



## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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### **MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.**

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated.

Sub-series B: Sermons, 1950-1989, undated.

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Tall Tales and Deep Meanings, 1967.

Tall Tales and Deep Meanings  
Daniel Jeremy Silver  
April 9, 1967

It is a Sabbath afternoon. You are seated cross-legged on one of the prayer rugs in a little synagogue in a townlet in Morocco. Everyone in the village is crowded into the synagogue, men, women, children, farmers, stallkeepers, school teachers. Why have they come? For Maggid, the story teller has come to town. Who is the maggid? He is part poet and part preacher, part troubador and part teacher, he is the living literature of our people, and he will tell us this afternoon the legends, the folk tales, the living stuff of Jewish history. It's not history, but it's history as it was told and retold over the long generations. He will tell us of Torah, but not of the Torah that we know, its philosophy, its doctrine, its depths, but the highlights, the elemental facts, the stories which were part of the tapestry of Jewish life. He will tell us of Rabbi Ibn Ezra, poet, writer of hymns, mathematician, astronomer, and the most artistic and aesthetic of the medieval giants of our people, but he will not tell us of Rabbi Abraham's Talmudic erudition nor of his Biblical commentaries; he will tell us of the legendary foibles of the man, of his biography, of his person. He will begin by quoting to us one of the sardonic, autobiographical little poems of Ibn Ezra.

T'was sure a luckless planet  
That ruled when I was born  
I hoped for fame and fortune  
I have but loss and scorn.

An evil fate pursues me  
With unrelenting spite  
If I sold lamps and candles  
The sun would shine all night.

I cannot cannot prosper  
No matter what I try  
Were selling shrouds my business  
No man would ever die.



Abraham Ibn Ezra wrote great poetry, some of the liturgies from his pen, but he was not a practical man. His head was in the heavens and his feet were not solidly planted on the ground and the maggid will tell us that history reveals that Moses Maimonides, the medieval philosopher, and Abraham Ibn Ezra, the medieval poet, were born in the self-same moment on the self-same day in the self-same year, that Maimonides was born as the wheel of fortune was rising, he was a man destined for fame and wealth; and Ibn Ezra was born as the wheel of fortune was falling, he was destined to wander the world, seeking desperately to keep body and soul together. Ibn Ezra bought when goods were cheap, the bottom fell out of the market.

Now Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, the maggid will tell us, were friends, and Maimonides tried to give Ibn Ezra good advice, when to buy and when to sell, but, somehow, between the advice and the act something always went wrong. Finally Maimonides decided that he would give his friend a gift, he would set him up, but he could not simply give him money, Ibn Ezra was too proud to receive charity, so he devised the scheme to leave on Ibn Ezra's doorstep late one night a purse, heavy with gold and silver coin. He knew that Ibn Ezra would get up before dawn to go to the synagogue for his morning prayers, he would pass the sill of his door and would find the purse and the purse would be his. And so he did, but that very same night Ibn Ezra was philosophizing. He realized his poverty, he realized that he had never been able to make a living, but he began to think to himself, you know, I'm not so badly off, far better to be a poor man and open eye than to be a rich man and blind. And the more he thought on his good fortune the more he was convinced of it. He determined as a vow to prove his good fortune that the next morning he would walk to the synagogue with his eyes shut tight and the bruising and the stumblings will be proof that truly God smiled upon him, and you know the rest. He walked directly over the purse, never seeing it, and Maimonides, for all his good intentions, was not able to do the good turn for his friend. And this is only one of ten



thousand tales which are taken from the living literature of the people, the stories mothers told their children, the stories school teachers told their pupils long after the text books were put aside, the stories told by the maggidim the Sabbath afternoon in the synagogue.

These stories are largely passing from our own knowledge. Our own education draws to us a literature, a folk literature, from many cultures. It is systematic education. We no longer need the free university. We are told what is good to read and librarians present to us a list for each year of our growth which tells us exactly what stories we should respond to. We have forgotten, we Jews of Europe, this literature. It is still alive among the Jews of North Africa, the Jews of Yemen and <sup>of</sup> Iraq, but for how long we do not know. They brought this literature to Israel and Hebrew University has sent out among their amateur and professional story tellers to tape record this living, classic literature for our people so at least it may be preserved. Their children and their grandchildren will probably know the world as we know it, the folk literature of Scandinavia, of Europe, of Asia as well as our own, that this whole rich tapestry, this woven fabric of Jewish life will, I'm afraid, disappear and I simply want to dip into it with you this morning to let you taste that wonderful classic literature which was never written down, but which informed the heart and mind and the soul of our people over the long centuries.

Now, as you know, we are a bookish people. We have the great classic texts the Bible, the Talmud, the midrash, the medieval philosophers. We are proud of our erudition of learning, but it's interesting to note that in the Talmud whenever the question is asked: "Who is a wise man?" the answer is never given in terms of degrees earned or texts mastered. Wisdom is the ability to see opportunity, connections, possibilities, where the more simple mind sees only frustration and obstacle, a challenge which cannot



be overcome. Who is the wise man? When this rhetorical question was asked one man answered: "The man who sees that which will be." - the opportunities. Some men read the headlines and see only the simple fact. The wise man reads the headlines and connects it with history, with the human condition. The man who reads the headlines and sees only the fact reacts emotionally, instinctively, thoughtlessly. The man who connects the fact to the social condition reacts with judgement, reasonably and intelligently. The wise man then is the man who can foresee the whole range of possibility and relate facts to their context.

When the question is asked the second time the answer is this: "Who is the wise man? The wise man is the man who translates his learning into living." There is no virtue in knowing all that you can know about the statistics of poverty and of urban blight, of cultural deprivation, of piling fact upon fact, if you do not guide your community towards eliminating this social and economic curse. There is no virtue in learning if it remain in the head, if it does not translate into a life, into an active life and to citizenship.

Finally, when they asked the question "Who is the wise man?" the rabbis answered: "The wise man is the man who can learn from every other man, from every experience, from every situation, from every relationship." Now, it is wisdom at this level with which this folk legend, the folk tales of our people, deal. There is no fine-spun logic here, simply illustration after illustration, moving tale after unforgettable tale. There is no theory, only life in the raw, life as this impoverished but proud people lived it over the long centuries.

Now a common human problem is the child who will not accept the yoke of his responsibility, the young man who has many talents, but is carefree, careless. Now I suppose if we were educational theoreticians we would say that this young man needs to be exposed to a wide variety of vocational opportunities which may be meaningful to



him. The maggid simply told the story. The story is of a father who lived in Marakesh, perhaps 80, perhaps 100 years ago. He had an only son and this boy was of the grasshopper people. He delighted to dally with wine and with women and with song and he had no interest in the father's business, instead of settling down and having a family of his own. Now some fathers disinherit their sons, and some fathers simply berate their sons so often that their sons turn a deaf ear to the father's counsel. This father had tried to instruct the boy. He had done everything he could. He still loved the boy, he had not cut him off. He tried to reach him but he could not. Death approached, and this father drew his son to his bedside and said to the young lad: "I love you, my boy, and I've tried to instruct you in the way that you should go, but you would have none of it. I will not now impose conditions upon you as a deathbed vow. I know that when I die you would quickly break the vow. I simply ask that you accept three calendar conditions, three matters of timing. They are not onerous, they're not burdensome, but I think that you would do yourself and me a great favor if you would accept them. "What are they, my father?" "When you go to the coffee house to carouse with your friends do not go before two o'clock in the morning. " To this the boy readily assented. "When you go to the house of a woman of easy virtue, do not knock on her door until the cock crows. " To that he again assented. "And when you are angry, when you are angry do not act on your anger until you have slept on it. " And to this, too, the boy agreed.

The father died. The days of mourning are completed. The young man decides to return to his friends in the coffee house, but he remembers the father's stipulation. He takes a nap. At midnight he dresses. He goes to the coffee house and he sees there his friends already drunken and sodden and incoherent, and he is no longer one of them. He is an outsider and he turns from these erstwhile friends and returns to his home.

Several days later he decides to visit a woman friend, but again he remembers



the father's time table. He goes to bed. He gets up just before dawn and he knocks on the door of a woman whose beauty he cherishes and remembers. And she opens the door, but her face is swollen with the ravages of the night, her beauty is long gone. Without a word the young man turns and returns to his home. He settles down, he enters business, he marries. Several months after he is married a caravan takes him far away on the business of the family. He is gone for many months. He returns unexpectedly in the middle of the night. He tiptoes to his wife's bedroom. He hears her whispering endearments into the night. He grabs at his dagger. He is so filled with anger he is ready to murder her, but he remembers his father's admonition, the third stipulation, and he quietly returns to his camels to return the next morning. At dawn he enters the family villa and he sees his mother playing with a little baby in the courtyard. Whose child is this? Yours, my son. He was born while you were away on your journey, but then he realizes that the baby's crib was in the mother's room and it was to the child that the mother was whispering her endearments.

And the once prodigal son blesses the wise father. What would we say? There are more ways than one to skin a cat? There are more ways than one to educate a child to help him to grow into his maturity? The maggid very rarely drew the moral of the story. He placed an unforgettable image before the people and let it sink in and they could, as best they would, apply it in their lives. The maggid turned theology, abstract theology, into a story. The Jews whom he lived with lived among the Muslims and the Muslims were much like the medieval Catholics who insisted that they controlled the keys to the Kingdom, that no one except a Muslim could enter Paradise. Now the Jews who have always believed that the righteous of any people have their place in Heaven always wondered at this exclusive property that other religions made of Heaven. The



story is told by one of these maggidim of an Arab who happened to live on a road on the way to the Jewish cemetery. Whenever a Jewish funeral passed by he heard the Jews say to one another, "righteousness delivers from death". Now, he knew no Hebrew and "staka" sounded in his language, in Araba, like "taka" which is the word for a portal, a narrow gate. And he wondered why the Jews, as they went out to the cemetery, spoke always of "taka", of a portal, and he went to a businessman, a Jew whom he knew, and he asked him. The Jew tried to put the man off. He said it's a great religious secret, I can't tell you it, but the man would not be put off and finally the Jew said, well, I'll tell you. This is the story.

We Jews know that Heaven is reserved for the Muslims, that you alone have the keys to the kingdom, but we have a great secret. We know that above the large gate into heaven there is a very small portal cut into the wall, just enough for a soul to inch their way in, and we go behind our corpse to the cemetery to remind the corpse that this little hidden portal, that he can get into heaven. The more the Muslim thought of this "takah", of this portal, the more disturbed he was that Jews should elbow their way in where they were not wanted. And what was his solution? He prepared his coffin. He put some clay and some mortar tools and a mortar board in the coffin, he took his dagger and plunged it into his breast, to make sure that he would get to heaven to close up the portal before any Jew could enter into it.

Now I submit to you that that is theology served up so that anyone can understand it. Life for these Jews was difficult. The margin between survival and failure, between safety and exile, was a very narrow one. And many of these stories reflect the difficulties and yet the laughter through tears which was the attitude of our people.

The Judge, the rabbi, of one of these little communities, ordered a new set of trousers and the tailor promised him that he'd have the trousers ready within a



week. A week passed by, three days more. Three days late, the tailor appeared with the trousers as ordered. The dayan tried the trousers on they fit perfectly, they were well made and he was very happy with them and he paid for the goods. But then he turned to the tailor and he said, "Tell me, how is it that God required only six days to make the world and you required ten days to make a simple pair of trousers?" The tailor thought for a moment and then answered: "My trousers fit perfectly, do they not? They are well made and without blemish. Look at the world."

In this world which was filled with difficulty and danger the Jew longed for the messiah, for safety, and he put all his hopes into some divine intervention, into David coming down and bringing about the redemption of Israel. He could not see his political situation change in any other way.

The story is told of two elderly scholars. They had spent their life in study, fasting, prayer. Their piety was famous throughout the countryside. They were known as holy men, saints. These two men dreamt of pushing the messiah into coming and they felt that because of their holiness that they could go to the holy land and their prayers might somehow hasten his arrival, but they lived in Casablanca, a thousand miles from Jerusalem. They had no money and so they undertook a pilgrimage, on foot, requiring many years to come to the holy land to pray for the coming of the messiah. They traveled and they came and such was their holiness that when they arrived in Jerusalem, Elijah came out to meet them. Elijah welcomed them to Jerusalem and he said: "Such is your virtue that the cave of the grave of David is open. If you will go down into this cave you will see David lying upon his bier. He will raise one hand towards you and if you take from a flagon of water which lies beside the coffin and pour it upon the hand of King David he will arise and the time of redemption will be at hand, but beware, the way into the cave is long and the walls of the entrance are filled with gold and with silver and with all the allurements of the world. You are simple men. Do not be dazzled or bemused.



Walk straight on. Perform the deed and our redemption will be here." The two pious men entered the cave and began to walk towards the bier and there was David lying. He raised his hand toward them and there was the flagon of water. These two pious men were so dazzled by the shine, by the glory, by the yellowness, the coin, the gold, of the allurements around them, that they were as if they were in shock. They forgot the flagon of water and as surely as the arm had been extended so was it returned and folded again upon the corpse of David. The messiah has not yet come. The time of His arrival is still sometime distant. May it please God that we, as Jews, remember to turn away from the beguilements and from the allurements of the material world, that we prepare our souls and our communities for His coming.

And so the maggid ended his story that late Sabbath afternoon. He spoke of the practical things in Jewish life. He spoke of the theology of Jewish life. He spoke of the heroes of Jewish life. He touched on the ethic of Jewish life. He was the embodiment of the living wisdom of Israel and those who heard learned, even though they may have not been learned people, and it was in this way over the long generations that the rich traditions of our people were passed down from simple folk to simple folk, the maggid, these legends helped them to live.

In the book of Job we read, "where is the place of wisdom and where can understanding be found." Wisdom can be found in many places. It can be found in the university, in libraries, in the conversation of scholarly people, and it can be found in the folk legend of a great people. Indeed, it is found there and I commend this literature to you.



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WRHS



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But he stayed his father - the next quickly when he was  
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stayed to find his father solon, staying, in the house -  
he did not stay.

He did not stay. He decided to go on. He was <sup>beautiful</sup> in the house -  
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stayed at the house staying in the house -  
his house - he was staying in the house -

A document staying in the house -  
The document staying in the house -  
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did not stay - he was his staying in the house -  
in the house staying in the house -

his staying in the house - but staying in the house -  
in the house staying in the house -  
he staying in the house -

until he died - Where? staying in the house -  
please I am staying in the house -





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interested in the story - it will make sense to  
keep you and about you

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and people. Keep away from them - a possibly from the school  
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another and level, I ask you to be as - maybe for some you  
from trouble

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These results were followed by a  
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 the ~~area~~ ~~market~~ ~~into~~ ~~the~~

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about 2 pm a heat

Deep - Break the sandy soil. ...  
... a small ...

There was a number = check + add

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put in small filled ...  
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20











Yearly meeting Wednesday 4 o'clock in English Church - 1795

to receive to 1000

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Memorial WRHS

Memorial WRHS

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