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The Noblest Song in all Literature, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE NOBLEST SONG IN ALL LITERATURE,"
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 15,
1921, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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Of all forms of poetry the lyric is perhaps the most intimate, and of all lyric poetry the religious poem, holding within itself the mystic thought, is perhaps the most intimate with human feelings and emotions. And of these religious lyrics the Psalms are perhaps the greatest.

Mankind has long recognized this fact, and the Psalms have been the treasured and the cherished songs of nearly the whole of the human race; under every sky, in every land, in every speech, the Psalms are sung; and in all the varied moods the Psalms are invoked to bring solace, comfort and cheer to the soul of man.

I sometimes think that a great song must fulfill three requirements. A great song must, in the first place, be an artistic song. It must be flawless, perfect; a gem enchased, as it were, in a setting of perfect diction and rythmic movement. It must be artistic.

In the second place a great song must convey a great thought--a thought that partakes of the Nature, of the eternal and the universal; a thought that rises from that hidden store house of human experience, just like a spring that rises from the subterranean ground waters of the earth; a great thought greatly expressed.

And, thirdly, a truly great song responds to a human need; it answers to something within our souls; it feeds our souls. Men turn to such a song as instinctively as one seeks the hand of one that one loves, when darkness falls upon the world. A song like, "Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead Thou me on, the night is dark, and I am far from home, lead Thou me on,"--that is a great song.

A song like, "Sunset and evening star, and one clear call for me, and may there be no moaning of the bar, when I put out to sea. But such a tide as moving seems asleep, too full for sound and foam, when that which drew me out the boundless deep, turns home again," that is a great song. Likewise a song like "Jo Anderson, my Jo."

They sound the chord in the soul of man, and nowhere in all literature do you find so many songs that satisfy these three requirements of artistic form, of universal thought and of universal appeal as the songs that were saved from the ravaging hand of time, and were canonized in that book, the spiritual creation of the genius of our people, known as the Book of Psalms.

Do you know, friends, that we even speak of Israel as being a religious people, a people that first gave the idea of the one God and the one humanity in the world. We speak of the ethics of Israel, the morality of Israel. We somehow never, or very seldom, speak of the literary genius, of the poetic genius of our people. And

yet no people has produced such literature as Israel, from the days of the minstrel who sang the song of Deborah, to Heine, who, after all, was a psalmist that persecution had distorted.

Israel has created superb literature, and apart from the substance, the form and style are classic--marvelous. I venture to say that there is no drama in the whole literature of the world, even among those superb, immortal dramas of the Greeks, comparable to Job. I know of no short story more perfect in its design, in its development, in its handling the situation, in its climaxes, as the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. I know of no triumphal ode in the whole literature of the world that has the fervor, the martial air, the stir, the impulse, as the song of Miriam, the Song by the Sea. I know of no love song in the whole range of marvelous love songs comparable to that matchless Song of Songs. I can find nowhere an elegy which for depth of feeling, for profoundness of human emotion, for the greatness of the things it says and of the things it only intimates, as David's lament on the death of Jonathan. You will search far in the literary creations of the people of the earth to find prophetic utterances, exaltation, religious meditations, like those of Isaiah. And you will find nowhere a lyric like the Twenty-third Psalm.

Our literature, my friends, is the sacred literature of the world, not because it speaks of Divinity,

but also because it speaks divinely. Unfortunately, like most great things, it is taken for granted and seldom read. Some one defined a classic as a book that is admired but not read; and the Bible is the greatest of such classics. One sometimes takes one's Bible as one's wife--for granted.

I sometimes think of the days that seem so far removed from these hectic and feverish days of ours, when the head of the family would take down the old family Bible, and place himself at the head of the table like a priest of old before the altar, turn to a page of that ancient and immortal literature, read it to his household, and interpret it and meditate upon it. Old fashioned, it is true. ^{its} What has taken place? We feverishly turn nowadays to that page in our newspaper to discover the most startling moving picture. There are very few people nowadays who read anything beside their newspaper and an occasional magazine; but even those who do read books, when you enter their homes you will find the latest novel on the library table, a novel that perhaps will not survive six months. But the Bible has survived the onslaught of the ages! The old Bible you will find stuck away somewhere in the corner along with the old family photographs and the marriage certificate.

But here is literature, friends, that stirred mankind--literature that armies sang as they marched into battle, and saints on their way to martyrdom; here is literature that gave the theme to some of the greatest

musical creations; that presented the subject matter to half of the great dramas of the world; that inspired nearly all the great patriots of the world. Here is literature that has fashioned the speech of nations; whose idiom is used daily, and unconsciously; whose names you carry; whose laws you obey. Yet our people today, educated, will know a great deal about the brilliant banalities of a Chesterton, or the charlatanism of a Menkin, but nothing of the immortal sayings of a , or the philosophy of an ecclesiast.

It is very difficult, for all the marvelous songs that we have, of these one hundred and fifty that have been saved--because there were many more and many other collections that were lost,--it is very difficult to select from these noble creations of the spirit of man the song that is perhaps the noblest. One hesitates to pick, to compare, when one thinks of a psalm like Twenty-seven: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Ye need not fear." When one reads Psalm Forty-two: "As pants the hart for the springs of water, so pants my soul for God." When one reads a psalm like Eighty-four: "How lovely are Thy brilliant places, oh Lord host! Better a day in Thy courts than a thousand elsewhere." One has difficulty in determining which of these gems is more attractive, or pleasing, or satisfying.

Perhaps that little Psalm Twenty-three, because of its brevity, because of its marvelous attraction, we may

call the noblest song in all literature.

I said there are three things that distinguish a great song, and you will see how these three things reach a height of expression in these six brief verses known as the Twenty-third Psalm:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He
leadeth me beside the still waters; He
restoreth my soul; He guideth me in stray paths
for my Name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou art with me.

Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me, in spite of mine
enemies. Thou annointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me all the days of my life.

For I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Artistic, but wonderfully vivid imagery, with classic restraint. You get the images, the pictures of that the psalm calls out in your mind. First, there is God--God is the living Shepherd who leads mankind--his flock--to the springs of life. When one reads the psalm one can see the green fields and the peaceful stream, and the winding lanes of sun and light, and quietness and peace.

Then comes the other image of God--as the Guide; God is the Guide of the lost and wandering sheep; of the

troubled and the sorrowing. One has a picture of a dark valley, and ravines, and thorns, and pitfalls, and shadows, and also of a strong, wise friend, who guides our feet alike. And then one has another picture of God--as a gracious host, who welcomes us after a long and wearisome journey; who welcomes us to the coolness of His arbor, and to the bounty of His fare, and to the peace of His home.

"Thou preparest a table before me; Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

I said that a great song must have a great thought. I need not tell you what the great thought of this psalm is. You find it in the keynote of the first verse: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Trust in God; peace in God; fulfillment in God--that is the universal thought of the psalm.

That, to my mind, friends, is the ultimate thought that the mind of man is capable of--the most prophetic, the most final, the ultimate word of truth. Before men can reach that marvelous serenity, that confidence, that trust which emanates from a song like this, they sometimes have to go through the valley of the shadow of death. Before men can drink of the still waters of God they sometimes must taste of that cup of life from the foam to the dregs of it; the bark of human life must sometimes be tossed about amid all the turbulent waters of life, and down the rapids and amidst the whirlpools before

it can sail forth smoothly, calmly, upon the peaceful waters of God.

This thought, my friends,--"that God is my Shepherd, I shall not want; yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil,"--comes to some men in old age, in the twilight hours of their days. All too few of us are blessed in our youth with the realization of this thought. "God is my Shepherd; I shall not want." Nothing matters, for there is God; that having Him we lack nothing, and wanting Him we are bereft of everything; that even life's trials are trials no more when He is by our side; that even in the valley of death, where our hopes perish and our ambitions die; that even in those moments, when we descend into the abyss, when our smiles turn to tears, and our laughter to choking and broken sobs, the wise and strong friend is still by our side, ready to give us His rod and His staff--to lead us out and up to the light of renewed hope.

