



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

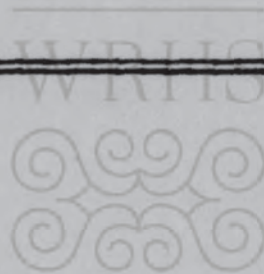
Reel
147

Box
51

Folder
111

If We were to Live Forever, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "IF WE WERE TO LIVE FOREVER,"
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
NOVEMBER 13, 1921, CLEVELAND, O.



Evidently there are quite a number of people who are interested in the subject. I don't want you to feel disappointed; I want you to remember that the subject is not how to live forever--just if we were to live forever.

One of the most frequent complaints of man, from earliest times to the present, from Koheleth to Faust, is concerning the brevity of human life. I read this morning psalm 90, which is perhaps one of the choicest pieces of liturgy, of literature, in the world; and you will observe how, in that psalm, the sentiment concerning the brief spell of human life is so pathetically, so tragically expressed. "The days of our life are threescore years and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years; yet they are tired of weariness and suffering; but they are soon gone and we are cut off." Not to speak of the young who pass away.

There you have a staggering cataclysm that the human mind has never been able to grasp. There seems to be such a waste in the economy of nature, that young men scarcely matured, on the very threshold of life, with hopes still unrealized, ambitions unfilled, with so much to do, are suddenly summoned by the hand of death.

I say, not to speak of the young who die; but even of those who die in what we call in the fulness of life, after the allotted threescore years and ten, a man is twenty

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

years old by the time he gets out of the stage of childhood, of the gaping age, when every fact amuses him; a man is forty years old by the time he has made his mistakes and learned a few things, and just when he is ready to profit by his experience he is called by death. For the average life of human beings is less than forty years. If a man is fortunate to live unto sixty, he receives constantly reminders, intimations of death--gray hair, white hair, whisperings of the grave. And at eighty, why, at eighty we become helpless and hopeless--children again. Children, however, whose path leads not to life but to the grave.

And so it is no wonder, then, that some people are driven by these reflections to a frightful pessimism--"Vanity of vanities, everything is of vanity!" What value is there for man to struggle and strive, to acquire things, accumulate knowledge, wisdom and experience, when it must all end in death? Others are driven to a course of folly and madness--epicures,--"Come, fill the cup, and in the fire of spring, the winter garment of repentance fling; the bird of time has but a little way to fly--and lo! the bird is on the wing." "You have but a few days to live; eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

Others, however, the more thoughtful, those who are able to look through a thing, into the heart of the thing, have begun in recent years seriously to study the science of life and of living. It has now become a

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

subject for the laboratory, for scientific investigation, for medical science. Men of authority have said that it is but an unfortunate habit of the human mind to think that a man must die at seventy, or eighty, or ninety; that there is no reason why the span of human life cannot be extended to a hundred, or two hundred, or three hundred years or more. And experiments have been conducted, as you know, with the object of finding ways of lengthening human life.

And it is a very promising thing; I believe there is a great deal to be expected from this. I think I once expressed the thought that there is not a dream that our race has ever dreamed that has not come true or that may not come true; there is not a thing that the human race has wished for, and wished for earnestly, intensely and continuously, but what it has come true or is coming true.

The human race wanted to fly; it wanted swift locomotion. Today we fly. The human race wanted to transmit its voice great distances, and today we can speak across lands and seas without any effort at all. Some day, before very long, we shall be able to circle the globe in a day.

Now, if the race could accomplish these things, there is really no reason under the sun why you cannot accomplish the feat of lengthening human life. There is no predetermined, hard and fast natural law that says that man must die before one hundred years; it is altogether a

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

question, so say these men, of wishing--of wishing the thing long enough and hard enough and continuously enough. For it is the wish that becomes the thing, and it is the idea that ultimately is corporeal--the word becomes flesh.

Now, around this thought of lengthening human life by wanting to lengthen it, George Bernard Shaw wrote his play, "Back to Methuselah." I am not going to tell you the story of the play (the booksellers might object), but I am going to tell you first of the idea which underlies the play, the philosophy of it, as expressed in the introduction, which, like all of Shaw's introductions, are better than the plays themselves. Then I will tell you my reaction to it.

Mr. Shaw starts out with this thesis: that the theory of evolution which held the minds of civilized men enthralled for the last half century or more is false, as it is commonly understood, and has proved a blight and a bane and a vast destructive force in civilization.

What is this theory of evolution, or the theory of natural selection, that is attributed to Darwin? Simply stated, without much technical terminology--and great truths can be very simply stated--it is this: that the species which exist today are the survivals of a long process of natural selection, and that all the varieties and species, from the frog to the human being, are traced to this unconscious line process that goes on in nature constantly.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

ceaselessly, of weeding out those that are less fit to adapt themselves to new physical conditions--climate, food, geology, or what not.

