



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Is God in this War?, 1918.



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"IS GOD IN THIS WAR"

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At another occasion, at another place, I spoke on the realization of God in the world war. It was a message which I thought responded to an immediate need in the souls of men and women.

At this time, the thoughtful men and women, and what man or what woman is not thoughtful at this hour, ask themselves this question, seriously, prayerfully, longingly - "Is God in this war"? I believe that it is the prime function of the minister to justify the ways of God among men and to answer these questions that emanate from the deepest recesses of the human soul, "Is God in this war?" If God is, as I have always thought he is, omnipotent, all-powerful, all-loving, full of mercy and forgiveness, how can he look upon this universal misery, this ineffable pain and sorrow of myriads of his children, how does he tolerate it all? It has been said, and truly so, that men, when they are happy, think little of God and are ready to accept him, but that men when they are unhappy, think much of God, but are tempted to deny him. There has been a real spiritual awakening in the world, during the last three years. Men have begun to think on those fundamental, elemental, basic realities in the world and they have, perhaps for the very first time, been brought face to face with the great reality of God, but they ask themselves these questions. They doubt God's omnipotence, God's power. Some are even tempted to deny God in the world. Now I believe it was a poet who said "There is more faith in honest doubt believe me, than in half your beliefs, there is more faith in <sup>honest</sup> ~~best~~ doubt, believe me, than in half your creeds;" The fact that a man doubts, is not a reflection upon his weakness but rather a splendid commentary on that \*\*\*\*\* of his mind and his soul. It is a splendid commentary on his mental make-up that he is not content to feed his soul upon the husks of belief, that he is not content to repeat mechanically



words and creeds and dogmas that his soul has, as yet, failed to realize. It is fortunate for men that they doubt, and even the religious soul must doubt, for God is not realized continuously in our lives. A man cannot live in a constant state of exaltation and ecstasy. We cannot be conscious in every moment of our life of divine presence and divine imminence. The fact is - we are too busily engaged in the daily pressing needs of our life, in the little things, to dwell continuously in the radiance and effulgence of God's presence. After all, we catch a glimpse of God, only in those rare moments of spiritual elevation, when our fingers, which have been fondling at those mighty curtains, somehow succeed in parting them for a moment, and our eyes catch a glimpse of some radiant reality which saturates our entire being, but it is only for a breath of a moment, but we must be content with that to sustain us during the long pedestrian hours of our life. Even the religious soul doubts and must doubt God's presence, God's being in the world. Is God in this war - and why, if he is in this war, does he permit this war? I suppose that the question ultimately resolves itself into this - "Why is there evil in the world?" If God is perfect and all-powerful, why did he not create a perfect, a complete and harmonious world? Why is there sin and error and death? Why are there accidents and pain and disillusionment and shattered hopes? Why was not the world created perfect, without a flaw, without a blotch, without an imperfection? Some men have said in justification of God's work, that evil really does not exist, that it is negative, that evil does not consist in the acquisition of something that is real but in the deprivation of something that makes for perfection, that it is not positive, as good is, that evil is only relative, - What might be evil for you ~~and~~ might be good for another man, - that evil is subjective. What you may think is evil, another ~~man~~ man might think extremely beneficial and good. Well, while it is true that evil is negative and relative, it is also true that this explanation does not satisfy us.



It might satisfy our philosophic scruples but it does not satisfy the question which our vivid and intense experiences raise in our minds. Evil might be negative and relative and subjective but evil is real if any sensation, if any feeling, is real and if there be any validity in our feeling and in our sensations. We are conscious of pain, we are conscious of our imperfections, of our goals that have never been achieved, of the hearts that are broken. We are conscious of them all. We know that they are real. To be sure, from a cosmic or universal point of view, we cannot speak of evil at all. We cannot say the world is evil for the simple reason that we do not know the plan, the scheme of the universe. It is folly to say that this world is imperfect simply because we do not know the purpose of the world, simply because our puny arms cannot embrace the mighty universe, because our mind cannot grasp this great universal mystery of life. If the world were created for us, for our sake, for the sake of the conscious beings that live on this planet, then we could say to ourselves, "Surely, this is a poor job, indeed". But the world was not created for our sake, nor from a plan which you and I might evolve. From the universal point of view, it is an absurdity to speak of evil in the world, but, after all, we are not interested in the cosmic and universal point of view. We are interested in the human point of view in our problem. We are interested in the things we say and the things we feel. We cannot live in intellectual abstractions. We live in a world of London and Paris. An evil to us is real as anything is real. Some have gone to the other extreme and said that nothing exists in the world but evil, that the good, that the pleasant things, that happiness, is only the background that makes the evil of this world seem so much more hideous, that the world is one bloody arena in which species and men struggle with one another for survival, that the world was created one stupendous blunder and error. That, of course, is the extreme



pessimistic point of view. That view, of course, like the other view, is an extreme view. It does not lay sufficient emphasis on the good and the happiness and the sunshine that is in the world, it does not lay sufficient stress on the real joy and happiness that you and I experience in certain moments of our life, the splendor of fine achievement, the warmth and comfort of friends, the beauty, the sweetness and the light that is in the world.

No, - to deny the existence of good and happiness, is to call our very sanity into question. Evil is real to us, just as good is real to us.

Now the men who are tempted to deny the reality of evil, do it because of

\*\*\*\*\*They say to themselves - "God is omnipotent, all-merciful

and kind. He cannot tolerate evil, hence evil does not exist, hence God

is not in this war, hence God is not in any of our experiences because ex-  
necessitates involves a

perience ~~implies~~ a new adjustment and a new adjustment ~~implies~~ certain

amount of pain. And what is the Jewish point of view on this problem of

evil? I believe that it is in keeping with this sanity, that the Jew, thru

the mouth of his prophet, has declared that God is the creator of peace, of

good, and the creator of evil as well. Evil is not a false note in the

harmony of life. Evil is not a ~~cadence~~<sup>(?)</sup> in the music of existence. Evil

is not an interpolation of something foreign. Evil is of the very warp

and woof of life. Evil is of the very soul of life. Without evil, life,

creation, existence, effort, are all impossible. It is folly to ask - "Why

is there evil". It is just as foolish to ask "Why was man created at all", -

because creation implies a variety of species and a variety of things, and

variety means degrees of imperfection and degrees of imperfection imply evil.

It is just as wise to ask "why was this world created and why was man created"

as to ask "Why is there evil in the world". You cannot think\*\*\*\*\*

unless you are able to compare one thing with another thing which is totally

or somewhat unlike itself. You cannot live at all, unless your experiences

differ one from another in the degree of their perfection. You cannot think

of white unless you knew of black and you cannot experience sweetness unless



your palate had previously tasted bitterness and you would not know happiness unless your soul knew pain and you would not know sunshine unless your eyes had previously experienced darkness. Sweetness and bitterness, sorrow and happiness, sunshine and darkness, silence and speech are the reverse and the obverse side of ~~x~~ coin of things that make for the harmony of life. Good and ~~xx~~ evil are interlaced realities. Good and evil are the two things that make for the fundamental unity of the world. Think for a moment, my friends, what significance would life have, if there were no evil in life. What would evolution be? What is evolution? It is a growth from a lower to a higher, from the less perfect to the more perfect. If there were no "less perfect" there would be no evolution, there would be a static state of stagnation. What is the meaning of morality - the conscious choosing between good and evil, striving for something better. What would life itself mean, unless we were surrounded completely with evils and imperfections, <sup>unless</sup> ~~that~~ we were constantly striving to reach out for perfection. That is the scheme of life. That is life itself. You must reconcile yourself to that scheme of life. You were not sent into the world to be pampered and fondled and given toys of pleasure and joy to entertain you. Life is a series of tremendously difficult tasks, that bring out all that is finest and best in you or it crushes you. Life is a serious business and not a comedy to entertain you. You are told that the children of Israel received the revelation in the wilderness and very frequently the sons of men, receive a revelation ~~xxxx~~ of God in the wilderness. Very frequently we gain our first glimpse of a higher life when our bodies are racked in pain. The sweetest songs have come from the lips that have tasted the bitter dregs of life's experience. The greatest ideas have come from minds which have been racked and torn upon the rack of life's ~~xxx~~ cruel and harsh experiences, and that is the glory of life and that is the inspiration of life - that men have risen on the rungs of pain to a higher level, that man has climbed from the slimy protoplasm ~~xx~~ to those spiritual and intellectual heights, that man has climbed thru sheer dint of exertion and sacrifice, from the lowest stages of savagery and barbarism



to that stage where voices sung the Iliad and minds rose\*\*\*\*\*

That is, to my mind, the zest, the worthwhileness of life. Is God in this war?

Surely, as God is in every experience of our lives. We are adjusting our-

selves today, ~~and~~ my friends, to new realities, we are awakening today, to a

new revelation and we had to be startled, we had to be disillusioned, we had

to be torn from our luxurious couches of ease and comfort and thrown out

into the cold reality before our eyes saw the truth and our ears harkened

to the new voices of life. When the year 1914 came to an end\*\*\*the civilization

that came to an end, was a civilization and an age of compromise, of temporizing,

of sins, of bargainings, it was an age that refused to look at the elemental

and fundamental truths of life. It was an age that was steeped in the things

material of life. It was an age that was losing its soul in the obesity of

wealth and prosperity. It was an age that had deified wealth. It was an age

that made not for spiritual well-being but for\*\*\*\*\*an age that was wrapped

and swathed in the swaddling clothes of petty conventions and our minds refused

to strip our souls from them. We wanted to live in a world of kings and

diplomats and political falsities and lies. We wanted to live in them because

they were so pleasant and comfortable. They permitted us to drift and drift

and drift. But the war has brot an end to it and our eyes are beholding a

new revelation and the evil of this war, the stupendous sacrifices, the blood and the

tears that myriads of God's children have shed, have enabled us to see the light.

We have risen and are rising to a higher level because of this war. Is God in

this war? As God trained us thru evil and suffering, so God is training us today

thru evil and suffering. The immediate results of this war might be puny, they

might be insignificant, they might mean merely a re-making of the map of Europe,

it might even mean a going-back to the antibellum, and yet, there have been

set in motion during the last three years, those movements and currents of

human thot, those imperceptible, invisible movements that are so strong that

they are destined to undermine the very foundations of the enlightened civilization



under whose roof we have lived for a century. There have been certain influences in this war, that will tell in our life. This war ~~will~~ hold a significance to us, not only in the fact that it ~~may~~ may be the last war of the world, not only in the fact that it may mark the beginning of national disarmament, not only that it may mark the day of the liberation of oppressed nationalities but the more immediate results of this war will lie in this: in the shock, in the thrill, which it gave to the soul and to the mind of man, in the fact that man has learned how to sacrifice for liberty, in the fact that it has spiritualized our life to the highest sense, in the fact that we have learned to ~~have~~ dare to experiment in the big issues of life, in the fact that we have learned to go back to the fundamental things in life, in the fact that we have determined that henceforth your ~~its~~ destiny and my destiny and the destiny of humanity and civilization be not left in the hands of lying kings and diplomats and their lackeys and their servants, but we, you and I will take the reins of life into our own hands and guide our own forces thru the world. It has been, it will be, I feel that it is an awakening of mankind, a new revelation and it was inevitable that the war or some great catastrophe should preclude this revelation. Thunder and lightning attended the revelation on Mt. Sinai and thunder and lightning have attended every revelation in the history of mankind. We must pay, we must pay for everything we get and we pay for new truth, for new revelations, for new beauties in our life. We pay with our blood and with our tears. This is my intellectual answer to the question - "Is God in this war? - but there is to me, another answer which perhaps is deeper and more real to me, which is ~~is~~ an emotional response, the answer which my ~~sentiments~~ emotions and my sentiments give to this question. Man thinks of God in two ways - first, as a transcending God, a God who transcends the world, who is over and above the universe, a God who is the creation of our intellectuality, a God who is a sort of a desperate generalization of the puny minds of men, but there is another conception of God, one that is more real, one that God is indwelling in the life of man, and that conception



says that, after all, the great mystery of the universe is unsolved, that the mind of man is too small to grasp the fullness, the comprehensiveness of the great spirit of life, but what we are conscious of, what we do experience is a reality within ourselves, a spirit within our lives that guides and drives and impells us ever onward to the higher levels and purer air, a being which stands to us as a goal in our life, a being that means for us, the prop and mainstay in our trials and tribulations, a ~~xxx~~ being who is the hallowing influence, the sanctifying grandeur, the radiance and effulgence of our being and with that spirit we identify our God and that is the real God whom we experience in our life, that is the God to whom we pray, that is the God that speaks to me and to you and that stands by me whenever I am engaged in the task of forming a being of grandeur out of the cold clay of experience, that is the being that guides me when I strive for a higher perfection, that is my God in whom I trust and that God is the God of hosts and that is the God who has battles of the Lord and that is the God who is the captain of the army in whose ~~xxx~~ ranks I am a soldier, a warrior in the ranks of the Lord, that is the God who is in this war, for if there are any spiritual values involved in this struggle, if there is an effort on the part of millions of men to arrive at some greater reality in life, then surely it is God who is guiding them, who is pointing the way, then surely it is God who is inspiring the men to bring the millions of sacrifices on the altar of humanity and he is the real God and the Lord God of war. This God who is near to me, with whom I am in intimate touch in those rare moments of spiritual ecstasy with which you and I are sometimes favored and blessed. This God is in this war for is he not the goal of human aims and aspirations that are inspiring the untold and ineffable sacrifices of millions of men today, and it is this God to whom we pray, and prayer such as this, which to my mind embodies the prayers of all men, of all races today, for this war is unifying mankind by bringing them back to ~~the simple~~ a simple, a simple



conception of God. Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, where knowledge is free, Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow, domestic walls, where words come out from the depth of truth, where tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection, where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way in the dreary desert-sand of habit, where the mind is lead forward by our feet into ~~the~~ ever-widening that and action" Into that heaven of freedom, Father let our world awake". It is a prayer for the greater freedom, for the wider ~~stretch~~ stretches for our soul's experiences, it is a prayer of the souls who have been enmeshed hithertofore by infinite, puny conventions, it is a prayer for men whose feet had sunk in the mire of life to reach out to the God who is calling and beckoning, the God who is the man of war who stands back of you and of me, <sup>in</sup> ~~for~~ the constant and Eternal struggle for righteousness. I say struggle for righteousness, because that is life, a struggle, a war, a ceaseless fighting and ~~clashing~~, an eternal series of sacrifices for truth and righteousness. That is life, and that, moreover, is the only life worth living, a life of effort, a life of striving, a life of aspiration, for without them, life is flat and stale and worthless. Mankind is strong enough to make sacrifices and the more we give the stronger we become. God is in this war and God is on the side of the right-----Amen.