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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Need of Prayer, 1922.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER

SUBJECT: THE NEED OF PRAYER.

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

NOVEMBER 26, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.

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WRHS

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



When I spoke of the need of God I expressed my belief that man needs God because he needs a sense of aloneness in a world that is, after all, very strange to him; that man needs God because he needs a sense of permanence amidst the flux, the transitoriness of existence, and that man needs God because he needs a sense of dignity in a world which constantly reminds him of his smallness and impotence and meanness.

And when I spoke of the need of ideals I expressed my belief that man needs ideals because he needs must have something to give significance to his life, and he needs ideals because he needs must have something to give zest and relish and enthusiasm to the concerns and the activities of his days.

Now this morning I am going to speak of man's need of prayer, and I shall express a belief and conviction that man needs prayer because he needs strength in the midst of his weakness, and he needs communion in the midst of his loneliness. You know it is as difficult to argue about prayer as it is to argue about God or about the value of human ideals. Many arguments may be adduced to prove that God does not exist, and many arguments may be adduced to prove that ideals and strivings and aspirations have no value because they cannot affect and remold the universe; and I suppose many arguments may be adduced to prove that prayer has no efficacy, and yet men do pray just as men do believe



in God, just as men do crucify themselves for the sake of ideals.

Prayer is beyond the range of logic; the needs for prayer is deeper than the surface of visible things. I believe it was Williams James who said the reason why we do pray is simply that we cannot help praying. Prayer is a natural human impulse, and we must satisfy that instinct or that impulse even as we must satisfy hunger or thirst; it is just as real. And when men need to pray, when men needs must give way to the pent up hopes and fears and emotions of their life, when men feel the need for union and divine comradeship, they do not at all stop to ask of their mind and their reason whether prayer has any value, whether God can answer prayer, whether there is any effacacy to prayer: they just instinctively, impulsively, immediately pray. Reason might say no; impulse drives them.

When we get down to the bed-rock realities of life, we are no longer in the realm of reason or logic or intellect; we are now in the sphere of human sentiments and emotions and longings and hopes and fears. I have seen men pray on the firing line--men whose lips were unaccustomed to the chant and the litany of prayer, whose lips may never have uttered a prayer before; I have <sup>heard</sup> ~~seen~~ them pray in crude, unformed phrases, when words came out of them like broken sobs, like the heaving and the panting of some soul in agony. But I knew why they were praying. It wasn't that they were afraid; it was because they had somehow come to a dreadful finality



in their lives--some crisis. They were facing a destiny concerning which their mind and their reason and their wisdom could give them no insight, no information and no help. They were instinctively reaching out for that spirit which brought ~~them there~~; they were instinctively reaching out for a strength that was greater than their strength; they were reaching out for an arm that helps, they were yearning for an eye that pities, they were yearning for companionship in the midst of a vast tribulation. ( That is why they prayed.

Lincoln once said, "I have been driven many times to my knees in prayer by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go, when my own wisdom and that of all concerned here seemed insufficient for the day and for the task." He was driven to his knees in prayer because he had nowhere else to go. And I read you this morning that mournful Psalm 107, of the sailors that go down in ships to the sea in the midst of the tempests and the storms, and they, too, cry unto the Lord in distress because they, too, are caught out in some elemental force greater than themselves and their wisdom and knowledge and experience and prowess, and impulsively they cry out in prayer.

I know that if men were absolutely convinced that prayer was of no avail they would continue to pray just the same. If men knew absolutely that there was no God they would believe in God just the same; they would fashion a God because they cannot live without God and without hope and without prayer. Men turn to prayer as instinctively as a



child does when night comes on and it grows dark; but when the child is hurt or unhappy it instinctively seeks the sheltering arms and protecting bosom of its mother. And so we grown-ups, in all our power, in all our pride, in all our circumstance, oftentimes, very often, when night falls upon our way, and we are hurt and we are miserable and we are unhappy, why, we just instinctively turn to the sheltering arm of the mercy everlasting. That is why men pray.

And to my mind men pray for yet another reason-- because they want someone to commune with. They need communion, they need a friend, a wise and understanding friend to whom they can come in the loneliness of their days and pour out their souls. Don't you realize, men and women, how very often we find ourselves in the midst of life dreadfully, dreadfully alone? How very often in the midst of familiar faces we feel ourselves so utterly strange? There are so very few who understand us, there are so very few who can understand us, there are so very few who can enter the sanctuary of our souls and seek out the deepest depths of our life. Oftentimes we smile when our hearts would break, and we laugh when we would rather give vent to a sob. Men cannot understand us.

And in the great crises of life how few know us as we are, how few know our needs and our yearning. And it is then that we need some wise and compassionate friend, some spirit, to whom we can come and just unburden ourselves; not to ask for anything, not to coax favors, not to receive a



thing, not to petition, but simply to commune, to establish a contact, to lay bare our souls.

I sometimes enter some synagogue and have seen men bend over their prayer books chanting old familiar words and phrases, the old litanies of the faith, with an accent that is sad and sweet and tender. What is it those men ask for? It is not that they want things in life, substance, wealth, position. They may have all that. What is it they ask for? What is it they seek? Why, just someone to whom to talk, before whom to open up the secret recesses of their souls.

I think of a Jewish mother who sometimes, in the gathering dusk of a day, would sit down by her window, open an old book of psalms, and in the old intonation would recite psalm after psalm, very often the words unintelligible to her because they were in the ancient Hebrew, and yet somehow she would derive so much of strength and comfort and consolation from it. And what is it she was asking for? Not for things at all, not for health or wealth. What is it? Why, she needed just someone, some kindred spirit to whom to come, to whom to talk, some communion.

And that, to my mind, my friends, is the highest type of prayer. True prayer is not the kind of prayer that is wrung out of our necessity; the real prayer is not the prayer that comes out of some crying emergency of our life, when we need immediate help and succor. True prayer is just a wistful longing of our soul to reach out and up and touch



the All-Soul of the universe; just a desire to invite God in to dwell in our soul, to bring His light and His truth and His peace into our life. That's all. To make of ourselves a passive channel through which the benign graciousness and tenderness of the almighty friend of men may pour. And that kind of prayer is always answered.

There is no question there of the effacacy of prayer; the response is immediate, direct; because with that kind of prayer there always comes an elevation of soul, a refinement of spirit, an ennoblement of peace, and a quietude that passeth all human understanding. Those prayers at all times are always answered. When a man says, "I seek the nearness of God"--I do not seek the things of God but God himself, then God is near unto all those who call upon Him, who call upon Him in truth.

It is as if when we play the masterpiece of some great musician intelligently, constructively, creatively--that response would be immediate, the master would speak to him who plays his masterpiece immediately, directly. And so when one stretches out the antenna of the soul, to reach God just in a prayer of invitation, ~~of solicitation~~--that prayer is always answered.

But prayers, my friends, are answered in more concrete ways likewise. I believe in the effacacy of prayer; I believe that prayers are answered; not always nor in the way in which we want them answered. Prayer is, of course, not magic; prayer is not meant to violate the laws of nature.



Prayer will not move mountains, but mountains have been moved by men. And what has moved mountains? Why, the will of man--the will which is a law of nature all of its own. What does man do with the laws of nature? Why, he bends them to his will. They are there--implacable, permanent, unchanging. But is man bent and broken by them? Does man submit to them? Does he become their slaves? No; he uses them; he combines them, he organizes them and transcends them. There is a law of gravity that pulls things down to the earth all the time, forever and ever, but man flies just the same. Why? Why, he uses the law of gravity to serve his ends and then laughs in the face of the law of gravity.

His will can cut through a channel from one ocean to another and move mountains--not by violating the laws of nature but by using the laws of nature. The will, human personality, is infinitely stronger than any law that exists in the physical world. Man can accomplish more through the power of his will than he can by magic; and there are no limitations to the thing which the human will, concentrated, focused upon one definite task, can achieve, and the whole story of civilization is nothing else than the story of the human will organized, focused, intensified to accomplish one end until that end is accomplished. And in the realm of the will--and that is the point I wish to make this morning--concerning which we have been just beginning to learn a few things, we are just beginning to plumb the depths of the conscious and the sub-conscious life of men, we are just



beginning to chart the seas, as it were; a new world is opening out for us,--in the realm of the will prayer, which is after all a passionate concentration, plays a tremendous role.

The rabbis said that prayer without concentration, prayer without intent and intensity was meaningless. And they understood, because they were wise; they knew that the value of prayers consists in a passionate, determined concentration of our willpower upon a thing, upon a reality. And that kind of prayer can move mountains. It is a commonplace that prayer heals. From earliest times men knew that prayer can heal. Science is just beginning to place its seal of scientific approval, and psychology is beginning to find the psychic basis for faith healing; but that prayer can heal, why that is the commonest experience, the commonest phenomenon in human life.

And how does prayer heal? Why, simply through the power of will, organized, concentrated, focused upon a certain definite thing. Most of our ailments and most of our maladies are not physical and psychical; they are derived from a certain distortion of our snarled complexus, a certain tension, a certain thwarting, a certain disorganization in our psychic life; and when human will and faith--because it feels itself in contact with the personal infinite will and purposes of the universe--when human will, strengthened by faith, concentrated by prayer, focuses itself upon the one ailment or the one malady or the one thing, why, there may be



a release of tension, there may be a rearrangement and a restoration of harmony, there may be an opening of dams that let loose human energy that heals, cures and makes whole again. That is prayer. And the old mother or grandmother or ancestors of my people and yours instinctively knew that, because they knew that no rock or substance is as real as will--personality. They called it the soul. It is all one.

I believe it was Francis Thompson who said that prayer was the very sword of saints. That is how saints conquered the world ultimately--through prayer, which is nothing but the instinctive expression of a great faith in a God of goodness and harmony and justice, who was bound ultimately to be victorious. And when the Rabbis said "Even an iron wall cannot stop between the prayers of Israel and their Father who is in Heaven," they were giving vent to one of the greatest facts of human life and an ancient wisdom of the race.

My friends, one should not pray when one is sick only, one should not pray when one is in need only. That kind of prayer is rather unworthy of our high estate. One should pray at all times for a restoration of the harmony of our being; one should try at all times in the midst of the rush and the bustle of our daily concerns to pause a moment, free himself from the concerns and the anxieties of life, and turn his soul from the temporal to the eternal, from the transitory to the permanent, from men to God.

That moment of meditation, that moment of reflection,



that moment of communion, brings with it the music of the spheres, and a peace and a healing balm which nothing else in life will give you. And prayer in congregations is a marvelous thing. "God stands in the presence of a Godly congregation." When we pray alone we are sometimes tempted to be selfish, to forget our common humanity; when we pray in worshipful throngs we are conscious of a community of interest, we are members of one family, and we seek the God of us all. There is an exhilaration that comes out of the multitude and the host, and that is the value of public prayer. Nothing stirs me as much as to see the great throngs, the thousands of people, rise in one moment of devotion and self-consecration, to give vent to a great faith and a great conviction. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one!" That spirit and that exaltation cannot come but through a worshipful host in reverent praying.

I think one of the great sad things about our life, men and women, is that we have driven prayer out of it; we no longer pray. Even in our temples we come for sermons and lectures but seldom for the purpose of praying; and yet a sermon and a lecture is but of momentary value; but prayer fashions your soul in your life, if you just knew how to use this dynamic of God. One of the sad things is that we have driven prayer from the hearts and the lives of our children--from our homes. Is it because we are so rational and so logical and so wise? Oh, no. The greatest wisdom is now turning men to prayer. The more we plumb the depths of the



human souls and the more we know of the great laws of the universe, the more we realize how much we need prayer. It is perhaps because we are still under the rationalistic incantations of a hundred years ago.

You want religion to be a helpful influence in your life, men and women, and it must be that or it is nothing. We say that we have no creeds and we have no dogmas. True enough that we have none, and we have mighty few ceremonies and customs and practices. How does our religion touch our lives? How does it mold the lives of our children? How can it be helpful at all? Through only one way: to pray, through prayer; to turn our hearts to our Heavenly Father and say, "Father in Heaven, we are Thy children. Behold our weaknesses, our tribulations and our unhappiness. We need Thee, friend, we need Thee, kin, we need Thee, Father. Let Thy life and Thy truth and Thy peace come to dwell in our hearts and in our homes."

"Return unto me, for I shall yet deliver thee."

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