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

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Common Folks: A Tribute, 1922.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,  
ON "COMMON FOLKS," AT THE TEMPLE,  
SUNDAY MORNING - FEBRUARY 5, 1922.  
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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The men who have always held the stage of the world have been the great and the heroic. The characters that figure prominently in song and play and fiction, as a rule, are those people who, by circumstance or position or endowments, are raised above the level of the average, the common place. The people who monopolize the news of the day are the extraordinary people--magnates, cotton kings, who have turned philanthropists; moving picture actors or directors, living or dead; prize fighters and diplomats; successful automobile mechanics, who are daily consulted on the best way of saving the world; and all such prominent people.

I sometimes wonder why it is that the average man is not given a chance at publicity; the common folks, the man who has done nothing to put him in jail; the man who is not blessed with genius to astound the world; who will never strut across the stage of history like a colossus; the plain, humble, quiet sort of a man, who does his work faithfully, builds his home, raises his children, keeps the faith, and, when his time comes, passes out quietly and makes room for other people.

Of course, people like the heroic. We all do. And perhaps it is well that we do, for in the homage that we pay to greatness, there is likewise promise of emulation and progress. Every great man is a challenge to

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lesser people to try to emulate his example, to climb the heights. We like great people because we like in them the things that we are not. They somehow complete the lives which are incomplete in ourselves. Children like to worship heroes; children are great hero worshippers; and that hero worship inspires within them ambitions to be like the people whom they worship.

When I was a child I wanted to be, first, a conductor; then a policeman; then a fireman--three characters that loom very large on the horizon of a child. When I got older and life sobered me a bit, I compromised on the ministry. I suppose those children who are more fortunate than I was, and less commonplace than I was, who had more wealth than my folks had, wanted to be butlers and chauffeurs; and when they grew up and life sobered them, why, they compromised on being, I suppose, clothing manufacturers, and bank presidents, or, if they were real fortunate, they would become presidents of mortgage companies.

Of course, this very busy world of ours has only time to notice the heroic, the unusual, the extraordinary. If a man marries once, why, he just becomes one out of that great host of silent heroes, and society acknowledges it, if it acknowledges it at all, in small type in the "license issued" column--that column which is only read by insurance agents. But if that man, by

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accident, should marry seven times, then he becomes a hero indeed, and his name will be blazed forth in head lines in every live newspaper in the land, and his picture will appear on the front page surrounded by his entire matrimonial constellation.

The unusual, the extraordinary, receives the tribute of notice in the busy world; and the papers nowadays are full of unusual people, of unusual things--freaks and quacks and murderers and divorcees and diplomats, and all sorts of things. But the work of the world is not done by these people; the work of the world is done by these silent, unnoticed, unsung, unacclaimed millions who carry the burdens of the world. They seldom get the spot light.

The man of genius, my friends, may be the salt of the earth; but you cannot make a meal out of salt. The bread and the meat of life are those millions of men who plow the fields and clear the forests and dig the mines and fashion the steel; the millions who, in ten thousand shops and mills and factories, forge and mold and fashion and build for the needs and the comforts of human life; the men and the women who do their daily tasks without heroic gesture--quietly, as a matter of course; who build homes and schools and churches; who live humble lives in the ten thousand Main Streets of our land.

I sometimes think that perhaps Main Street is the foundation of our society. The glittering

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romance of life may not be there; the caviar of life may not be there, but there is more to Main Street, my friends, than sprawling, raw streets; there is more to Main Street than squat and ugly buildings; there is more to Main Street than narrowness and intolerance and gossip. There are in the Main Streets of our land the men who work through the days and the nights to build for themselves homes and firesides; there are in the Main Streets humble women, who, while they may lack the finer y and the polish and the glitter which embellish life, do, nevertheless, possess that primeval strength and sturdiness of the race; the women who transmit the great traditions of a great people unto their children; who give of themselves that their children may grow up into fine manhood and womanhood.

There are in the Main Streets in the towns and the villages and the hamlets of this land, homes which are, to my mind, the strength of our civilization; homes where men are taught duty and labor and prayer; and there are in the many Main Streets of this land souls--souls which have passed through the deep waters of life; souls which have been tested in life's cruellest tribulations, but who, nevertheless, carry on quietly, carry on nobly, until, wearied and a bit tired, they lie down to a deserved rest. And I say unto you men and women that these common folks are the defense of every civilization, the strength of it, the bread and the meat of it, the body and the soul of it!

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What is heroism? What is the heroic?

Is heroism the act of a moment? the flash? the brilliant impulse? Is heroism a thing<sup>by</sup> which someone, at the spur of some overpowering emotion--a soldier, a martyr, a rescuer--will then perform an immemorial act? Is that the greatest and the highest type there is of bravery in the world? Or is heroism perhaps a much more difficult thing? Is heroism perhaps a thing of long endurance, of infinite patience, of a slow, unyielding push against obstacle and harshness and failure? Is it perhaps a thing of dull monotony--that monotonous grind of duty, a common daily task, that wears against the heart beats and the nerves of us through the years, the long, long years?

Isn't that perhaps the highest type of courage known to mankind? the courage that builds? the courage that creates? And is not perhaps the real hero of human society a man of the type of Isak, of Hamsun's "Growth of the Soil" --the uncouth and ungainly, lumberly barge of a man? -- primitive, primeval, almost archaic in the elemental strength of him; who goes out into the virgin forest alone, and there by dint of labor and toil and drudgery through the days and the years, builds for himself and for society a home and a field and a family, and for his children an inheritance. Isn't he, perhaps, in his endurance, in his patience, in his submissiveness, in his humility, in his toil--ceaseless, endless toil,

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the hero of life? Of course, there is no romance about him, unless it be the romance of creation.

Common people! common folks! I sometimes wonder whether there are such things as common folks in the world. The more I live and the more I see of men and women, the more I believe that there are no ordinary or average common people in the world; that somehow in each human being there is an element of greatness; that somehow in the soul of every one there is a spark which holds the secret of divine fire within itself; that as I see men and women go through their days faithfully pursuing the tasks allotted to them in life, bearing up and carrying on through sorrow and struggle and trial and misfortune, I say unto myself that perhaps we have been mistaken in pointing to the exceptional and the unusual and the extraordinary as the object of emulation and adoration, and not to the average and to the common, to the millions of them who daily stand there hewing away, building, digging, fashioning, molding, forging,--doing the things of life in faith and hope and deep humility.

Common folks! There are the millions of mothers--your mother and my mother--all over this land; a bit old fashioned, a stranger would say, but we who know her and share her life and her spirit, know that, beyond fad and fashion, mother is of a quality that is perhaps timeless and eternal. Her dress may be a little plain,

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and she may lack the social graces that come with wealth and leisure; for most mothers have neither wealth nor servants nor leisure; her hands are perhaps more tender than soft, for mother must daily do the work and the infinite tasks which but for love would be drudgery; care may have drained much of the warm color out of mother's face; it may be a little pale, a wee bit drawn, and a line here and there, but somehow a face that one loves to touch with the lips of adoration.

Mother's eyes are no longer brilliant or sparkling, but somehow never cold; eyes that see so much because they have so often been washed in tears. That is the mother of millions of men--your mother and my mother. When there is work to do--the scrubbing and the washing and the cooking--there's mother; where there are lessons to learn, quarrels to end, stories to tell, why--there's mother; when our little hearts break, when our little bodies ache, why--of course, there's mother; and when we err or sin or fail, why, there's mother, with her sympathy and her understanding ways. And when we grow to manhood and womanhood, and life summons us to other fields and we leave home, why, there's mother--alone, praying through her tears, her nest desolate--a mother of men. And when, after a life so spent, a little weary, a little tired, she lays herself down to her long rest, why, there's mother still--a memory, a consecration.

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There is nothing heroic about mother; no great tragedies; no fascinating romances; but just a mother of the millions of men--common folks. And there is father. Father left school when he was twelve; father is a bit rough; no frills, no knick-knacks about dad; father is not very strong on social graces; father hasn't read the latest novel, and perhaps he has not read many of the earlier ones. Father just reads his newspaper, and sometimes he glances through a magazine; and his boys and girls, whom he is sending through high school and college, so that they may have the advantages which he did not have,--his boys and girls know much more than father--or think they do.

Father gave his youth and his manhood that he might build for himself and his wife and his children a home and a hearth; and father poured the life blood into the food of his children and the raiment of his family. Father is ordinary, as ordinary as the rain and the soil, but as eternal as either.

Common folks! They are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters--millions of them; and you will pass by and say, "Oh, they are very common and very ordinary." But if you could throw open the portals of their souls and look within, you would see legends and stories of infinite beauty and charm and greatness; you would read revelations as to the magnificent heroism of common people!

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You and I know of sisters who have sacrificed themselves for brothers that they may go through life more successfully; sisters who have permitted life to pass them by so that some dear one may advance and succeed; and brothers and sons who have sacrificed careers so that they may build up upon the ruins which a father left. Why, all about you, everywhere, if you had but eyes to see and a sympathetic soul to interpret, you will see the daily acts of quiet heroism--everywhere! everywhere! in your own home, in your neighbor's home, around the corner of your home! Common folks!

Some four years ago when I returned from the battlefields of France, I remember speaking to you on the epic of the common man. It was there, amidst the elemental forces let loose by the great struggle where I first gained an insight into the profound depths of the human soul; it was there that I saw these average, ordinary, commonplace folks become transfigured before my very eyes into sublimity, until I stood humble and chastened in spirit before the revelation which was vouchsafed unto me.

I saw these plow boys and stevedores and truck drivers, the lads from the mills, the factories and the mines--the commonplace folks, the average folks; uncouth, perhaps; rough; and I saw them respond to the challenge of the moment; I saw them go over the top and

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plunge into the night to meet their fate, with such a spontaneity, with such a divine frenzy, with such a recklessness and abandon. But I was humbled before the things which I saw. And when I saw these lads in the back of the lines, in the dressing stations, submitting to the excruciating agony incidental to the dressing of fresh wounds, biting their lips until the blood fairly spurted, and digging their nails into the palms of their hands, but never a cry and never a sob to betray the hell of torture that they were passing through; and when I saw the millions of them standing there day after day, week after week, month after month, through the dull, crushing, heart-breaking monotony, in the cold or the heat,--standing there carrying on, and holding on, and holding on through the years,--I knew then what real, divine courage there is in the soul of every human being--the least noticed, the least educated, the least cultured.

There are no common folks today, my friends. A man is common only as long as the spark within his soul has not been struck, the fire has not been called to life; but it is there--latent, potent, within the soul of every human being. There are infinite capacities for greatness, for sublimity, for sacrifice, for endurance, and when the moment comes most common folks are not found wanting. That makes a man real proud of being a man; that is the promise of democracy; that is the hope of the world.

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Democracy knows that there is precious ore in the soul of every human being that can be mined by opportunity, and so democracy sets for its task not the cultivation of a few, the elect, the best--there are no best; but democracy sets for its task the reaching down into the vast layers, into the lowest strata, into the masses, and there mining the precious gold that is there; for God gave of his spirit equally to each child of God, and His spirit is within.

Common folks! God bless them! They are the strength of our life; the bread and the meat of our life. And when you and I go out into our daily tasks and rub shoulders with people, let us try to remember that in the man of the street--the average man that we meet, why, within his soul he may be carrying a glory; he may have gone through an experience in life which, while unknown as yet, transfigured him.

He may be one of those silent, humble heroes--the sons of democracy; the burden bearers of civilization. He is a child of God!

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