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A grown-up way of looking at life, 1934.

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**A GROWN-UP WAY OF LOOKING AT LIFE**

**By**  
**Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver**  
**At**  
**The Temple**  
**On**  
**Sunday morning, April 15, 1934**





There is a department in the literature of our people which has been designated as grown-up literature or wisdom literature. That department is represented in the Bible by the Book of Proverbs, Pirke Avoth and Ecclesiastes. In the Ecclesiastes which is a later collection of Jewish writings which were not included in the of the Bible, this department of literature is represented by the wisdom of or as it is sometimes called, Ecclesiastes. In the Talmud this department of writing is represented by the Pirke Avoth, the second chapter of which I read to you this morning. Now this literature is rather distinctive, what is called didactic literature. The purpose is to teach by way of Proverbs, impress some principles of human conduct upon the minds of the rabbis to an adage, to a pithy concise and attractive phrase. Now as literature it is not of the highest order. This type of literature has neither the sweetness nor the majesty nor the emotional appeal of great poetry or of great drama. It is not great art. Its appeal is purely intellectual. It has no eloquence other than the eloquence of truth. What thoughtful men have learned out of their observations of human life is here in this type of writing. The contents is summarized and presented for the guidance of human beings. In this writing you will find very little compromise with the romantic or with the eloquent. There is no wishful thinking here, no pleasant delusions. There are no extreme affirmations of life or negations. It isn't that kind of writing. Only the facts



of human experience are presented, pleasant and unpleasant, bitter and sweet, the possible and the impossible. In other words, what you have in this literature, the Book of Proverbs, Pirke Avoth and Ecclesiastes is world wisdom or the hard discipline of human life against which our youthful wings sometimes beat in vain until we are vanquished and our wings are broken and we come to accept the inherent sovereign truths of these aphorism and proverbs contained in this literature.

Now this wisdom literature is not philosophy in the technical sense of the term. If you read for example the sayings of the Fathers which you find in your prayer books you will discover many conscious systems of ethics derived from many schools of thought or based on many principles of philosophy. There is no speculation. Nothing like the speculation in Plator's "Academy", or in the "Lyceum of Aristotle" or in the "Porch" of the stoics. It is just an accumulation of the pragmatic wisdom derived from life itself. And because of that it represents the highest type of philosophy, the guide to life.

And after you read these chapters you are impressed by one fact -- the remarkable balance of judgment, the symetric and in a way too, the calm serenity of it all. No ardor, no over-statement, no over-emphasis. Remarkable balance.

This literature is not exaltingly mystic nor profusely lyrical. It isn't all sunshine nor all shadow. It doesn't speak of life as being all evil, nor as all good. It doesn't advise men to become



ascetic to escape from life, not to become epicurean nor stoic. It doesn't exalt men. It doesn't degrade man. In other words the philosophy is for grown-up people. It is a grown-up way of looking at life.

Let me elucidate what I mean by this balance which you find in this literature of our people. First, in the field of theology. Akibah is quoted as saying: -- I believe I read that this morning -- he was one of the greatest of the rabbis of the Talmud. Akibah said: "Everything is foreseen. Nevertheless free will is granted unto man. The world is judged by the grace of God and yet everything honored according to the merits of a man's work." On the face of this there is an amazing contradiction here presented in this compact sentence or two of the age-old problems of theology. First, the problem of God's omniscience -- man's free will. If God knows the past and future, how then has man the free will to choose what he is to do? That problem has wracked the brains of theologians and scholars for centuries. Some have sought to exalt God as to deny man's free will altogether. On the other hand, some have sought to eliminate it even at the expense of limiting the all-knowingness of God.

How does this solve the matter? It doesn't solve it. He balances one against the other. Everything is foreseen by God. Nevertheless free will is granted. Logically, there is no free will. Everything has its cause and its effect. That is what the intellect says. Everything is pre-determined. That is a mystery. The wise man accepts it as such. And that is the fantasy and the mystery.



Akibah said: "This world is governed by the grace of God." A man is judged by God not by what he thinks because if all men were judged by what they think they could not stand in the sight of God. Nevertheless everything depends upon a man's works, as a man conducts himself in life -- a contradiction -- and this struggle between grace and good works has been the classic struggle. Christian theology, to the present day -- Paul in the New Testament insists that "Everything depends on grace." We recommend therefore "That a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." For the law worketh wrath, but when there is no law, neither is there transgression...God reputeth righteousness apart from works."

What is Rabbi Akibah's answer to this? Again, balance. The world is judged by God's grace and a man's life is measured a great deal by what a man believes. A man is judged not so much by what he professes. It isn't so much what he thinks. It is both.

Sometimes a man is compelled to do things against his inner convictions. A man cannot be judged exclusively on the basis of his views nor exclusively on the basis of his acts. Both are important. Let me give you another passage passing from Theology to Ethics in this grown-up way of looking at life, in this wisdom learning of our people.

