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Can Faith Heal?, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"CAN FAITH HEAL?", AT THE TEMPLE,
SUNDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 7, 1920,
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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The difference between a scientifically trained mind and an untrained mind is this: the scientifically trained mind is never absolutely certain of anything and never generalizes; the untrained mind is never happy unless it is absolutely certain, and is never satisfied unless it can generalize. In early days when men were encouraged or inspired by the first few fragmentary bits of knowledge which they wrested from Nature, they began in a grandiose spirit to generalize about things and to establish final certainties about things.

The philosophers of two or three thousand years ago built up whole systems to explain everything in Creation, and nothing satisfied them unless it was final, and certain, and complete, and all-embracing. To have doubts, to be uncertain about a thing was, in their minds, a confession of weakness, of inferiority. But in the last two thousand years philosophy and science and all departments of human knowledge have learned a few things, and among the few things which they learned was this: to be modest; never to be absolutely certain of anything. They have learned that every scientific conclusion is only

tentative, and subject to revision, to reversal, to modification, as new knowledge and new experience and new empirical facts are brought in to add to the sum total of human knowledge.

What philosophy and science are seeking to do is not so much the absolute perfection; they are content with having a certain direction; they are satisfied to have a compass to guide them upon their journeys. The harbor of ultimate truth may be eons and eternities away from us. They are satisfied if they can just move in a definite direction and gain definite, specific results here, there, and here again.

Now, this naive, primitive tendency to generalize and to simplify is responsible, to my mind, for a good number of these short cuts that men and women frequently discover-- short cuts to truths; a short cut to salvation, a short cut to industrial righteousness, a short cut to political freedom, a short cut to health and to happiness. You recall your school days when you were given a problem in arithmetic to solve, you were tempted so frequently to turn to the back of the book to look up the answer. You were interested in the answer; that was the shortest way to get to it--to look in the back of the book.

We couldn't realize then, as children, that the important thing was not so much to find the answer, nor even to solve the specific problem that was offered to us, but the important thing was to learn the method of solving

similar problems--to learn how to do it; but learning how to do it took time, study, work, effort, concentration; there was no short cut to it; there is a short cut to finding the answer--to turn to the back of the book.

In religion, too, people have from time to time thought that there is a short cut to salvation. All one has to do is to accept a certain creed; to subscribe to a certain formula, and then one is saved. All one has to do is to walk up a sawdust trail and shake hands with an enthusiastic evangelist and one has gotten religion.

I read a few days ago in one of our local papers an advertisement giving the qualifications of these ministers who offer short cuts to salvation--an upstanding, double-fisted, red-blooded regular fellow, who doesn't pussy-foot around his subject, but plunges right in and manhandles it without gloves in a way that will keep you sitting on the edge of your seat with interest. One wonders if also with profit.

This is a new type of evangelistic religion. When I read this description of the man who was to bring salvation to hundreds, I asked myself whether the Master of the faith, the gentle Jesus, would qualify with this description of a double-fisted, red-blooded, regular fellow. What is the psychology back of it? The psychology back of it is that religion may be given to one by force, by overpowering him, by a dynamic influence of some sort.

Now, religion can no more be gotten by walking up a sawdust trail and shaking hands with an evangelist than that a man can learn music by shaking hands with a violinist. To gain religion is to go through years of training, and discipline, and worship, and service. There is no short cut to salvation. To subscribe to a creed and to a formula is not to gain religion, is not to commune with the Infinite, is not to gain new light in one's life. It is an intellectual self-delusion and nothing else.

And the same craving for a short cut to salvation one finds in those who urge industrial righteousness by revolution and violence. I think it was Tolstoy who said that violence is a temptation because it frees one from the necessity of rising. It is very easy to cut a knot; it is much more difficult to unravel and untie. Violence is the simple thing, the naive thing, the primitive thing. Progress and evolution is the difficult, the involved, the complex thing, that requires study, application, concentration and experimentation, and that is why people are more eager to do the simple and the naive thing rather than to do the difficult and the complex thing.

In the Middle Ages there was a whole mystic philosophy--the philosophy of the alchemists, who wished to transmute the baser metals into gold, and to find a cure-all for all the ailments and diseases of man by one simple formula. That is what they were after--a simple formula to cure all the ills of life, and to transmute all

the grosser and baser metals into the pure gold and absolute perfection. That, too, was naive and primitive.

Now, I believe that the same temper and the same longing for a short cut to salvation underlies the thinking and the reasoning of all those who seem to have found or think they have found a short cut to health. There is no difference between the man or the woman who thinks that reading a chapter of this book or that book, or pronouncing a formula here and there, will cure all ills and ailments and evils of life,--there is no difference psychologically--and I say it in all the spirit of reverence--between that attitude of mind and the frame of mind of the primitive medicine man who cured all ills by singing certain songs or performing certain Terpsichorean gyrations. The idea basic to both of them is a short cut to health.

Now, there is no short cut to health. Health is an achievement and not a gift. I believe it was Dr. Metchnikoff who makes this assertion: that men and women are naturally ill and not well, because the evolution of man out of some anthropoid ape has been irregular, and man has not sufficiently adjusted himself to his new environment, and because of that certain organic disharmonies exist within him that are the source of all disorders, and all ailments, and all unhappiness, and that these disharmonies, physical or organic, can be improved only by a scientific method through generations and centuries of self-discipline and self-development.

One must cultivate one's body to be normal and whole, just as one must cultivate one's mind to function. A child's mind uncultivated cannot function in the life of an adult; and a body that is not cultivated, not disciplined, not exercised, will not be able to function in life. There are millions of men and women who are born into life with hereditary taints of one kind or another. These taints cannot be eradicated by a formula or an incantation, but by generations of self-discipline and self-improvement.

I understand that in the City of Cleveland in normal times there are fifty thousand sick. Now, some of these are caused by accident, which no metaphysics can avoid, but most of it is caused by neglect, by dissipation, by vice, by laziness, by overfeeding, by social neglect, by civic neglect, by unsanitary conditions--things which must be and can be improved; not by reading a book or two, but by the coordinated efforts of all of us, laboriously, painfully, slowly working to educate the individual into a higher concept of himself, of his body, and to educate the community into a sense of responsibility towards the citizens.

There are social ills, social diseases, that ravage millions, that destroy the best manhood and womanhood of this land and other lands. Now, these ills may be corrected, but by years of devoted effort and labor to

educate the youth of our land into a sense of real manhood and womanhood, by educating them into the dangers which menace them, of the complete physical and moral breakdown of their lives when they submit to the wilfulness and to the whims of their physical selves.

The world has beheld in recent years perhaps thirty millions of men and women destroyed by war and by the concomitants of war, starvation and epidemics. Now, the ills which war brings to pass are very real and very palpable and very tragic ills; and those who have seen them with their own eyes, and have been close to the awful tragic of it all, know how real it is; of the men who walk in eternal darkness, having lost the sight of their eyes; and the jaws shot away, and the limbs torn from the body. They are no mortal delusions of the mortal mind, but very real and very tragic.

Just this morning, as I came to my study, I was told by one who does our printing in the office, that he was informed yesterday that his father and his mother died of starvation in Hungary--a direct concomitant of this upheaval, of this war,--something very real.

How is war to be stopped? By pronouncing a formula? No! By thinking ourselves into a freedom of mind that war is unreal? No! But by the united efforts of the millions of God's children in a spirit of real service, to uproot those conditions in society that make war possible; to uproot the control of the destinies of

nations by a few men who have vested interests; by destroying the unbridled lust for wealth, for power, for territorial conquests. It is the work of ages and the concentration of millions of men!

