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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Sayings of the Fathers, 1923.



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SERMON BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,

SUBJECT: "THE SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS."

AT THE TEMPLE - SUNDAY MORNING,

MAY 6th, 1923 - CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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WRHS

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



During the past few weeks I have been reading to you, in place of the customary scriptural portion, a chapter from the ethics of the sayings of the fathers; first, because tradition decrees that it should be done in the weeks between Passover and Shabuoth ; and, secondly, because these chapters contain the accumulated wisdom of the Rabbis. These chapters, which are embodied in one of the treatises of the Mishnah, which is, as you know, the teachings of the Rabbis up to the third century of the common era, are, to the Talmud, what the Book of Proverbs is to the Bible.

They are a compendium, a collection of anthology, of the aphorisms, the maxims, the wise moral sayings of the Rabbis; for the Rabbis were not only engaged in the exposition of the law, but were also engaged, and perhaps more concerned, in the exposition of morality, ethics and practical wisdom. And so in these chapters--originally only four, but now six--you have before you almost a glittering tray of gems, sparkling in the sunlight; thoughts that are, some of them, very profound, and some of them only the homely wisdom of men, but all of them significant, meaningful and worthwhile.

And while there is no system of ethics built up here, or any attempt made to build up a complete system, there is continuity there, the continuity of the spirit. There is not a logical sequence of reasoning, but the



spiritual sequence of unifying principles. Right through these hundreds of wise sayings and maxims you have that sane, sound, practical idealistic genius of the race speaking.

It is very difficult to select one maxim for discussion or contemplation, but I have done so this morning, first, because the maxim itself is profound, and, secondly, because it sheds light on the attitude of Judaism in some of the more vital relationships of men. I selected this maxim which I read to you this morning.

Ben Zoma said, "Who is a wise man? He who learns from everybody." "Who is a hero? He who controls his passions." "Who is a rich man? He who rejoiceth in his lot." "Who is the honored man? He who honors his fellowmen." Almost a trite aphorism, and yet upon closer scrutiny there is revealed some thought which is not so trite. The Rabbi Ben Zoma has selected four of the most common objectives of men: Wisdom, Wealth, Strength and Honor. All normal men seek these high, desirable things; and, in a sense, these things are selfish objectives. One wants to be rich because it is comfortable and pleasant; and one wants to be honored because it gives a man a fine sense of gratification; and so with strength, and so with wisdom.

But ben Zoma, with that characteristic bent of the Jew, immediately shifts the center of gravity, and from becoming a desirable objective, in the mouth of ben Zoma these things become obligations and compelling duties.



Who is wise? He who learns from everybody.

Wisdom is interpreted as the obligation to learn. Heroism is interpreted as the obligation to control one's passions. Honor is interpreted as the duty to honor your fellowmen. There is a deliberate shifting from oneself to society, and that of course is typical of the genius of the Jew. The Jew has always maintained that the good is a social good, that to find it one must lose oneself; that no good is selfish, and that no selfish man can ever find good. That is one, to my mind, rather stimulating thought that comes out of this maxim.

And the second one is this: taken in and by themselves these objectives have to do with possessions. A rich man is the man who has abundant possessions; a strong man is a man who has abundant physical strength; an honored man is a man who has received recognition and preferments and rank from society, who is in possession of something; and the wise man is a man who has a great deal of knowledge. But in the genius of the Rabbis there is again a deliberate shifting, a reevaluation, a reinterpretation of values. Wisdom is no longer a matter of having things--knowledge, information--but wisdom becomes a matter of search, a quest. He who learns from everybody--an attitude of mind, a point of view, a disposition.

Honor becomes no longer a matter of having preferments bestowed upon one, or medals, or tributes, but of having a disposition which loves and honors every human



being. He who is honored; he who honors his fellowmen.

And so with strength. Who is strong? Not the man who was by nature endowed with muscular prowess, but the man who uses character to control passion. In other words, in the genius of the Jew the tyranny of things is destroyed. Taken as ben Zoma takes these objectives, every man may come into possession of them, and ben Zoma, true to the creative genius of the Jew, has democratized--I should like to have you get the full implication of this profound saying of the Rabbi ben Zoma--has democratized perhaps the four supreme objectives in life and has put it in the hand of every human being. And therefore, to my mind, there is a message for the humblest and the lowliest .

Who is wise? Not the man who has been able, because of environment, or because of family, or because of great opportunities, to gain a great deal of knowledge and information, to travel extensively, to accumulate wisdom, and therefore he who has never enjoyed these opportunities is read out of this charmed circle of the wise. Ah, no, says ben Zoma. Who is wise? He who learns from everybody, and everybody may learn from everybody. The humblest, the lowliest, is then invited into the circle of the wise.

One may not be "a wise scholar," not having had the opportunities of training, of education, of schooling, but every man may be "a wise man," if only he has with him or trains himself into having an attitude of learning, an



eagerness, an inquisitive mind, a desire to profit from every contact and every experience in human life. Later Judaism may have built up an aristocracy of learning, but certainly ben Zoma is here propounding the democracy of wisdom.

And so it is with his question: Who has strength? Who is the hero? Not merely the man who is one of military distinction; not merely the soldier on the battlefield; not merely those who belong to the aristocracy of the recognized brave and heroic; but every man who, by dint of effort, by dint of supreme moral and spiritual exertion, conquers the jungle beasts that live in the soul of every human being, every man enters into the circle of the heroic. For as the wise teacher in the Book of the Proverbs said: "He who controls his passion is greater than he who conquers a fortified city."

And so ben Zoma adroitly and keenly instills and declares the heroism of the commonplace, the heroics of the daily routine of life, and puts the humblest and the lowliest into contact with supreme heroism.

And so it is when he asks, "Who is rich?" and answers, "He who rejoiceth in his lot." There is profound truth there, too; for possessions do not make a man rich. Only he is rich who is satisfied, and only he is poor who never has enough. Now, when a man is content, when he rejoiceth in his lot, then whether his possessions be many or few is immaterial; he is rich. And so wealth becomes a



a democratic thing in the hands of ben Zoma, because it is removed and abstracted from the common conception of wealth, as having to do with a multitude of things possessed.

And so with honor. Who is honored? Not the man who belongs to nobilities and aristocracies, the man singled out for honors, but the man who carries within his soul a kindliness of disposition, a good heart, which prompts him to honor every child of God created in the image of God; and that knack, that habit of honoring ordinary men, reacts upon one, inasmuch as the man himself rises in his own estimation, in his dignity of manhood. And so honor now belongs to all men, for all men may come into the highest ranks of self-appreciation as children of God.

I want to dwell just one minute upon these four parts of the aphorism, Who is Wise? Judaism has always urged upon men the duty of learning, of gaining wisdom. The religion of all people has never been one which was based upon ignorance. "Know the Lord, thy God." But wisdom in Judaism was never mere academic knowledge. Wisdom was, as I said, a quest, a pilgrimage, an open mind, an alert intellect, a receptive mind, and Judaism urged its disciples to go out into the world and gain wisdom from everything and everyone, and more especially from that great source of divine wisdom, which is the Torah. And that is why Judaism laid so much emphasis upon the study of the Torah.

"Two men," says one of the Rabbis of the Ethics of the Fathers, "who meet and do not discuss Torah may be called



cynics, despicable characters. Three men who sit around the table and partake of a meal and do not discuss Torah are as if they had eaten of the carcass of the dead. When ten men assemble and discuss Torah, law and morality, ethics, spiritual values, it is as if the Shachina of God descended from on high and dwelt in their midst."

"Get unto thyself a teacher," said one rabbi. Not merely the professional teacher, but look up to some man who can guide you, teach you and help you to grow. Hillel, perhaps the wisest of these wise men, said, "The man who does not learn ought to be destroyed, because he is dead even though his body is alive." And another one of these rabbis wisely said, "Even when a man teaches you one letter, you must honor him as if he were your teacher."

But wisdom, said the rabbis, ought to go with work. The rabbis had no patience with such men who were romancing about the absolutes and the ultimates of life and never came down to the hard, definite tasks of human life which alone teach. "Love work," said one of the rabbis. "It is more worthy, as far as the gaining of wisdom is concerned, to cobble a shoe and do that task well, than to be romancing about abstract ideas all the time."

And they also said that all Torah which does not bring with it work, physical labor, if you choose, the \_\_\_\_\_ in the end is destroyed. And wisdom, they also said, is a means, not an end in itself. No man should gain wisdom for its own sake, no man should become wise and then isolate



himself, abstract himself from society, like a removed Brahman on a higher level, out of touch with the sweating and struggling humanity.

All Torah, said the rabbis, which does not bring with it deeds, which does not express itself in life, in service, in helpfulness, in the augmentation of the goods, the spiritual goods of life, in the end cannot endure. Education and learning and wisdom is a social responsibility; it represents the social investment in you, and you must pay dividends upon it in social service.

They also said concerning wisdom, that when a man is wise he should not boast of it. "To that end wast thou created." There is no especial merit due you because you have gained wisdom. That is your patent duty in life. You deserve no more credit for having gained knowledge and wisdom than you do for breathing the air about you. That is part of your function as a human being. And wisdom, said the rabbis, far from making men proud and arrogant, should make men humble, for the wise man knows how little wisdom he has, and the man of knowledge knows how much of ignorance there still dwells in him.

That is what ben Zoma had in mind when he asks, "Who is Wise?" and answers, "He who learns from everybody." And when he asks, "Who is strong?" and answers, "He who controls his passions," there, too, he is true to the spirit of the Jew. "Yezer" is the Hebrew word for "inclination," and the rabbis assumed that God has placed, too, all these



"Yezer" in the soul of man--the Yezer of            and the Yezer of            -- the good inclination and the evil inclination, both the work of God, and God put both of these inclinations in the soul of man, so that through their struggle and through their conflict he may grow and develop and rise to the higher levels of life. That is God's discipline, that is God's pedagogy, that is how God trains us; not by creating us perfect, but by creating us Adham--a man of the earth, with the red, throbbing blood in our veins, with passions and ambitions and desires, many of them evil and immoral and anti-social.

But who is the strong man? He who uses his moral strength, his better self, to subdue and control the lower, who uses the lower as a stepping stone to the higher. Both are            and both serve God's purpose.

And who is rich? I have said more than once that Judaism did not condemn wealth or money because it is wealth or money, but Judaism condemned the abuse of wealth. Judaism knew, as we all know, the menace to oneself of wealth. "May the Lord bless thee and keep thee." One will be asked why is there this double blessing--"May the Lord bless thee and keep thee"--and the answer is, "May the Lord bless thee with money and keep thee from the devil."

Who is rich? He who rejoiceth in his lot. "Who rejoiceth in his lot?" says the rabbi. "When thou eatest out of the fruit of thine own neighbor, then thou art blest." Whether a man has great wealth or not, just so he sweated for



it and he labored for it, and it is the result of effort and exertion and sacrifice and planning and thinking, you are a blessed man.

But wealth that has come to you as a parasite, unlabored for, untoiled for, that wealth will never bring rejoicing or contentment, and you will always be a pauper.

And so likewise, who is honored? He who honors his fellowmen. Ah, that is a profound observation of our faith. Judaism always said that man is of God; a man partakes of the holiness of God, and every human soul is sacred, and every life is holy, and because God dwells in every human being, every human being is to be honored and respected.

One of our great leaders said, "One who sees a crowd of men, what blessing should he pronounce?" And he wisely says, "He who sees a crowd should utter a blessing. Blessed is the Master of mysteries, who did not create two of them alike, who did not make two of their minds alike. Think of the blessed God for having created individuality and personality in human life."

That is Judaism. Every man is sufficient unto himself, in that there is something of divinity dwelling into him, and therefore every man is to be honored, but in honoring him you honor God and the God who dwells in you; and therefore do not judge your neighbor until you have placed himself in your place. Welcome every man with joy. Let the property of thy neighbor be respected as thine own



property, and therefore love thy neighbor as thyself. It is all part and parcel of one point of view and of one attitude.

And so to sum up what I have said this morning:  
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he who has wisdom that is here accounted wisdom, and he who has the strength that is here accounted strength, and he who has the wealth that here is accounted wealth, and he who has the honor that here is denominated honor, he is, indeed, a blessed and favored child of God. For grace, my friends, comes not to him who has clearness of intellect, or abundance of physical strength, or a multitude of wealth, or a great accumulation of honors and distinctions, but grace and charm and contentment come to him only who has the openness of mind, and the strength of character, and the contented disposition, and the good heart.

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