



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.

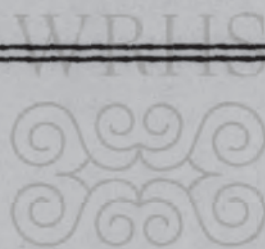
Reel
147

Box
51

Folder
112

Is God a Superstition?, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "IS GOD A SUPERSTITION?", AT
THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
NOVEMBER 20, 1921, CLEVELAND, O.



One approaches this problem with a great deal of timidity. You recall when Moses in the wilderness saw the burning bush, and was approaching it to discover what it was, a voice out of the bush cried unto him, saying: "Remove the sandals from off your feet, for the ground upon which you stand is holy ground." Whenever I think of this question of God, His existence, His relation to the universe, I somehow always think of a little drop of water flowing down the Niagara River, before it plunges over the falls, being suddenly diverted by channels and hurled down in company with billions and billions of other drops of water, down the mighty penstocks to turn some vast machinery, and somehow to produce power and light; and I think of this little drop of water, wondering what it is that diverted it from its course and hurled it down these mighty penstocks; what it is that this machinery is, and how miraculously it becomes power and light.

Whenever I think of these eternal problems of God and His universe, I sometimes think of a small pebble washed up upon the shore of a great sea, wondering to itself what hands were those that fashioned and polished it, and whence it came; what is it all about?

Man becomes, in spite of his knowledge and wisdom, mighty small when he faces these eternal problems. And yet there is a difference--isn't there?--between man and this drop of water and this pebble. The drop of water and the

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

pebble do not question, but man does question; and therein lies man's greatness and man's tragedy. The human being does seek to know, and in spite of his limited avenues of cognition, in spite of his vast ignorance, in spite of his finite self, he somehow longs to grapple with these problems of the infinite; he longs to know.

I believe that it is man's birthright to question and to doubt. In olden days they used to call a doubter a heretic; they used to burn him at the stake. But there has never been a man or a woman, be they the most pious and religious of men and women, who have not sometime or other in their lives doubted and questioned. Why, even Moses, who the Bible says saw God face to face and spoke to Him, in moments of darkness and despair asked of God: "Show me Thy glory." He was not so certain of God's existence and of God's providential care of him.

The realization of God, my friends, is not a continuous thing; the realization of God in our lives is a moment's ecstasy, it is like a flash, a spark, a moment's sacrament; it comes like a revelation, and it is gone. And by the light of that revelation we live our days and our years; that grows dim again, and then we begin to wander again, and stray again, waiting for a new revelation.

Doubt? Why, doubt is as natural to man as faith is. "There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half your creeds," said a great poet once. Of course we doubt most when we are most in trouble: do we not?

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

When every thing goes well, we take things for granted; we do not question. But when life begins to try us sorely, when we begin to experience the harshness, the cruelty of fate, then we begin to question, to doubt the providential order of the universe, to doubt whether there is a spirit guiding the destinies of the world.

I have it brought to my attention very often: men and women come to me after some great bereavement in their life, after some great sorrow has been visited upon them, when their souls lie crushed and broken and wingless, like a bird that has been brought down suddenly in its flight by some arrow; and it lies there bleeding, and in its eyes is that misery, that stupefaction, that amazement, wondering, questioning what it is all about, and why. They come to me and say: "Why, Rabbi, I can't pray any more; I can't come to the temple any more; there is no God, or this thing could never have come to me."

They can't take hold of God, even as a man who has been nervously wrecked can't take hold of himself, hard as he tries. It has escaped them for the time being. And I believe that this doubt is more acceptable in the sight of God than all the thoughtless affirmation of heedless people, because the road of that man or that woman is the awful road that leads to God.

When I ask myself: Is God a superstition? what do I mean by God? Frankly, I mean a personal God; I do not

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

mean nature. Our rabbis have said: "God is the dwelling place of the world." But the world is not necessarily, in itself, the dwelling place of God. In other words, the universe does not exhaust the content of God. God is not nature only. Just as much as a piece of machinery, even though it is moving, is yet not the power which moves it, or the purpose for which it moves, or the mind which planned it and built it; no more than your mind is exhausted by your body; your mind works through your body, like electricity that works through a wire; but the power of electricity is not yet the wire, nor is it dependent upon the wire.

The universe is the channel through which God moves, but God is the creative, the motive, the vital, the intelligent principle in the universe. God moulds it constantly, creates it constantly, shapes its destiny all the time--guides it, controls it; and man is a part of this universe. And in man this life force which we call God, this intelligent life force in man, has found its highest expression. Man has more of it than any other living thing; and therefore God stands in a more especial relation--what we call a personal relation--with the human being.

The Psalmist says: "Thou hast made him a little lower than God." We partake of it in our mind and in our soul and in our faculties,--we partake something, though in a very small and meager way, but something, nevertheless;

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

just as the spark is something of the great fire--not as eternal, not as enduring, but it is of the essence of the fire; so man partakes, in some measure, of this great, intelligent, creative force which is in the universe. That, I take it, in the simplest terms, is the belief of the religious man concerning God.

Now, is this God a superstition? One thing is very clear to every religious man: that you cannot know God. That is, you cannot know Him as you would know a tree, or as you would know a formula--by your senses or by your reason. God cannot be grasped by our senses or by our reason. I think it was Edwin Arnold who said: "He is unknown to those who think they know, and known to whose know they know him not." One of the great singers of the synagogue truly said of God: "I imagine Thee; I picture Thee; but I do not know Thee."

Really, one of the chief tasks of the religious thinker has been to prove that you cannot know God, because were God known as we know a tree, or as we know a theorem, then it is a thing or a description of a thing, and not a God. You cannot discover God as you would discover an element that goes into the making of a substance in your laboratory. You cannot do it. Because in the very process of trying to find or detect God, in the very process of thinking, thought itself comes in for criticism.

What is thought? Is it a dependable agency for

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

discovering the truth? What is reason? Is it faultless and infallible? And can we really, by the power of reason and logic, and by the evidences of our five senses, discover the real essence of a thing--discover real reality? And then we are startled and amazed when we are told by science that our senses are faulty and meager and inaccurate and deceptive--all of them; and that our reason is, after all, not an agency for discovering truth, but merely an agency for coordinating information that life gives us. Intellect is only a tool which life has evolved in order to correct and interpret experience; that intellect never discovers the truth at all; and that the thing in itself--anything--remains forever unknown to man.

And so when we try to know God we soon realize that this veil, which is our mind, is cracked, and small, and cannot hold the vast truth that we would try to pour into it. And so I believe the religious thinkers were very correct when they said: "I can imagine Thee; I can reach out for Thee; I can picture Thee; but I cannot know Thee."

I believe it was Tennyson who wrote these lines: "Thou canst not prove the nameless, Oh my son, nor canst thou prove the world thou movest in. Thou canst not prove that thou art body alone, nor canst thou prove that thou art spirit alone; not canst thou prove that thou art both in one. Thou canst not prove that thou art immortal; no,

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

nor yet that thou art immortal. Yea, my son, thou canst not prove that ye who speak of all these may not be thyself in converse with thyself. For nothing worthy proven can be proven or disproven."

Because we do not know a thing, it does not follow that a thing does not exist, or that we cannot express it. There are other ways of learning, of getting at the heart of a thing, and the most authoritative way that the human race possesses at arriving at a truth is the direct way, the immediate way--not through speculation, nor yet through the evidences of our senses, but intuitively, immediately.

The life force that is in us reaches out into the dark and grasps truth; and then we call in our intellect, our mind, to interpret it, to classify it, to coordinate it, to use it. But all great truths come to us by, as we say, inspiration, by revelation, by a reaching out into the darkness, by a stretching out of the antennae of our soul, out into the void, as it were, and establishing communication with the great life force of the universe.

But that is true not only of religious truth but of all truth. That is how the race came to experience God; and that is how the mystic, the real religious man, knows God--by a direct, immediate, intuitive experience of God, and not through reason or speculation. Those who have not experienced it may say: "Well, I have not experienced it; it does not exist." That is like a man who would say: "There

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

is no music, because I have not heard it." The men who have ears and have heard, know that it exists. And the religious minds, from earliest days to this, who have received the whisperings of this reality, know that it is.

So that after all is said and done, the revelation is the greatest authority for religion. It is difficult to understand; but every great truth is difficult to understand.

There is another way of inferring that God exists. To those for whom this first way is no authority, because they have not experienced it, there is yet another way, namely, that the rationality of the universe, the order of the universe, the symmetry of it, implies an intelligent, creative principal or spirit. I think it was the great agnostic, Voltaire, who said: "If God did not exist, we would have to create a God." And that is true. The arrangement of the universe, the laws that govern it, the eternal conservation of everything--of matter and of energy, all of these imply not chance or accident, but a planning, a thinking intelligence.

You can't take an ink well and pour it over paper and expect a book to be written as a result of it; to write a book there must be a mind back of the pen. And to plan a universe such as ours there must be a creative genius, a master mind back of it. There is design in the world. Of course, sometimes we cannot see the design, but it is

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

there. It is like being given a mathematical problem that you cannot solve; the fact that you cannot solve it does not mean that there is no solution for the problem. You cannot see it. It is like being given a picture puzzle of broken-up bits; if you knew how you would arrange all these bits into their proper design, and you would have the complete picture. But it is oftentimes very difficult for a man to know the complete design and to arrange all these bits of reality into their proper places; for there is design, nevertheless.

And so when the Psalmist says: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament telleth of his handiwork," he is pronouncing an immemorial truth. Creation speaks of the Creator, and life speaks of the life force that is in it.

Now, there is yet another way by which men come to God, and that is through their own life and their own life's experiences. There is in human life a longing, a need for God. It is a pathetic longing, but it is a real longing and yearning for God. "As panteth the hart for the springs of water, so panteth my soul for Thee."

Man, in his ceaseless climbing, in his aspirations, in his struggles against circumstances and reality, finds the pathetic need for some mighty kinsman to stand by his side, to help him, to inspire him, to underwrite the ultimate triumph of his efforts and of his enterprise; and

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

when he fails and is hurled into the depths of despondency, when the waters reach up to drown him, then he cries: "Help me, O God, for the waters have reached unto my soul!"

This inarticulate need for God, in every age and in every clime, the savage and the civilized, the cultured man, has experienced. This is implied--the reality of the thing for which we long. You cannot prove the existence of God, either by your senses or by your reason; but you cannot disprove the existence of God, either by your senses or by your reason. And if you cannot disprove His existence, and if the experiences of your life, the mystic experiences of your life seem to bespeak a God, and if the rationality of the world seems to imply a God, and if the faith in such a God brings meaning and purpose and sense and destiny and hope into the world, then we ought to cling, in spite of our great ignorance, to this possibility--hold unto it and live by it, even if we cannot prove it.

I have often said to men and women who are guided in life solely by reason, that if these considerations and motives that I have just presented to you do not lead them to God, then perhaps they ought to reason in this way: "I will live as if God existed." For, after all, a man needs an ideal in life. It is the need; the great things that we achieve and accomplish in the world are achieved and accomplished simply because we have an abiding faith in some great ideal, which ideal was never tested and proved

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

by experience or by life. We live by it because we believe it. And our life became full and rich and abundant as a result of this great faith which we have in this ideal.

Men have died for the principle of democracy because they believed it in. Now, it may very well be that democracy will prove a failure as a system of government, even as monarchism or feudalism proved a failure. Yet the lives of these men were ennobled and enriched because of the great transcendent faith which they had in their ideal. They lived as if their ideal were real and proved; and all progress is dependent upon this.

Unless we live as if things were real and worthwhile--and nobody has yet proved that life is worthwhile--then life becomes impossible, and we sink into the soul of despondency and despair. But if we are mistaken! "It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." It is better to have found a purpose for our efforts, even though that purpose may be, in the millennium to come, proved untrue, than to have gone through life without purpose, without meaning, without a goal, without inspiration, without enthusiasm.

Why, I can prove to you that you cannot choose, that you have no free will, that you are just a hopeless cog in a great machinery. Men have proved it to their satisfaction. But if you accept that as a fact in your life, what happens? Why, there is no way open to you but

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

the way of pessimism, or of cynicism; your life becomes broken and crushed. You live as if you were a free agent; you live as if you could choose, and because of that faith that you are free and can choose, you actually do become a free and a choosing agent.