It is not at all, to my mind, a sound thing to cure a disease by denying it, because a disease is Nature's danger signal. Pain is Nature's danger signal, warning that something is wrong with you. It is just as foolish to ignore these danger signals as it would be for an engineer to ignore the danger signals on the road. When a man has pain, Nature is indicating to him that there is something wrong with his system; that he must try to restore harmony and balance in his system; that he must endeavor to change, if necessary, the whole mode of his living. To be sure, there are many ailments of many kinds, and there is no one cure for all of them. There are diseases that may be cured by the surgical method, and others medicinally, and still others by a change of climate, by a rest cure, by a mental cure for healing.

But all these are branches of medical science, and have nothing to do with religion. It is true that our knowledge of mental healing is not, perhaps, as profound as we would like it to be, but science never claims things that it cannot absolutely verify. Science, in many of its branches and departments, is still in its infancy. It was only within the last generation that

science of bacteriology developed, and physicians were able to find antitoxins for the specific poisons of the human system, and thereby made certain diseases which had heretofore baffled them subject to alleviation and control.

Now, the science of healing by mental processes,--
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the science of theuropeutics, is young, but I have no doubt that within the next generation or so the science will develop so that ultimately we will be able to probe the very depths of the subconscious mind, where the causes for most of the disorders and the unhappinesses of human life are to be found.

I read a few weeks ago a piece of news that came out from Vienna that startled me. We have all been accustomed to lament old age as the age of decrepitude, the age of ills, of energy, mental and physical; the age that leads to the great and tragic night of death. And now word is brought from a great physician, who, after years of experimentation in his laboratory, has discovered the new Elixer of Youth; that he is able to and has succeeded in rejuvenating men to the full vigor and freshness of youth. Think what that means! Think what it means to the human race--to be able to save millions from the debility, and the weakness, and the ills that come with old age! Think what it can mean for progress and civilization, if men, after they have gained experience in youth, will not have to waste that experience

in old age, having lost the energy and the ambition, the power of endurance, but will be able to use it all in an old age that will have all the strength and the energy and the freshness and the vigor of youth.

But that discovery, if it is true, came to humanity not through faith in its most limited sense, not through wishing for it, but through industrious and painstaking and sacrificial labor of years and years in the scientific research laboratory.

There is evil in life, and no theologic subtlety can take advantage. To be sure, in God's eyes there is no evil, but in man's eyes there is evil, for God is not subject to the limitations of time, space and accidents of life, but man is subject to them; and because he is subject to the limitations and the restrictions and the confinements and the accidents of life, he suffers frequently from them. To be sure, if our eyes were different, we would see differently, and if our ears were differently shaped, we would hear things differently; if our senses were other than what they are, or if we had more senses than what we have, perhaps the whole of life or the whole of the universe would appear different to us. But our senses are what they are. We are what we are--human beings, confined and incarcerated, if you like, in certain senses that we cannot get out of us, and as a consequence we must live as we are, and we must endeavor to adjust ourselves as best as possible to life in order to derive the greatest

happiness from life.

The wise man faces the facts; the wise man does not dwell in a beatific state in a sort of a fool's paradise; the wise man realizes that our knowledge is fragmentary; that our lives are incomplete; that we are at present just in one stage of a series of stages and an endless process of evolution; that we are imperfect and incomplete, and that all imperfection and all incompleteness make for unhappiness, and for suffering, and for ailments. The wise man, I say, accepts these facts as facts, and then proceeds to make the best of them.

Evil has certain uses,--the sweet uses of adversity, and blessed is the man or woman who can use evil whenever possible--and it is not always possible--as a stepping-stone in life rather than a stumbling block. Evil, I say, has its uses. In the first place, it is very frequently the great goad to progress--the impulse to progress. It is the appetite that makes us seek for food; it is the hidden thing that incites us to curiosity. It is the thing we cannot have that creates in us the desire for it.

In other words, all the fine ambitions of our mortal days are caused by the things which we have not; by the ills, if you like, that we are trying to correct, because not having the thing which would make for our happiness is the same as saying that we are subject to evil and unhappiness. The lack of things, the absence

of things goads us on, prods us on to the higher lives and to the purer air. That is one use of adversity in life.

And then it has this additional use--that it is a splendid discipline in life. You and I know of men and women who life has favored most generously, in whose lap fortune has heaped all the blessings of the world--luxury and comfort; they are pampered; they are morally weakened; they are spiritually starved; they degenerate because of it. They have not the evils and the ills of life to discipline them. It is the men and the women who live in the torrid climates who do not have to go far for their clothing, for their raiment, for their food, that degenerate, that remain barbarians; but it is the men and the women who live in the temperate zones who must work and toil and seek their food and their raiment afar, who must fight inclement weather and the hostile forces of Nature, that develop and progress, that are in the vanguard of civilization.

This sentence that I quote from the memoirs of the journal of Tolstoy always comes to me when I speak of this subject. He said, "When you suffer, remember that the suffering is not something disagreeable that you wish to get rid of, but it is the very work of life, that very task which you have been designated to do in wanting to get rid of it. You are doing that which a man would do who lifts the plow there where the earth is hard, just

where, in fact, it has to be plowed up."

The evils of life are the very things that challenge our initiative, our enterprise, that give zest and color and meaning to life.

Yes, and evil has yet another use, and it is this: it adds glory to human life. I remember a beautiful sentence of our rabbis: "The angels in Heaven once said unto Almighty God 'Why must we wait to sing our song of praise until the children of Israel on earth first sing their song of praise?' And the Almighty answered and said, 'You are angels who live in Heaven, but the children of Israel dwell upon earth. They are born of women. Evil has dominion among them, and yet in spite of that they rise every morning to extol my name and to pray for the coming of my kingdom. Their merit is infinitely greater than is your merit.'"

In other words, the glory of civilization is that we have risen from the jungle and climbed with torn hands and bleeding feet up upon the thorny rungs of progress, overcoming adversity, and opposition, and disillusionment, and failures, and catastrophies, and earthquakes, ravaging diseases, wars and calamities of all kinds. That is the glory of civilization. Our upward climb has been tortuous and slow and painful. But that in itself has developed our character, our strength, our power of resistance, our manhood. That is the crown of life. We have struggled

and conquered; and that is what gives glory and zest to human life.

Evil, said the rabbis, is a huge rock on the crossways of life upon which men stumble. "Chip that block little by little, year by year, generation by generation, and ultimately," says God, "I will remove it. entirely."

Can faith heal? Certainly. Nothing is possible without faith. **Faith** brings to a man and a woman who are in pain and suffering an added strength, a stimulus, an optimism, that is in itself half a cure. Many men and women have been cured by prayer, by an exalted faith and hopefulness in a beneficent God. Many of our ailments are distempers and disorders of our mind and of our soul, and a deep faith brought to act upon our minds and our souls restores the harmony which means good health.

Faith heals because it comforts. I know of men and women who have given up the best years of their lives to some fine cause, who have sacrificed much and worked hard, and suddenly realize that all their work has come to naught; they have failed. These men and women would be plunged into the morass of pessimism, of dejection, of hopelessness, were it not for the great faith that sustains and inspirits them; the faith that in the work of God and in the men who do the work of God, time has no place, because they are eternal; and the things which they have left incomplete, and the failures which

they see, are, in themselves, but evidences of ultimate completeness and ultimate triumph, because God says faith can never fail.

Men and women who have lived their lives honestly, and have worked hard, and then found themselves in old age bent, weak, broken, with death in front of them,-- a great melancholy would come into their lives, and a great tragic sorrow, if they felt that the grave was the end of all; and all the tumultuous strivings, and all the earnest and honest intents and impulses of their mortal days would be brought low to the reeking gloom of the grave; that there is nothing beyond--nothing to perfect their imperfection; nothing to complete the circle of which their experience was a broken arc; nothing to give added knowledge to that fragmentary bit that was vouchsafed unto them in life. I say, that life would be unbearable, unspeakably sad, if men and women did not have the exalted faith that God will not see His children go to their destruction;

If men and women did not have the faith that we are of God, light of his eternal light, spark of his eternal fire, that we live in Him and by Him, and that just as He is eternal, so are we eternal.

Does that faith heal? It heals much. Faith can heal because it gives inspiration in life. Faith tells us to live our lives bravely and do our work courageously, and establish relations with our fellowmen

gracefully, and face death manfully; because we are not a clod of the earth; because we are a bit of Divinity.

I say unto you men and women, unless you have that faith, a faith which does not serve you merely as a patent medicine, to cure certain specific ailments of your body, but a faith that passes through you like a purging fire, purifying you, ennobling you, elevating you, carrying you away from the dull routine of pettiness and smallness into which you may have sunk, and flung you out into the great maelstrom of life, to do and to dare, to serve and to work; unless you have that overpowering faith that grips you, then you may be perfectly wholesome in your physical body, but you are sick through and through in your soul. And millions of men and women go through life with a soul that is ravaged with the disease of faithlessness, of selfishness, of smallness; and it is this illness, greater than any ailment on earth, that faith can heal supremely and superbly; it is this ailment of the soul that hurls men into the mire of fratricidal struggle, that throws men into war, that makes men hate, and tear, and claw at one another; it is this disease of the soul that corrodes and eats of the very lives of men, that brings misery untold and suffering immeasurable into the lives of men.

That faith--real faith, faith in the ultimate triumph of the good; faith that nothing is worth while but the good; faith that nothing mean can ever make a man happy;

faith that nothing wrong and no injustice can ever lend
and iota of soul to a human soul; faith that God
does visit the sins of the father upon the children unto
the third and fourth generation; faith that there is a
Divine retribution; faith in the fact that the good we do
extends into the thousandth generation of those that live
who keep His commandments; faith that there is a destiny
to human life; faith that the grave is only the portal to
the higher life and the purer life. Faith in all these
are the things which heal humanity.

And would that men and women, instead of
concentrating their attention upon themselves and their
own bodily ailments--which is in itself a sign of disease--
would that men and women instead of being concerned so
much in and of themselves and their physical welfare, would
transfer the center of gravity of their attention from
themselves to others; and that in itself is a cure of most
of the disorders of human life.

Would that you and I would take this healing faith
into our lives, that our knowledge will grow from year to
year, that science will add much that will contribute to
human happiness, that old age will be robbed of its terror,
and that many of the things today that contribute to the
unhappiness of mankind science will remove. Faith that
love does grow upon men; faith that we are moving not
directly upward, but, like a spiral, moving into the
higher realms of truth and beauty.--faith in God. "The

righteous man shall live by his faith."

No man can live without faith. The need of our race is the healing faith, not so much for this particular ailment of this man or of this woman, but the healing faith for the soul of our race, so that the untold sufferings of the past may not be duplicated but decreased in the days to come. Judaism and Christianity in their highest expression, and Mohammedanism in its finest expression, and all the religions of the East, have preached a healing faith unto the children of men. But men, instead of looking upon faith as a soul-cure, as a mind-cure, as a cure for mankind, have come to look upon faith as an individual cure for this disease or that disease.

Do not permit your religion to be starved into a medicinal concept; do not permit your religion to be interpreted as a quack cure for physical ailments. It is infinitely more than that. Religion is faith in God; religion is moral conduct; religion is self-discipline and self-purification. Religion is the recognition of the fact that the Heavens belong unto the Lord, but the earth, with all its hardships and all its unpleasantness and all its difficulties and obstacles,--the earth He gave unto the children of men, to make a Garden of Eden thereof.

And blessed are the men and the women who realize that we are of the earth earthy. "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou remembereth him?" "Yet hath thou made him but a little lower than the

angels, and hath crowned him with glory and honor."

And all life consists in making the Divine influence, that something which is a little lower than the angels, control and mold that which is mortal, physical, earthly in human life.

"The righteous man shall live and shall be healed by his faith."

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