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What is Happiness?, 1923.

SERMON BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

SUBJECT: WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

APRIL 15, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
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I suppose that from the prince in the palace to the beggar in the hovel we are, all of us, seeking happiness, and it is strange, is it not, that with all our concentration upon that one thing, how few of us have succeeded in finding it. I sometimes wonder whether our quest for happiness is not like unto the quest of that oriental philosopher who set out to find the philosopher's stone, that stone of strange potency which could transform everything it touches into gold, and he left his home, his kith and kin and traveled to distant lands, over seas and over mountains, to find the philosopher's stone. And he did not find it. In the twilight years of his life, a broken and disconsolate man, he returned to his home, and there, strangely enough, he discovered that the philosopher's stone which he was seeking had been all the time pendent from the chain around his own neck.

What is happiness? How is it to be found? Two weeks ago I spoke on What is Freedom? And I said that freedom is based upon the belief in the perfectibility of life, that life can grow better, that we can make life better, and that therefore we need the freedom of experimentation, the freedom of initiative, in order to make life better; if life revolves in a hopeless cycle, if we arrive all the time at a point whence we started, if there is only process in life but no progress, then there is no need for freedom.

Last week I spoke on What is Justice? And I said

that justice is based first on the idea of human interdependence, and next and more fundamentally on the belief that there is a complete moral intent in the universe, that the world is morally organized, harmoniously organized, and that we express ourselves most fully when we express the moral motif of the universe most fully.

In other words, the basis of freedom and the basis of justice is faith. Is it not? You cannot establish by logical proof that the world is becoming better, and you cannot establish by logical proof that there is a moral intent and organization in the universe. On the contrary, you may introduce many arguments, many telling arguments, to prove that there is no moral purpose in the universe, and that the world does revolve in a hopeless cycle of recurrences--going nowhere, just motion, movement, aimless, purposeless.

You cannot prove these theses. I suppose the only proof that you can have is this: that believing in these things, you live a life that is free and that is just, and that this free and just life will make for that something for which we all unconsciously strive--happiness.

In other words, happiness is based on faith, and that is one of the major thoughts that I would like to leave with you this morning. I do not mean church faith; I do not mean dogmatic faith. I mean the faith which is the assurance of things hoped for; I mean faith which is a conviction in things not seen with the physical eye. I mean that faith which every man needs, whether it be a scientist

or a man of religion, who wants to do anything worthwhile in life; the faith which tells us, who are situated on this islet in the midst of a sea of vast ignorance, in a world little known and little explored, swathed and wrapped in mystery and mystery.--the faith which tells us that our efforts are tending to some worthwhile goal; faith in the rationality, in the benevolence, in the harmony and in the future good of the world. Without that faith no happiness is possible.

You need that faith in religion, too. The great religions of the world, religions which have influenced mankind, have been those which have what we call a Messianic belief. The Greeks did not have it, and therefore the Greek outlook upon life was pathetic and melancholy. All that the pagan religion could tell the worshipper was to resign himself, helplessly, hopelessly, unto inexorable fate; and that is why the religion of Hellenes never really influenced the people of Hellenes. But the lift and the inspiration of Judaism, as the lift and the inspiration of Christianity, is Messianism--the belief that somewhere in the dim, distant future there is a golden land of beatitude---We call it the Kingdom of God---but that we are moving to some far off divine event--good and beneficent and harmonious and beautiful.

That is the faith that one needs to start out with. The man who begins life with the philosophy of Koheleth, which I read this morning--"I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and vexation"--that

man will never be happy. The man who says with Ecclesiastes, "That which has been, that will be; that which was done, that will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun"; the man who says with Koheleth, "That which is crooked can never be made straight, and that which is wanting can never be completed,"--that man will never really find happiness in the world.

The man who says with Matthew Arnold--you will recall that beautiful poem of his, called "Dover Beach"--

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain,
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night." --

the man who thinks of life as a battlefield, where ignorant armies clash by night, will never find felicity in life.

To be happy, then, first of all one must believe in a scheme of things which makes room for the possibility of happiness. Now, it is only the naive or the inexperienced or the exaltant mystic who does not find evil and sadness and sorrow in the world; it is only the rapturous who can shut their eyes to all the turbidity that is in life. There is enough of crushing burdens and defeats and bereavements and frustration and helplessness and want in the world of men to sober the most exaltant optimist; and true happiness is made

possible not by denying these facts in existence--they are real, they are bitter, especially when it strikes you--true happiness is made possible by determining the sphere and the scope and the value of these tragic experiences of life; by defining their proportion and their purpose.

Happiness is made possible not by the thought that all is vanity, or by the thought that there is neither joy nor hope in the world, but that along with sadness and sorrow there are joys and delights and beauty and charm and smiling children and happy homes and hopes that do come true.

True happiness is made possible, I believe, by sharing these sorrows of life with some one; by identifying these experiences with some one all-inclusive, universal experience, of some wise, beneficent purpose, by somehow believing, however difficult it may be, that this discord is part of an ultimate harmony, and that this deficiency and this want which is so keen and which is so hard to bear, is really an intimation of an ultimate completion and an ultimate perfection.

"Cast upon the Lord your burden," says the Psalmist. The Psalmist does not deny the existence of these burdens, but he says share them with the Lord. "Cast upon the Lord thy burden, and he will sustain thee."

In other words, the basis of happiness, to my mind, is faith. Now, having this faith, how can we find happiness? Clearly, happiness is not as real a thing as freedom or justice. You can't strive to find happiness. You can

strive to be just, and you can strive to be free; but you cannot say to yourself, "I am going to be happy today," or this year. You may sit down to a meal, but your enjoyment of the meal will depend upon how the meal is prepared and upon your appetite. You may approach certain experiences in life, but your reactions to them, the happiness which you may derive from them, will depend upon the experiences themselves and upon the conditions and the preparations of the faculties of your soul and your mind.

Happiness is not a thing in itself; it goes with something. Happiness is an attendant circumstance; happiness is a resultant harmony. If you do certain things in a certain way, if you have a certain mode of living, a mode of conduct, there may come as an echo, as a result, as an accident, as an attendant circumstance of that mode, of that living, of that action, a sensation, a feeling, an emotional state which we call happiness.

In other words, happiness comes from doing certain things. Action alone makes for happiness. The oriental man who comes of the hot clime in which he lives, who hates labor and looks upon labor as a curse, can never experience happiness in this world, and that is why he always expects his happiness in the world to come. The man who drifts, who idles, who commits the capital crime of "killing time," the man who has no absorbing interests, no controlling concerns, no problems, no adventure, no enterprises in life,--that man may from time to time experience a pleasure, an exultation;

he may at times experience fullness, he may be surfeited, he may be satiated, but that man will never experience real happiness, no more than the man who follows a sedentary route in life will experience the glow of health which comes to the cheeks of him who exercises himself in the outdoors, who does things.

But there are many people who do, who work, who are feverishly busy, and yet who are unhappy. What kind of action leads to happiness? That is our problem, isn't it? What exertions of our lives will bring the glow to our heart and the peace to our soul which we call happiness? Clearly, only those acts which spring from our higher selves, and which give full expression to all the faculties of our being; only those acts which do not violate our moral nature; in other words, only those actions will lead to happiness which partake of the nature of freedom and justice.

Let us restate our definition for a moment. What is freedom? Freedom is the subjection of the lower self to the higher self to such a degree that the performance of an unworthy act becomes impossible for us. Freedom is self-mastery to a degree where we do the right thing almost instinctively, spontaneously, without the effort and without the struggle which make for unhappiness.

What is justice? And I speak now of justice to one's self. Justice is the opportunity given to all the faculties of the soul to express themselves fully and completely. Now, I believe that an act which emanates from

our higher self, from the state where we are free master, and an act which gives expression to our full being, to our complete nature, to our character--that act will bring happiness.

What makes people unhappy? Students of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, doctors of nervous diseases, will tell you that one of the great causes for nervous derangement, for many of our ailments, is suppression; the suppression of some desire, the thwarting of some impulse, the holding down of some great wish tends to disintegrate our character, to create havoc in our emotional being, to destroy and tear apart the harmony of our life, and this disharmony so created will express itself in nervous derangements, in a soul inhibition, in moral perversion; in all kinds of diseases of the body and soul.

Now in every one of us there is a moral sense. How it was placed there is beyond the point; whether it emanates from God, or whether it is the precept of human experience; whether it comes from without or from within, from above or from below, is of little moment at the present time. What is real is that in every one of us there is a moral sense. There are promptings to do the higher and the better. We have glimpses at certain moments of our lives, of the higher levels, and we sense the purer air. Now when we do not respond to these impulses and these promptings of our higher selves, when we suppress them, when we force them down and trample upon them and yield to the urgings of our

lower selves, why, there is created within us a disparity, a double hemisphere, there is a constant opposition in our lives, there is a secret rebellion there all the time; there is always the contrast between what we are doing and what we should be doing, between what we are and what we ought to be; and this contrast, this opposition, whether it is conscious or unconscious, is so real and so potent that it creates a state of restlessness and unhappiness and discontent in our being, which all the wealth and all the power and all the faith which we may have achieved cannot assuage or allay.

In other words, when we suppress our freedom we become unhappy.

The first condition of happiness, then, is being true to our higher self. "To thine own self be true."
"Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."
Freud bases his entire science of psychoanalysis on this thesis: that the good man is the free man, and the free man is the happy man.

And then happiness, I say, is based on justice; and justice, I said, is the opportunity given to ourselves to express ourselves completely. And how do we express ourselves? Through social contacts. No man can live unto himself alone, and no man can realize himself by himself. It is only through our relationships with other men, through our contacts, through living in society and convention, through social agencies and social channels that we grow and develop and express ourselves. Therefore the man who does

not recognize this interdependence of men, the man who is, in other words, selfish, who tries to find his complete happiness in acts which can only tend to his own good, but which may tend to the hurt of his fellow men--that man will never be happy because he will never complete his life.

You take failure. The selfish man who is engaged upon a selfish task, when he fails he is the most wretched and miserable of men. Isn't he? You take the idealist, who is engaged upon some tremendous mission in life, when he sees his life drawing to a close and his mission not yet realized--is he wretched, or is he miserable? No. You know of martyrs that have walked singing to the burning stake; you know of men who have subjected themselves to torture, racked and torn upon inquisitorial cruelty, who sang in their misery. Why? Because for that failure and for that suffering there was a compensation there in their soul. They had fulfilled their lives, they had expressed the God that was in them. Their purpose does not die with them; others will arrive who will carry on their work and their mission, for their work is of the eternal and partakes of the nature of the eternal. It is indestructible. Selfishness, then, can never lead to happiness.

We are free, then, to sum up, When we rise to the higher levels. We are just when we express all the aptitudes of our being; and when we do these things we will know and experience happiness, as an attendant circumstance of moral living, of ethical conduct.

Happiness, then, is a subjective thing; and that is the second major thought I would leave with you. It has nothing to do with things; it has nothing to do with acquisitions; it has nothing to do with aggrandizements; it has nothing to do with possessions, with wealth or power or influence or fame. Some of these things may contribute to happiness, but they are not the essentials and they are not the elements. Happiness is from within, from a mental and spiritual adjustment to life; and that sort of happiness is within the reach of everyone, and he who has it will find happiness everywhere--everywhere.

A few days ago I read a book written by a Jewish mystic a hundred years ago, a book of pious meditation, and I came across this marvelous thought: he said the truly pious man, when he leaves his home in the morning and steps out into the street, will discover in everything which he sees a memorial of some religious commandment. If he sees a house he will at once remind himself of the law of putting a parapet around the walls of your house when the house is in the process of construction, lest the laborer fall and be killed. He will remind himself of the mazzuza, which he was commanded to place upon the door post of the house; when he sees a clean animal in the street, he will remind himself of the law of sacrifice. Everything which he sees with his eyes will bring him a religious intimation; and he concludes with this remarkable phrase: "Every man should strive to think of these things in order to bring holiness into your

eyes."

Now, the free man and the just man will bring holiness and beauty and charm, and therefore happiness, into his eyes. All the beauty of the world will pour in through his eyes, and all the music of the world will pour in through his ears. He will find opportunities for happiness everywhere--in his family circle, in the circle of his friends, in reading books which bring him into contact with the great minds of the world, while at every turn of the road he will find the god of joy and the god of happiness, because he has prepared for it; the soil is prepared. You cannot be sure of the harvest; you cannot command the rain and the sun, but if you have plowed the field and sown the seed, when the rain does come and the sun does shine, there will be a plenteous harvest to reward you.

What is happiness? How is it to be gained?

Simply when one does not tie himself down to one consuming ambition; when one tries to lead a full life, a rich life, a many-sided life--not a life in which all your energies are consumed by one passion, by one job, by one task; but when you give every prompting and inclination of your mind and soul a chance to live, and when you rise from the lower rungs and the lower levels, where your selfish ambitions and selfish motives hold sway, tyrannic, and you rise to the higher levels, where you yourself, the strength of you and the nobility of you and the fineness of you dominate and master, and when you act in consonance with the promptings of

of your higher self at all times, why, the chances are that in this world you may find, from time to time, serenity, a condition of peace of mind and soul which we call felicity--happiness.

You cannot always be happy. It is a mistake to think that if you lead a good life until you are twenty or thirty, and you work hard, that you are going to be happy all the rest of your life. That is a naive way, an almost childish point of view. This world is not a fool's paradise; this is an arena. Men must struggle here; men must struggle for a bit of happiness. Life is serious and the problems of life are real. But we can prepare our physical, our moral, our spiritual faculties so that there will come certain experiences in life which will yield us that precious ointment of the spirit, that rich wine of the soul, which we call happiness.

"Great peace have they that love thy law." Peace comes only through loving the law of God, through working through the moral purposes of the universe. When you do that you need not be impatient and fretful and disturbed; you need not be afraid of ultimates, what will be in the end of your days, when you live in accord with the law of God, the moral law of being.

You may be trustful and patient; you will have what is called the impassionate quiet, the faith unsevered from tranquility; you will love steadily and purposefully, you will work steadily and purposefully; you will not fret at

discomforts; you will not yield and break under sorrow and suffering; you will feel that beneath you all the time is the great river which up-bears your bark of life; that somehow underneath you are the great wings of the Schachina, the great outspread, sustaining wings of God himself upholding you in all your efforts and in all your struggles.

"Great peace have they that love His law."

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