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Hillel speaks - ancient wisdom and its modern application, 1925.

"HILLEL SPEAKS--ANCIENT WISDOM
AND ITS MODERN APPLICATION."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MAY 3, 1925, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

The character outside of the Bible which is perhaps the most lovable, the most truly representative of the Jewish ideal of moral perfection, is perhaps that of Hillel. We have no saints in Judaism--unless it be those whom popular tribute sanctified because those men in their lives sanctified God, died in martyrdom--al kiddush hashem--sanctifying the name of God; otherwise we have no saints in Israel. And yet Judaism has a conception of saintliness, a condition of moral perfection--not in isolation, not in ascetic monasticism, but a condition of moral perfection in the midst of life's very turmoil and struggle; and Hillel most closely approximates this ideal of Jewish saintliness.

Hillel lived in the generation before the common era; he was born in Babylon, which at that time was the hinterland of Palestine. Babylon in the days of Hillel could boast of no great academies of learning, nor of great culture; its golden era of Talmudic activity was still to come. Young Hillel had a great thirst for learning, not at all peculiar to him, but rather characteristic of all the great men of his day. And so very early in life he emigrated from Babylon and wended his way to Palestine. He was a poor lad and earned his living, so tradition recounts, hewing wood and doing all kinds of carpentry--work enough to earn for himself a subsistence, and enough to earn the fee which was required for admission to the academy of learning.

The great thirst for learning and his simple perspicacity of purpose are illustrated, of course, in that beautiful legend concerning him, with which you are all familiar. Young Hillel one day found himself without the small fee required in order to be admitted in the great school of Shemaiah, and of the Talmud; he did not have the wherewithal to enter; and so eager was he to listen in, and so afraid was he of missing any of the instruction, that tradition says he clambered up to the flat roof of the school house, where there was a skylight, and that he listened in. It was in the midst of the wintry season and snow began to fall, but so absorbed was Hillel in the discussion that was going on in the school that he did not notice the snow covering him until he was too numb to notice it. Fortunately, the scholars and the teachers inside of the academy noticed this shadow upon the roof, and they went to investigate, and there they found the prostrate and benumbed figure of Hillel. They took him into the school, and the great teacher Shemaiah and his confrere, Abtalion, said that for a man like Hillel one is permitted even to violate the Sabbath.

Hillel learned readily, eagerly, and before very long Hillel became the president of the sanhedrin and the outstanding religious figure of his day. He established a great school, raised many disciples, interpreted the law, expounded the Bible, laid down rules by means of which the new laws required by the altered conditions of society could be derived from the old law in the Bible, thereby preserving

the validity and the absolute authority of the Bible without stultifying the life of the people.

But it is not with the legal work of Hillel that we are concerned this morning, great as that work, all-important as that work was; it is with Hillel's ethics that we wish to deal this morning. Hillel did not develop a complete system of ethics. That was not done in Israel until more than a thousand years later in Spain. Life did not require as yet systematization. Hillel, however, laid down certain tremendously vital moral and ethical precepts, which, though now two thousand years old, have still a most immediate and vital applicability to life and conditions today. And what is even more important, Hillel's own life was an ethical preachment. Hillel was universally beloved for his humility, his piety, his love of peace, his humanity, his sympathetic understanding of all life's trials and troubles, and of the heavy burdens which all men are wont to bear in life; and this superb kindness of the man, this active gentility won for him universal admiration, and what is even more important, universal love.

Hillel's love of his fellowmen is illustrated both in maxim and in story. The most significant story of the Talmud is, of course, the story of the proselyte who came to Shamaiah, who was the confrere of Hillel, a contemporary of Hillel, and also a great rabbi, and when he raised many disciples after him, a proselyte came to Shamaiah and said to the rabbi: "Teach me the whole of the Torah in the time that

it takes me to stand on one foot. Teach me the whole of Judaism in the brief space of time that a man can stand on one foot." Shamaiah, who was a man jealous of his dignity and his authority, resented this frivolity of the would-be proselyte and expelled him from his school. The proselyte then went to Hillel, the kindly, peace-loving Hillel, and asked him the same question, thinking perhaps that he would disconcert Hillel, too, and anger him; but Hillel, wishing to disarm the proselyte, and at the same time to utilize the occasion to propound the most tremendous truth in all religion, said, "Why, surely, I can teach you the whole of the Torah while you stand on one foot. 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' This is the whole of the Torah; the rest is only commentary. Go and study."

No more vital religious enunciation was ever made--and that from a rabbi. "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This is the whole of religion; the rest is only secondary, a help, a pedagogic method. The heart and soul, the sum and substance of all religion is love of our fellowmen. Those so-called higher critics who have popularized the notion that in the days of Hillel, which was shortly before the days of the beginning of Christianity, Judaism was a moribund, stultified faith, whose spirit had been crushed by legalism and by the literalists of the Torah,--those so-called higher critics who have popularized the notion that Judaism was ever a religion of stern and rigid justice, and that its God was a cruel, vindictive deity, ought to turn to this maxim of

Hillel, which was not at all unique, which finds its echoes resplendently and abundantly in that rich literature of that period which we call the Apocrypha and the apocalypse. Love, love of God, love of our fellowmen, love of study, love of the Torah,--these were essential principles in Judaism generations before the birth of the daughter religion.

Hillel is also credited with expounding the golden rule--"That which is hateful to thyself, do not do unto thy neighbor." In a positive form this same principle is repeated in the New Testament. "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Neither Hillel nor Jesus are the originators of this maxim. Four hundred years before their time Confucius already laid down this principle. The significant thing in connection with this formulation of love, of human love, is this: that by positing the principle of love in this particular form, namely, "What is hateful unto thyself do not do unto thy neighbor," Hillel, in a sense, reinterpreted and sanely modified the same thought found in the Book of Leviticus, chapter 19, namely, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." One cannot love his neighbor as one loves himself, as one loves his own; it is not within the sphere of human emotions. "And the Torah was not given to angels; the Torah was given to human beings with their essential limitation." One cannot and one does not love his neighbor as one loves his own, his immediate family, his children, as one loves himself; and unless this principle become utterly irrelevant, it must be reinterpreted as Hillel reinterpreted

it, namely, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Just as you do not wish to be hurt, insulted, derided, exploited, just so do not insult, deride or exploit your neighbor. In other words, the very negative form of this principle saves that principle from utter inapplicability.

Hillel furthermore said, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving all creatures." Love all whom God created; not Jew only, but Jew and non-Jew; not master only, but master and slave; not equals only, but those who are your equals and those who may not be your equals. Love all whom God created. The principle of love cuts athwart all human lines of demarcations and definitions; it embraces all the children of God in its compassionate arm of sympathetic interest and understanding. Love all created beings, but-- and this again is highly important--immediately following this subject "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving all created beings" there comes this other statement: "And bring them nigh unto the Torah." Hillel did not preach just an evanescent or sentimental kind of human affection; Hillel did not preach a love which pampers; Hillel did not preach a love which enfeebles; Hillel did not preach the kind of a love which is the result of mere indifference, of pacifity of reaction; that kind of love is oftentimes the most destructive because it is the most enervating thing in the world.

Love people and help them come near to the Torah, to moral life, to intelligent moral activity. Some-

times love is hard, and sometimes love must be taxing and exacting. The aim of love is robust morality; the aim of love is to enable a man more readily to develop himself and to live a finer, nobler life. In other words, love is not an end in itself; it is a means to help men to augment their lives and lead better, finer, nobler, more helpful lives. This is the conception of love in Judaism, and it is the only sound conception of love.

Hillel also said, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace." There are two distinct ideas involved in this brief maxim to love peace, to develop a disposition, a hunger for peace, just as there is in human life a love of fight, of combat, of rivalry, of domination, of competition. So Hillel counsels men to cultivate within themselves the emotional quality of loving peace--of loving it; not merely being peaceful, but actually to love it with an overpowering, emotional urge. In other words, to create in human society a temperament, a will to peace. That is what life needs today. First of all, before any machinery for the ultimate pacification of the world can be established, mankind must get a hunger for peace; it must evolve a will, a real wish to have it, and when mankind wishes a thing and wishes it much and wishes it intensely, man gets what it wishes.

And then Hillel said, "Pursue peace." It is not enough to wish it; one must go out in active pursuit of it. Why, mankind has preached peace, peace, peace, for

thousands of years, and there is no peace, because mankind, chained to its localities and its temporal conditions and its conventions and its prejudices and its national chauvinism and its national antagonisms, was forced to stay put and remain where it is, and merely to engage in the pious and the mechanical repetition of peace, peace, peace! Hillel said, "Be of those who pursue it" - actively and energetically to build those agencies and to establish that machinery, however temporal, however tentative, which will bring peace a little nearer, and still a little nearer.

Those who are engaged in peace work today, the fine, devoted souls, the men and women of this land and throughout the world who are giving of themselves unstintingly to the cause of peace, ought to remember these two principles which Hillel enunciated, both indispensable. Men must work first for a kind of education which, in the kindergarten, in the public schools and in the high schools and in the church and in the home will build up a peace sentiment, a peace love, so that youth will be inspired to work for it and to sacrifice for it. And then they must ^{also} work not for peace in the abstract, not for peace merely as a principal ideal desired, but for peace corporealized, expressed in distinctive institutions and agencies. If one is undesirable and unsatisfactory, then another must be discovered, and others must be discovered. But machinery, institutions, agencies, which will give the nations of the world a sense of security, and which will therefore make possible universal

disarmament and international comity and peace.--institutions are necessary to accomplish that.

And then Hillel, from the maxim which we read last week, gives expression to his own great hunger of learning in the following saying: "He who does not study deserves death." Now, of course Hillel is using a hyperbole here. What he means clearly is this: that he who does not study dies, for when man ceases to learn, not merely book learning, but to learn of life, to increase his store of knowledge and wisdom, why, man ceases to live. Once our mental alertness is deadened, once our intellectual hunger is sated, once there is no longer any quest or eagerness or venturesomeness in our life, why, then we cease to live. Life is only deserving of the name life when it is tense, when it has eagerness and expectancy, when the mind is constantly active, seeking, searching, pilgrimaging, sending forth ever new antennae to reach out to touch the universe. He who does not study dies.

And Hillel furthermore said, "He who does not increase in knowledge decreases." Man never stands still. In man's life there is either ascendancy or decline. You cannot stand still. A pool of water which does not receive from time to time a fresh influx stagnates. And it is so with the human mind. The human mind cannot forever feed upon itself; it must open up new windows upon life; it must invite the world into it--the learning and the wisdom, the book knowledge and the knowledge that comes from experience

in order to keep that mind clean and alert and creative.

"He who does not increase in knowledge decreases it."

Hillel furthermore says--and this is quite important today--that there can be no piety, there can be no true religion without knowledge. The ignoramus cannot really be a sin-fearing man, and the illiterate cannot really be pious. Religion finds its deadliest enemy in ignorance, and its strongest ally in knowledge and learning. Religion has nothing to fear from science, which means knowing. Superstition need fear science; religion can well welcome it with open arms.

When you compare this doctrine of Hillel's with that which prevailed in the Middle Ages, for example, credo quia absurdum--I believe in a thing just because it is absurd--and when you contrast the religious liberality and tolerance of that man Hillel with those political illiterates and religious fanatics in the legislature of the state of Tennessee, who feel that the only way to preserve religion is to stamp out science, you understand, you realize how far in advance of his day Hillel was, and how far behind their times these people of today are.

Love learning! And that has been a dominant motif in Jewish life right through the ages.

And lastly, I should like to call your attention to Hillel's marvelous sanity, to Hillel's superb balance. He was not an extremist one way or the other. To him the ideal of life, just as to the great Aristotle among the great

Greeks, was the Meson--the middle way. He said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself only, what am I?" There are two philosophies of life contrasted there--egoism and altruism; self-effacement and self-aggrandizement. And Hillel finds a golden mean between the two. A man should think of himself, a man should think of his welfare and of the welfare of those near to him; for if he does not, no one will do it for him. A man should not deny himself, a man should not efface himself; a man should perfect himself to the highest potentialities of his being; a man should think of his dignity, of his position, of his pride.

But if one thinks he can develop himself without regard to society, that he can develop, as it were, out of himself, indifferent to the desires, to the needs, or to the similar yearnings on the part of other men, he is mistaken. If a man develops for himself only, namely, to have a little more and to be a little more--if I am for myself only, what am I? Nothing! A mean, small, starved personality, unrelated to the great world about him, out of contact with the great movements of life about him.

The ideal is to find the middle course; self-development through social life, by means of social life, for the sake of social life; for man is a social being, and his life depends for its sustenance, for its growth, upon society, and he is therefore duty bound to recompense society for the investment which society makes.

Hillel furthermore explained this idea of his of the golden mean by a story. He was found one day going to the great baths which the Romans had established in Palestine, and his disciples asked him whither he was going, and why. He said, "I am going to exalt the name of God." And they wondered, and he explained. He said, "In the great circuses and amphitheatres which the Romans have built here they have put up statues--statues of their gods, statues of their emperors, either men of little importance or gods which do not exist; and yet men take care of these statues and wash them and clean them, keep them resplendent. I, in whose body God placed part of his spirit; I, who am created in the image of God, shall I neglect my body? The body is the temple in which the soul dwells."

Now that is a remarkable doctrine, when one thinks of the great movements in the days of Hillel and since, which taught men to look upon the body not as the temple of the soul but as the prison of the soul; which taught men that their bodies are contaminated, that their bodies are sinful, that their bodies are the causes of all weaknesses and all wickedness and all evil in the world, and that their body should be castigated and afflicted, tortured and repressed, in order that the soul may be exalted.

Hillel kept the golden mean between asceticism on the one hand and epicureanism on the other; between over-indulgence, between over-pampering the body, and between absolute repression and stultification. That is sound,

robust morality. That is what Hillel preached.

And lastly--and I shall be through--he said, "If not now, when?" The whole of life centers in the now, not in the hereafter, not in the other world, nor even tomorrow. Now! This moment which is given you, which you have, which you can use; do it now! The morrow is not yours. It is in the will of God. The hereafter is beyond your ken; the other world is not of your knowing. All that you know, all that you can use is that precious moment which is given you now. Use it! "Do not say," said Hillel, "when I shall have time I will study." For most people never have the time. I have known so many very busy, very active businessmen who are so absorbed in their business and the task of building up a great establishment, and I have often heard them say, "Well, I am too busy just now; I am too pre-occupied; I haven't got time for study; I haven't time for music and symphonies and operas; I haven't time for the Temple and for worship; I haven't time for books. I am too busy. Later on, later on after I will have built up my business and I will have leisure and time, I will retire and devote myself to these things." But the chances are that when they retire, if they retire, they are no longer qualified to do any real reading or study, any real intellectual or cultural work. They have so long starved the muscles of their mind and their soul that they can no longer use them; and most of them, when they do retire, retire under the care of a doctor or of a nurse; they retire to a sick bed.

Do not say "When I shall have time I will study. Thou mayst never have the time. If not now, when?" And even those who are not so-called practical businessmen, even those who are the impractical idealists often make the same mistake. They sacrifice the present, the now, the precious moments which are given them, to some distant, perhaps never attainable goal. Gorky, in his "Fragments of my Diary," tells this simple but profound little anecdote. In the Alexander Park in St. Petrograd, there was a gardener who for years and years took care of the park, of the flower beds, of the walks in the park, and during the days of the czar, daily, like clock-work, this gardener would come to his park, put on his frock and go out weeding his plants, watering his flowers and cleaning the walks. When the revolution broke out and Petrograd was agog with excitement and movements of armies, when great ideals were in the air and men were speaking of the millennium, this simple gardener, day by day, with white apron, repaired to his garden and tended to his work; and when the second great revolution took place in Russia, and again vast armies crowded the streets of St. Petrograd, and again great expectations were in the air, and people and soldiers thoughtlessly would come and stamp over the nicely grown grass and lawns of the park, or of the flower beds, this gardener would stand there like an avenging angel, and scold and threaten and protect, as a mother protects its babies, the flower beds and the lawn and the walks of his park. And sometimes soldiers would ask him,

"Fool, when all the world is being changed, and all these wonderful things are coming to happen, why are you remaining here in the garden, satisfied with this stupid little work, this spade work, this trucking?" But he would respond just simply, "You wish to fight? You wish new government? You wish new conditions? You go and get them; I will take care of my dear little park." That's all the story. And yet one can read a great deal in that story. Others were trampling over parks, and others were trampling over human life, and others were destroying, others were sacrificing the now, the kindly things that could be done now, the beautiful things that could be done now, for some distant, ultimate ideal at stake which may never come to be.

Perhaps the only real thing, the only lasting thing, the only worthwhile thing that was done in that stormy city of Petrograd during all those years was the work of these humble little gardeners, each one doing his humble job now and here. Whether it be the gardener of a flower bed, or the cobbler at his lathe, or the student in his study, those who day by day do their God-appointed task are those who serve mankind. If not now, when?

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