



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Painted Windows, 1922.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,

"PAINTED WINDOWS"

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MAY 14th, 1922 - CLEVELAND, O.

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"The Gentleman With a Duster," who, in his "Mirrors of Downing Street" wrote so definitely and luminously about the political leaders of England, and who, in his "Glass of Fashion," revealed in such a caustic way the foibles of English society today, has now presented us with a series of studies on the religious personalities of England, called "Painted Windows."

The same frankness which made the other two books so delectable and instructive one finds here, and also the same force and restraint. The author, who chooses anonymity not as a cloak behind which to stab at his adversaries with impunity, but rather to give the impression of impartiality and objectivity, approaches his problem not as one who has an axe to grind, not as a scoffer or as an iconoclast. He is a deeply religious man himself, and he is deeply concerned with what he calls the ignoble position which the church occupies today in the world.

He is aware, like so many of us are aware, of the rather pathetic picture of ineffectiveness and irrelevancy which the church of organized religion presented during the war. He is aware of the loss of moral leadership--the moral leadership which seems to have passed from the church. He knows of the cold indifference of thinking men and women to the church and its institutions,

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and he also knows of the confusion in the minds of the ministers themselves, of the struggle between traditionalism and modernism, between the old and the new; and he knows of the terrible stress, the terrible mental and spiritual stress to which the earnest and upright ministers of the church are subjected, because of the imperative need for a readjustment and a new orientation which present day life and new forms of thought have made imperative, and he envisages these problems through the medium of personalities, as they work themselves out in the lives and in the acts and in the writing of the outstanding religious leaders of England.

His twelve studies introduce the twelve great church leaders representing all the more important church units in the empire--Catholicism, the Anglican Church, and the various groups of Nonconformists, and the characterization of these men by the author is at all times clear and comprehensive, and very often very apt and brilliant.

Thus, for example, when he speaks of Bishop Gore, who visited Cleveland during the war, and who was regarded by many as the most important and commanding figure in England, in the religious life of England,--he says of him: "One thinks of him as of a soul under a cloud. His look is the look of one who has not conquered, and who expects further, perhaps greater, disaster. He set himself

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to be not an exponent of the faith, but a defender of a particular aspect of that faith. Organization destroyed him."

And of Dean Inge, the dean of St. Paul's church, perhaps the greatest mind, the greatest intellectual force in the English church, the author says: "He does not lean as decisively as he might. Perhaps he is still thinking; perhaps he has not yet made up his mind whether clergymen ought to be multiplied or exterminated, whether in religion we are getting on, and if so, where are we going to? He thinks of mankind with interest, but not with affection. Humanity for him is a spectacle but not a brotherhood."

And of Father Knox, the brilliant, playful young priest, who, though the son of an Anglican bishop, left the Church of England and entered the Church of Rome, the author says this: "Everybody loves him but nobody takes him seriously. I am forced to think of the image of one who may occasionally be haunted by the dreadful fear that his fortress is his prison."

And of the archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Davidson, the author says these very apt and well delineated words: "If he has a passion at all it is a passion for the status quo; if he has a genius, it is for compromise." And he sums it up in the words of Henry James: "Let us be flexible, dear grace, let us be

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flexible." And so on, right through the book, there are many incisive, well characterizing phrases that make the book charming and worthwhile.

And yet we are not concerned this morning with these individual personalities to which we are introduced; we are concerned this morning with Painted Windows, with the problems of religious effectiveness and vitality and usefulness as they are presented through these personalities in this book. And throughout you find confusion, uncertainty, compromise, apologetics, spiritual bewilderment and chaos of opinion; and the author sums up his work with these rather striking and challenging words:

"It is curious, if Christianity is from heaven, that it exercises so little power in the affairs of the human race. Far from exercising power of any noticeable degree, it now ceases to be even attractive. The successors of St. Paul are not shaping world policy. They are organizing whist drives and opening bazaars. The average clergyman, I am afraid, is regarded in these days as something of a bore, a wet blanket even at tea parties. (That is England, of course). Something is wrong with the church. It is impious to think that heaven interposed in the affairs of humanity to produce that ridiculous mouse, the modern curate. No teacher in the history of the world ever occupied a lower place in the respect of men. So deep is the pit into which the modern

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minister has fallen that no one attempts to get him out. He is abandoned by the world. He figures with the starved children of Russia in appeals to the charitable, an object of pity. (That is true even in these United States). The hungry sheep look up and are not fed, but the shepherd also looks up from his pit of poverty, as neglected, as hungry as the sheep, hungry for the bare necessities of animal life."

Now, what is wrong with the church? And when I speak of the church I have in mind equally the synagogue. While the synagogue has problems peculiar unto itself, it shares in many of these universal religious problems. Why have men grown cold and indifferent to the church? It is not because the church is deliberately anti-social, is deliberately hostile to the highest interests of men; it is not that the church does not try to serve honestly the needs of humanity, and it really is not because ministers and priests and rabbis are so hopelessly incompetent and insincere.

There are hundreds of thousands of God-fearing, man-serving ministers throughout the world, who in true humility of spirit and devotion and loyalty give of themselves unstintingly to the service of their people, expecting little reward and receiving less. I venture to say that as a class the ministers are perhaps the most abused people in the world. At the beck and call of

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everyone, their lives scattered over an infinite number of tasks, they are at no time masters of themselves, of their time, of their privacy. They are public utilities and public property. And if so many of them do not rise above the level of mediocrity, it is not that they have not the innate capacity for bigger and finer things, but because the multitudinous demands upon their time drive them and force them to a hopeless level of mediocrity.

It is true of the rabbis, it is true of the priest and the minister. In the olden days a religious leader was a leader of men, with time for meditation and study, to gain a rich and varied experience in life, so as to be in position to impart these things to those whom he is called upon to lead. But nowadays the rabbi is also a schames and a chason, a teacher and a pastor.

Greatness requires leisure, and the minister today in the Christian or in the Jewish church has no leisure. I say it is not because the church is anti-social or the ministers are incompetent or insincere that men have turned from it. Why have they turned from it? I believe for two reasons: first of all, because the church is still chained to old traditions. It is still championing a lost cause; it is still shackled by old world conceptions; it has not yet emancipated itself from the ancient and the medieval notions concerning life and the origin of man and human destiny. In its infancy the

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church adopted the scientific notions of the day, current in those days. It adopted them and from them founded this theology which gave them divine sanction, and as long as people knew no better these things were valid and acceptable, but during the past two or three hundred years man has marvelously progressed scientifically, and has revised his old notions about the universe.

Science has advanced, but the church has failed as yet to redefine and reevaluate and reorganize itself in consonance with the new truths and the new scientific revelations of the day. It still speaks the ancient language, the language of satan and angels and miracles and Bibliology and supernaturalism and transsubstantiation and salvation by atonement of blood,-- notions and ideas which meant something to peoples a thousand years ago, which were real and meaningful unto them, but which mean nothing to thinking men and women today.

Because the church is an institution it can change with great difficulty. An attitude of mind may change more readily than an institution and an organization; and the church is almost hopelessly over-organized, and modern man cannot be attracted to a religion which still speaks in terms of ancient cosmologies and angelologies. Modern man cannot be attracted to a church or a religion that speaks of creation instead of evolution, of a saint

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falling from grace instead of a savage rising to higher levels, of miracles instead of the immutable laws of nature, of the authority of a book in place of the authority of the outreaching spirit of man. Modern man has no use for these pretensions of medievalism, and the church that insists upon these pretensions must forfeit the loyalty and the devotion of thinking men and women.

And there is, to my mind, yet another reason why men have turned from the doors of the church and have sought self-satisfaction elsewhere. The church today is still much more concerned with other worldliness than with this world. Life is still a preparation for death and the hereafter; life is still a vale of sin and suffering through which men must pass in order to reach the kingdom beyond. The good act here is to be rewarded elsewhere, and sin is to be shunned because it is to be punished in the life beyond.

That was well and good when men did look upon this life as a corridor leading to the other and the more important life, but the attitude of man has changed in the last few hundred years. Modern man is concerned with this life and this world, with the tasks and the duties confronting him today. He is concerned with fashioning this mold which God gave unto him, this earth, so that it will become a better place for himself to live in and for his children. "The heavens belong unto God, but

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the earth He gave unto the children of man, to make beautiful a Garden of Eden, a kingdom of joy here below."

These are its concerns--political organization, social organization, economic reconstruction, art, literature, science, knowledge, truth. Whatever is beyond he leaves unto Him whose will guides the universe. Whatever his state in the world to come, it will be as natural as his state is here. There is nothing supernatural, but all is nature and all is God. This condition beyond the grave will develop as naturally as the growth of the flower, or as the stream that moves onto its appointed destiny. He is no longer afraid of death and the circumstances of death, and he no longer devotes the concerns and the energies of his life to the problems of the hereafter.

And because the church has not realized the change which has come over the thoughts of men, the shifting of the center of gravity and interest to the now and the present and the here, it has been unable to lead and to hold. Being concerned with other worldliness, it left this world to knaves and to scoundrels, to exploiters, to money grubbers. It began to say aye whenever those in power said aye, and nay whenever those in power said nay. It began, <sup>with</sup> as this Bishop Davidson, to have a genius for the status quo and the compromise. The power of prophesy, the propelling, revolutionary power to

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project new visions, new ideals, to teach men to dream and hope,--that left the church, and it became an institution dead, like its images and its altars and its pulpits--property but not prophesy.

Painted windows! I, for one, believe that the church has a real function to perform in life, and that real religion does answer a need of the human soul. It has been the supreme conviction of my life; because of that I have been so intolerant of these things that distort the real mission of the church, that take it away from its real appointed course in life. Why does a savage make an idol and worship it? Fear? Yes, in a sense it is fear. It is fear of the uncontrolled forces of nature all about him. What does the savage want? Why, he wants to master these forces, to dominate them, to control them so that they will do him no harm. And how does he do it? Why, simply by projecting his wishes, his spirit, his desire, by fashioning an idol which embodies all the things which he would like to be but is not. He is weak; his idol is powerful. He does not know what the future will bring unto him; his idol is all-knowing.

His wish has created for him a reality which can master and dominate the world, which he himself, in his impotence, in his weakness, cannot dominate. All about him are terrors and dangers and famine and earthquakes and beasts that lurk in the night; he himself, alone,

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is defenseless; he has not yet evolved the tools with which to cope with life. And what does he do? Why, he simply projects his spirit, his imagination, his will, the will to live and the will to rule, and he creates for himself a god, an idol, an image, which shields him, which protects him, which gives him the hope and the confidence to endure, and ultimately really to dominate nature in the world about him.

That is why a man makes gods. Priests do not make religion. Men, out of the tragic need of their lives, evolve the gods they worship. Now, I maintain that this need modern man still experiences. I maintain that modern man still needs that faith to enable him to wrestle with a world that seeks at every moment to destroy him. I maintain that man, in his climb from the primeval mud to the heights, needs this faith, this God--this faith in the ultimate triumph of the spirit, in the enthronement of his spirit and his will over the rabid, crude, coarse, relentless forces of nature. He needs the confidence that all this confused and chaotic world about him is basically and fundamentally one, unified and controlled by one wise purpose and one great intelligence.

He needs that faith to urge him on, to give him the impulse to endure, to climb, to suffer, but to advance. And that is religion. Religion is not science, and religion is not knowledge or ethics or therapeutics or

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medicine. Religion is not Bibliological, the worship of a book, of an infallible, of a man or a pope; religion is simply the immortal hope of the human race, the will to live and to rule; religion is simply the craving and the longing of the human soul for expansion, for growth, for mastery. And man today needs that faith which we call God to inform and inspirit all his outreachings for expansion, for greater freedom and for dominion. That is religion.

Religion is the unifying principle of the world. It is the cord that threads all the pearls; it is the channel that holds all the cross-currents; it is the theme that organizes all the notes of brass and wood and string into one symphony. The physical eye sees a world in conflict, in confusion; the physical eye sees struggle and war and famine and death, and species tearing and clawing at one another, and men destroying one another. The physical eye discerns no harmony, no purpose, but the blind, heedless, careless working out of some unknown purpose or whim. But the spiritual eye, the eye of faith, faith that does not know, but intuitively has found the truth,--the spiritual eye sees the purpose, sees a goal, sees organization, and sees a fundamental unity.

And so the purpose of religion throughout the ages has been to unify all the efforts of the human race; and that is why all art and all music and all

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literature and all philosophy sprang from religion. Your theater and your dance and your ballads and your music are all expressions of religion; because religion urged men to give expression to all that is latent within them, and then set about to organize, to coordinate, to balance, to unify them all. Religion is the spirit of expansion and the spirit of unity in the world, and I maintain that this age of ours needs this faith and this harmony as much as the savage in his swamp needed it, and perhaps more so.

There is today throughout the world such a corrosive doubt prevalent. Men have lost their mooring, men have lost their anchor, men are adrift, men are troubled and perplexed and bewildered. They need some faith to steady them, to give them that superb confidence which will send them out into the world enthused and inspirited, to work--to work for the greater glory of man.

And, oh, how scattered our life is today, how disjointed and chaotic! The scientific man thinks there is nothing else in life but knowledge, and the artist thinks there is nothing else in life but beauty, and the religious man thinks there is nothing else in life but theology, and the epicure thinks there is nothing else to live for in life but the hectic pursuit of pleasure. And each one of them remains throughout his days an unhappy man, and in the autumn of his life he is a disillusioned man, because he has missed the harmony of being, he has

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missed the theme of life.

Religion comes to the world today in its confusion and in its chaos, and says unto it: "All is one. God is one; man is one; nature is one. It is all one scene of endless energy, one endless stream of vitality, surging, plunging, moving on through eternity and the infinite; evolving, creating, experimenting, forming new things, new species, new ideas, new beauties, new glories all the time--all the time. It is all one vast unity. And science and art and literature and knowledge and the longings and prayers of men, and the things which we achieve with our hands and the things which we achieve with our minds are all one, and the beauty of life and the blessedness of life is to organize it, to balance it, to find the perfect equilibrium." That is religion.

The harmony of being, and faith in effort. That is religion. Painted windows! Ah, painted windows have a beauty of their own. They soften the glare of the sun. Sometimes the light is too brilliant for the human eye; painted windows mellow it and soften it. I remember the day I tramped over the hills of Jerusalem in the brilliant noontime. The heat was scorching, the light dazzled and burnt into one and made one very uncomfortable. And then I stepped into the cool, quiet precincts of the mosque of Omar, and the painted windows of blue and dark

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green so softened the glare of the light from without, and so refreshed the soul that withered and wilted under the merciless, searching heat of the sun. Dim light has a beauty of its own, the beauty of dusk and of twilight, the hour for meditation and the quieter life.

You know there is much more to life than reason and logic. A man's mind grows tired, oh, how easily it tires of scientific formulae and mathematic equations and inductive and deductive speculation. It wants to dream, it wants the coolness and the refreshing atmosphere of shadows in which to spin the silken web of fancy, the gold and the gossamer of the imaginative life. And painted windows in religion create that mood and that atmosphere.

I sometimes think that religion has softened the harsh glare of life for human beings. Religion has dissolved the rigid angularity of things into that tantalizing and elusive and hard, intriguing arabesque of spiritual beauty. I think that religion has been a balm to the aching hearts of the human race. It built for mankind high, vaulted cathedrals and filled them with coolness and shadows, so as to shelter the human race from the pitiless reality of physical life, with all its ugliness and all its viciousness and all its cruelty. Religion built its tabernacles with vast domes, as if to embrace all the suffering children of God in compassion and in love.

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Painted windows! I think they have been a blessing to mankind. I can think of a little woman whose companion and helpmate in life long ago left her--and this comes to me on Mothers' day--I can think of the little woman whose children have scattered, her nest flown, lonely, with nothing but her burden of years and memories. I can see her now on a Sabbath afternoon, as the day began to darken, taking her old, age worn, yellow leaf Book of Psalms, setting herself by the window through which the rumbling and the noise of a great city swarming by greet her, and bending over this old prayer book and in a broken voice repeating the ancient axioms of her faith: "Out of the depths do I cry unto Thee, oh Heavenly Father; hearken unto the voice of my supplication! Hear my cry!"

And I think, I know, that her God will reach down and touch her bent and sorrowing frame in compassion; I know that He will bring balm to her tired, aching heart. Painted windows? Yes, what a wonderful blessing they have been to the world. I believe that some day men and women will turn back to their temples and their synagogues and their churches, seeking again the fountain of living water, the meanings of life and the faith which sustains life. I think that will come about when churches will realize that painted windows are meant to soften life and not to darken the minds; when churches will surrender all their ancient pretensions to exclusive

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and absolute truth; when churches will rightly surrender all attempts to dictate to science, to physics, to biology and geology; when churches will conceive of their one and supreme function in life to be expansion of the spirit of man and unity in the efforts of men; when churches realize--and the realization will come to them as a new revelation--that their one supreme task in life is simply this:

To teach men to reach up and touch the hem of God's robe of glory; to teach men to find a blessedness and contentment by service in the kingdom of God!



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