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The Eyes of Youth, 1919.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON "THE
EYES OF YOUTH", AT THE TEMPLE, EAST 55th
STREET AND CENTRAL AVENUE, DECEMBER 14,
1919, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

In endeavoring to bring a message to the men and women who are this day celebrating the silver anniversary of the Alumni Association of our Temple, I could find no better theme than that suggested by a member of the Alumni of the Temple,--"The Eyes of Youth." If God were to bestow his choicest blessing upon his children, it would be, to my mind, the gift of eyes of youth. The eyes of youth see that which the eyes of age sometimes fail to see. They see, first of all, the poetry of life. The eyes of youth have the light of wonderment in them. They see the wide contours of life, the broad outlines of nature and of human experience.

The eyes of youth never use a magnifying glass upon any one phenomena of nature or of human life. They do not take a thing or an emotion and subject it to a close scrutiny so that all the coarse grained texture of it is revealed to the eye. The eyes of youth have a passionate contemplation of nature, and not necessarily a critical or intellectual contemplation of life and nature. And because of that youth is the age of poetry, because poetry is essentially the passionate, intense,

emotional contemplation of nature and of life.

Now, men and women lose the eyes of youth very early in life, and they begin to read prose instead of poetry. In age they become myopic--near-sighted; their eyes are bent so close to read the text of human experience, every word of it, that they lose the poem of it. And their ears, too, are trained to catch a note here and a note there, but they lose the full symphony of it all. Age becomes so submerged in detail, in routine, that it loses the flaming vision of things--as Emerson would call it--"The divine generalization of life."

Now, youth has that gift, and it is God's choicest gift. Then, again, the eyes of youth see the beauty of life. The eyes of youth idealize life. When you idealize life you do not necessarily make it unreal. To idealize a thing is, in reality, to reveal its true, deep-most, essential reality. When you idealize one you love you do not falsify her, but you bring to light that which is hidden to other eyes--the innate beauty and soul of her. When we idealize man we do not exactly idealize man as he is, but the destiny of man as he might be. We do not overlook his shortcomings, his failures, his ignorance, his crudities; we only look below these short-comings to the soul of him, to the capacities of him, to the destinies of him.

Now, the eyes of youth have that gift of incisiveness; they have that divine gift of penetration; they

can pierce the external, the superficial, the unattractive, the ugly and find the golden glory and the beauty of things. All men start life with idealism, with the ability to idealize the most commonplace and ordinary things of life. Every man starts out life with a fund of God-given ideals and fine aspirations and beautiful motives, but somehow we lose them on our way before we reach middle age.

There are many classic examples of this process in the history of the world. One comes to my mind at this moment especially. Not long ago I was re-reading the story of Fredrick the Great, the man who, more than any other man in the eighteenth century, determined the history of Europe. Fredrick started out life with a wonderful fund of fine enthusiasm and ideals. In youth he loved the fine arts--poetry, music, philosophy, French ideals; he was a devotee of culture, refinement--a veritable paragon of kindness. He promised to become the most enlightened, cultured and kindly ruler of Europe. But when Fredrick was called to ascend the throne of his father it was the work of but a few years when this warmhearted, kindly, idealistic youth, with all the fine ambitions and aspirations of youth, was turned as if by some cruel alchemy into a cold, cruel, cynical, immoral despot.

It was just a year or two after he ascended the throne that this man invaded and occupied the territory of Silesia, a territory which was protected by

solemn covenant and pledge of Prussia itself. And when reproached by his friends, he said, "Take what you can. You are never wrong unless you have to return it." It was not very long before this man, through whose veins the warm wine of youth and ideals coursed, became the skeptic, the cynical, wiseman of the world. And when he invaded Saxony and robbed its treasury and forced the men of Saxony to fight in his army, and he was reproached by his friends, he said, "If there is any gain in being honest, honest we shall be, but if it is necessary to deceive let us be scoundrels."

This classic example of youth, robbed of its idealism by the expenditures and the experiences of age, is not at all unique. You and I know of young men that start life with all the charm and all the grace of fine ideals. They are beautiful souls to watch; they have all the spirit of initiative and adventure, and all the spirit of sacrifice and loyalty to fine ideals. Yet somehow it is not very long before one meets them settled, rutted, cold, practical, skeptical men of the world, men of affairs, with all the enthusiasm of youth dead, and all the fine emotions hidden in some unfrequented corner of their souls; men who become cheap exploiters, drivers of hard bargains; men who have lost all illusions; men who appeal to no fine emotions in human life. They have become the slaves of that god which we call success, and they have lost the eyes of youth.

The eyes of youth likewise see clearly because

they see what we might say intuitively. Their lives and their minds are not prejudiced to a definite course and a definite channel. Their lives are not institutionalized. In youth life is free, like some onrushing tide, careless alike of course or confining banks. It overruns all artificial dams and dykes and obstacles; it strikes out for itself; but as youth deadens into age the momentum is slow, and the stream of life begins to run into fixed channels, into definite courses, and life becomes shackled, as it were,--chained, confined in molds that other men have created.

That is true of religion as of life. Every religion begins with a wonderful, onsweeping, onrushing enthusiasm. It is iconoclastic; it is revolutionary; it destroys all the vast institutions of creed and dogma and ceremony. It is a new impulse in society; it is new wine that breaks through the old vessel. And yet it is not very long before this new enthusiasm dies out and religion begins to settle into institutions and forms and dogmas. It is not very long before religion loses the eyes of youth.

Prophecy in Israel began as a vast, unsweeping flood of religious enthusiasm. It challenged all the established ecclesiastical institutions of the day; it called for life, for the freedom of the human soul, for the immediate contact of man with his Maker, but it wasn't very long before prophecy was gripped into legalism, into rabbinic doctrines, and the soul of it became

confined into a body that frequently stifled the soul. That is true not only of Judaism; it is equally true of Christianity or any other religion. Christianity in the first two or three centuries was verily a religion of apostles; it had a new gospel, a new preachment to the world, true or untrue it matters little. The enthusiasm was there, the conviction was there; the revolutionary spirit of bringing an emotion to the world and sacrificing oneself in the performance of that duty was there. But it was not very long before that spirit became encrusted and hardened and a shell came around it and an institution was formed and dogmas were congealed so that the life of it began to be stifled.

Now, what holds true of life in general, of religion, holds true of the life of the individual as well. We start out in youth with great convictions, and with noble ambitions. We want to do things; we want to break through the confining walls of convention; we want to strike out for ourselves; we have all the eagerness and all the acquisitiveness and all the intellectual alertness that comes with youth, and we are ready to bring sacrifices for our ideals. But it is not very long before the icy fingers of age are laid upon these dreams of youth; it is not very long before we come face to face with a practical world that is not very sympathetic to our ideals. It is not very long before we are thrown into the maelstrom of life, where we must struggle for a footing, and it is not very long before

we begin to surrender one after another these noble ideals, these inspiring ambitions, these fine, all-embracing loyalties of our life. It is not very long before we begin to lose the eyes of youth.

Some time ago I saw a play by the name of "The Eyes of Youth." It was one that appealed to me greatly. The theme of it, of course, was the old, old, theme--oh, would that we knew our end; would that we could penetrate the veil of the future and see that we shall come to be. I sometimes think that the greatest tragedy that can come in the life of a man or woman would be the ability to know their future. Of course, this craving to know what is to be is like the craving of a little child that reads a book--too impatient to read it through, and he must turn to the last page of the book quickly to see the end of the story, the outcome of it. What possible interest life would have if we knew the future, what zest, what relish, what adventure there would be in life if we knew the outcome of it, one fails to see. What interest would a man have in a race if one knew exactly the outcome of the race? What meaning would there be to our hopes and our strivings and our planning and our building for the future if we knew from the beginning the end of it? When Moses asked of God, "Reveal, I pray Thee, unto me Thy glory that I may know it; show me Thy face; let me see the things that are to be," God said unto him. "No man can see my face and live." To know the future is to die.

"Thou canst see my back."--the past, the things that were; and from the past learn to mold your future.

