



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and  
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

---

Reel  
148

Box  
52

Folder  
200

The Plastic Age, 1924.



---

"THE PLASTIC AGE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

NOVEMBER 9, 1924, CLEVELAND, O.

---



JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



I chose this book, "The Plastic Age," as the subject of my discourse for this morning, not because it is a great book, but because it thrusts to the fore certain great educational problems which are of concern to people today, and they are more especially of concern to parents who are contemplating sending their children to college, or have already sent them, and they should be of concern, also, to men and women now attending our schools of higher learning.

I chose it especially for discussion this morning because the young men and women of our alumni are this day assembled here, celebrating the beginning of their year's activities, and it may be of interest to them--those who are now attending college, or are planning to attend college, and learn of these reactions of a college professor to college life.

The book is a full size portrait of the life of an undergraduate at one or at any American college. Everything is included. It takes a young lad from the day that he enters the institution until the day that he graduates from it, and delineates deftly, and at times brilliantly, this boy's reactions to the various phases of college life--to its thoughts, its recreations, its fraternities, its customs, its faculties, its student body,--everything. It also lays bare the inner struggle which must go on in the mind and in the soul of a young man when he is



brought face to face for the first time in his life with the hard facts of our common life--the emotional facts, the social facts, the biologic facts.

The hero enters the halls of the academy quite innocent, quite ignorant of life, and after four years of adjustment and turbulence and disillusionment, he leaves these halls, a little less innocent, perhaps, and a little less ignorant, perhaps, but, in the main, better and finer for his experience.

In following the four years travelogue of this writer, we are at times regaled by the telling of those hilarious incidents in the life of an undergraduate which are the common experience of all college men, and at times we are shocked and hurt by the revelation of facts so coarse and vulgar as not to be passed by lightly as college pranks. The author is frank, he is realistic, in his description of the life of the undergraduate--of his manners, his habits, his idealism, his vulgarity, his interest, his gropings, his failings. And not only is the undergraduate swept into this caldron of criticism, but the whole educational institution known as the American college; its administration, its curriculum, its faculty, are all brought in and submitted to the critical test; and when you are through reading the book, you feel that a little bit of the halo of the college is gone, and a little bit of the romance has disappeared. You feel that the college, in common with all our modern institutions, has yet to undergo a vast process of revamping



and readjustment before it can properly and efficiently serve the needs of the community and fulfill the obligations which it assumes, but at the same time you feel that it is an institution decidedly worth while, an institution that can be, and, in many instances is, a beautiful and wholesome and helpful influence in the lives of young people.

There are two problems presented in this book. The one: does the college educate? And the other: does the college help in the upbuilding of character? In a sense, these two problems are one. For the sake of exposition and discussion, I have separated the two. The book calls into question and challenges the whole method and mechanics of our college education. It seems, perhaps superficially so, but it seems, nevertheless, that the whole routine of education in our American colleges and universities is mechanical and purposeless and sterile.

A boy or a girl is required to take a certain number of courses. Very often he has no use for most of these courses. He takes them as requirements; he goes through them as one goes through chores. He wrestles with them. But they leave him practically untouched. It is remarkable, the genius which an undergraduate has for resisting information; and it is remarkable, the genius which a college has for making information unattractive. The average student bolts his studies as he bolts his lunch, and digests neither well. Most of the teachers and professors do not inspire the boy or girl; they bore him or her. There



are a few teachers who have enkindled the enthusiasm and stirred the imagination of a boy, and intrigued his interest, but they are, according to the author, quite the exception. In most instances the teacher stands between the student and the subject.

The chief interest of the boy at college is not study but athletics, sports, fraternities, and, nowadays, parties. The studious lad is under suspicion. The garb of the undergraduate is the football hero.

In other words, if the aim of higher education is to enable the young man to think effectively, to concentrate on a problem, to judge intelligently, and to use his imagination,--if this is the aim of education, then the average American undergraduate misses the mark completely. This seems to be the general impression one gleans from the book.

Let me permit the author to speak for himself. The professor is addressing a body of undergraduates, one of the professors who does possess personality and does stimulate thinking on the part of students; the kind of a professor to whom a boy can come when he is in doubt and trouble, when problems beset a young boy of eighteen and nineteen, problems concerning religion, problems concerning his personal life, moral problems, ethical problems, his own problems; the type of a man to whom a boy instinctively goes for guidance, when the life urge suddenly overtakes him with a wild impetuosity, and he needs some stabilizing influence



in life. The professor is now speaking to a group of young boys at school:

"In the first place, this is supposed to be an educational institution; it is endowed for that purpose and it advertises itself as such. And you men say that you come here to get an education. But what do you really do? You resist education with all your might and main, digging your heels into the gravel of your own ignorance and fighting any attempt to teach you anything every inch of the way. What's worse, you aren't content with your own ignorance; you insist that every one else be ignorant, too. Suppose a man attempts to acquire culture, as some of them do. What happens? He is branded as wet. He is a social leper.

"Wet! What currency that bit of slang has-- and what awful power. It took me a long time to find out what the word meant, but after long research I think that I know. A man is wet if he isn't a 'regular guy'; he is wet if he isn't 'smooth'; (you will have to pardon this slang; it is the author's.) he is wet if he has intellectual interests and lets the mob discover them; and, strangely enough, he is wet by the same token if he is utterly stupid. He is wet if he doesn't show at least a tendency to dissipate, but he isn't wet if he dissipates to excess. A man will be branded as wet for any of these reasons, and once he is so branded, he might as well leave college; if he doesn't, he will have a lonely and hard row to hoe. It is a rare undergraduate who can stand the open contempt of his fellows."



And the professor continues: "What horrible little conformers you are, and how you loathe any one who doesn't conform! You dress both your bodies and your minds to some set model. Just at present you are making your hair foul with some sort of perfumed axle-grease; nine-tenths of you part it in the middle. It makes no difference whether the style is becoming to you or not; you slick it down and part it in the middle. Last year nobody did it; the chances are that next year nobody will do it, but anybody who doesn't do it right now is in danger of being called wet."

"And you insist," continues the professor, "on the same standardization of your minds. Just now it is not the thing to like poetry; a man who does is exceedingly wet, indeed; he is effeminate, a sissy. As a matter of fact, most of you like poetry very much. You never give me such good attention as when I read poetry. What's more, some of you are writing the disgraceful stuff. But what happens when a man does submit a poem as a theme? He writes at the bottom of the page, 'Please do not read this in class.' Some of you write that because you don't think that the poem is very good, but most of you are afraid of the contempt of your classmates. I know of any number of men in this college who read vast quantities of poetry, but always on the sly. Just think of that! Men pay thousands of dollars and give four years of their lives supposedly to acquire culture and then have to sneak off into a corner to read poetry."

"And who are your college gods? The



brilliant men who are thinking and learning, the men with ideals and aspirations? Not by a long shot. They are the athletes. Some of the athletes happen to be as intelligent and as eager to learn as anybody else, but a fair number are here simply because they are paid to come to play football or baseball or what not. And they are worshiped, bowed down to, cheered and adored. The brilliant men, unless they happen to be very 'smooth' in the bargain, are considered wet and are ostracized."

"You pride yourselves on being the cream of the earth, the noblest work of God. You are told so constantly. You are the intellectual aristocracy of America, the men who are going to lead the masses to a brighter and broader vision of life. Merciful heavens preserve us! You swagger around utterly contemptuous of the man who hasn't gone to college. You talk magnificently about democracy, but you scorn the non-college man--and you try pathetically to imitate Yale and Princeton. And I suppose Yale and Princeton are trying to imitate Fifth Avenue and Newport. Democracy! Rot! This college isn't democratic. Certain fraternities condescend to other fraternities, and those fraternities barely deign even to condescend to the non-fraternity men. You say hello to everybody on the campus and think that you are democratic. Don't fool yourselves, and don't try to fool me. If you want to write some themes about Sanford (that's the name of the college) that have some sense and truth in them, some honest observation, go ahead;



but don't pass in any more chauvinistic bunk."

You may belong to the intellectual aristocracy of the country, but I doubt it; you may lead the masses to a 'bigger and better' life, but I doubt it; you may be the cream of the earth, but I doubt it. All I've got to say is this: if you're the cream of the earth, God help the skimmed milk."

In other words, the first question is: does the college educate? And the author hesitates. He does not give a definite answer; and his very hesitancy is significant. The second question which the book presents to us is: does the college contribute to the upbuilding of character? For, after all, education is a two-fold thing. It is, first, education for efficiency, and then it is education for culture. To know is one half of life, but the theme is the other half of life. Education must cultivate the brain, the mind, to think accurately, efficiently, to enable a man to wrestle more successfully with the problems of life, to help him be a successful man, in whatever calling, occupation or profession he may find himself.

That is the one half of education, and that half the author questions whether the college actually contributed to it. But the other half has to do with character, with inculcating fine loyalties and enthusiasms in the soul of a man; with touching him with the grace and the charm of life; with teaching him the grace of moderation and restraint; the beauty of self-respect and self-dignity.



Does the college help? The author presents some very ghastly pictures of undergraduate life--coarse, brutal. The author tells of the gambling and of the dissipation and of the wild parties and of the drunkenness that seem to prevail in some or in all of our American colleges today. The author describes fraternity house parties and junior proms, which have very little over what he calls the "longshoremen's ball" of long ago. Pathetic things but terribly cheap and vulgar things.

Perhaps these things are only a passing phase of undergraduate life, but it is a dangerous phase. I maintain that the college cannot be responsible for it, nor can it be indicted on that score. The acceleration of the tempo of our life today is not peculiar to the college. It is universal. It has invaded our home. Parents have come to look with complacency upon the hectic social life of their children, and children in their early 'teens are today quite naturally, as a matter of course, inducted into a life of what is called innocent dissipation--a life which lacks the saving proprieties, a life of late hours and surreptitious drinking and wild dancing. Innocent, to be sure; but innocent only at times.

Fond mothers are afraid to object lest they be called old-fashioned, and lest their daughters find themselves left out of the social swirl. And foolish children very early in life have their palates spoiled because of the too rich dishes they partake of, for the



finer and softer and more abiding pleasures and entertainments of normal life. And very often these so-called innocent dissipations lead to real tragedy, and then parents wonder how and why.

I think the menace of this so-called passing phase is a very real one, and I'll tell you why. Because this land is progressively becoming more wealthy; an increasingly large number of people are coming to possess luxuries of life, and with the increase in wealth there comes inevitably a cheapening of life. That has been the story of civilization from the beginning of time. The Jewish home is no exception. The Jewish home is beginning to share this universal prosperity of this land, and it is beginning to share in the universal let down of moral standards and moral proprieties. With this addition: that the Jew is exceptionally emotional, and is prone to go to excess, and when the Jewish youth begins to let down, the limit is nowhere in sight.

Our Jewish homes have never been austere and somber and dour and lugubrious. In our homes at no time did we cultivate puritanic habits of mind or thought or action. The Jew never frowned upon amusements and innocent pleasures and the joy of life. His outlook has always been wholesome, and we should not permit ourselves, because of false notions of modishness and modernity, to indulge in moral shabbiness, in emotional extravagance, in the indecorous and the unrefined.



I make bold to say that the college is the most wholesome place in the world for a wholesome boy and girl, but some boys and girls bring with them to college a certain weakness and a certain viciousness which they gain in their homes and in their earlier environments. After all, the student body of a college and its morals cannot be any different than the morals of the American home. The college is the mirror, the reflection, of the life of the community and of the country, and if in our homes and in our communities, we have accelerated into a hectic, feverish life our youth, then the college will reflect that ultimately.

The college cannot become the monger of the moral and ethical conduct of a student. The college, after all, is not a boarding school, nor is it a monastery. A boy bent on mischief will find ample opportunity outside of the campus and outside of school hours to express that desire for mischief. But I make bold to say that, given a wholesome lad, hailing from a home where culture and refinement and high standards prevail, that college will help the boy morally and ethically and spiritually, and perfect the qualities of goodness that are in him and make him a better man.

"The Plastic Age" could not have been written ten years ago. The conditions described therein did not prevail ten years ago. And why? Not because our colleges have changed, but because our homes have changed, our life has changed. Perhaps that is due to the war.



I came across this significant statement of the late Dr. Washington Gladden, in his "Recollections," written shortly after the Civil War, in which he says: "No nation can engage in a patriotic war without suffering a serious loss of national brotherhood and honor. The worst losses are outside of the army and after the war. The total effect of war upon the nation is disastrous. Inevitably it lowers the moral tone; it scatters the seeds of moral pestilence." And I think we are suffering from just such an epidemic today.

I have had occasion to observe here in the city of Cleveland, especially during the holiday season, gatherings of young people home from school on their vacation, of fraternity conclaves of one kind or another, and almost in every instance, in the last few years--these gatherings and conclaves properly chaperoned, of course, by wives and discreet chaperones, who are always out of the way.--these parties almost inevitably, with some very fine exceptions, have degenerated into all night brawls and dissipations of the worst kind. And I suppose that will happen again next month during the holidays. The humiliating thing is not the sight of fine boys and girls who are making fools of themselves, tarnishing themselves, cheapening themselves; the humiliating thing about it all is the utter complacency, that indifference, with which parents react when they are told about these things.

College life is a wonderful experience in the



life of a man. I think every boy and girl ought to look forward to four years of college as to a real prize; to be able to spend four years in a wholesome and fine environment, in contact with fine minds; to be able to make friends; to have your minds trained and your emotions disciplined. It is a wonderful experience, and as we grow older we look back upon our college days with real affection, almost with a sentimental weakness. It stands out in our life as an epoch of beauty and charm, and every boy and girl ought to make a decided effort, and every parent ought to make a decided effort, to give that boy or girl that chance of a college education.

But be it always remembered that as far as character is concerned, the plastic age is not the age from eighteen to twenty-two--the college age; the plastic age is the school age and the high school age. The plastic age begins with the cradle. By the time a boy or girl is fourteen and fifteen its character is pretty well molded; its habits are pretty well fixed, and its reactions will be pretty constant; and the great molding institution, that character-molding institution in life, be it remembered,--the great fashioner of ideals, of fine enthusiasms, of fine aspirations, is God's own university--the home!

--o--