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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Ecclesiastes - Is Life Worth Living?, 1919.



LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER ON  
"ECCLESIASTES" - "IS LIFE WORTH LIVING"?  
SUNDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 16, 1919. AT THE  
TEMPLE, EAST 55th STREET AND CENTRAL AVENUE,  
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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The rabbis said that King Solomon wrote three books during his lifetime. When he was young he wrote the "Song of Songs"; when he reached middle age he wrote the "Book of Proverbs", and when he grew old he wrote "Ecclesiastes." Now, King Solomon did not write these three books, but if he had written these three books he would have written the Song of Songs when he was young, and the Book of Proverbs when he was <sup>of</sup> middle age, and the book of Ecclesiastes when he was very old; for Ecclesiastes is essentially the work of an old man, and breathes the spirit of the weariness and disillusionment of old age.

~~Now~~ Koheleth, or Ecclesiastes, is not a harsh word. It does not possess <sup>much</sup> ~~any~~ of the harshness, the bitterness, the sting of real cynicism. There is nothing of the scoffer in the book of Koheleth. While there is an undertone of sadness, there is no sorrow in Koheleth. It has none of that majestic, imperial ~~grief and~~ sorrow of the Book of Job. Koheleth is evidently the work of a man who lived life very gracefully, who tasted all the fruits



in the garden of life, who traveled far and saw much, and in the declining years of his life evolved an attitude of mind which is softly ironical and gently cynical and daintily skeptical and worldly wise. Koheleth is essentially the work, to my mind, of a patrician, an aristocrat; *it has* ~~back that has~~ a spirit of superiority which is not offensive, and a spirit of criticism which is not aggressive. At all events, it is not a book of extreme. Koheleth had the good sense, the tact, of not being too consistent in his views. His conclusions are not the severe austerity of the stoic, or the charmless asceticism of the cynic, or the vulgar self-indulgence of the epicurean. Koheleth advises pleasure not as an end in itself, but as a means of making life *Endurable* ~~better~~, and he advises work as the means of making pleasure possible; *maintaining at the same time* ~~but at the same time maintain-~~ ~~ing~~ that both pleasure and work, and life itself, are vanity of vanities; ~~and is vanity~~

Now, this attitude of mind is not altogether ~~an~~ unwholesome, ~~one~~. It saves us, sometimes, from extremes,-- the extreme of pietism, and the extreme of asceticism, the extreme of solemnity, and the extreme of *folly*. I feel such thoughts are sometimes very salutary, especially when they come in those rare moments of self forgetfulness; when we are alone, and the hue and cry of our busy days dies away, and the twilight hour, *and* sweet ~~but~~ tinged with a certain sadness, steals over us; and then if we meditate dispassionately upon *the dying* ~~our~~ day, upon all the things that



worried us and fretted us, upon all the absorbing concerns and furious controversies, upon all the jostling and climbing and reaching,--if then a voice echoes through <sup>our soul</sup> ~~us~~--vanity of vanities, all is vanity--it is not altogether unsalutary. It corrects the ambitions and desires of our days; it restores a certain poise and balance to our life; it sends us back to the new day sweetly chastened. Such thoughts, to my mind, are good in the quiet hours of meditation, but are not good in the busy hours of work and enterprise. Such thoughts are good when they are not taken too seriously. Such thoughts are good for old men in the solemn sunset hours of their lives, but not for young men in the heroic dawn of their days or in the high noontime of their lives. A man cannot work courageously and happily striking the hammer of human aspirations upon the anvil of life with the echo of "Vanity of vanities--all is vanity" ringing in his ears. Therefore, I say that the book of Koheleth is essentially a book of old age. <sup>of course</sup> ~~and~~ It is surprising that it was included in the canon of the Bible.

The rabbis knew of a controversy that raged about this book, <sup>as to</sup> whether it should be included in the Bible or not, ~~that~~ Apparently the popularity of the book and the editing to which it was submitted in later days made it acceptable to the men who compiled the canon of the Bible. ~~Some of the things in Koheleth are very true, but only partially true.~~ The Book of Koheleth, to my mind, has certain essential weaknesses, and of four of these I shall speak this morning.



Let us first see what are the central ideas of the Book of Koheleth. First of all is the idea that life is one vast monotony. ~~nothing new ever takes place~~; nothing new ever takes place, ~~that which has been, that will be, and there is nothing new~~ under the sun. "One generation cometh, another generation goeth, but the earth endureth forever." Life moves in a vicious circle, starting nowhere and going nowhere, ~~and so~~. There is no such thing as progress in human life, neither in the physical life nor in the moral life of human beings. There is no such thing as reform, as advancement; "that which is crooked cannot be made whole, and that which is wanting cannot be repleted." Life is today what it was a millennium ago, and what it shall be centuries hence, and all our work and our toiling and moiling is ineffectual, ~~and~~ meaningless. ~~because there can be no progress in life.~~

If there can be no progress, no amelioration or no improvement in social life, if evil is permanent, then a soul such as that of Koheleth, which is, after all, sensitive and not ~~callous~~ <sup>calloused</sup>, seeing all the abuse of life, seeing all the iniquities and the wickedness of the world, is driven to the conclusion: "I hated life and death is better than life."

Furthermore, if there can be no progress in life, what meaning is there to the idea of human destiny? There is no such thing as human destiny. The destiny of man is the grave, the end. The fate that overtakes him is the fate that overtakes the beast, and the fate of the good



man is like unto the fate of the wicked man. ~~all alike, all~~ Both  
sink into the dust and into oblivion. ~~How~~ If there is no  
destiny to human life, what meaning is there to all human  
strivings and strugglings and aspirations? What value is  
there in striving to attain ~~the~~ wealth, or power, or love,  
or learning, or wisdom, or fame? They lead nowhere, they  
are vanity of vanities. And hence the conclusion: ~~and this~~  
~~gentle cynic is this:~~ life is frightfully wearisome and  
boring; <sup>1)</sup> everything wearies a man; ~~everything wearies and~~  
~~tires a man.~~ Make the best of it; work so that you may  
enjoy a little pleasure, but do not think that work is  
important, and do not think that pleasure amounts to ~~anything~~ <sup>anything</sup>  
~~either, or~~ <sup>either,</sup> for it is all vanity of vanities.

~~Such ideas would never have been included~~  
in the Bible. They hold no edification and no inspiration  
for men; but <sup>popular among</sup> because these ideas were accepted by men and <sup>because</sup>  
revised and supplemented and corrected, because they were  
submitted to a Jewish interpretation, they ultimately found  
their way into the Bible. And it is not what Koheleth says  
that is important, but what the editors of Koheleth added  
thereto that, to my mind, are the things really worth while  
in the book.

I said there are four essential weaknesses in the  
Book of Koheleth. ~~and~~ The first one is this: Koheleth sees  
no goal in human life; he feels that the value of human  
life is determined by its goal, ~~and the end~~, by the destiny  
of human life, and inasmuch as he can see no goal, <sup>and</sup> ~~no end~~,  
no destiny, ~~there~~ there is no value to human life.



~~But~~ life itself refutes Koheleth. Men know all these hard vicissitudes and conditions of human life; men know its brevity, men know the wickedness and the injustice of life, men know the wistful and pathetic finality of it all, and yet men live as though life were supremely real, magnificently real, and gloriously eternal. Men fling their visions high and project themselves, as it were, into eternity. In spite of all these sad and melancholy considerations of human life, men go on planting the seeds of hope and watering them with their tears <sup>and blood</sup> ~~of~~ their ~~land~~. In spite of all these things men go on building upon the ruins of thrice ruined cities, plowing the <sup>fields</sup> ~~lands~~ that hide the bones of forgotten generations. In spite of all these things men go on spanning the rivers and plumbing the depths and tunnelling the mountains and soaring through the vast realms of space. In spite of these things men go on and build their roads of steel into lands that hold the majestic ruins of forgotten ~~empires~~ empires. In spite of these things men suffer for ideals as though ideals were real, and die for faith as though faith were true.

Why? Because men know that the value of life is not the end of it but the living of it; that the glory of the road is not the goal but the road itself—the traveling upon the road; that the <sup>charm</sup> ~~beauty~~ of the <sup>tale</sup> ~~story~~ of life does not depend upon the end but upon the <sup>tale</sup> ~~story~~ itself;—its manifolded adventures, its baffling adventures, its diverse incidents, the zest of it, the movement of it.



The end? Why, it may have no end. The tale that is told for a night's entertainment needs must have an end, but the epic of humanity needs must be an eternal *Odyssey*.] The ship is manned, the winds are high, the sails are spread; ~~But~~ <sup>dip</sup> the oars and plow the mighty main, sail on to ~~the~~ distant shores and ~~the~~ foreign lands; ~~visit the shores and explore the lands, and see the sights and scenes unseen~~ before. No ~~one~~ shore is like another; no adventure is ~~twice~~ <sup>thrice</sup> repeated. The end? ~~Why, there may be no end.~~ The ~~end~~ <sup>Why, when we shall have sailed into</sup> all the shores of ~~eternity,~~ <sup>and visited all the lands of space</sup> ~~then~~ we shall drop the ~~oars~~ and furl the sails in the shadowland of oblivion. Until then ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> joy of life is in the adventure!

Some of the greatest tragedies of human life are to be found just in this false ~~goal~~ <sup>evolution</sup> of life. So many of us stake everything upon the ultimate outcome, the goal, the end of life, as though that were the important thing, and sacrifice the present, ~~every~~ <sup>the</sup> precious moments ~~the~~ living of life, to the one moment of ultimate glory and ultimate success. We ~~pass~~ <sup>hurry</sup> along the highway of life, ~~driven by~~ <sup>goaded by</sup> ambition, looking neither to the right nor to the left, jostling, crowding, pushing forward, on, on, ~~to the goal, and in the meantime forgetting to look on~~ <sup>our haste</sup> ~~either side~~ <sup>to see</sup> of us ~~and missing~~ the beauty, the majesty of it all, ~~and not stopping~~ <sup>or to stop</sup> a moment ~~to~~ <sup>and</sup> hold converse with our fellow men, ~~to enjoy the journey.~~

Koheleth is afflicted with the same false philosophy of life. His soul is bent upon knowing the end and



the goal, and, because his eyes cannot penetrate the veil of mystery, <sup>he sees no value to human life.</sup> ~~he says that life holds no value, and life is not worth living.~~

That, to my mind, is the first great weakness of his philosophy; and the second is this: that seeing no goal, he has not the faith to believe in a goal. Koheleth sees facts, but he cannot, he will <sup>see through</sup> ~~not look upon the~~ facts or try to interpret <sup>them</sup> ~~these facts~~. He refuses to believe; and if you refuse to believe that life is worth while, life will not be worth while. It is, after all, <sup>by</sup> ~~in~~ our attitude toward life that the value of life is <sup>determined</sup> ~~obvious~~. ~~It is~~ What you think it is that it will come to be, ~~for you~~. If you assume that life is evil, purposeless, planless, meaningless, life will be for you <sup>evil,</sup> purposeless, ~~and~~ planless and meaningless, and all your efforts and all your achievements will <sup>turn to bitterness</sup> ~~come in your mouth like~~ ~~ashes of Sodom~~, and you will say unto yourself, "Vanity of vanities--all is vanity."

Now if you assume <sup>that life is evil, that assumption</sup> ~~it~~ does not serve life. <sup>therefore</sup> That assumption is false, for any truth that does not serve life is a lie. On the other <sup>hand,</sup> ~~hand,~~ if you assume that life is worthwhile, if you assume that efforts do ultimately count, if you assume that you are a co-worker of God, if not in the physical world <sup>then</sup> in the spiritual and moral world of men, if you assume that all your efforts to improve life and conditions of life ultimately bring about results, then your work will bring about results and your life will be meaningful and purposeful to you and to your fellowmen. ~~But if it does serve life, then it is correct, for any life that serves life is not a lie but a truth,~~



~~for~~ Life and living are, after all, the tests of truth; we have no other measures and standards for truth; truth is what serves the highest interests of human life, and lies are those which destroy life.

The second weakness of Koheleth <sup>then</sup> is that he <sup>^</sup>refuses to believe in the value of human life, ~~and this~~

The third weakness, to my mind, is that Koheleth is cloyed and surfeited with life. He says he was king in Jerusalem. Perhaps that was only a figure of speech; but certainly from his catalogue of experiences he undoubtedly was a man who found himself in the evening of his life surfeited ~~and~~ cloyed with life.

Now, if Koheleth <sup>had not been</sup> ~~was not~~ a king but a young man struggling for success, <sup>or</sup> ~~or life~~; if he <sup>or</sup> ~~he~~ were a middle-aged man struggling for fame ~~or success~~; if he <sup>or</sup> ~~he~~ were an old man <sup>working</sup> ~~struggling and endeavoring~~ to share with other people the gifts and blessings of his wealth and ~~of~~ his experience, he never would have written Koheleth. The secret of human happiness is unsatisfied desires; <sup>to</sup> ~~you~~ want something that is fine and <sup>to</sup> ~~you~~ want it much--that is the recipe for human happiness. Hence, the secret of happiness is youth, because youth is hungry and thirsty and in want of things. Youth wants success, and achievement, and adventure, and enterprise, <sup>love and</sup> and loving friendships; hence, youth is supremely happy.

And youth is not a matter of age, ~~you understand~~. It sometimes takes a whole lifetime to discover youth. A man of three score years and ten may be supremely young.



You know of such and I know of such ~~men~~; men who have not drained the cup of life too greedily and hastily, but have drunk moderately and left a bit of the wine of human aspirations for the declining days of their life; men who saved a bit of the hope and the spirit of youth for the wintry days of life; old men who are young because they still have certain ideals that are unsatisfied, certain desires, certain wants, certain longings that have not been completely satisfied. ~~An~~ Ideal keeps men young. An ideal is like the climbing sap in a tree, that gives warmth and life to the tree after the starving cold of the winter.

~~Koheleth~~ Koheleth was not young because he had no ideals; he was not happy because he had no wants. He had success and he had wealth and he had fame, and all men did obeisance to him, so there was nothing left in life for him but to say, "Vanity of vanities--all is vanity."

And lastly, a weakness of Koheleth is that when all is said and done he is supremely selfish. ~~The~~ <sup>if</sup> selfish man will never be happy, because <sup>if</sup> his selfish ambitions are satisfied he will become like Koheleth, surfeited and cloy<sup>ed</sup>, and an unpleasant taste will come into his life. If his ambitions are not satisfied he will become embittered and cynical, because there is no sustaining spiritual or moral influence in his life. ~~He~~ started out <sup>in</sup> life to make the best of it for himself--a purely selfish enterprise. If he succeeded success will inspire him for a moment; if he failed failure will embitter him forever.



But if a man shifts the center of his life gravity from himself to others, if a man lives supremely ~~selflessly~~ <sup>selflessly</sup>, then if he succeeds he can never be cloy<sup>ed</sup> because his success will be but a drop in the great ocean of life; there will always be so much more to ~~it~~ <sup>do</sup> for the improvement of ~~society~~ <sup>life</sup>. If he fails he has that sustaining moral and spiritual force in his life which tells him that he fought the good fight. If he failed, others that will come after him may succeed. He is never discouraged; he can never become a pessimist.

Koheleth, who went through life as a dilettante, as a spectator, ~~as an observer~~, trying to gather as much <sup>honey</sup> from life as he possibly could, found in the last hours of his life the disillusionment and the weariness of it all, ~~because his life was supremely selfish.~~

So that if you ask me the question which Koheleth answered in the negative--is life worth living?--I would say unto you, and in saying it I would voice the spirit of our race--life is worth living if you are interested in the adventure of life and not so much concerned with the goal and destiny of life. If you believe in the good fight for its own sake, if you like the exhilarating and inspiring adventures of life--and there is one to be found <sup>at</sup> every turn of the road--then life is worth while. If you ask me, "Is life worth living"--I would say unto you, "It is, if you believe that it is." If you attitudinize yourself to life, and assume the optimistic point of view, you will find that life is worth ~~wh~~ living. If you put on the dark glasses



and through them scan the purview of life, you are <sup>bound</sup> ~~about~~ to come to the conclusion that life is not worth living. Is life worth living? Yes, if you have something to do. If you want something that is fine, and want it badly, then life is worth living, <sup>for</sup> ~~and~~ there is a zest and a relish and a challenge <sup>to you</sup> in life. If you haven't anything to do, if you have no wants, if you just drift through life from one petty effort to another petty effort, life is a terrible bore and a great weariness. Is life worth living? Yes, if you live for others.

So that, after all, the editor of the Book of Koheleth, when he said at the conclusion of the book, —  
~~"Revere God (have faith in the value, the worthwhileness of life, and the value of living the life), and do His commandments (do the things worthwhile; serve your fellow men), for this is the whole of man"—after all, the editor of the Book of Koheleth was right.~~

→ "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole man"—was right!