



## 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  
282

What is morality?, 1927.

---

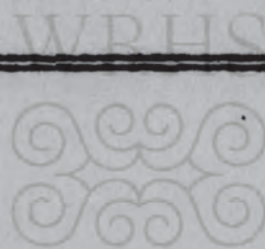
"WHAT IS MORALITY?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

APRIL 24, 1927, CLEVELAND, O.

---



JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND

The subject which I have propounded for this morning--"What is Morality?"--is vast in its scope, and I shall not presume even to attempt to treat of it in its entirety. All I wish to do this morning is point out one or two important facts touching this problem of morality which are being overlooked in our day. Every one knows or suspects that our age is revising its moral standards. Everywhere men and women are questioning the moral codes. Some are even violating the moral code in this or that regard without any particular form of conscience.

A few weeks ago Dr. Durant addressed the Men's Club of our Temple on the subject of the modern woman. His very discussion, his style, already indicated a shifting of standards with regards to the old fashioned restraints of public speech. Dr. Durant called attention to the radical changes in the political and economical and social status of the modern woman, and warned of the inevitable changes in moral standards which would follow these changes.

Everywhere we hear about the revolt of youth. I, for one, have not found this revolt of youth. To me the revolt seems more like a wild party. There is everywhere a frank , a more public indulgence of the appetites. That might be revolting but it is hardly a revolt. But clearly we sense it in the air that our moral standards are being

sharply revised, and as a result of this nigh universal readjustment in our moral life, our ideas concerning the essentials of morality have become confused, and those notions which frequently infest an age of moral transition have again made their appearance among us. Quite a number of people are seeking refuge from the censure of society for their moral misdeeds in that argument, clearly anarchistic, which states that morality after all is only a set of social functions; that there are no principles in morality abiding and irrevocable, but that morality is only a matter of social usage or custom which one age accepts, which another age may reject.

Under the guise of this pseudo-scientific justification young adventurers and old sinners are carrying on their practices. It is therefore important, to my mind, in this age of moral flux and change, to point out that while morality has evolved, as all life has evolved, from the lower forms to the higher, and that therefore morality has been changing continuously,--I say it is all important to point out that while all this is true, this change, this evolution, has not been sporadic and unintelligent and capricious, a matter of chance or whim, but that certain quite definite principles and ideals have always guided this moral evolution of the race.

And it is also all important to point out, especially to our young people today, that morality is not synonymous with social custom or convention; that it is

more than mere habit of conduct of the majority of peoples. There was a time in the history of the human race when morality was almost exclusively customary. That is true of all primitive peoples, and I suppose it is still true of all peoples whose minds are primitive. The primitive man was dominated by the habits and the practices of his tribe, his clan, his group. He obeyed the moral code in vogue not because his reason sanctioned it; not because he had thought through his moral code, but because usage demanded it. He brought to his moral problem no free ideas, no intelligence, no questioning spirit; he exercised no judgment and no freedom in his moral decisions. His reactions to a moral situation were almost instinctive. Morality for the primitive man was not a matter of inner experience but merely of outer conformity. Just the same as we conform today to our canons of fashion. We wear the kind of dress we do wear or the kind of hats we do wear not because we believe in them, not because we believe they are the most appropriate or the most beautiful or the most comfortable. We wear our clothes because everybody else wears them in the same style and in the same fashion, and we wouldn't dare to violate that social usage or convention. There are people who think less of violating morality than of violating manners. I know of business men who would not think twice about overreaching his business but would not dream of appearing, say, in a public function in a tuxedo suit

with a red necktie. I know of women who do not think twice of gossiping and slandering, doing all sorts of things, but would be mortified if they had to appear in public in a dress of the style of 1910.

We accept these things and we submit to these fashions automatically. Now, primitive man submitted to his moral code in the self-same way, only more so. To him his moral code was not only a matter of fashion but a matter of military uniform. It was part of his discipline. It was fixed and binding upon him, and to that degree he was not a moral being at all, because morality is predicated upon the thought that a man is free to choose between right and wrong. When a man thinks a child will be neither moral nor immoral he is unmoral, and the primitive man who merely followed blindly the practices and the usages of his tribe or group was to that extent not a moral being. It is only as man developed and his mind expanded, it is only as man began to emancipate himself from the complete domination of his clan, of his tribe, or a group, as he began to think for himself and to make his own decisions, that morality made its appearance, and to the degree that man continued his mental and spiritual emancipation did his moral sense develop and expand.

