



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
149

Box
53

Folder
219

The Privilege of Living Today, 1925.

"THE PRIVILEGE OF LIVING TODAY."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MARCH 29, 1925, CLEVELAND, O.



AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

The word "privilege" in our theme "The Privilege of Living Today" is derived from a Latin word, "privilegium," which means one's own law. In olden times certain classes of people, like the nobility or the clergy, enjoyed certain prerogatives, certain legal advantages, certain immunities which the common folk did not. By virtue of belonging to a class a man enjoyed legal favors which others did not enjoy. It is in this sense of the word that I speak of the privilege of living today--the enjoyment of certain prerogatives, which we have not by virtue of belonging to a certain class but by virtue of belonging to a certain age--this age, the most marvelous, the most adventuresome, the most revolutionary age since the beginning of human history.

It is a privilege to live, and it is even a greater privilege to live today. There are some people who do not regard life as a privilege; there are some who hold it cheap because it is shared by everybody; there are many who look upon life as upon a commonplace thing; the miracle of being alive never broke upon them. They are so accustomed to the sensations of living that life itself, this glowing, thinking, clamoring, manifold something which we call life, resident in them, has never evoked a moment of wonderment or admiration in them.

And yet human life is the supreme miracle of the universe. Human life is the profoundest mystery of

existence; and we never realize this privilege of living until life departs in someone dear to us, and we never realize the privilege of the senses which we enjoy until perchance one of them is lost to us, and a door shuts in our life. I remember reading a few months ago a bit of a newspaper account. A group of blind children in an institution were asked what they would like to do if sight were restored to them for one hour, and one said, "I should like to be in a garden and see flowers for the one hour of sight"; another one said, "I should like to be on the sea shore and see the ocean"; and another one said, "I should like to be able to look into the eyes of my mother."

Those of us who are blessed with these gifts of sight, and have them with us daily, hold them oftentimes quite cheap. Seldom do we stop to use those gifts as these children would have wished to use them. Some look upon life not as a privilege but rather as a burden, especially those men and women who have gone through the great tribulations, who have suffered much; to whose door destiny brought many trials and many disillusionments and many bereavements. These people are prone to say, with the writer of Ecclesiastes: "What benefits it a man for all his labor which he taketh under the sun?" And it is only a fulsome optimist, friends, who overlooks these hard facts of existence; for life very frequently is hard, and life does bring to almost every human being heartaches, sorrows, pain and suffering. Life is not made up altogether of golden strands. The web

of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and evil together. And yet the sense of privilege of which I speak comes not from a preponderance of the good over the evil, of the fortunate over the unfortunate; the sense of privilege in life does not come from cancelling the plusses and the minuses and showing the quotient which is left, whether it be good or evil; the sense of privilege comes from our manner of meeting those good fortunes and misfortunes--our attitude towards all of our life's experiences.

Some men are strong enough and have insight enough and vision enough to say, "I thank thee, O Lord, that thou hast afflicted me." Some people look upon their suffering as so many avenues leading them to higher truth and deeper understanding and vaster sympathies to their fellowmen. The prophets, for example, regarded it as a badge of honor, their supreme testimonial, to be called the "suffering servant of the Lord." And some people, my friends, look upon life not as a privilege but as a sort of a pasttime. Life is a legacy best served by squandering it; life is irrational; it has neither sense nor goal nor rime nor reason, and the best thing to do is to make the best of a hopeless and unwelcome situation. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Only he conceives of life as a privilege who conceives of the universe as having a wise and good design and purpose; and only he conceives life as a privilege who conceives of himself as having been summoned to play a part in carrying out this universal, eternal plan

and purpose. Life must have something in it worthy of our effort if we are to look upon it as a privilege.

And so unless the men of faith, the men who see the scattered, broken, unrelated, uncoordinated facts of existence, can posit in this quest the unity of a steadfast purpose; who can, however vaguely, however tentatively, project a design, a plan--a plan which needs man--only he will look upon the gift of life as the supreme privilege. Life then becomes full and surcharged with duty and obligation and responsibilities--with things to do. When there are things to do in the world, and you can do them, then you are a privileged man. Life becomes missionary; and life, if it is to be anything, must be a mission. The great Italian Mazzini profoundly remarked, "Life is a mission. Every other definition of life is false and leads all who accept it astray." Religion, science, philosophy, though still at variance upon many points, all agree on this: that every existence is an aim, a striving towards something, an aspiration, a rising to higher levels. And when you conceive of your life as a mission you conceive of it as a privilege. For then there is nothing in life that is commonplace, not alone your own life. Think of it! A clod in the midst of a dead world suddenly thrilled with that mysterious energy we call life; not only the life of movement, not only the life of growth, but the life of thinking, of planning, of dreaming, of hoping. Not only does that become a miracle to us and not at all a commonplace thing, but anything and everything in life, from

the grain of dust to the solar system; everything loses the garb of the ordinary and the commonplace and becomes a glowing miracle. When Shakespeare marches down the street the street begins to masquerade; when the poet passes the tree the poem hangs from the tree.

And so to live is a privilege. To find oneself in a world of other men, with things to do, with capacities seeking expression, with talents; to have eyes to see all the beauty of the world, and ears to hear all the glorious music of the world, and hands to fashion out of common clay things of divine beauty; to be able to hold communion with our fellowmen, to exchange ideas, to build where nothing was before, and to write where nothing had been written before; to speak the word that inspires, or to listen to a word which moves,--why, all these are gifts--gifts of a gracious God.

But it is even a greater privilege, friends, to live today, in this age; for life today is at its full tide. There is a moving and a stirring everywhere; the stream of life is sweeping on rapidly, and the argosy of the human soul is travelling fast upon the waves, driven by favor of the winds to the distant havens of greater truth and greater beauty and greater knowledge. This is a marvelous age. Doors are everywhere opening--prison doors which incarcerated the mind of man and the soul of man in distant times of ignorance and fear and superstition and dread and hate; prison doors are opening now, and the free and open

fields, the sunlit fields, stretch before the emancipated spirit of man today.

There are ages like the Middle Ages, like the Dark Ages, when life somehow stagnates, when life is slowed down, when mankind seems to be spiritually and mentally enfeebled and exhausted, when the mind goes to seed, when everything is dull and routine and chain-fast, when the spirit of death and decay and degradation is abroad in the land; when somehow everything is tied down, shackled; there is no movement and there is no stirring and there is no seeking and there is no aspiring. There are such ages. And then again there are ages like the Renaissance, when the spirit of man seems as if it were rising in its ~~birth~~ from the grave, when spring is in the air, and there is a stirring and a rustle and a movement, a seeking and a groping and an aspiring; when the mind of man frees itself from shackles and chains; when it begins to go upon its marvelous journey of adventure in quest of the Holy Grail, of new truth and new beauty; when there is freedom in the world, when the doors are opening everywhere.

Now this, our age, is such an age. Because we are so close to the facts and because sometimes these facts are not very pleasant or inspiriting, we are prone to overlook the marvelous character of the age in which we live. Why, it is only a matter of a generation or two, it is only a matter of the last fifty years when most of the scientific inventions which are now an integral part of our civilization

came to be; it is only a matter of yesterday that all our electrical engineering, which is so much a part today of our production and distribution and commercial life, came to be; the telephone and the wireless and the incandescent lamp and the cinema and radio, and the heavier-than-air motor-driven aeroplane; why, it is only yesterday that the X-ray and radium were discovered, and that the new theories of the atom and the electron were propounded; it is only yesterday that Darwin launched his doctrine of evolution, which has completely revolutionized all human thought; it is only in the morning of this day of this marvelous advancement in physics and chemistry and the medical sciences, and bacteriology and the quest of disease and the prolongation of human life, its sanitation. In all these matters which touch human life at a thousand and one points, why, it is only a matter of this morning from the point of view of time, that these things have come to be. It is a matter of a few hours, really, that the science of the mind--psychology, psychoanalysis, group-psychology--has been studied constructively and scientifically.

And so inventions, friends, are more than means whereby man gains control over nature. They give man much more than power; they give him freedom, which comes with the sense of mastery of the universe; they open the windows of his soul; they emancipate him from the dreads and the fears and the superstitions of yesterday. Every new discovery is a new declaration of independence for the human mind and the

human soul. So this age has been particularly an age of freedom--freedom of the human intelligence, not merely political freedom. Economically, our age is a marvelous age. The norm of life not so very long ago was poverty. Most of the children of man lived on the verge of penury and misery and suffering; today the goods of life are more equitably being distributed; there are more human beings sharing in the elementary needs and comforts of life than at any time in the history of mankind; there is more care being taken today in the protection of labor, in the protection of childhood and womanhood in industry than at any time in the past. And we are at the very beginning of this movement, which ultimately will bring about an era of real economic justice in the world.

In education, why, a hundred years ago education was the prerogative of the very rich, the nobility and the clergy. The masses of the world were steeped in illiteracy, unable either to read or write; in other words, unable either to observe truth or to impart truth. Today education is fast being universalized. Millions are being given these keys which open vast mansions, where once upon a time only hundreds enjoyed that privilege.

Politically, think what this age, your age, has done. Fifty or sixty years ago the institution of monarchy was everywhere firmly intrenched, with the exception of one or two lands. Today democracy is everywhere enthroned. And what does democracy bring with it? Not merely a new

paraphernalia of government, a new form of administration; democracy brings with it a new philosophy of life, for democracy is based on the philosophy of the worthwhileness of every individual, of the precious ore of human personality which may be mined and given opportunity. Democracy bases itself upon the freedom of fulfillment, which is the inalienable right of every child of God. Think of the emancipation of woman in the last thirty or forty years--the political emancipation, and, in a sense, the economic emancipation of woman. Half of the race is being restored, or advanced, rather, to a position of freedom; and freedom means the possibility of growth and development.

So that in every avenue we wander up we find progress in our age. You take this movement for peace, concerning which all of us are dubious so much of the time; at no time in the history of mankind did the major thought of governments apply itself so consistently and so earnestly to the problem of establishing a permanent peace than in this, our own day--this year, last year, and next year. And peace will come. We may have many a tragic disillusionment, perhaps many a bloody war, many heartaches, but mankind has now reached that level from which it will not descend again. It will clamor and cry and demand and insist upon peace until it gets peace. At no time in the history of the world was there this organized effort for peace that we have today. As far as we Jews are concerned, this age is one of the most remarkable periods in our history since the destruction of

the Temple, nigh nineteen hundred years ago.

In spite of the tragedies which the last war brought to us; in spite of the disorganization of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, there is in Jewish life today all over a stirring and a movement; there is life. Jewish thought today is alive. Jews everywhere are beginning to think of their place in the world and their mission in the world and their duties to themselves and to their children, as well as to their neighbors. The thought of Jewry is being today focused upon educational and cultural and spiritual problems. Everywhere throughout the world there are more fine books being written today by Jews and of Jews, either in the original language of our race--in the Hebrew, or in the various vernaculars of the world, than in the five hundred years preceding this era. And Wednesday next, the Hebrew university--the first university built by Jews--will be opened on Mt. Scopus, overlooking the beautiful and romance-laden city of Jerusalem--a very symbolic and significant event. For it is prophetic of the ingathering of the spirit of the race--the spirit, the shachina--the Holy Ghost of the race, which for hundreds of years wandered about, wistful and abashed and timid, all over the world, seeking recognition, is now returning like a queen to her own courts and mounting her alabaster throne.

It is symbolic of the fact that the deep waters of our racial genius are not yet dry; that we have not yet said our last say in the world, and we have not yet given

our last Bible to mankind; that the genius of the race is still as vigorous, as urgent, as creative, as petulant and demanding as it was in the days when from the wilderness and from amid the sheepfolds men appeared who spoke of God, of prophetic truth. And so as far as we Jews are concerned, this is a privileged age in which we live; and the fine thing about it all is that we are at the beginning of things. This age is not a closing hour of the creative day; it is not the twilight, it is the dawn. You speak to any scientist and he will tell you that scientific men today look upon themselves as being on the threshold of new revelation. All which has been achieved in the last two or three generations is as nothing to what will be achieved in the next two or three generations. All things are at their beginnings-- economic progress, political progress, social progress, educational progress, religious progress. We have just begun the march.

And isn't it a supreme privilege to live in an age so fluid, so flexible, so yielding that you and you can leave an imprint upon it, that you can actually contribute something to the vast advance of the human race? Of course not all of us are discoverers and mentors and leaders. These things have always been the prerogatives of the few. But as regards social progress, where so much depends upon the will of the mass--you and you can make real, original contributions; for without you, without your will, without your cooperation, without your loyalty and devotion, the real advancements in

social progress, in bringing about peace, for example, in establishing a more equitable economic order, cannot take place.

What mankind needs today is not only inspired leaders but consecrated disciples, and in this discipleship you and I can make vast and original contributions. The unpardonable sin of all is for a man to live in this age, in the year 1925, and do nothing. That is the unpardonable sin.

I re-read a few days ago that marvelous apocalypse called Enoch. Enoch has a vision of the hereafter, of the judgment which will be visited upon the wicked and the righteous at the ultimate end of time, and he says that in the west he saw four valleys, one radiant with sunlight and the other three dark. The first valley is for the righteous--the sun-bathed valley; that is where the righteous will assemble at the end of time, and we shall receive our recompense from God; and the second valley was for the wicked, who receive and must receive their punishment before they are admitted to Paradise; and the third valley was for those who violently put an end to their own life, who must atone for the sin of destroying human life; the fourth valley, says Enoch, was reserved for the mediocre people, for the people who were not good enough to go to heaven or bad enough to go to hell--people God himself did not know what to do with.

The unpardonable sin is the sin of renunciation of the privilege and opportunity of living today. Everyone of us ought to try to renew life. Every new truth is a

renewal of human society. Truth is a perennial fountain of youth. As soon as man projects a new idea into the world society is immediately revived. Why, the blood begins to run swifter and warmer in the veins of society; cobwebs are brushed aside; sunlight streams in; youth comes with truth. Everyone of us can work for the continuous renewal of life by helping every forward-looking cause. Every hour should be the hora novicium--the great, new, resplendent hour; and every day should be charged with apocalyptic possibility.

You men and women ought to live in this age, so palpitating, so full of spiritual leaven, you ought to live lives of intensity and expansion, lives of concentration and consecration. And this land is alive. All else is mere dull routine, stupid existence, going through the mimicry of being and becoming; but only he who does and thinks, who thinks and does, lives really. And whatever your sphere of activity may be, your profession, your business, your trade, your job--whatever it be, into it you can bring a spirit of intensity and expansion, a spirit of concentration and consecration, a desire to make your job contribute in some way to the social good and to the common weal, the privilege of living.

--o--