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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Life Serene, 1924.



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"THE LIFE SERENE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

FEBRUARY 17, 1924, CLEVELAND.

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In Omar and in Ecclesiastes you saw the tragedy of men who had lost their way in the world, of men whom doubt and rebellion and scorn, little knowledge and less faith, led to the valley of dark despair. In Rabbi Ben Ezra, the poem of Robert Browning, and in the two psalms by unknown poets, Psalms 84 and 91, you will see souls which rise to the plane of high confidence and great peace on the wings of a surpassing faith. Of the Browning poem it has been truly said that there is no poem of equal length which will do more to make a man calm and stern and glad as this poem Rabbi Ben Ezra. And you know that Psalm 91, of all psalms, has been chosen from time immemorial to be read at memorial services and at the services for the dead--chosen because of its marvelous quality of comfort and consolation which it has.

Now the optimism of Browning and the optimism of the anonymous poets of these two psalms is not the kind of optimism that is based on ignorance or inexperience, or on a good digestion. These poets, again, are not whistling to keep up courage. They have, judging from their songs, passed through the valley of weeping. They were not unknown to sorrow and suffering and disappointment. And yet Omar and Ecclesiastes, who seemingly suffered nothing, ended their career as dejected and humiliated men, while Rabbi Ben Ezra and these two



poets of the Psalms seem to have emerged triumphantly into the life serene.

I think it was Chesterton who said that Robert Browning was not an optimist; and there is a profound difference between an optimist and a happy man. Optimism implies a certain intellectual abstraction; optimism implies a deliberate effort on the part of a man to look at the brighter side of things, to place the best interpretation possible upon a thing. The optimist thinks in terms of hopefulness, but the happy man is the man who has experienced happiness. The happy man has, somehow, a predisposition, more unconscious than conscious, for happiness; the happy man does not think himself and argue himself and speculate himself into happiness. And he is happy largely because he is a great lover. The happy man is the great lover; the happy man loves nature, loves men, loves God. The happy man is one who has a predisposition to embrace in a generous sweep of native sympathy all the creation of God.

Now you cannot command love and you cannot think yourself into love. A love which is based on speculation is at best a sordid affair. Love is almost an instinctive thing. Now, the trouble with Omar and the trouble with Ecclesiastes was that they were not predisposed to love anything or anyone very much. If Ecclesiastes, this man who had everything--the key to all the wealth and all the power and all the glory and all the wisdom of the world,--if he had<sup>had</sup> just one transfiguring love,



if he had loved someone with a love that was more than love; if he had loved nature with a love that enriches and ennobles and expands the soul of man, then he would not have found all of life vanity of vanities. If Omar had for a moment left the tavern of the wine givers, and all the useless, arrogant speculation about man's destiny and the purposes of creation, and had turned around the corner of his tavern and gone out to seek someone whom he could serve in the mystery of love, someone into whose life he could pour his own spiritual self; if he had just opened his eyes and saw all the beauty and all the light that was about him, he might have discovered a meaning and a purpose in life. The trouble with both of them was that they were supreme selfish men. Their life began in the ego, or the "myself," and naturally ended in a crushed, beaten, miserable ego.

Now, Rabbi Ben Ezra and the authors of Psalms 84 and 91 belong to those fortunate men who love, and so they found peace in life. The very first words of Psalm 84 is, "How lovely are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!" And the keynote of Psalm 91 is, "Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him." The redemptive power of a great love.

I think it was Lamb who, in his sly cynicism, said that all mankind is divided into two classes, the debtors and the creditors; and the debtors, he maintains, are by far the happier of the two. Now, raised to a higher



level this classification is profoundly true. All men may be divided into two classes: those who look upon themselves as creditors of life, and those who look upon themselves as debtors of life; those who feel that they have a claim upon life, and those who feel that life has a claim upon them.

Omar and Ecclesiastes belonged to the creditor class. They believed that life was indebted to them, that life owed them wealth and comfort and luxury and long life and power and immortality--everything; just because they were they; and naturally the more they demanded of life the less life could give them and the more miserable they became.

Rabbi Ben Ezra and the authors of Psalms 84 and 91 belong to the debtor class. They felt that because they were alive, because they were privileged to enjoy this miraculous experience of being alive and breathing, of seeing all the beauty and charm and grace in the world, of moving in this beautiful world, of moving among men, of making contacts, of having loved ones, of having friends,--because of this very privilege of being alive they were eternally obligated to life; they were eternally bound to give and give and give. And so they were happy, because the more they gave the happier they became.

Rabbi Ben Ezra sums up this profound truth when he says, "Rejoice, then, that we are allied to that which doth provide and not partake, effect and not receive!



A spark disturbs our clod; nearer we hold of God (nearer we partake of God, nearer we are to God) who gives, than of His tribes that take." Now when Rabbi Ben Ezra and the psalmists come to discover the source of their great confidences, come to ask themselves "Just why are we so content and happy in life?" then they find that it is due entirely to an unquestioning and overwhelming and transporting faith in God.

Now, Omar and Ecclesiastes also belived in God. In fact, even the atheist believes in God. But the God of Omar and Ecclesiastes was neither friend, nor father, nor guide, nor inspiration to them. He was just a spiritual, an intellectual abstract; he was far removed from the world and from the concerns of the world. Long, long ago He created this universe, established for all time certain unalterable laws which control until the end of time all that lives and all that moves within this universe, and then, having created, He abdicated; He lost interest; He retired; His work was done. And then this world was created by an indifferent deity; man was placed in a limited groove, confined and circumscribed by unchanging laws, there within that small grove to stay and stew until the crack of doom. There was no chance for him to get out of that groove; there was no chance for him to reach up; there was no chance for him to come in contact with God; he couldn't reach Him; God did not need him, God need not want him.



That was the God of Omar and of Ecclesiastes. But how different was the God of the Psalmists! "The Lord God," says the author of Psalm 84, "is a sun and a shield; the Lord giveth grace and glory. My heart and my flesh sing for joy unto the living God." And the psalmist of 91 speaks of "dwelling in the convent of the most High" - abiding in the shadow, in the compassionate, everlasting mercy and protection of the most High. These men felt that God lived here and now in the universe and in the lives of men; that God worked through their struggles and their efforts and their aspirations; that God's purpose was being worked out here and now, and that man is the channel through which the wise and good purpose of an Almighty God was being expressed in the world. And so they were happy because they were not alone.

Now, from this majestic premise, the existence of a living God and a good God, there followed certain tremendous convictions, certain great conclusions for Rabbi Ben Ezra and the Psalmists. First of all was this conclusion: that the scheme of things is perfect; that the plan of the universe is perfect. We cannot see it; we do not know. We see broken fragments; we see bits of reality; we cannot collect them; we cannot organize them into a perfect whole; we are limited by the limitations of our bodies and of our senses and our experiences; but if there is a wise, all-powerful God, then His plan must be perfect, in time and in eternity.



And so Rabbi Ben Ezra said:

"Not once beat 'Praise be Thine!

I see the whole design,

I, who saw power, see now (that I am old) love perfect too.

Perfect I call Thy plan;

Thanks that I was a man!

Maker, remake, complete,--I trust what Thou shalt do!"

I am in thy hands. Make me, remake me, break me, if you choose, if that is your purpose, because I believe that thy purpose is good and thy plan is perfect.

Omar and Ecclesiastes saw a few dark strands, a few broken threads, and at once concluded that the vast tapestry of creation which they could not see was without design and without plan, raveled and knotted and torn and meaningless. Rabbi Ben Ezra and the Psalmists, from these very few dark strands which they were privileged to behold, concluded that the plan of this vast tapestry of creation was perfect and beautiful.

And the second great conviction which they derive from their vast premise of the existence of a wise, creative purpose in the universe, was that evil, even though it exists and even though it is real,--evil is meant for good. Evil is part of the beneficent purpose of the Almighty. Omar and Ecclesiastes saw evil in the world and at once concluded that God's plan is faulty, or that God was mocking His children. Rabbi Ben Ezra and the Psalmists concluded that evil was man's proudest heritage and the surest proof of



immortality. They knew this profound truth: that it is care and want and deprivation that are the goading, driving impulses in life; that man moves, progresses, climbs, because want is gnawing at him, and misery and failure and sorrow and suffering are driving him on. And so the wise Jewish philosopher says:

"Poor vaunt of life indeed,

Were man but formed to feed

On joy, to solely seek and find and feast; (it were indeed a poor vaunt if men would do nothing else but feast and feast)

Such feasting ended, then

As sure an end to men;

Irks care the crop-full bird? (the bird whose crop is full) Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast? (the beast whose maw is crammed with food is never troubled with doubt)

"But you welcome each rebuff

That turns earth's smoothness rough,

Each sting that bids neither to sit nor stand but go!

Be our joys three-parts pain!

Strive, and hold cheap the strain;

Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!"

The most glorious thing about man, friends, are his aspirations; the thing man aspires after and has not.



Somehow God has placed in the human soul a restlessness, a longing after the unattainable. Man is never satisfied; man always seeks to climb the battlements of eternity, to unravel every mystery, to pry open every secret, to push aside every veil; man wants to master everything about him, to analyze, to discover, to understand all the forces about him, and to hold them in his power, and this ceaseless aspiration of man is what distinguishes man from the beast. The beast is content within the narrow limits of his desires, content to abide there. Man is never content to abide upon any plane or any level, but ceaselessly he climbs the rungs that lead to the higher levels and the unknown, and this ceaseless aspiration brings to man sorrow and struggle and disillusionment; for progress means pain; advance means tearing yourself away from your habits and from your previous circumstances; progress means initiative and enterprise, and these things must of necessity bring with them, oftentimes, failure and tragedy and unhappiness. But that is man's proudest heritage; that is the God in man, the stamp of divinity upon the soul of man.

And so Rabbi Ben Ezra says man could be satisfied with a few things. Food, shelter, and cravings of the physical--these things could be easily satisfied; but then man would be a beast, and not made in the image of God.

"For thence,--a paradox

Which comforts while it mocks,--

Shall life succeed in the very thing where it seems



to fail:

What I aspired to be,

And was not, comforts me: (there is a  
marvelous line)

A brute I might have been, but would not sink in the  
scale.

"What is he but a brute

Whose flesh has soul to suit,

Whose spirit works lest arms and legs want play?

To man, propose this test--

Thy body at its best,

How far can that project thy soul in its lone way?"

After having satisfied all the wants of the  
body, how far can that body project the soul on its lone way.  
How far do you transcend the wants of your body; how far do  
you project your wish into the unknown. That is the test  
of real manhood.

And from that there follows another profound  
conclusion. If the imperfections of man, if man's incom-  
pleteness, mind you, are his greatest heritage and the surest  
proof of his divinity, then the value of a man must not be  
measured in terms of achievement but in terms of aspiration;  
because <sup>a</sup> man's achievements are at best imperfect, but a man's  
aspirations after the unattainable may be perfect. A man  
should not be judged by the visible results of his life's  
efforts. A Lincoln and a Wilson must not be judged by the



tangible, visible achievements of their lives. They must be judged by the quality of the ideal for which they labored, and by the manner in which that ideal of theirs molded their character and fashioned their lives.

The value of a man is to be found not in what he can accurately express and point to as the visible attainments of his life, but why those motives and longings and ambitions which actuated his days and drove him upon the high adventures of life, may have led him, and undoubtedly would lead him, if his ideals were high and exalted, not to the goal of consummation, but to the via dolorosa--the dolorous road of frustration, of disillusionment, of failure. That is the measure of a man's worth.

And so Rabbi Ben Ezra says:

"Not on the vulgar mass

Called 'work' must sentence pass,

(Do not pass sentence upon what the world calls work done.)

Things done, that took the eye and had the price;

O'er which, from level stand,

The low world laid its hand,

Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice."

(The things that the world can appraise easily because it sees them in concrete form.)

"But all the world's coarse thumb

And finger failed to plumb,

(All those things which the coarse finger of the world fails



to understand, to plumb.)

So passed in making up the main account;  
(that which the world passes by when it makes up the main  
account.)

All instincts immature,

All purposes unsure,

That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's  
amount.

"Thoughts hardly to be packed

Into a narrow act,

(Those thoughts which we cannot crowd into an act because  
they are too vast and almost timeless.)

Fancies that broke through language and escaped;

All I could never be,

All, men ignored in me,

This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher  
shaped."

That is man, truly. Another tremendous  
conclusion which the poets derive from their great premise  
is immortality. Because we know that we are incomplete,  
because we know that we are imperfect, we also know that  
there must be a plane where the imperfect will become  
perfect and the incomplete complete. In this world things  
cannot be explained. In the life beyond, which is the  
unbroken continuation of the life here, all the doubts will  
be resolved, and all that which was crooked shall be made



straight, and that which was wanting shall be made full.  
Immortality is the great conclusion that the great rabbi  
arrives at.

"Ay, note that Potter's wheel,

That metaphor! and feel

Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,--

Thou, to whom fools propound,

When the wine makes its round,

'Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone,

seize today!'"

(Because you see that life is short, that our days are  
numbered, therefore seize hold today because there is  
no tomorrow.)

"Fool! All that is, at all,

Lasts ever, past recall;

Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:

What entered into thee,

That was, is, and shall be:

Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay

endure."

And here I would like to call your attention  
to a very interesting parallel between Omar and Rabbi Ben  
Ezra. You will recall that Omar uses the same metaphor  
of the potter and the clay. Both, of course, derive their  
metaphor from the Bible. Already Isaac and Jeremiah speak  
of this and of God. "Like clay in the hands of the potter



are we in the hands of God." Now, both of these poets use the same metaphor. But what different morals they derive from the very same thing! Omar walks into the potter's house and sees a lot of pots arranged around the house, and hears them converse with one another. And one says, "Look at me. I am all awry and all crooked. Surely the hand of the potter must have slipped!" Another pot says, "Why, who can tell, who knows which is the potter and which is the pot?" And so each one of them gives voice to a blasphemy, and each one of them gives voice to a doubt; and the concluding remark is, "Fill me with the old familiar juice." That is the last, that is the final solution of the problem. Let each man get drunk. That is the object of and end of life.

Browning takes the same metaphor and says, "There is the wheel of life--spinning, revolving endlessly, and upon it we are the clay, and it is the finger of God that shapes us. Sometimes He presses harder than at other times; sometimes He brings pain and sorrow into our lives. But the pressure of the finger is only to give direction to our lives. And what is the purpose of all these parts so fashioned by the hand of the great Potter? That each one of them may become filled with the juice of the wine, saturated and drunk? Ah, no, says Rabbi Ben Ezra, and in a most daring imagery he says all these parts so fashioned by Him are there to slake His thirst.

God has a vast longing; God has a great hunger



and thirst, a great wish to form a marvelous universe,  
and these parts (men) help Him to slake that thirst, they  
help Him to express this great longing of his; they are His  
co-workers and co-creators; they make His will possible.

"He fixed thee mid this dance  
of plastic circumstance,

This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:  
(he would hold the present moment.)

But that is just machinery meant  
To give thy soul its bent,  
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

"But I need, now as then,  
Thee, God, who moulded men;  
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,  
Did I,--to the wheel of life  
With shapes and colours rife,  
Bound dizzily,--mistake my end, to slake Thy thirst."

(He never lost sight of the fact, even  
when he was most dizzily being revolved upon the wheel of  
this circumstance and fate,--he never for a moment forgot  
his destiny and his mission, so to be fashioned and so to  
live that he would slake the thirst of the Almighty, that  
he would serve His purpose.)

Now, there are the two points of view and the  
two philosophies. Where did the philosophy of Omar lead  
him? To degradation and misery and hopelessness. And where



did the philosophy of Rabbi Ben Ezra lead him? To serenity, and tranquility, and peace of soul. What are his conclusions? Why, friends, he says life is one whole, one unity. Youth serves the ends of old age, and old age is a preparation for the life hereafter. Do not be afraid of old age, do not dread it as Omar did, as Ecclesiastes did--old age is beautiful; and no poet has ever described the beauty and the calm and the peace of old age as Browning did: "Grow old along with me; the best is yet to be."

Each period in life is a preparation for another period, and old age does not bring you to the brink of the grave, but prepares you for the great adventure into the unknown, where your life, having profited from the experiences in this mundane existence, will grow richer and fuller in the hereafter.

It is well that Browning should select this Jewish rabbi of the twelfth century--Rabbi Ben Ezra, the poet-philosopher and scientific commentator, as the spokesman of these ideas, for these ideas are essentially Jewish ideas. And the sum and substance of it is summed up in the first few sentences of that magnificent Psalm 91: "O thou that dwellest in the convent of the most High and abidest in the shadow of the Almighty art dwelling in God. I will say of my Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." That he will deliver me from all the doubts and all the fears which beset our mortal days.



Faith in God will bring confidence and strength into our days. Faith in God will enable us to struggle, to carry on, to seek after the unattainable. Faith in God will give us faith in ourselves, in the life which is in us; that it is of the eternal; that it will continue. Faith in God will bring serenity and quietude of spirit and happiness into our days.

"Happy is the man who trusts in the Lord."

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