And so when old Jacob on his deathbed began to reveal the future to his children, suddenly the spirit of God departed from him. We are not meant to know the things that are to be, for the things that are to be, in many ways, are the things that we ourselves make. It is not at all necessary that we know the events and the things of the future; it is of supreme importance that we so plan our own lives, that we so fashion our mind and our attitudes towards life that whatever happens, good or evil, prosperity or failure, we shall not be robbed utterly of happiness. We all set out in life to become happy, and yet happiness is not a thing to be attained. Happiness is not in substance a reality in itself. Happiness is an incident in life; happiness is an attendant circumstance in life. Men eat not because they want happiness but because they are hungry, and in the eating and in the satisfying of their hunger they might obtain a certain amount of pleasure which in a spiritual act may mean happiness.

Men do the big things in life, my friends, men write the great poems and perform the great acts of sacrificial valor, and labor and toil, not because they want happiness, but because they have to do it, because there is this urge, the press, the hunger in our souls, for the performance of these acts. But in

the performance of these acts we let loose those emotions which when stifled make us unhappy, but which when liberated and given fair field to play in make us happy. In other words, happiness comes with beneficent labor; happiness comes with any work that liberates our emotions, any work that gives us an opportunity for self-expression, for self-realization.

So that happiness is really within the grasp and the reach of any one of us. You must plan your life, the program of your life in such a way that you will do the things that you love to do, and do them in the best possible way, and then happiness will just run along with them side by side with your activities. But if you do not do the things that you love to do, and do not do them in the best possible way, you can strive and struggle and seek all your days, but you will never be happy. And that is the tragedy of most business men today. They believe that happiness is something to be found in and by itself at the end of the road, and if they will work hard doing the things sometimes which they do not like to do, and doing them in any sort of way, if they would just become successful and amass a comfortable fortune, then surely at the end of the road they will find happiness. But at the end of the road they will find nothing, because happiness is not at the end of the road. Happiness is by your side as you walk upon the road of life. Very frequently when I am called upon to perform the sad rites on the occasion of the death of a dear one, I hear the

remark often repeated, "He died just at the time when he was able to enjoy his life." But that is such a terrible fallacy; that is such a frightful mistake. A man can enjoy his life all the time; a man can find true happiness in poverty, in lack of things, simply by doing the thing he likes to do and doing it well, without any reference to success or victory. It is the easiest possible thing in the world to be happy. By that I do not mean a hilarious sort of happiness that is never tinged with sadness or solemnity. We do not live in a fool's paradise in spite of what men and women may hypnotize themselves into. This is a world of Rome and London and not a fool's paradise. We have our heart-aches and we have our disappointments, and we suffer our bereavements, and they are hard to bear; but in spite of this sadness that comes into the life of everyone of us, we may still enjoy a great measure of real spiritual happiness, which is peace and contentment and an elevation of soul, by doing honestly the things that we wish to do and the things that we ought to do.

And that is why I say unto you young men and women: start life out right and take with you always the eyes of youth. Never for a moment forget to find the poetry in life. There is music and lyric and glory in life all about you. Do not hasten the day of transforming yourself into a lamentable, prosaic soul. Do not imitate your elders. Do not try too soon to become like unto them, for you will become like unto them soon enough. Keep

with you as a precious gift of the Almighty the eyes of youth, the eyes that will enable you clearly to see the transfiguring glory of the most commonplace and ordinary vicissitude or fact of life. Keep with you the eyes of youth that will enable you to idealize human life. Do not begin to pride yourself too early upon the fact that you are a practical, well-informed, worldly wise man of the world, contemptuous of sentiment, looking with disdain upon dreamers and visionaries. Why, men and women it is the dreams and the visions of life that are, after all, the things that are worth while. The realities, however great and however imposing, never fully satisfy the yearning soul of man and woman.

Hold fast to whatever dream may be yours and whatever vision God may have vouchsafed unto you and live for it and by it; and keep with you the eyes of youth that will enable you to see clearly, honestly, that will keep you from institutionalizing your life too early, from falling into the grooves and the routine and the ruts and the channels that your fathers have built for you. Strike out for yourselves as far as you can; give free rein to the fine impulses and the propelling forces of your life. Let the warm blood of adventure course through you; do not settle down too early in life into a niche or a groove. That will come soon enough.

The eyes of youth, dear friends, will enable you to find happiness, not of the things, not through the

acquisition of wealth, or fame, or glory, or power, or
influence, but happiness in doing the things that your
soul wishes to do and in doing them well. May God
bless you all with this, His holiest gift,--the
eyes of youth. Amen.



RABBI SILVER TALKS ON "THE EYES OF YOUTH"

Sermon
20

"Hold Fast to Your Dreams and Visions," He Urges—"The Eyes of Youth See the Beauty of Life"

(The following talk to young men was delivered by Rabbi Abba H. Silver of The Temple. The Jewish Review and Observer takes great pleasure in presenting it to our readers.—Editor's note.)

If God were to bestow His choicest blessing upon His children, it would be, to my mind, the gift of eyes of youth.

The eyes of youth see that which the eyes of age sometimes fail to see. They see, first of all, the poetry of life. The eyes of youth have the light of wonderment in them. They see the wide contours of life, the broad outlines of nature and of human experience.

The eyes of youth never use a magnifying glass upon any one phenomenon of nature or of human life. They do not take a thing or an emotion and subject it to a close scrutiny so that all the coarse grained texture of it is revealed to the eye. The eyes of youth enjoy a passionate contemplation of nature, not necessarily a critical or intellectual one. Because of that youth is the age of poetry, because poetry is essentially the passionate, intense, emotional contemplation of nature and of life.

Now, men and women lose the eyes

of youth very early in life, and they begin to read prose instead of poetry. In age they become myopic—near-sighted; their eyes are bent so close to read the text of human experience, every word of it, that they lose the poem of life. And their ears, too, are trained to catch a note here and a note there, but they lose the full theme of the symphony of it all. Age becomes so submerged in detail, in routine, that it loses the flaming vision of things—as Emerson would call it—"The divine generalization of life."

Now, youth has that gift, and it is God's choicest gift.

Then, again, the eyes of youth see the beauty of life. The eyes of youth idealize life. When you idealize life you do not necessarily make it unreal. To idealize a thing is, in reality, to reveal its true, deep-most, essential reality. When you idealize one you love you do not falsify her, but you bring to light that which is hidden to other eyes—the innate beauty and soul of her. When we idealize man we do not exactly idealize man as he is, but the destiny of man as he might be. We do not overlook his shortcomings, his failures, his ignorance, his crudities; we only look below

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(Continued from page 1.)

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There are many classic examples of this process in the history of the world. One comes to my mind at this moment especially. Not long ago I was re-reading the story of Frederick the Great, the man who, more than any other man in the eighteenth century, determined the history of Europe. Frederick started out life with a wonderful fund of fine enthusiasm and ideals. In youth he loved the fine arts—poetry, music, philosophy; he was a devotee of culture, refinement—a veritable paragon of kindness. He promised to become the most enlightened, cultured and kindly ruler of Europe. But when Frederick ascended the throne of his father it was the work of but a few years when this warm-hearted, kindly, idealistic youth, with all the fine ambitions and aspirations of youth, was turned as if by some cruel alchemy into a cold, cruel, cynical, immoral despot.

It was just a year or two after he ascended the throne that this man invaded and occupied the territory of Silesia, a territory which was protected by solemn covenant and the pledge of Prussia itself. And when reproached by his friends, he said, "Take what you can. You are never wrong unless you have to return it." It was not very long before this man, through whose veins the warm wine of youth and ideals had coursed, became the skeptic, the cynical, disillusioned man of the world. And when he invaded Saxony and robbed its treasury and forced the men of Saxony to fight in his army, on being reproached by his friends, he said: "If there is any gain in being honest honest we shall be, but if it is necessary to deceive let us be scoundrels."