Mr. Shaw gives as his illustration the giraffe-- a very interesting animal. The giraffe has a long neck, as you know. How came the giraffe by the long neck? Why, once upon a time there were very many little giraffes, and they multiplied; their necks were not so long, and they consumed as food the leaves of the shrubbery up to their height; say their height was four feet, and then there was no more food; those who could not reach up perished, and those giraffes who were more fortunate, whose necks were perhaps an inch longer, survived; and by mating with other giraffes whose necks were an inch longer, they produced a generation of giraffes whose necks were a little longer. And so on down the ages until the limit was reached, when the neck did not have to stretch any further.

Now, this process of weeding out the unfit, blindly, brutally, by murder--if that is what it is-- is really the fundamental principle of the theory of evolution, of natural selection. We sometimes call it the survival of the fittest. Now, that seems very reasonable, very logical. And what are its implications? Why, its implications are awful. Its implications are that there is no intelligence in the world; that there is no purpose in the world; that will, and hope, and aspiration are of no

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

consequence whatsoever; that life, from the imbecile to the member of the French academy, is determined purely and exclusively by a blind, stupid, relentless, unconscious force to kill, to murder, to destroy.

Now, that thought that life is a desperate struggle, a tearing and a clawing, got into our politics and our international relations. Nations came to talk glibly of the survival of the fittest. In order that Germany might live, why, it has got to crush its weaker neighbors. That is the law of nature; it is a holy thing. And up to this day our international relations are determined by this rather innocent looking theory of evolution.

That same thing applies to business philosophy. We talk about "business is business" -- meaning that business is a cutthroat process--the survival of the fittest. If you can't reach up and munch away at the leaves a little higher, why, you die. And our life became blighted by tragic and destructive materialism, that went right through every inch of our organism.

Now, Mr. Shaw says, Mr. Bergson says, others say, that this theory of evolution is false--not alone false but wicked; not alone wicked, but the most wicked thing that has obsessed the mind of man for thousands of years. And as against this theory they present this other theory of life which accepts naturally the irrefutable theory of evolution; that it is a fact that things grow and develop

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

and change and adapt themselves; that nothing springs full grown, as it were, from the brow of Zeus; they accept it. But they say that things change not because of external forces only but because of internal volitions as well. Species change because they want to change, and it is the will that ultimately expresses itself in faculties, in muscles, in the acquisition of new things. A species wants to see, and wants it hard enough, and ultimately comes to have eyes with which to see. Just as you, says Mr. Shaw, make up your mind that you want to ride a bicycle, and if you will try hard, and try and try, ultimately that will of yours will develop that muscle, that aptitude, that faculty within you that will enable you to ride a bicycle.

The word becomes flesh; the idea becomes a thing that is what is commonly known as the theory of creative evolution. There is in this world a life force and an energy that is not blind, but intelligent, purposeful, that is constantly trying, constantly trying to express itself in matter and through circumstances, constantly trying to create new forms, new species. Sometimes it fails, and that is why you have so many failures in the world. Sometimes it succeeds.

But back of this trying is a will, an aspiration, a hope. Now, this philosophy of life makes for optimism, makes for faith, makes for happiness. I suppose that one theory is as demonstrable as the other. Perhaps neither

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

is demonstrable. But the fact is one theory makes for war, for pessimism, for depression, for death; and the other theory makes for hope, for life, the exercise of free will, for adventure, for purposefulness in life. Mr. Shaw, Mr. Bergson and other idealists prefer to live by and for and through life by this theory of creative evolution. Now, this idea underlies Mr. Shaw's play, "Back to Methuselah" --that age is a habit, a stupid habit, and, somehow, the human race got into that habit. There is really no reason why one breed should live a year, and a turtle, we will say, should live a thousand years; no reason in the world. We can live longer, we can live forever, if we just will hard enough.

Not only can we live longer, but we can live in a more concentrated form. Why should it take a man twenty years before he gets out of his fool age? There is no sense in that, is there? A little Polish boy can play chess at the age of eight. What is happening in him? Why, in him the normal development, which would take forty years, has been concentrated in perhaps six; he can think through a process quicker, in shorter time than normally.

A little boy is born who can master the keyboard at the age of four; another one will try forty years and not get there. What has happened in this little boy? We call him a prodigy; there is no reason why every human being should not be a prodigy. In this little boy a long process

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

has been condensed, concentrated.

Now, some day, Mr. Shaw thinks, all our education, of whatever nature, will be concentrated, so that so much time will not be lost in learning the elementary things; just as the child is born with a natural appetite for assimilating food, or breathing; it comes natural to the child; so other faculties of thinking will come more natural to us and quicker. But it is interesting, anyhow.

Mr. Shaw goes back to Adam and Eve in his play, and forward as far as thought can reach. He begins with Lilith, who is in Shaw's play the life force of which I spoke, and this life force, by willing to create life, as he says, "tears itself asunder to create a man and a woman." In the Garden of Eden is the serpent, which embodies wisdom and knowledge--which is a serpent, isn't it? Ignorance is bliss; ignorance is the paradise where people can vegetate; but as soon as you gain wisdom and knowledge, you have taken unto yourself a serpent, a poison, that makes you restive and restless, that makes you a pilgrim through life.

It is wisdom and knowledge that bring pain and suffering into the world. Koheleth said, "With great wisdom there is great suffering." But it also brings a happiness which this vegetative animal in the Garden of Eden could never understand; and the serpent tells Eve of

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

the secret of life and of the bringing of life into the world. Cain and Abel are introduced, and the play progresses and shows the separation of the races of mankind into what Mr. Shaw calls the "dirty diggers," or the "dirty killers." Adam becomes the digger, who has got to earn his food by the sweat of his brow. Cain becomes the dirty killer; he must live as a parasite. Both of them are afraid of immortality. Adam is afraid of immortality, of living forever, because he doesn't know what he shall do, because life is so monotonous; keeping on digging every day, that is a terrible thing, and so his greatest fear is that he will have to live forever.

Cain, of course, does not want to live forever; he is the killer; he lives on death. Then Eve, the mother of Cain, dreams of a time when Cain will neither have to do the digging nor killing, but a new race will come to be, a race that is forecasted in Abel, who is the dreamer; a race that will want immortality, because it dreams and sees visions and creates beauty in the world, and always brings something new, something afresh, something inspirational in life.

And the play proceeds to our own day, when this war brings the world to a cataclysm, to the brink of ruin. The statesmen are unable to wrestle with the problem of civilization because they have not lived long enough; they are still children. A man that lives sixty years spends ,

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

twenty years sleeping. Did you ever think of it?

Civilization has become too involved for man, with a mere sixty or eighty years experience, to wrestle with the problem successfully, and there is likelihood that our entire civilization would break up as a result of it. So in this crisis some very thoughtful man decides to live three hundred years, and the miracle is performed.

The rest of the play shows the gradual transformations that come upon life, the gradual transevaluations of all values, as a result of the fact that man lives longer and longer,--a very interesting thing. The things that seem so important to us today, because our life is limited, become insignificant when we have a thousand years to live in; and the things that become of no consequence because we have a little time to live in, become of tremendous significance, because we have to be with these little things for a thousand years or more.

So the story goes on and on until its climax, or its epilogue, when the serpent, Cain and Abel, and Lilith and Eve are made to speak again. I will read you the last paragraph--it is rather interesting. The serpent says: "I am justified for I chose wisdom and the knowledge of good and evil, and now there is no more evil, and wisdom and good are one." It is enough." (She vanishes.) Cain, who is the dirty killer, says: "There is no place for me on earth any longer. You cannot deny that mine was a splendid

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

game while it lasted. But now! Out, out, brief candle!
(He vanishes).

Eve says: "The clever ones were always my favorites. The diggers and the fighters have dug themselves in with the worms. My clever ones have inherited the earth. All's well." (She vanishes).

Mr. Shaw does not think very much of Adam. Of course you know there is quite a very serious theologic discussion among some churches whether it was Eve that tempted Adam; that Adam was a pure, fine soul to start with, and Eve spoiled him; or whether Adam was a first class rascal to begin with. Shaw accepts the latter theologic view.

Adam says: "I can make nothing of it, neither head nor tail. What is it all for? Why? Whither? Whence? We were well enough in the garden. And now the fools have killed all the animals; and they are dissatisfied because they cannot be bothered with their bodies! Foolishness, I call it." (He disappears).

Of course, after a man has lived a thousand, or five thousand years, he gets tired of his body; there is no sense in having it; and life resolves itself purely into energy, force, thought.

And then Lilith, who is this primal life force, says: "They have accepted the burden of eternal life. They have taken the agony from birth; and their life does not

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

fail them even in the hour of their destruction. * * *

Is this enough; or shall I labor again? Shall I bring forth something that will sweep them away and make an end of them as they have swept away the beasts of the garden, and make an end of the crawling things and the flying things and all of them that refuse to live forever? I had patience with them for many ages; they tried me very sorely. They did terrible things (men); they embraced death, and said that eternal life was a fable. I stood amazed at the malice and destructiveness of the things I had made: Mars blushed as he looked down on the shame of his sister planet; cruelty and hypocrisy became so hideous that the face of the earth was pitted with the graves of little children among which living skeletons crawled in search of horrible food. The pangs of another birth were already upon me when one man repented and lived three hundred years; and I waited to see what would come of that. And so much came of it that the horrors of that time seem now but an evil dream. They have redeemed themselves from their vileness, and turned away from their sins. Best of all, they are still not satisfied: the impulse I gave them in that day when I sundered myself in twain and launched Man and Woman on the earth still urges them: after passing a million goals they press on to the goal of redemption from the flesh, to the vortex freed from matter, to the whirlpool in pure intelligence that, when the world began, was a

