



## 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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Reel  
145

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Tolerance, 1918.



## TOLERANCE.

Full many a man will say that the glory of our age is its generous spirit of tolerance. We pride ourselves upon our mental attitude of broadness and inclusiveness, upon the absence of bigotry, fanaticism and illiberality in our spiritual makeup. If this were really so, we would indeed be justified in congratulating ourselves upon this state, for the spirit of tolerance is truly divine. But I sometimes think that we misinterpret our sentiments. What we consider a laudable sense of tolerance is nothing more than mere indifference; what we choose to call broadmindedness is nothing else than dull mindedness and our vaunted liberalism is only a synonym for unconcernedness. When we burrow beneath this deceptive mold of our civilization we find an apathy towards the great issues of life, an insensibility to its pressing problems, an indifference to its trend or drift that is simply appalling. Under the cloak of tolerance we hide our disinterestedness; under the guise of liberalism we conceal our spiritual inertia and our intellectual cowardice. We are afraid to profess definite convictions for that would entail the task of defending them or of propogating them. We are too weak to be aggressive and too timid to be contradictory. We have too little faith in our own beliefs to deny another man's. We therefore shun the brunt of battle. We withdraw into a tranquil felicity by feigning a liberal attitude of mind. By pretending to see the good in every faith and doctrine we absolve ourselves from fighting the evil that is in them. We grow compliant and complaisant. We lull ourselves into peaceful slumber and we drift, drift, drift on the currents of life. And this is what we call tolerance, broad-mindedness, liberalism!

Now every epoch in human history has witnessed spiritual corruption, every civilization that suffered decay was cursed with



some such false notion of tolerance. Greek and Roman civilizations perished because their pristine cultures ceased to be aggressive, because they became tolerant of all sorts of moral philosophies, because they permitted the rank weeds of intrinsically harmful alien cultures to grow unchecked in their midst.

The great, creative periods of human history witnessed great intolerance in its broadest and finest sense. When an age is in the birth throes of new ideas and values, when it struggles to give expression to some great truth which throbs within it, it is restless, agitated, impatient of opposition. When a people is fired with the holy fervor of creation, it becomes intolerant frequently to the point of ruthlessness.

Men who were the great constructive thinkers and leaders of humanity were intolerant and uncompromising. The passionate, single-minded and whole-hearted devotion to the truth which Elijah, for example, evinced may brand him a bigot. Elijah knew of no compromise or concession. "How long will you halt between two opinions" he cries unto his people. "If the Lord be God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him." And in the frenzy of devotion to his cause he slew the false prophets of the false God. The prophets were not suave and agreeable gentlemen who saw the good in everything and fell back with a sigh of relief upon the luxurious couch of sham tolerance. They waged a bitter relentless warfare upon all social evils and all false doctrines as they saw them. They neither asked nor gave quarter. Ezra in order to save a nation and to perpetuate an ideal was intolerant to the point of cruelty, but out of such intolerance is the Kingdom of Heaven born.

But, to be sure, some people will overstep the mark. They will go to extremes. Their enthusiasm will drive them into narrow-mindedness. That is lamentable. But let us remember at all times that it



is these intolerant men that actually create things. They bring new treasures into life and humanity is often willing to forgive their excesses.

But we, in our fear of intolerance have run to the other extreme - - we have become -- what shall I say? - non-committal, conciliatory, indifferent. We espouse no one cause. We fight for no one principle. We are content to let every man hug his own little truth or his own little lie, so that, while in our gentleness and graciousness we hurt no one's feelings, we do no one any good. We do not build for we are afraid to destroy.

Oh would that we had a little less of this false notion of tolerance. Would that we had a little more of devotion and aggressiveness in our doctrines and beliefs. Would that we were fighters instead of diplomats, belligerents instead of neutrals. Would that we were definite in our views, positive in our convictions, firm in our faith and uncompromising in our devotion to it. Would that we sacrificed some of our affability and indulgence, some of our finesse and courtesy for the sake of intellectual firmness, moral stubbornness and spiritual insistency.

For progress is possible only thru the clash and conflict of powerfully opposing ideals. Out of the discord of the titanic struggle is the divine harmony of civilization begotten. This false notion of tolerance has been the bane of American life. American culture - well, if there has been such a thing \*\*\*\*\*it had no mission, it had no purpose, it was not liberal in the sense of tolerating views that differed with it, it was liberal because it had no definite views of its own, it was broad-minded because it was dull-minded, it was liberal because it did not know itself, it did not know its own soul.



If the dominant note of American culture is democracy then surely is nothing said about making of our culture something impelling, something revolutionizing in the lives, not only of us Americans, but in the lives of the peoples of all nations and thank God, that, at last, American life has found itself and discovered its mission in the world -- I say, thank God that American culture has come forth into the world preaching a gospel, fighting for convictions and principles. I know it is unfortunate that cultures have to be preached with the sword, but, my friends, it has been truly remarked that the plow of civilization is frequently tipped with a sword. It is unfortunate that we must kill in order to save, but that is the law of life, and, I say, thank God that American culture and American life has found a compelling conviction in itself, which send us forth into the world, a messenger of truth, a spokesman of great ideals. We are going to lose our sham notion of tolerance before many days. We are going to grow into\*\*\*\*\*

Now this false notion of tolerance is characteristic also of our lives as Jews. We liberal Jews have found truth in every religion and, by a curious twist of logic we have absolved our duty. We liberal Jews seem to discern or detect a similarity between all religions. We have grown confident that religions all differ only as to certain rites and ceremonies and forms. We have somehow talked ourselves into believing that Judaism is only one religion and that there are many many religions equally as good and equally as bad and in our fear of dark intolerance we have endeavored to suppress every evidence of firmness and resoluteness in our own faith, in our own conviction, with the result that Judaism has become sicklied over with the pale cast of genial passivity. It has become a good-natured non-combatant. It is feeble with anaemic abstractions and starved



with truisms. This liberal frame of mind, so called, has created a certain stolidity in our ranks which is fraught with the greatest menace to the future of Judaism. Judaism can survive persecution, enmity and hostility but it cannot survive indifference and apathy. If you profess Judaism at all, you must profess it with all the force of true conviction. If you love Judaism at all, you must love it as you must love your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. If Judaism is your faith you must regard it as the only faith which contains the highest truth. If Judaism is the light of your life, why do you hide it under a bushel? Why don't you raise your torch aloft so that all may see its wonderful light? If you have found the principles of Judaism, the principles of the unity of God, the brotherhood of man, the principles of truth, justice and equity, of social and individual and national responsibility, the strength of your life, why don't you proclaim them, insist upon them, challenge the world to deny them, work for them, fight for them? Why are you afraid to pull down the pillars that support the temple of the Philistines? Why don't you live as Jews and fight as Jews?

This is an age when the world needs ideas. This is an age when the world needs virile, strong, aggressive ideas. We need, if we are to be of any service to humanity, a militant, aggressive Judaism. We have become too surfeited with false liberalism to do any real constructive work, to be of any real service to the world. We must stand for concrete, definite things, we must not swerve, conciliate nor comprise. Do not apologize for your Judaism! Do not mitigate its import. Judaism challenges the whole world! It challenges the whole of Christendom. It challenges the miserable



sham of European civilization! It challenges the false philosophies of the day. We must realize that if our lives as Jews are to be of any service to humanity they will be of service only as they are Jewish in the most intense, in the fullest, in the highest sense of the word.

Now do not misunderstand me. I am not preaching intolerance as the word is usually taken. Intolerance of the baser kind the intolerance that does not brook opposition because it is afraid of it, the intolerance that resorts to crude, physical means to defend itself instead of drawing the full strength for its offensive from its own innate truth, the intolerance that will hate a man because he dares to be different, the intolerance that will hurt a man in body because he differs with it in mind, is despicable, is brutish, is an abomination. Such intolerance built the rack, lit the auto-de-fe and filled the lives of men with bitterness and sorrow. No, it is not that type of intolerance that I have reference to. I appeal for firmness, resoluteness, conviction. My plea, my prayer is for a vigorous aggressive, self-conscious Judaism and for zealous, enthusiastic Jews. Not less tolerance but greater devotion to our own ideals and to our own God. Oh, for a bit of this saving intolerance, for a dram of this kind of spiritual stiff-neckedness today!

These thoughts come to my mind whenever Purim is celebrated and whenever I read the scroll of Esther, one sentence always appeals to me because it unfolds forth, the thought which has become the saving grace of Jewish life. And Mordecai the Jew, would not bow to Haman. Now if you will permit me to indulge in a bit of hom\*\*\*\*\* I would say, "He would not bow, not out of a spirit of Jewish pride but because in so doing he would be making concessions to those things for which Haman, at all times, stood.



We Jews, we liberal Jews, have been too anxious to please the world, we have been going thru life with one object: to make ourselves affable and gracious, to have people think well of us. That seems to have been the one absorbing passion in our lives and because of that we have\*\*\*\*\* because of their aggressiveness, might not make for a pleasant life about us, might make us enemies. I say unto you, men and women, that if we Jews would devote half as much time to our Judaism as we devote to our \*\*\*\*\*I say unto you, men and women, that if you would be worrying a little more about yourselves as Jews, about your \*\*\*\*\*think of yourselves, of your faith, of your people and if you would be worried a little less about what people think of you, then you would think more of yourselves and so would other people. A man that has a principle in life knows that he will make enemies, a man that has convictions knows that people will jeer at him but he has the faith that will \*\*\*\*\*

"Why people dislike me when I do not stand for any thing. Why should people dislike me when I try so hard to like them and to please them." That has been the tragedy of Jewish life. And we have robbed the great spiritual vessel of our life of all its treasures in order to please the world and then we find that the world is not pleased. Oh would that I could inject that spirit unto you, and especially unto you younger generation. Mordecai would not kneel would not bow. If you are going to live as Jews, if you are going to be of service in the world then live a life of definite, positive, convictions. Speak of a Judaism that is the fire, the inspiration of your being and be a crusader for your Judaism and speak of your



ideals at all times and preach them at all times. Then Judaism shall be your love as God is your love. The love of your heart, the love of your strength and the love of your mind. This is the message that I would leave with you on this day when the echoes of the great Purim festival are still with us, a festival that is great, not because it is glorious, but a festival that is so characteristic of the golus, of the spirit of the exile. Of all the people of his day who fawned and cringed before men Mordecai alone would not kneel. He would not bow. Amen.