Often you find one who cannot feel, say, as the Psalmist feels--that "God is with thee"; that he experiences that immediately and directly; that it is not in the intervention of mind or thought or reason. "God, Thou hast been our dwelling place from of old." He dwells in God; his soul is saturated with God; he feels Him near, constantly present. If you cannot experience that, and if the world about you does not seem to tell you of a design which implies a designer, a creator; and if the need that men feel for the great kinsman to stand by them and help them in all their efforts and struggles, is not real to you, then this thought ought to help you: to live your life as if God is; and you will find that you are approaching divinity when you grasp that thought.

Is God a superstition? What is a superstition? A superstition is an irrational and misleading belief. But God, my friends, is not irrational; but godlessness is irrational. God is the most rational--and I speak of it now in the highest sense of the term--the most laudable explanation of all those facts in the confused and intricate universe that is about us. He is the reality that abides

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

amid all the flux and change and transformation of life; He is the purpose back of it, the unity in all of its diversity, the unifying and informing spirit in all this world of matter. Without Him life becomes completely, utterly, hopelessly unintelligent--confused and chaos.

And is faith in God misleading? Any faith which does not take God into consideration is misleading. Faithlessness is misleading, because it leads to the ways of death, despair, hopelessness. But belief in God leads to the ways of life, of hope, of effort, of cheerfulness, of peace.

No, my friends, God is not a superstition; and all the discoveries of science, and all the accumulation of our wisdom and knowledge, have not yet proved that this ancient faith of the human race is a superstition. And it seems to me that what this age of ours needs--this age that is going the way of death and destruction--is another burning realization of the existence of God in the universe.

The philosophies of the past few generations have blasted and blighted the minds and the souls of men. The human race has devoted itself wholeheartedly and zealously to the task of improving the mind, of sharpening the wits, of learning, of acquiring, of mastering nature and the facts of nature, but they have not deepened the content of human life; they have not refined the sensibilities and the emotions of human life; they have not

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

brought God into the hearts and the lives of human beings. And that is why, my friends, this world of ours is today a pit where peoples and nations are grappling and tearing at one another, and clawing at one another in brutality and viciousness. And that is why our private lives, our individual lives, are dominated by a similar spirit of gain and acquisitiveness, of lust and power.

We have materialized life because we have driven God out of the world. And the regeneration of life, and the resurrection of sweetness and beauty and peace into the world will come about, my friends, not by the limitation of armaments only, not by the cessation of war only, but by the opening of our hearts for the spirit of God to enter; a humble faith, a recognition of our smallness and our weakness in the presence of the supreme reality of life, and at the same time a recognition of our greatness and our power, because we are akin unto that spirit.

"What is man that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man that Thou praiseth him?" A grain of dust, a thing of the minute, that lives and ceases to be; whose life is troubled and shot through with pain. Yet hast Thou made him a little lower than God, for in him is the spark of the eternal fire, in his life is the life of God, and God works through him; he is the co-worker of Deity; he is the partner of the eternal God in creation; he is God's choicest experiment in the world.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

If men would become conscious that God is in them, then their lives would become so wonderfully and so overpoweringly rich and full, that love would well out of their eyes as the spring that wells out of the ground--spontaneously and free, without effort; then happiness would come into their life; then all the doubts would be resolved, and they would feel themselves that they were walking with God; that they are living in God and by God; that somehow they are partaking of the divine purpose and plan of the universe. Then all the problems of evil that come to them from day to day would assume a new meaning and a new interpretation, and they would gain that abiding and lasting happiness which comes from God alone.

God must be searched, God must be sought. You must seek Him; and if you seek Him in humility of spirit, if you seek Him in sincerity, then somehow, some day, you might find Him abiding just around the path of the turn of the road, waiting for you. And the realization of God will come to you like an ecstasy, like a flash, like a moment's sanctity; and by the light of that revelation you will live for days and for years a transfigured human being.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; who need I fear!"

--o--

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND