



## 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  
52

Folder  
134

In the Company of the Wise, 1922.

---

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,

"IN THE COMPANY OF THE WISE,"

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 30, 1922 - CLEVELAND, O.

---

WRHS

AMERICAN JEWISH  
ARCHIVES



JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



The Ethics of the Fathers, a selection of which I read this morning, belongs, as a book, to the wisdom of literature, the didactic literature of our people. It is one of the books like that of Proverbs of the Bible, and the wisdom of Ben Sira of the Apocrypha. The Ethics of the Fathers, the chapters of the sayings of the Rabbis, is one of the sixty-three treatises of the Mishnah. The Mishnah, you will recall, is the great collection of the law of the early Rabbis. The Ethics of the Fathers is a compendium, a collection of maxims, of wise sayings, covering a period of perhaps five hundred years, from the second century before the common era to the third century of the common era.

These moral and ethical dicta or maxims proved very popular. In the course of time they became incorporated in our liturgy and in our prayer books, and tradition has decreed that these six chapters of the Ethics be read on the six successive Sabbath afternoons beginning with the Sabbath after Passover and ending with the Sabbath afternoon before the Feast of Weeks.

When you read these six brief chapters through you get the impression of a trayful of glittering gems, all bright and attractive. Some are more precious than others. Some sayings are more profound and more

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



sublime, but all of them have character, distinctiveness and meaning. It is very difficult to choose from that trayful of gems one for discussion, for each one of them is a challenge to further thought, each one of them is like an open sesame to great treasure coves of reflection and meditation.

One would like to think very long on a saying such as that of Hillel, that I read this morning: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?" It is rather thought provoking, isn't it? One would like to think on a maxim such as this: "The coarse man cannot fear sin, and the ignorant man cannot be pious, and the bashful man cannot learn, and the irritable man cannot teach, and the man who is too busy making money will hardly ever get wise, and in the place where there are no men, you try to be a man."

And I have thought very often and very long upon a simple yet thought stimulating phrase like this: "Thine is not the duty to complete the task, but neither art thou free to desist from it." I think there is profound philosophy there. However, I am going to select this morning just one of these gems and hold it up to the sunlight and let the sunlight play upon all its facets. I am going to take that maxim of Simeon, the son of Gamaliel, "On three things the world stands: upon truth, and upon

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



justice, and upon peace."

The very order of these three is interesting. First is truth, and then is justice, and lastly is peace. The primary position is given to truth. There may be a justice of technicality, and there may be a peace of compromise; the one is not justice for it is not based on truth, and the other will not endure long as peace for it is not based on justice and truth.

The primary fact in life is truth, and I suppose if you ask any man what he thinks of this, he will say, "Why, that is very true." He will readily acquiesce. "Why, truth is a great virtue, and lying is the greatest sin." And let it go at that. And yet if that man knew the full implications of that single word Truth, he would shrink from it as he does shrink from it. There is one thing that people do not like and that is truth, for there is enough dynamite in truth to shatter all our preconceptions and all our beliefs and all our faiths and all our convictions, and people do not like to have these things interfered with.

You would think, for example, that the world, having paid for so many centuries lip homage to truth, would welcome truth readily and eagerly. You would think that when a man comes and proves conclusively by logic, by experimentation, that the world, for example, moves, that it is not the center of the universe, and that

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



the sun does not revolve around it, that he proves conclusively a new truth,--I say, you would think that the world would welcome him and acclaim him. You would think, for example, that when a man brings the truth that these various species and things which we see with our eyes are not distinctive acts of special creations, but belong to one continuous, unbroken chain of evolving life, that he would be welcomed and hailed as a new discoverer of new and wonderful lands for the great spirit of man to roam in.

But they are not. They are quartered and burnt at the stake, or imprisoned, or mocked, or crucified.

There is a very interesting book that has appeared of late, which I would recommend to each one of you. It is called "The Mind in the Making," by a great historian, James Harvey Robinson. Mr. Robinson devotes the first few chapters of his book to show why thinking is so difficult, and why men and women really do not like truth. He says, among other things, that our mind is always active, whether we are asleep or awake. We are always, always thinking, but most of the time we are thinking about ourselves. You take the average man at a moment when he is not engaged in any specific task to arrive at a definite decision, and he is not in what may be called a moment of reverie, and you ask him to tell you what he was thinking about, he will tell you he was thinking about

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



himself, about something touching himself, about means of self-magnification or self-justification.

Abstract truth, truth for its own sake, occupies very little place in our thinking hours. The Rabbis truthfully said, "A man is nearest to himself." And that is very true. We are primarily concerned with ourselves, and disinterested thinking is a rather rare pastime and not the order of the day.

There is another type of thinking in which we indulge which makes real creative thinking difficult, and that Mr. Robinson calls rationalizing. I would call it apologetic thinking. We get certain convictions concerning family, property, politics, government, religion; we get these convictions almost from infancy, from our crib, from our environment; we do not get them critically, we do not arrive at them by deliberate, critical, scientific analysis or study; we just imbibe them, we absorb them from environment. We are Jews because we are born Jews; we are Baptists because we are born Baptists; we believe in democracy because we happen to be born in a democratic country; we are capitalists because we happen to be interested in capital; we are socialists because we do not happen to have any capital.

These convictions are ours; they become part of ourselves; they become as the very warp and woof of our life, the very fiber; and when people call them into

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



question, when people attack them or criticize them, we feel that we are being attacked and we are being criticized; our self-esteem begins to suffer; we do not want people to find weaknesses and errors in ourselves, and so we begin to look around for reasons and arguments and justifications to ratify our conviction; we begin to rationalize. We are not concerned primarily in discovering truth; we are concerned primarily in retaining our self-esteem by finding arguments here, there and there to prove that we are right. That is most of our thinking. And I venture to say that most of the books that have been written on ethics and philosophy and social science and political economy and religion were written, consciously and unconsciously--most often unconsciously--from that point of view--a biased and prejudiced point of view,--these writers who are thinking with their hearts; and it is just as difficult to think with your heart as it is to feel with your mind.

I recall during the early days of the war a group of German professors, some thirty or forty in number, the most representative intellects of Germany, published a manifesto in which they established, and proved to their complete and absolute satisfaction, that Germany was right, that Germany was waging a war for civilization, that the Allies were hopelessly and criminally in the wrong. Now, these professors were not

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



deliberately distorters of the truth, they were not liars. What was wrong there? Why, there was an emotional blockade established which kept truth from penetrating; they couldn't think disinterestedly because their entire mode of thinking had been taken over, had become ill for the time being, by the all-embracing and all-absorbing passion to justify their own native land.

That is most of our thinking. You know a hundred years ago people used to speak with a great deal of eulogy and praise of the mind, the human intellect, of reasoning; that was divine. Pure thought was the salvation of the world. We have come to realize that there is no such thing as pure thought. The body has an awful lot to do with our thinking, whether we like it or not. You take a man who happens to talk about human kindness and forgiveness and all these fine virtues, and if he happens to have doubt, just step on his foot.

I recall a professor of the kind who is very fond of talking of pure reasoning, of the marvelous human mind. He was very sensitive about it; and in the midst of this great hortatory, this exaltation concerning the pure, infallible human mind, some wag of the class would pass a slighting remark about the professor and the bald head, concerning which he was so sensitive. This pure mind in a moment would become transformed into a hissing volcano.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



Pure reason? There is no such thing.

There is a type of thinking which does yield truth. Mr. Robinson calls it creative thinking; other people call it curiosity, idle curiosity. The human being is a curious animal; he has among his many instincts of urges the urge of curiosity; he likes to ferret things out, to search things out, to discover hidden places; just like a child will take a clock and dismantle it to see how the works go. He is curious. And in pursuit of this disinterested curiosity, when he is not concerned with defending himself or his position, or his predilections, or his prejudices, but in those moments when he is just idly curious, when he looks upon life, nature and society, with clear eyes, when he is a detective seeking clues, that is when he is likely to stumble upon truth; and most of the great discoveries of science have been brought about just through this idle curiosity of the human race.

It is like Moses who sees the burning bush, and he is curious to see what it is. "I will approach and see what is the cause of this fire burning in the bush without consuming it." And it is then, by the prompting of this idle curiosity, that he discovers God and receives a revelation and a message; and most of the great revelations which have benefitted mankind have come just through this disinterested, impersonal, almost objective, curiosity of the race to see things.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



Shaw realizes it. You will recall in his "Back to Methuselah" Eve has something to say, as she always <sup>are</sup> did, to Adam. She says, "You, Adam, and you, Cain, the diggers and the fighters; you offer no hope to the human race; you will dig yourselves into the ground, and you will fight yourself into death; you will destroy the race. My hope lies with my sons and sons' sons, whom you regard as useless but who go out into the field and take a reed and blow through it, or take a stone and begin to fashion something upon it, or study the sky and name the stars. My hope lies with Tubal, who, in a moment of idle curiosity, fashioned a wheel that eased all my work and my labor. The hope of the race is to be found with Enoch, who wanders over the hillside and seems to hear invisible voices and follows these voices. The hope of the race is to be found with the artists, the dreamers, the visionaries, who serve no immediate practical purposes, who do not defend and do not champion, but who simply love learning, seek truth, and fashion life by the truth which they discover."

Now, that question of truth is the emmus of which Simeon, the son of Gamaliel, speaks when he says the world is based upon it. That is the only hope of mankind. A few days ago I read some very interesting chapters on art. The greatest, perhaps, of French sculptors of the last century, Rodin, says of art:

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



"There is nothing ugly in art except that which is without character; that is to say, that which offers no outer or inner truth. Whatever is false, whatever is artificial, whatever seeks to be pretty rather than expressive, whatever is capricious and affected, whatever smiles without motive, bends or struts without cause, is mannered without reason,--all that is without soul and without truth, all that is only a parody of beauty and grace. All in authority that lies is ugliness in art. When an artist intending to improve upon nature adds green to the springtime, rose to the sunrise, calm unto young lips, he creates ugliness because he lies. When he softens the grimace of pain, the shapelessness of age, the hideousness of perversion, when he arranges nature, disguising it, tempering it, to please the ignorant public, then he is creating ugliness, because he fears the truth."

I sometimes ask myself why is it, in this land of ours, that art and literature and culture are at so low an ebb. It is not because we have no innate gifts or capacities. I believe it is because we are, as a people, afraid to face truth--truth in nature, truth in our social organization, truth in our private and family lives, truth in all the contacts and the relationships which exist among men. A story that has a happy ending, though improbable and impossible, will appeal tremendously, it or a play will have a wide reading public; but a story that strips

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



the veil and reveals nature in all its reality, perhaps in its crudeness, in its harshness, but in the beauty of truth,--that story or play will arouse a storm of protest, and voices will cry for suppression and censorship. Our conventions have been outraged, our traditions have been challenged; we are not concerned with truth, but with our own self-esteem, our own self-magnification, our own self-justification.

But isn't it true, my friends, that there is no beauty in the world unless it be of the very mould and substance of truth. Whether it be the sculptor in his studio, the thinker in his study, the preacher in his pulpit, the cobbler in his shop, none of them can create anything that will quiver with life, that will have the stamp of God upon it, the stamp of reality, unless it is moulded and fashioned and created in sincerity, in truth, in deference to facts as they are.

Who is the artist? What is an artist? Why, the artist is simply the man that reveals the spiritual truth in all reality, in what he may call beauty or ugliness, in what he may like or dislike; the artist is the man that reveals the inner meaning and the inner beauty and the inner truth in it all. The artist makes us see the things which heretofore we have seen, I might say, blindly. The artist makes us note creatively the things which we have heretofore noted passively. He therefore

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



creates for us a new heaven and a new earth, because he reveals a new truth to us.

We human mortals get into grooves of habits. We do not notice the accustomed things around us; they do not interest, they do not challenge us any more; they sink into the grooves of our mind, and there they lay mouldering and dead. And then comes the artist and he takes it out of its grave, that same ordinary, commonplace thing which we have been beholding with our eyes but have never seen, and he takes it and holds it up to the light and lets the light play upon it, and behold, there radiates forth a new revelation and a new message.

He reveals the ~~emmus~~<sup>emmet</sup>--the seal of God. He reveals truth to us, and that is the thing upon which the world is based--truth! Disinterested truth! I read you this morning that famous sentence of A : "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving reward, but rather be like servants who serve their master without any expectation of reward."

That is religion. That is piety, disinterested piety. The religious man who expects God to give him all the things of the world, prosperity and good health, because he is good, is merely bartering with the Almighty. He is not seeking truth; he is seeking his own self-aggrandizement; he is trying to establish a contract with the Almighty. He will worship Him provided the

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



Almighty will be good to him. "I will give that you may give unto thee." That is not religion because it is not truth. Job founded the real essence of religion. Job discovered it. Job, the pious man, the man who never sinned, the man who refuses to accept the implications of the world, of his friends, of his suffering, his leprosy, that malady of his which broke him completely and threw him on the ash heap outside his village, this proud emir, this proud man, honored and respected by his fellowmen, is now a loathsome, foul, diseased leper.

He refuses to accept the implication of the words of his friends that his suffering is retributive, that God has punished him for his sins. He knows he has not sinned, and he is perplexed to know why, if he has not sinned, God has punished him and deprived him of his position, of his children, of his home, of his possessions, of his very health. And then through the long agony of the days and nights of waiting, of thinking, the truth begins to dawn upon him: that our relation to God is not the relation of the servants who serve their masters for the sake of receiving reward.

We do not know how God rules His universe. We do not know the principle by which He does it. We cannot by any means grasp the infinite plan and purpose of it all, but we do know that within us God has placed a moral law; we know, through the divine idle curiosity, that somehow

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



within us, in our souls, God has placed (we call it conscience) a moral law--the ideal. The moral law tells us to do good, to live uprightly, to love justice, to love mercy, to assist the oppressed. We must do that because it is the truth! Whether we suffer by it, or agonize by it, or pass through hell for it, whether God exists or does not exist, it is the truth and by it we must live!

And so Job cries out: "Even though God would kill me, I will still hope in Him; I will still do His bidding." That is religion. That is disinterested piety. And it is upon this truth that the world stands.

We live upon justice. I suppose it is just as difficult to know what justice is as to know what truth is; but one thing we do know--that justice is much more than legal justice, than court justice. Legal justice is but the application of the standards of the day; legal justice is but the expression of the morality of the hour. A hundred years ago fifty crimes were punishable in England by hanging. The stealing of a loaf of bread by a poor outcast was punishable by hanging. That was the justice, the legal justice of the day. But what was justice yesterday may be cruelty today.

There is a higher kind of justice, a moral justice which is based upon this presupposition that life and happiness are meant for all, that in the sight of God there are no favored children, and that every human

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



institution, whether it be government or industry, must make for human happiness; that the goal of life is self-expression, that every child of God must be given an opportunity for self-liberation, to give adequate expression to all the latent gifts and capacities of his soul and his mind. That is justice.

It is not a question of the dry letter of the law; it is not a question of crime punishable by this or that; it is a question of establishing each child of God in his patrimony, to make each child of God fashioned in the image of God, as free, as God-like in his freedom as possible. That is the deed upon which the world is based.

The shalem--peace! By peace, my friends, is not meant the peace of Versailles, the peace of Washington, or the peace of Genoa; by peace is not meant a compromise, tacitly based upon wrong and force and oppression. Shalem means not a formal, superficial peace, when there is no fighting going on. Shalem means a peace that is based on justice and truth, a peace that is the result of every people being given the privilege and the right to live its own life and to express its own soul, when there is no exploitation and no economic imperialism and no force strangling the weak. That is the shalem that the sage had in mind.

When the children of man will realize that

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



there are other battles much more grave and serious to be fought than the battle of man against man--the war on ignorance and the war on disease and the war on superstition; that there are much more interesting worlds to be conquered than territory, the shifting of boundaries--that there is the whole universe of God to be conquered and subdued and used for the glory of the human race; when men will realize that there is glory to be found in the field--and not necessarily on the battlefield--in the flower, in the stream, in the blade of grass, that God reveals His infinite glory, His grace and beauty in everything that lives and exists and breathes, and that all that man needs is an eye to see, and a heart to feel, and a mind to think dispassionately, disinterestedly, then peace will come to this tired and troubled earth of ours.

On three things the world exists: on truth, on justice, and on peace!

--o--

JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND