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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 Immortality, 1922.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,  
SUBJECT: THE NEED FOR IMMORTALITY.  
AT THE TEMPLE - SUNDAY MORNING,  
DECEMBER 3, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



When I spoke of the need of God I expressed the belief then that man needs God because he needs a sense of at-homeness in the universe and a sense of dignity, because he needs someone to underwrite his ideals, and because he needs freedom. When I spoke of the need of ideals I said that we needed ideals to lend significance to our life and to give relish and zest and enthusiasm to our actions. When I spoke of prayer I said that we needed prayer because we needed strength in our weakness and communion in our loneliness.

This morning I shall speak of the need of immortality, and I will express the opinion that we need immortality because we needs must have some explanation for much that is dark and difficult of understanding, for much that is confused and unharmonious, for much that seems irrational and unjust and cruel in our universe. And when I speak of immortality I have clearly in mind something much more than the immortality of our work, than the immortality of our influence in the world. That, too, is a beautiful and inspiring conception--that what we do lives after us, that nothing we achieve or aspire to achieve, that no dream or hope of our mortal days ever perishes from record or recollection.

We live on eternally in our work. Nothing is destroyed; nothing is lost. You may spin a top here and if you had eyes to see the vibrations of that spinning top will



widen and widen and extend and ascend until they touch the furthestmost star in the universe. You cast a pebble into the lake and there will be ringlets widening, widening, widening, until they will reach the uttermost shores of eternity. You utter a sound and you think that that sound ceases with the utterance of it. And now you have invented a mechanism by which your normal voice can now travel throughout the world through an almost immaterial substance. Now that sound which I utter will continue to resound through the vast immensities of the world for ever. It is never lost.

Nothing is destroyed in the universe, and certainly an act, and more especially a beneficent act, which is so much of vital energy let loose in the world, never perishes.

I say that that conception of the immortality of our work is itself a very inspiring one, for it makes us feel, does it not, how very significant is everything we do. There is nothing insignificant in the world. Everything is eternal. You can take a moment of time, a second of time, and crowd it with such intense activity and purpose and meaning that it will partake of the nature and the quality of the eternal. Everything we do counts, everything we do registers, everything we do remains.

Now, that is immortality, too. And yet I have in mind something more than that. Some people are content with this form of immortality. Some people say "I do not wish my life to continue forever; I do not desire my personality to be perpetuated. In the East, in the Orient, there are religions



that look upon the existence of individuality as an evil, and they certainly regard the perpetuation of individuality as the supreme evil; there are religions in the East that look upon it as the highest good in life to be able to free ourselves from ourselves, to lose ourselves in the all--just like a stream loses itself in the ocean. Personality , individuality, is an evil, and they do not want immortality; of course, not.

And yet most of us do wish for immortality. We believe that the highest good is not self-annihilation but self-realization, self-expression, self-fulfillment. That is not a selfish feeling at all because that which we desire of ourselves to endure is not the small and the petty and the mean and the selfish, but rather that something of us which partakes of the selflessness of ideals and devotions and loyalties and sacrifices and consecrations and friendships.

That personality which we molded out of the longings of our souls and out of the compulsions of the world outside of us, that thing which in us is like a shrine and a sanctuary--we wish that, somehow, to escape the corruption and the dissolution to which the body is subjected at death. Most of us hate to think of self-annihilation; we abhor the idea of self-destruction. We want immortality, and by that we mean the survival of our conscious self after the death of the body. By immortality we mean frankly the continuance and the perpetuation of our individuality, the sum total of that which we are really. Our memories and our affections and our ideals, our characteristics, ourselves--we wish that



to be eternal.

Now, there are two ways of approaching this problem of immortality: one is the way of science and the other is the way of faith; one is the way of logic and the other is the way of intuition; one is derived from evidences presented by our senses, the data of experience, and the other is derived from evidences presented by the qualities and the urgencies of our spiritual being, of our existence. And both are valid and both are real, and in the profounder realities of life the way of faith and the way of intuition and the evidences of our spiritual life are even more compelling and true and yield more of real truth than the way of the intellect and the way of logic and the way of reason.

Now science has as yet no definite answer to the problem: If a man dies shall he live again? It is yet too early for science to express a definite conviction or to dogmatize about it. The whole realm of the psychic is as yet a terra incognita--an unknown country, a mysterious land for the scientist. We are just beginning to scratch the surface; we have not at all plumbed the depths. The human soul and the human mind are as much a mystery today as they were five thousand years ago.

This age may perhaps contribute some new information concerning the nature and the quality of that which we call the mind, the conscious mind, the sub-conscious mind, and that which we call the human soul. But this is clear to science today--at least, no scientist will undertake today to



maintain that the human mind is inevitably dependent upon the human brain; no scientist will today maintain that the human brain cells create thought, just as no man today will maintain that the electric wire through which this unknown force courses and surges, creates the energy, the electricity. No scientist today has the courage or the reason to maintain that consciousness is produced by the interplay and the interaction of molecules, that life can be explained by matter.

Science today faces some strange and inexplicable phenomena. There is a something which we call thought transference, telepathy, where a thought can leave our minds and travel through immaterial substances to another mind thousands of miles away from us and there function and there act. Science today is faced by a strange phenomenon that we do get truth and we do get information through other agencies besides our five senses; that somehow truth and revelations, as we call them, come to us on the wings of the unknown from sources unknown, and that that truth is even more real and even more incisive and even more revealing of the nature and essence of reality than the information which our faulty and inadequate senses bring to us.

And psychic research has brought to the door of the scientist's laboratory a mass of startling facts, which somehow science is as yet unable to explain on the basis of physical law. I haven't the time nor have I the inclination at the present moment to go into the discussion of the evidences of psychic research. Certainly a layman is not



justified in jumping at conclusions, but these things which have engaged the minds of eminent, disciplined, trained scientists,--what we call levitation, communion, apparitions, automatic writings, and sounds which apparently are uncalled by a physical agency, and the immunity of certain mediums to pain and to suffering--these things which come to us--admonitions, premonitions, warnings--infinite facts, realities, making due allowances for fraud and for self-delusion and for autosuggestion--facts which somehow our physical laws today cannot explain,--science today faces these facts and refuses as yet to draw conclusions and to dogmatize.

Science, therefore, if it does not affirm the immortality of the soul, certainly does not deny it, and some day may yet establish it. But surely we laymen ought not to permit ourselves to indulge in the morbidity and the undignified procedure of making a religion of these fragmentary bits of intimations that come to us from what we call the other world. I think it is a sad thing, I think it is a tragic thing, I think it is an undignified thing for us to pry into the future like inquisitive, prying children. I think when we morbidly seek for some message from our dear departed through the medium of knocks or table tippings, when we make an idol of a ouija board, I think we are degrading a fact of life which should be fraught with solemnity and with dignity today.

If we must commune with our dear departed, if we need them in our moments of loneliness, let us commune with



them not through the pathetic fragments of the spiritualistic intimations and signs and whispers and knocks and flashes and apparitions; let us commune with them quietly and tenderly, through the memories which they have bequeathed unto us; let us enter the secret chambers of our souls and there we shall find a host of precious things which they have left unto us; certain gestures of grace and charm which they have bequeathed unto us, certain tender words--a smile; just those intimate things that speak to us as if our dear ones were with us.

I say that science may some day prove immortality, but the religious man, the man who believes in God, need not wait upon such proofs. There is the way of faith to establish immortality. The religious man does not have to wait upon psychology to tell him of life eternal, because he derives his faith and his belief and his conviction in life eternal out of his God idea, out of his conception of God and God's universe. If God is, if there exists a supreme, intelligent, creative force in the world, then it must be a supremely rational force and it must be a supremely good force and it must be a supremely just force; if life is not controlled by blind, chaotic, accidental, irresponsible forces; if there is a will and a personality working through the universe, then that personality, at least, must in itself have the perfection of those things which, because finite and limited and weak, are looked upon as just and rational and true, and the religious man who believes in God sees; and if God exists then there must be immortality for man, because



without immortality life remains irrational, and life remains unjust, and life remains cruel and stupid and meaningless and inexplicable.

The rationality of the world requires it. Here we are upon a planet that some myriads of years ago was evolved out of some flaming sea of star dust, some mass of gas, which cooled and cooled through the cycles and revolved and hardened and incrustrated until life appeared upon it. For millions of years something labored there to evolve this world, and then on this world through eternities of time there was an impulse which expressed itself first in plants, and then in animals, and then through successive stages of species into what now is man; some will struggling to fulfill itself in ever higher, in ever more perfect form, and now we face the prospect--and it is an almost certain prospect--that some day this earth of ours will again return to chaos, that some day this earth will become cold and frozen so that all life will perish upon it, and the human race will cease to be, and all the beautiful civilization which man has built up will be wiped out and lie in oblivion and desolation beneath an eternal blanket of ice and snow. Chaos to begin with, chaos as the goal.

Is that a rational thing? Has the human race sweated and agonized and suffered, has this life energy in the world struggled through eons and eternities to achieve, to produce, to express itself, only to be lost ultimately in the frozen silences of eternal oblivion? Is it rational?



Does an artist fashion through years and years of toil and labor and devotion a beautiful piece of sculpture, and put his soul in it, his heart in it, and the sweat of his soul in it, only to smash it into bits when once it is completed? Does an artist paint a beautiful picture and put in it all the fine emotions of his soul and all the sweatings of his genius and all his experiences, only to tear it into shreds when it is completed?

Certainly God, who is the source supreme of reason, who is mind in its highest purity,--certainly He has created a rational world; and if the world be rational then the life of human beings must not perish with the death of human bodies or with the collapse of the whole physical world. The spiritual world, the life energy, the soul--the impulse which we call the human soul--that must survive or else God does not exist.

I say, if the religious man assumes that God is good, then there must be life eternal. Here is a young man reared by the kind love and devotion of his parents, full of ambition, with so many hopes to be realized, so many dreams to come true, magnificent in the enterprise and the daring of youth; suddenly he is cut off, and this throbbing human soul is lowered into the corruption and the dissolution of the grave. Is that goodness?

Here are ten millions of God's children taken out into the night in the mud on a battlefield and hacked and torn and burnt and gashed and butchered. To no purpose? So that



ultimately the world may become a frozen bit of death? Is that goodness? Is that justice? If God exists then God is just.

Here is a prophet preaching the Word of God stoned to death or crucified; here is an idealist serving the will of God, giving of himself to be the light bearer, hounded and hated and persecuted; here is a Lincoln assassinated; here is a whole people being martyred for the sake of God and for God's truth. Is that justice?

Here is a world where the wicked prosper; here is a world where wrong and iniquity and tyranny and oppression reign. Is that justice? "Shall the Judge of all the world not do justice himself?" cried Abraham.

Here is a man who has an ideal, and it is the biggest thing in his life, and he knows that he will never be able to realize that ideal; but he can't help himself, he must serve it, because in his soul there are promptings and intimations of an ultimate perfection and an ultimate completeness which he is trying to reach. Who planted these intimations and these longings in our souls? Why is man never satisfied? Why are we always striving to reach a goal that is always advancing before us? Why have we been so created as to be constantly following some will-o'-the-wisp--never content, always restive, seeking, longing, aspiring, climbing?

Why? Because somehow there is in our soul intimations, whisperings, that there is beyond a perfection,



a completeness, a harmony which our life as yet does not possess. And so we climb upon the ruins of the foe with torn hands and bleeding feet--we climb, climb, climb to reach that.

But if there is no perfection and if there is no completeness and if there is no harmony anywhere, if life some day will be cut short, if my life ends with a poor dissolution of my weak flesh, then, somehow, God, who dwells in eternity, is mocking me; then He is "a cruel Aristophanes, as Heine said, who mocks His helpless children."

There must be immortality if there is God. To the religious man, then, immortality is a need, a necessity. All the doubts and all the confusions and all the complexities of life become resolved and explicable when once assumed it is true. Life is fragmentary and life is broken and life is weak and wickedness does exist and cruelty does exist, but somehow some day this life of ours, which today is struggling to express itself through our bodies, will, with the passing of our mortal frame, continue its course, evolving, adventuring through cycle after cycle, reaching out through eternity to the higher levels and the purer air, endlessly, eternally.

Of course the religious man cannot say to you and cannot say to himself, "I know the details of my expectation; I know exactly what the future life will be like." He cannot conceive of it. He cannot conceive of a thought; no one can ever picture to himself what a thought looks like. No one has ever imagined God. He is beyond the reach of our



imagination. But he knows from the meaning and the implications of his present experiences that there must be a life eternal. I think it was Professor Fosdick who once said that Columbus knew from the meaning of the facts at his disposal that there must be a Western route to India. Now, he never expected to find what he did find--a new world. The details he did not know; but his main thesis was vindicated--that there is a western route to India.

What we shall find in the world to come we do not know. The sea is uncharted; we cannot reach out there; but as God lives our main faith will be vindicated: there must be another shore. And so we face the future. The religious man faces his future not in fear or dread of death. Death he looks upon as a fact in life as much as birth. Birth is of God and death is of God; this world is of God and the next world is of God. It is all one--it is all one plan and one purpose, one rational, good and just plan.

And so the religious man daily and at the hour of his death says: "In thine hands I trust my spirit, when I am asleep and when I am awake; and with my spirit my body, too. The Lord is with me; I shall not be afraid."

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