I say, friends, that this truth, so majestically embodied in this little psalm, is perhaps the ultimate and most perfect truth that there is in life. And it has an appeal--this song, for it feeds the soul. There is a beautiful legend among our rabbis that over the couch of David there once hung a harp, and when God came the breezes played through the strings of the harp, and the king David would awaken to sing the praises of the Lord. I sometimes think that sentiments such as those are like the things

that play through the harp strings of our souls, that awaken us to a new day and to a new life.

I cannot help but feel, when I merely repeat that phrase--"the Lord is my Shepherd," an incursion of spirit. How fondly, my friends, the spirit of our people clung to that image of the shepherd; Abraham was a shepherd; Isaac and Jacob were shepherds; and Moses was a shepherd. And God took Moses from the midst of his flock to lead his people. You recall that beautiful legend of the rabbis as to how Moses came to be chosen leader of Israel. One day Moses was out in the wilderness tending his flock, and at nightfall he realized, counting his flock, that a little lamb was missing and lost; and so Moses set out in the gathering darkness of the wilderness to find the lost and the strayed lamb; and far away, near a little brook, he found the lamb with a broken limb, and he picked up the lamb, bandaged its broken limb, and taking it up in his arms fondled it and caressed it and carried it back to his flock. And then God said: "A man who can so take care of a dumb beast, of a little, helpless thing, is the man that should lead My people."

David was a shepherd; and so most of the great heroes of our people legend took from the shepherdfold and made them king and leaders of Israel. And so it was but natural that God himself should come to be regarded by the worshipful as a shepherd. "The Lord is my Shepherd." "The Lord is the Shepherd of Israel."

They who knowest not, they who have never plumbed the depth of the soul of Israel, that compassionate soul of our people, speak of our God as a stern, cruel, revengeful tyrant. Israel knew better. Israel spoke of its God as the shepherd.

What pathetic need, my friends, what tragic need the wisest and the strongest among us, the most prosperous and the most successful among us oftentimes have for ^{some} God to shepherd them through life; in those troubled and fretted moods of our days. Oh, for some kind hand to lead us in the green fields of quietude and beside the still waters of peace! Don't you experience that yearning, that need, sometimes, amidst the fuss and the fury, and the strife and the struggle of our ambitious days, amidst the clutter and the clashing of passions, of loves, of hates?

Don't you in those moments sometimes wish for some wise, understanding, kindly friend to take us by the hand and lead us to the fields of quietness and peace? "God is my Shepherd, I shall not want!"

Don't you sometimes feel the need of a guide through the valley of shadows? During the war a great mind wrote a book in which he spoke of a new revelation that has come to him. God, the invisible king; God, the champion of humanity; God, the leader of the hosts of men; God, who is with His children walking by their side through the valley of the shadow of death! God, who is with them as they plunge into battle; God, who hears their broken

sobs as they fall blinded to the earth; God, who stands beside their fevered cot and lays His hand of cooling peace upon their fevered brow! That is the new revelation, thought the author, that has come to humanity. But it is no new revelation. That is our God; that is the God of the Psalmist, who said: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me."

God leads us on; through sin and suffering; He is our leader; through failure and disappointment He is our leader; through war and pestilence He is our leader; through disillusionment, through bereavement, through sickness, through sorrow, through want, through poverty, through wealth, through richness, He is our Guide and our Leader.

And when, after a long life of wearisome journeying down the highways and the byways of life, we seek ultimate peace and rest, where shall we find it? "Thou preparest a table before me; Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." To dwell in God! That is the peace that passeth all understanding.

I wish, I pray, that this God, who could make this unknown singer of Israel burst forth into this matchless lyric of ineffable trust in God, would be permitted to enter our lives today. For we need Him even as Israel

needed Him. And He is not a God in the heavens afar off;
and He is not away out in the wilderness, inaccessible.
Call unto Him; He is near; He is by you; He is within.

"Seek Him for He can be found." Seek me and
live."

There is no life but life in God; there is no
truth but truth in God; there is no peace but peace in God.

"Seek me and live."

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