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

whirlpool in pure force. And though all that they have done seems but the first hour of the infinite work of creation, yet I will not supersede them until they have forded this last stream that lies between flesh and spirit, and disentangled their life from the matter that has always mocked it. I can wait: waiting and patience mean nothing to the eternal. I gave the woman the greatest of gifts: curiosity. By that her seed has been saved from my wrath; for I also am curious; and I have waited always to see what they will do tomorrow. Let them feed that appetite well for me. I say, let them dread, of all things, stagnation; for from the moment I, Lilith, lose hope and faith in them, they are doomed. In that hope and faith I have let them live for a moment; and in that moment I have spared them many times. But mightier creatures than they have killed hope and faith, and perished from the earth; and I may not spare them forever. I am Lilith: I brought life into the whirlpool of force, and compelled my enemy, Matter, to obey a living soul. But in enslaving Life's enemy I made Life's master; for that is the end of all slavery; and now I shall see the slave set free and the enemy reconciled, the whirlpool become all life and no matter. And because these infants that call themselves ancients are reaching out towards that, I will have patience with them still; though I know well that when they attain it they shall become one with me and

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

supersede me, and Lilith will be only a legend and a lay that has lost its meaning. Of Life only is there no end; and though of its million starry mansions many are empty and many still unbuilt, and though its vast domain is as yet unbearably desert, my seed shall one day fill it and master its matter to its uttermost confines. And for what may be beyond, the eyesight of Lilith is too short. It is enough that there is a beyond."

Now, that is a mighty fine vision, isn't it? It is a vision that we may well entertain; but the problem comes up to us. It is rather unlikely that we who live today will live forever; the likelihood is that we shall go the way of all flesh, as we have heretofore understood it, and cease to be. What should be our attitude to this problem of death? How should we live? Ought we to adopt the attitude of Koheleth: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity"? Ought we to adopt the attitude of Omar: "Fill the cup, and in the fire of spring, the winter garment of repentance fling. Eat, drink and be merry!"? Or is there perhaps a more encouraging attitude than either?

I believe there is, and it is summed up in the words: "As if." We must live our life, friends, brief though it be, as if life were eternal; we must live our days as if they never ended; we must live as if we were immortal. I think that sums up the whole of religion. We must believe in the reality of every passing moment.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

This moment--now--is eternal! The past has vanquished; the future is not yet here. Now is, and is eternal! The reality of every passing moment; the infinity of every passing moment! That must be borne in upon us if we are to live our days intelligently, purposefully--the reality of every passing act, however small, however insignificant it may appear. There is nothing insignificant in life. The second and the century mean the same thing to eternity. They are all human symbols and nothing else.

Everything is significant; everything is ultimate. A pebble thrown into the bosom of the lake may be lost, but the ripples widen and extend until they touch the farthest shores. The spinning of a top here may touch the spheres there. Nothing dies, nothing perishes; everything touches something else, and that in turn touches another thing. A beautiful symphony that is played, when it is ended and the music is stilled, that has not passed into nothingness; it has not perished; it has been translated into emotions and sentiments and stimulations that have gone into the hearts of the listeners, which might express themselves in an infinity, in acts that will touch the uttermost limits of time.

The reality of the passing act and the passing moment, the eternity of our living if not of our life--that is the philosophy that we ought to take along with us through life. What matters it whether our life be long

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

or short? I can imagine men living forever, and living uselessly, purposelessly. It is not how long we live; it is not the quantity of our days--it is the quality. It is tone, it is character, it is what you have put into the days. Why, you can crowd a world into a little space! You can reflect the heavens in a little pool of water!

"Some men can gain immortality in one hour."

There has nothing truer ever been said than that. Crowd your days, because your days are few. Crowd them, but not with things that have no moral significance, not life to them, no inspiration to them, that do not broaden your life, that do not give you expansion; but crowd your days with things that radiate, that thrill, that ennoble, that purify, that exalt, that bring enthusiasm with them, and the ecstacy of living. Live in ecstacy! That is the challenge of life's prayer!

"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain us the heart of wisdom." To number our days, to count them as one counts precious things, because they are so rare; to get all out of them and everything into them. That is the immortality of life.

To live forever is to identify yourself with a cause that lives forever. To become immortal is to identify yourself with one who is immortal--with God. To live eternally is to do the things that abide forever.

--o--

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND