



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
150

Box
53

Folder
267

My quest of knowledge, 1926.

"MY QUEST OF KNOWLEDGE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

DECEMBER 19, 1926, CLEVELAND.



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

The man of today who sets out in his quest of knowledge is in a sorrier plight than the man of antiquity or the man of the Middle Ages. In those days the amount of accumulated knowledge was not so vast and overwhelming but that educated people still thought of encompassing the whole scope of the then known knowledge of man. It was still possible to aspire to encyclopedic knowledge, to embrace all the fields of human thought; and it was not a rare phenomenon at all, in ancient days or in the Middle Ages, to find writers of ability writing with equal authority and equal facility on nearly all sciences and all arts,--in physics, philosophy, politics, art, medicine. An Aristotle, a was not at all rare, as far as the scope of their interests and their studies was concerned.

Modern man, however, can aspire to no such all-embracing knowledge. Man today knows that there is much that he cannot know. There has been accumulated so much of knowledge that no man, in the short space of life, can attain it at all. We realize this fact, and so we have begun to ask for outlines of one kind or another,--an outline of science, an outline of literature, an outline of philosophy,--something which will give us in condensed form the salient things of the particular fields of human thought. But of course these outlines do not give us mastery over the field; nor do they equip us to contribute to that field, to create something new in that field of human thought. I suppose that a modern man

can spend a whole lifetime in one alcove of our great libraries. It has been estimated that if a man were to read a book a day, it would take him ten thousand years to read all the books in the British Museum. So you see that the task of acquiring knowledge is an appalling one, almost a hopeless one. And when one realizes this fact he has taken the first step on the road to knowledge; and when one realizes further that the amount of knowledge already accumulated by the human race is only a fraction of a fraction of what ought to be known but is not known, he will have taken another step on the road to real knowledge.

It was that sagacious Frenchman Montaigne who said that men have nibbled on the outward crusts of science. And that is true. We have only nibbled at the infinite knowledge and the infinite truth of the universe. We have yet so much to learn. It was Darwin, wasn't it? who said that our knowledge is like a small island of knowing in a vast sea of ignorance.

So that the correct attitude for a seeker after knowledge is one of supreme humility. We know that we cannot learn all that there is to learn, and that the wise among us are doomed to a vast amount of ignorance on a vast number of subjects, and the awareness of this fact, the realization of this fact is one of greatest moment in the attainment of knowledge. The student, the thinker, the seeker who is aware of the far flung frontiers of human thought, many of which he will never reach, with the best of

intentions and the most arduous of efforts, that man is never ashamed to acknowledge his ignorance on this or that. He is very ready to acknowledge his incompleteness of information about many things in life. And if it is true that the meek shall inherit the earth, it is equally true that only the meek can inherit knowledge.

Again, friends, man advances another step on the road of knowledge when he realizes that knowledge is not happiness. Knowledge may be power, knowledge may give us mastery over nature to a degree, knowledge may supply us with certain comforts and physical comforts, but knowledge cannot insure a permanent state of happiness or contentment. It was that gentle cynic whose philosophy is imbedded in that amazing book of the Bible, the Book of Ecclesiastes, who said, you will recall, "He who increases knowledge increases worries and heartaches and the troubling of the spirit. Someone has said that knowledge by suffering enters. Knowledge comes to us through suffering. And that is a profound truth. It is on the rungs of pain that we rise to the levels of truth and knowledge. But even when that truth is reached, it may lead to still greater restlessness and perturbation of spirit and doubts and perplexities and mental and spiritual anxieties. Knowledge does not and never has insured for man happiness.

The Rabbis said that "the wise men, the scholar, have no rest in this world and in the next world. For it is written they will go from strength to strength

until they see God." They will rise from one level of cognition to a higher level, ceaselessly, constantly, never at rest, either in this world or in the next. That is the nature of knowledge. Knowledge, of course, and the quest of knowledge, is our crown and our glory. It is that which differentiates the man from the beast; it is that which vindicates our human estate. The quest of knowledge is the life urge in mankind. It is glorious, it is beautiful, but oftentimes the way of it is hard and oftentimes the way of it is tragic. The quest of real knowledge, friends, furrows the cheek and wrinkles the brow and tires the heart. It is not easy to probe into the unknown, to seek to wrest an iota of new truth for the spiritual enlightenment of the mental evolution of man.

I am of course speaking at this moment of real knowledge; I am not now speaking of just reading. I am speaking of knowledge for research, knowledge for discovery, knowledge for truth. You will recall that that classic essayist, who was able to condense so much of human wisdom in so short a space, Roger Bacon, said that studies serve three purposes. Studies serve for delight, and for ornament, and for ability. And by delight he meant for the retiring hours of our life, the quiet hours of retirement, when we can delight our spirit in reading, in study; and by ornament he meant ornament in conversation, to liven up and enrich our conversation with knowledge and truth gleaned in the many fields of human experience; and by ability he meant

knowledge which will enable us to wrestle with the problems of life, to form judgments, to make decisions, to make discoveries. Now, even that kind of knowledge which we use for delight and for ornament requires painstaking effort before it may be acquired. Culture is grounded in profound understanding. Culture comes as a result of a highly sensitized spirit which can discriminate and select, which can choose the best in all that has been wrote or written. Culture comes as a result of years and years of training, of self-pruning and self-development.

There are, of course, men and women, especially in our land, who seem to acquire knowledge with great ease. For their delight they read newspapers and magazines, and for ornament I suppose they read some relaxing novel, and for ability at times they attend a lecture which gives them some predigested wisdom. But all that is flirting with knowledge; it is not acquiring real knowledge. Knowledge for ability demands hard thinking. No man is completely able unless he is completely free, and only truth makes us free. As long as our minds are shackled by misinformation, by half-truths, by propaganda, by superstition, by prejudices, by hastily formed impressions, by unanalyzed concepts and notions, so long are we not free. We may have a splendid intelligence, but we are like Samson chained; we are completely able only as we can become completely free, and only truth can make us free.

Now, there may be truth all around us but we

cannot recognize it because we have not trained our eyes to see truth and our ears to discover the true note from the false note; and the whole object of knowledge is not the acquiring of an additional amount of information, of unrelated, unorganized and unattracted facts, but the whole object of knowledge, of this toiling and mulling of the human mind, the sweating and groaning of life, is to fashion our minds into an expert thinking apparatus, into a thinking instrument which will weigh and measure and select and detect the truth from the false, and combine, resolve, analyze and make decisions, and that comes with hard labor and long years of work. To fashion our mind into an instrument of accuracy and precision is an arduous lifetime enterprise, and too many of us relinquish that task all too early in life. That is why the American people is the worst educated and least cultured people in the world, in spite of the fact that we have more colleges and more universities than the rest of the world put together.

There recently appeared a book by Dr. Joseph Collins, an eminent physician. The title of the book is, "The Doctor Looks upon Love and Life," and in this book Dr. Collins accuses us of what he calls "adult infantilism." By that he means a condition of an individual who has arrived at physical maturity but whose mind is still infantile in its reactions to the situations and the problems of adult life. Among many uncomplimentary things he says about us he has this to say: "We are constantly shifting our viewpoints,

seeking new occupations, unfamiliar horizons, different pleasures, because we have little focusing power. A passing idea attracts our attention but we cannot concentrate on it. We are too afraid that meanwhile another idea may go by unnoticed." Dr. Collins has observed that Americans will succumb to anything, reasonable or otherwise, if it is sufficiently advertised. "They will overstep any limit if the bait is fashionable or popular. We have had more crazes and fads in our country in the past fifty years than any other country can boast in twice that time." "Does the American people take politics seriously?" asks Dr. Collins. "No, Americans do not," he answers. "For to follow the trend and achievements of the country requires maturity of mind which involves emotional maturity. That is what we lack. The happy-go-lucky attitude is so much easier. We would rather play golf or go to a foot-ball game than vote, and we cannot take the time from radios and movies to inquire into the merit of constitutional amendments." Dr. Collins places the blame squarely on the shoulder of the parents, who, he claims, have coddled and pampered the rising generation to a degree which has made thought unnecessary in their lives. It is the way the past generation," he says, "has brought up its children, spiritually and materially, and the way the present generation is bringing up its own that is responsible for our personal and national infantilism."

I have heard parents say, "I want to spare my children the knocks I had when I was young," and the next

moment that same parent will say, "I owe everything that I am to my early training, to the hard knocks that I had to endure." He prides himself on being a self-made man, and will not give his child the opportunity to make a man out of himself. And Dr. Collins concludes: "The young should be taught how to think. Thought is the expression of power in its highest and noblest form. It is the enemy of privilege, the friend of mercy, the proponent of justice." And that is the primary object of knowledge; not the amassing of detailed information, but the perfecting of a thinking machinery in ourselves. Someone has correctly said that it is better to know nothing than to know badly. And there is so much in this highly civilized age of ours, in the midst of these ten thousand colleges and universities, there is so much of bad knowledge abroad in the world, and in all our minds, that it is better, in many instances, that we know nothing of certain things.

In other words, the first attitude required for a knowledge seeker is one of humility, and the second attitude is one which will lead him to seek knowledge not outside of himself but into a laboratory of himself, where he will be sharpening the tools of the mind, sharpening the thinking tools, and where he will be clearing out rubbish of half-truths, of ill formed concepts and inherent prejudices which clutter up the mind and keep us from seeing truth about us,--that truth alone which can make us free and make us able successfully to wrestle with the problems which life brings

to our door.

And lastly, the third way to knowledge is the way which leads one to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. That is a distinction which the ancients already discovered. Knowledge and wisdom are not opposites, but they are not at all identical. One may be very learned and yet not be very wise; and one may be very wise and yet not be very learned. Real knowledge, of course, contributes to real wisdom, but the two are not necessarily the same. I sometimes think of wisdom as knowledge moralized. I think of wisdom as of knowledge judiciously and beneficently applied to human worships and translated into states of inner being. Knowledge may destroy; learning may devastate. Just as mankind ten years ago employed the last word in scientific knowledge to increase the slaughter and the butchery of human beings on the battle-fields, so in private life knowledge may be used in the hands of the unscrupulous, the shrewd and the cunning, to destroy, to hurt rather than to heal and enrich life.

Knowledge is power, but wisdom is control. How to control that power,--that is wisdom. Knowledge is light. It very often can be a glaring light and a blinding light. Wisdom is not only light but warmth. Wisdom will tell us how to employ our knowledge for the ennoblement of life. Wisdom will tell us the delicate nuances in social relationships; wisdom will tell us the difference, for example, between ambition and avarice, between liberty and

license, between pride and arrogance, between reform and revolution. Wisdom, which is the accumulated experiences of social living--not necessarily the accumulated knowledge of man, but the accumulated experiences of social living, will tell us how to translate knowledge into a way of life.

That is the word that I should like to underscore this morning. All knowledge is valuable only as it can translate itself, or as it does translate itself into a mode of living, into a way of life; only insofar as it helps man to lead a fuller and a richer and a happier life. Therefore the Bible thrice repeats that marvelous phrase which I read this morning out of the twenty-eighth chapter of the Book of Job: "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." And by the fear of the Lord, of course you understand, the author has in mind not fearing God, nor even merely revering God. He has in mind the whole moral and ethical life of man, which is grounded in faith in God. The beginning of wisdom and the end of wisdom is moral living; intelligent enlightenment, spacious, free, but moral living. And the author of the Book of Job goes even a step further. He does not say the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; he says: "The fear of the Lord--that is wisdom." "And the keeping away from evil--that is knowledge."

And that, to my mind, is perhaps the last word that can be said and not be said on the subject of seeking knowledge. The road to knowledge is the road of humility, of humbleness, in the face of all that has been learned which

I cannot learn, and in the face of what is yet to be learned which no one has as yet learned. And it is the way which leads inwardly to a mental self-discipline, to a rigorous mind exercise, a mind training; and it is the way which leads through knowledge to a life of service, of beneficence, of morality to the dwelling place of light--which is God.

And wisdom, where shall it be found, and where is the dwelling place thereof? Where all goodness and all beauty and all truth are found--in God.

--o--