This classic example of youth robbed by the expediencies and the experiences of age, is not at all unique. You and I know of young men that start life with all the charm and all the grace of fine ideals. They are beautiful souls to watch; they have all the spirit of initiative and adventure, and all the spirit of sacrifice and loyalty. Yet somehow it is not very long before one meets them



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Jewish Review & Observer Jan 30 1920

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some unfrequented corner of their souls; men who become cheap exploiters, drivers of hard bargains; men who have lost all illusions; men who respond to the appeal of no fine emotions in human life. They have become the slaves of that god which we call success, and they have lost the eyes of youth.

The eyes of youth likewise see clearly because they see intuitively. Their lives and their minds are not prejudiced to a definite course and a definite channel. Their lives are not institutionalized. In youth life is free, like some onrushing tide, careless alike of course or confining banks. It overruns all artificial dams and dykes and obstacles; it strikes out for itself. But as youth deadens into age the momentum is retarded, and the stream of life begins to run into fixed channels, into definite courses, and life becomes shackled, as it were—chained, confined in molds which other men have created.

That is true of religion as of life. Every religion begins with a wonderful, onrushing, onrushing enthusiasm. It is iconoclastic; it is revolutionary; it destroys all the vast institutions of creed and dogma and ceremony. It is a new impulse in society; it is new wine that breaks the old vessel. And yet it is not very long before this new enthusiasm dies out and the new religion begins to settle into institutions and forms and dogmas. It is not very long before religion loses the eyes of youth.

Prophecy in Israel began as a vast, onrushing flood of religious enthusiasm. It challenged all the established ecclesiastical institutions of the day; it called for life, for the freedom of the human soul, for the immediate contact of man with his Maker. But it wasn't very long before prophecy was starved into legalism, into doctrines, and the soul of it became confined into a body that frequently stifled the soul. That is true not only of Judaism; it is equally true of Christianity or any other religion. Christianity in the first two or three centuries was verily a religion of apostles; it had a new gospel, a new preaching to the world, true or untrue, it matters little. The enthusiasm was there, the conviction was there; the revolutionary spirit of projecting a new emotion into the world and sacrificing oneself in the performance of that duty was there. But it was not very long before that spirit became encrusted and hardened and a shell formed around it and an institution was established and dogmas were congealed so that the life of it began to be stifled.

Now, what holds true of life in general, of religion, holds true of the life of the individual as well. We start out in youth with great convictions, and with noble ambitions. We want to do things; we want to break through the confining walls of convention; we want to strike out for ourselves; we have all the eagerness and all the acquisitiveness and all the intellectual alertness that comes with youth, and we are ready to bring sac-

rifices for our ideals. But it is not very long before the icy fingers of age are laid upon these dreams of youth; it is not very long before we come face to face with a practical world that is not very sympathetic to our ideals. It is not very long before we are thrown into the maelstrom of life, where we must struggle for a footing, and it is not very long before we begin to surrender one after another these noble ideals, these inspiring ambitions, these fine, all-embracing loyalties of our life. It is not very long before we begin to lose the eyes of youth.

Some time ago I saw a play by the name of "The Eyes of Youth." It was one that appealed to me greatly. The theme of it, of course, was the old, old, theme—the desire of man to know his future. Oh, would that we knew our end; would that we could penetrate the veil of the future and see what we shall come to be. I sometimes think that the greatest tragedy that can come into the life of men or women would be the ability to know their future. Of course, this craving to know what is to be is like the craving of a little child reading a book—impatient to know the end. He must turn to the last page of the book quickly to see the outcome of it. What possible interest life would have if we knew the future, what zest, what relish, what adventure there would be in life if we knew the end of it, one fails to see. What interest would a man have in a race if he knew the outcome of the race? What meaning would there be to our hopes and our strivings and our planning and our building for the future if we knew from the beginning the end of it? When Moses asked of God, "Reveal, I pray Thee, unto me Thy glory that I may know it; show me Thy face; let me see the things that are to be," God said unto him: "No man can see my face and live." To know the future is to die. "Thou canst see my back"—the past, the things that were; and from the past learn to plan your future.

And so when Jacob on his deathbed began to reveal the future to his children, suddenly the spirit of God departed from him. We are not meant to know the things that are to be. It is not at all necessary that we know the events and the things of the future; it is of supreme importance that we so plan our own lives, that we so fashion our mind and our attitudes towards life that whatever happens, good or evil, prosperity or failure, we shall not be robbed utterly of happiness. We all set out in life to become happy, and yet happiness is not a thing to be pursued. Happiness is not a substance, a reality in itself. Happiness is an incident in life; happiness is an attendant circumstance of life. Men eat not because they want happiness, but because they are hungry, and in the eating and in the satisfying of their hunger they might obtain a certain amount of pleasure which in a spiritual act may mean happiness.

Men do the big things in life; they write the great poems and perform the great acts of sacrificial val-

labor and toil, not because they want happiness, but because they have to do it, because there is the urge, the press, the hunger in our souls, for the performance of these acts. But in the performance of these acts we let loose those emotions which when stifled make us unhappy, but which when liberated and given fair field to play in make us happy. In other words, happiness comes with beneficent labor; happiness comes with any work that liberates our emotions, any work that gives us an opportunity for self-expression, for self-realization.

So that happiness is really within the grasp and the reach of every one of us. You must plan the program of your life in such a way that you will do the things that you love to do, and do them in the best possible way, and then happiness will attend your activities. But if you do not do the things that you love to do, and do not do them in the best possible way, you can strive and struggle and seek all your days, but you will never be happy.

And that is the tragedy of most business men today. They believe that happiness is something to be found in and by itself at the end of the road, and if they will work hard doing the things which they do not like to do, and doing them in any sort of way, if they would just become successful and amass a comfortable fortune, then surely at the end of the road they will find happiness. But at the end of the road they will find—nothing! Because happiness is not at the end of the road. Happiness is by your side as you walk upon the road of life.

Very frequently when I am called upon to perform the sad rites on the occasion of the death of a dear one, I hear the remark often repeated: "He died just at the time when he was able to enjoy life." But that is such a terrible fallacy; that is such a frightful mistake. A man can enjoy his life all the time; a man can find true happiness even in poverty, simply by doing the things he likes to do and doing it well, without any reference to success or victory. It is the easiest possible thing in the world to be happy. By that I do not mean the sort of happiness that is never tinged with sadness or solemnity. We do not live in a fool's paradise in spite of what men and women may hypnotize themselves into thinking. This is a world of Rome and London and not a fool's paradise. We have our heartaches and we have our disappointments, and we suffer our bereavements, and they are hard to bear. But in spite of this sadness that comes into the life of everyone of us, we may still enjoy a great measure of real spiritual happiness, which is peace and contentment and an elevation of soul, by doing honestly the things that we wish to do and the things that we ought to do and doing them well.

And that is why I say unto you young men and women: Retain as long as you can the eyes of youth. Never lose sight of the poetry in life. There is music and grace and glory in

life all about you. Do not hasten the day of transforming yourself into a lamentable, prosaic soul. Do not imitate your elders. Do not try too early to become like unto them, for you will become like unto them soon enough. Keep with you as the precious gift of the Almighty, the eyes of youth, the eyes that will enable you clearly to see the transfiguring glory in the most commonplace and ordinary vicissitude or fact of life. Keep with you the eyes of youth that will enable you to idealize human life. Do not begin to pride yourself too early upon the fact that you are a practical, well-informed, worldly wise man of the world, contemptuous of sentiment, looking with disdain upon dreamers and visionaries. Why, men and women, it is the dreams and the visions of life that are, after all, the things that are worth while. The realities, however great and however imposing, never fully satisfy the yearning soul of man and woman.

Hold fast to whatever dream may be yours and whatever vision God may have vouchsafed unto you and live for it and by it. Do not institutionalize your life too early. Do not fall into the grooves and the routine and the ruts and the channels that your fathers have built for you. Strike out for yourselves as far as you can; give free rein to the fine impulses and the propelling forces of your life. Let the warm blood of adventure course through you.

The eyes of youth, dear friends, will enable you to find happiness, not in things, not in the acquisition of wealth, or fame, or glory, or power, or influence, but in doing the things that your soul wishes to do and in doing them well. May God bless you all with this, His holiest gift—the eyes of youth.