In other words, morality is coterminous with freedom. Man was never entirely free, and we are not entirely free to this day. We are still subject largely to

the herd instinct, and we are still subject largely to the influences of heredity and environment, but to the degree that we do struggle to free ourselves from these shackles which time and place and tradition impose upon us, to the degree that we struggle to rise to the level of an autonomous personality, does our moral sense grow and develop. Therefore to say that morality today is only a matter of social convention is to deny the whole progress of the human race, is to put man back in the jungle.

Morality today is no longer a matter of conformity. It is reflected. The very fact that each age undertakes to reexamine its moral standards proves that morality has entered a new stage in human development. We are conscious of being free to obey or to disobey, to select, to modify, to reject, if necessary. Why very often we challenge convention in the name of the higher moral law. In 1860 and before that time slavery was a moral institution, accepted by society, almost universally practiced, part of the law of the land, and yet men dared to challenge that institution in the name of the higher moral law. In 1927, in our own day, war is a legalized institution, accepted quietly, uniformly practiced, part of our moral code, if you will, if morality is only a matter of custom and usage and habit, and yet in 1927 men dared to challenge war, to seek the outlawry of war. In the name of what? Not in the name of social conventions but in the name of the higher law which may still be the

possession of only a few of the aristocrats of the human species. Twenty-five hundred years ago idolatry, the worship of idols, was universally habitual and customary, but the prophets arose and challenged that entire institution. In the name of what? Not of things as they are; not of the accepted, but in the name of the higher ideals which had begun to stir in their souls.

And so the test of morality--this is the first great thought which I would seek to underscore this morning--the test of whether a thing is moral or not is no longer in this age of reflective morality, whether it conforms with social usage or whether it is legal or whether it is traditional. The test of the morality of an act or of a condition or of an institution today is whether it conforms with the highest ideals of the best minds of the race, even if these minds be few and in opposition to the minds of the agnostic. A condition, therefore, or an institution of the act remains moral until the higher ideal begins to dawn upon the race, and as soon as that higher ideal appears, that condition or institution of practice, however broadly or generally held, becomes immoral and subject to rejection.

But it is only in the name of an ideal and a higher ideal that the social code dare be challenged. Mere rebelliousness of spirit, mere seeking after novelty or a quest of the different, inability to submit to the discipline which morality exacts, a desire to indulge one's

appetites with greater convenience,--these things do not justify or warrant a challenging of the moral code of an age or an experimentation with new moral practices. The challenging, the seeking of the new, must be in the name of the higher ideals and only in the name of the higher ideals.

Now, what are these higher ideals? In whose behalf are we justified in seeking moral revision and modification? Why, friends, they are synonymous with those ideals which have guided the human race in its long, long ascent from the low levels to the higher levels. They are the ideals which have beckoned the race constantly; they are the ideals of self-perfection, self-realization, self-fulfillment; the ideals which would enable men to live on the highest planes of existence, physically, mentally and spiritually. Some called it the ideals of freedom. That is a good word--freedom. For every form of imperfection, every condition which keeps a man from realizing his highest destiny is slavery. Ignorance, superstition, poverty, hate, lust, war,--these are chains which keep us shackled to our imperfections and to our restrictions and to our limitations; which keep us from adventuring freely in the broad worlds where we can become more, be more, know more, grow.

Now these ideals, political, economical, social, personal, which enable a man, and simultaneously all other men, to realize their fullest destiny, these

ideals are the guiding principles in morality and in the name of these ideals and only in their name is an age justified in seeking a revision of its moral code and an experimentation with new moral institutions. And it is quite beyond the point, friends, to raise the question at this time whether these ideals are of God or of man, whether the moral code is man-made or God-made; whether we ought to follow these ideals because they are divine imperatives imposed upon the human race by God, or whether these ideals represent the finding of man's own reason and man's own experiences. That is quite beyond the point. These ideals do represent the best that the human mind and heart are capable of, and if we are to believe in human progress at all, in man's capacity to order his future and to control his progress, then we must accept the doctrine that only as man follows these highest ideals will he grow and develop.

Now this may sound quite vague, all that I have said, but then the whole subject is quite vague, indefinite and concrete formulation. But these ideals of which I speak are definite and permanent principles in morality, and the fine minds of the human race found it possible to compress these ideals in certain maxims, certain concise, serviceable maxims to aid people in their daily life. The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant, when asked: "When can I know whether an act is moral or immoral?" --here I am facing a situation; I do not know

exactly whether it is right or wrong for me to do this particular act. What shall I do? What shall be my guiding principle?"--and he replied by saying, "Act from a maxim fit for universal law." Restated it means simply this: ask yourself whether this particular act which you are about to perform, if done by everybody else, would lead to your and their greater happiness and well-being or not. Universalize your act, your contemplated act. If you are about to tell a lie, ask yourself if all men would tell lies in all situations whether that would be conducive to the growth and the development of yourself and of mankind or not. If you are about to put through a deal in business, or perform a piece of labor in a shady or unsatisfactory manner, in your own mind and imagination universalize that act and ask yourself what would be the result if all men did the same thing. If you are about to stoop to the depths of sensual self-indulgence and to prostitute your moral being, universalize that practice in your own mind and ask yourself what would happen if your daughter or your wife or your sister or your son would do the selfsame thing, whether that would contribute to your happiness and to the happiness of all other human beings.

Now, this is a definite, guiding principle in the moral life. Our great Hillel said the selfsame thing two thousand years before Kant when he said: "What is hateful unto thyself do not do unto thy neighbor." And

a generation later the master of Christianity phrased the same thought in the famous Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." And Confucius centuries before said the selfsame thing. Now in these pithy, concise phrases are expressed all these higher ideals which have guided the human race from the earliest period of its conscious moral evolution.

So that if I were to summarize all that I have said about this subject "What is morality?" I would say this: in the first place, morality is not a matter of fashion. Whether a girl bobs her hair or not is not a moral question. Whether a woman smokes cigarettes or not is not a moral question. These things have to do with social conventions and social usages which change, rapidly change from one age to another. Nor is morality a matter of what a man should eat or what a man should drink. Whether a man should drink spiritous liquors or not is not a moral question. Whether a man should obey a law on the statute book which regulates or prohibits the drinking of spiritous liquors, that is quite a moral question. But the mere eating and drinking does not become a moral question until eating reaches the point of gluttony and drinking reaches the point of insobriety which make for the degradation of man's physical and mental and spiritual life, which keep men from the fullest and highest realization of their capacities. Then eating and drinking become a moral question. Nor is morality merely a matter of law.

The law always lags behind the moral idealism of the race. The law after all represents only the concensus of the majority at any given time; nothing more. You cannot write into your codes of law love, charity, goodness of heart, purity, industry. You cannot legislate these things at all, and they are essential, perhaps the supreme essentials of morality. They are those laws which our sages said were "the things which were turned over to the heart." They are "the beauties of the heart." And so morality is higher than mere law.

What then is morality? It is the sum total, as I see it, of the highest spiritual intuition of the finest minds of the race. It is the sum total of the highest spiritual intuition of the finest minds of the race. Morality is that set of codes which man at his best, intellectually, spiritually, thinks desirable for himself and for his fellowmen. The Rabbis said that morality is the imitation of God; and that sums it all up; because God is the sum total of the noblest ideals of which the mind of man is capable. The imitation of God. Just as God is merciful, so ought we to be merciful. Just as God is just, so ought we to try to approximate the justice of God. That is morality. And having those few simple ideals fixed in one's mind, one can quite readily ask himself, when he confronts a situation which involves a moral issue, whether my act is right or wrong, moral or immoral, by these standards which are permanent and abiding, not

a matter of whim or fashion or fancy, but guiding principles which have led the race through its millennial struggle for freedom and self-perfection.

What is the reward of the moral life? Why the moral life itself. What do we receive in return for obeying these ideals? Why nothing more than the joy and the satisfaction of obeying these ideals. Don't you see that they are the dictates and the imperatives of the best in us? And the satisfaction in following the best in us is the only reward which men ought to expect in life. Obeying the moral law does not always make us happy in the sense in which people frequently interpret the word "happy." Very often in the pursuit of these higher ideals we will find ourselves in opposition to the people about us, defying them, challenging institutions, bringing down upon us the hate and the mockery and the persecution of the world. Very often in the pursuit of these higher ideals we will miss those physical and material comforts and luxuries which might have been ours if we had chosen to flaunt, to deny these ideals. Obedience to the moral law does not always make us happy, unless it be the truest kind of happiness, the inner glow, the inner kind of satisfaction, the spiritual contentment of having played the game as a man. That happiness comes, always comes, with obedience to the highest moral law.

The story is told of one of the sages of our people--it is told in the Talmud and is a very incisive

and illuminating, simple tale, as nearly all of the Talmudic sagas and tales are---a certain queen, says this legend, lost a very precious stone, and the king had it proclaimed throughout his dominion that the finder of this precious stone shall return it within thirty days and receive a reward, but failing to return it within thirty days he will be put to death. Rabbi Samuel ben Sasaadia found the stone before the thirty days were over, but he returned it after the thirty days. And when questioned by his disciples why he delayed, thereby endangering his life, he replied: "If I had returned the stone within the assigned time, all men would have said that I did it in order to gain the reward. I delayed so as to teach my disciples and pupils the most fundamental law in life: that man ought to obey the moral law without expecting any reward."

And in these sayings of the Fathers which I read for you this morning there is that remarkable phrase which condenses all that I said this morning: "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like those who serve their master--God--without any expectation of reward."

The reward of goodness is goodness itself.

--o--

# WHAT IS MORALITY?

Address delivered by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver  
Sunday morning at The Temple, E. 105th St. at Ansel Rd.

Apr 24, 1929

?

As a result of the high universal readjustment which is taking place in the moral lives of people today, their ideas touching the essentials of morality have become confused. They are confusing the temporary with the permanent, the superficial with the essential, the legal with the spiritual. Some people are justifying their violation of moral standards by declaring that morality is after all only social custom and usage which one age accepts and another may reject.

It is important in this age of flux and moral groping to point out that while morality has evolved as all life has evolved from lower forms and has therefore changed continuously, it nevertheless possesses definite guiding principles which determine its evolution. The changes are not sporadic, accidental or capricious. It is also imperative to point out that morality today is not synonymous with social convention and is not a mere matter of conformity to social habits.

To say that man's morality today is merely social custom is to deny the whole cultural development of the human race. It is to place modern man on a par with the savage of the jungle whose reactions to a moral situation were not the result of principle or intelligence but of imitation.

The test of morality today is no longer whether a given act or institution is sanctioned by the laws or traditions of society but whether it is at one with the highest ideals held by the best minds of society.

Morality is not a matter of fashion. Whether one bobs her hair or smokes is not a moral question. Whether one drinks spiritous liquors or not is not a moral question. However whether one should observe a law upon the statute books which prohibits the consumption of spiritous liquors is decidedly a moral question. Morality is not entirely a matter of obeying laws. The written law frequently lags behind the moral idealism of the race. Love, charity, purity, industry cannot be legislated.

Morality is the sum total of the highest spiritual intuitions of the best minds and hearts of the race. It is all that man at his best conceives of as desirable for himself and for all other men.

# WHAT IS MORALITY?

Address delivered by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver  
Sunday morning at The Temple, E. 105th St. at Ansel Rd.

As a result of the Nigh universal readjustment which is taking place in the moral lives of people today, their ideas touching the essentials of morality have become confused. They are confusing the temporary with the permanent, the superficial with the essential, the legal with the spiritual. Some people are justifying their violation of moral standards by declaring that morality is after all only social custom and usage which one age accepts and another may reject.

It is important in this age of flux and moral groping to point out that while morality has evolved as all life has evolved from lower forms and has therefore changed continuously, it nevertheless possesses definite guiding principles which determine its evolution. The changes are not sporadic, accidental or capricious. It is also imperative to point out that morality today is not synonymous with social convention and is not a mere matter of conformity to social habits.

To say that man's morality today is merely social custom is to deny the whole cultural development of the human race. It is to place modern man on a par with the savage of the jungle whose reactions to a moral situation were not the result of principle or intelligence but of imitation.

The test of morality today is no longer whether a given act or institution is sanctioned by the laws or traditions of society but whether it is at one with the highest ideals held by the best minds of society.

Morality is not a matter of fashion. Whether one bobs her hair or smokes is not a moral question. Whether one drinks spiritous liquors or not is not a moral question. However whether one should observe a law upon the statute books which prohibits the consumption of spiritous liquors is decidedly a moral question. Morality is not entirely a matter of obeying laws. The written law frequently lags behind the moral idealism of the race. Love, charity, purity, industry cannot be legislated.

Morality is the sum total of the highest spiritual intuitions of the best minds and hearts of the race. It is all that man at his best conceives of as desirable for himself and for all other men.

sporadic