college. Yes, I even taught at The Temple when I was of age. I love The Temple to this day. It's a part of my very being.

I spoke many times to Rabbi Abba since that first day of Sunday School. At Confirmation he honored me by saying he gave me his beautiful poem, "America" to recite as my part in the service.

Today I am a grown woman (no longer tiny), but still in awe of The Temple - and I shall never forget the first words I heard from Rabbi Abba, "You're no bigger than a little dew drop!"

-Marjorie (Klaus) Schwartz

Right around the time that Israel was becoming a state, I used to perform magic for various groups. I remember Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver asking me to perform privately for him, before I would do a show for other Temple groups, like the Mr. and Mrs. Club.

Rabbi Abba loved magic, at times I would perform for close to a half an hour simply for him, even before I did a show. I remember that he would rub his hands through his hair and say,

"If only I could do magic like that. If I lived to be a 100 years old, I would never be the great magician that you are today."

Well, in my opinion, Rabbi Abba WAS and will always be remembered as a great magician. He had an awe and stance about him that can not be replicated. To this day it is me that was in awe of him, for he was the great magician.

-Dr. Arthur Hirsch

The Levins
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On February 14, 1918 Rabbi Aaron
Mittel Silver performed the marriage
ceremony for my mother and father, Sidney
and Lucie Rosenbaum. He had recently
come to Cleveland. On July 12, 1942, he
performed our marriage ceremony. While
waiting for the ceremony to begin, he
remarked to Bob that "the last time
I performed a ceremony for your family
was your father's funeral." This occurred
November, 1918. We were, and have always
been touched by the memory of that comment
with the knowledge that he had the time
to note and remember that information to
recall to us his association with our
combined families - surely the sign of a
living man. As the years passed, he
became our neighbor, and always our
friend. He literally "supervised" the
construction of our home around the
corner from his as in that his
regular walks, occasionally with his
son, David, who later performed the
wedding ceremonies for our two
daughters.

There is a long special relation-
ship with the Rabbi Silver.

Lucie Rosenbaum Levin

Mrs. Edith B. Gottesman
2773 Vernon Ave S
Minneapolis MN 55416-1837



April 15, 1993

Dear Mrs. Mayers:

I never knew or met Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, but we have been receiving the Temple Bulletin in our home since my marriage over 40 years ago. I had to write you to tell you how deeply touched I was by the excerpt from his book, Therefore Choose Life, entitled "Why I Believe and What I Believe." It was beautiful and it lifted my spirits beyond all description. Let I forget, and since I am human I do forget, I have cut ^{out} that excerpt and pasted it on my mirror so that I can see and read it every morning when I wake up. Please thank Esther Saginor for submitting such an inspiring essay from Rabbi A. H. Silver. I would like to order the book, Therefore Choose Life, by Rabbi Silver, so please bill me, send me the book, and I will reimburse you.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Edith B. Gottesman
2773 Vernon Ave. S.
Mpls, Mn. 55416

From the desk of:

MERRILL D. GROSS

RUTh MAYERS.

THESE PAGES ARE
FROM A FAMILY SCRAP
BOOK.

THE CHILD IN THE TOP
TWO PICTURES AND
STANDING DIRECTLY BEHIND
RABBI ABBA IS JOHN GROSS
SON OF MARTHA - MERRILL
GROSS.

Jim and I were married just after World War II by Rabbi Silver. We chose to be married at home, in front of the fireplace, with just the immediate family present. It was February, and someone told my mother it would be "charming" to have dying embers in the fireplace - that was where we were to stand.

After the ceremony, the Rabbi told us it was his shortest service. He could not stand the heat of the "quiet fire" at his rear!

Ruth Mellman

Dear Ruth -

I could not get the pictures out of the album without spoiling things! Sorry -

March 8, 1993

Dear Ruth:

The enclosed snap has not extraordinary individuals pictured, but to us it was very special(it is not in perfect condition and I know that).

My mother, who is 94, and our family were members of The Temple for years - we date back to 1926, when we lived in Lakewood (the only other Jewish family there was that of Herbert Gold) and we travelled every Sunday by streetcar(you might have to look that up in the World Book!)to Sunday School. We were there and I was asking at age 6 why "the kids at school threw their garbage at my brother and I, knocked us down and didn't like us if we were the Chosen People" I still see Abba Hillel with his army around me saying"I can't explain now but you will understand when you are older." Those were the days the Bund marched on Sunday, not with guns but full 'costume'.

More to the point, my husband and I both were in World War II and wanted Rabbi Silver to marry us. I was told he was much too busy and David and I were both returning to school on the GI Bill so we had little flexibility in the date. You can see he made time and David's family from Boston thought God himself had performed that wedding. I tried to explain it was just one step down....

Rabbi Silver married us and even made time to celebrate with dinner as shown. Enjoy viewing some of the memorabilia you already have in place. Best of luck on the May celebration.

Sincerely,

Helen

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