Rabbi Gemaliel said -- that I believe I read to you this morning -- "The study of the Torah is beautiful if it is joined with a worthy occupation." All work which is not supplemented by work in the end becomes meaningless. Now there is nothing in Jewish learning which is



repetitious as the importance and the primacy of the study of the Torah. Yet man must not exclude work. The highest object is the study of the Torah. Nevertheless the study of the Torah must include work, labor. A man must not permit himself to live in an ivory tower of academic interests. He must root his life in physical labor, in work or his intellectual speculations become so abstract as to become meaningless. and A cloistered scholar is a one-sided man/even if his one-mindedness was on the score of learning and piety he was frowned upon by the wise men of our people. There was never any mockery in Jewish religion. Hermits were foreign and alien to the spirit of our people. "Do not separate thyself from the congregation. Live among them. Work among them."

That self-same balance between study and work they emphasized between study and moral conduct. It is not enough to know a great deal. One must do a great deal. One must do a great deal. It is not enough to be wise. One must be good.

Among the ancient Greek philosophers was a sect known as the sophists. They were a people who believed in wisdom. They were a people who trained their intellects to the highest point of development. They over-emphasized mind training the intellect and under-emphasized moral conduct. Before very long these sophists began to prostitute their mental prowess. They began to hire themselves out as skilled vendors of fallacies and smartness to everybody and anybody. They took pride in their mental juggling. They were brilliant athletes in controversy. Mind was separate from conduct.



Rabbi                      said: "Anyone in whom the fear of sin comes before wisdom, his wisdom will endure. But anyone in whom wisdom comes before the fear of sin, his wisdom will not endure." And to emphasize the point he repeats it in another way. "Any man whose moral conduct is greater than his wisdom, more important than his wisdom -- that man's wisdom will endure. Otherwise that man's wisdom will collapse." Conduct, character on the one hand. Mind, wisdom, honor on the other. Knowledge is not enough. Art is not enough. Science is not enough. Judaism never recognized art for art's sake, nor knowledge for its own sake but for the ennoblement, the enrichment of human life. Balance.

This is another illustration of this philosophy for grown-up people. Let me quote to you that phrase of Hillel. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself only, what am I?" Now in this you have again a controversy between egotism and altruism. What shall be most important in a man's moral planning and thinking? Shall it be his ego, his happiness? Is that the way man will find the supreme happiness in life? Or will it be in serving others?

A man's starting point is, after all, himself. His own life -- that is the gift which God gave him. A man is closest to himself. His immediate world, his own family -- that should constitute a primary center of interest in life. But that is not enough for the fulfillment of man's life. He must link himself up with the destiny of the race.



A man's life takes on significance, dignity as it becomes linked up with the race. If I am for myself, therefore, what am I? Significant, small. The balance again. The grown-up person recognizes this in human life.

Lastly, I call your attention to another statement which I read this morning which illustrates the same point. "The Day is Short", declared Rabbi Tarphin. Here again an age-old problem is presented. Does the brevity of human life, the fact that we have only a few years on earth really force us to 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die!?' The day is short. Should we not snatch every bit of happiness and pleasure we can get. Why worry after tomorrow? "No," says the rabbi. "The day is short and because of that, the work is great." Why? You haven't many years and the tasks of life are great. But you must not measure your life against these age-old tasks of the race. It is not your duty to question the work but neither are you free to desist them. Every small task will go in the major design of your life. It is not your duty to question. And so throughout this great literature you find this balanced way of life which is offered not to the youth but to the grown-up people.

To summarize a way of life for grown-up people I can do no better than quote Hillel ben Zaki. They knew a great deal about life, these rabbis. You think of those rabbis as a sort of long-bearded people who lived in an isolated corner in ancient Palestine and poured over their books, and who knew nothing about life. That is a mistaken notion. Each one of these phrases is a key which opens up a door which leads to a treasure house. They lived, experienced, suffered.



Grown-up people, my friends, in the first place look after their physical as well as their mental life in such a way that one will not be a hindrance to the other. They will try to hold a balance between the two. They will not turn away from pleasures and happiness for fear that those things are sin. For they are not sinful.

Lastly, to quote one of the rabbis: "In the future when a man comes up before the judgment seat, he will be held accountable for every joy and pleasure which he might have had in life and which he denied himself. The balance between pleasure, happiness, not gross indulgences, not pampering himself, not turning <sup>the</sup> whole of life into physical, but the balance.

A grown-up way of looking at life will guide a man to work but not to make a fetish out of work. We in this country are inclined to look upon work as something holy. A man must die in the harness or there is something morally wrong with him. Play and recreation are holy. One is as holy as the other. Beyond work there is life. Man must seek to supplement his life. Work and play. That is balance for a grown-up man's philosophy of life.

He must look to himself. To his family first and also to humanity. A man should look to himself and to his home first. But beyond that there is the world. A man must think of all the misery that is there. A man must give of himself to causes to rectify some of the evils, some of the harshness and brutality of life.



A grown-up person will keep his mind clear, clean, free. He will not permit himself to be swayed by propaganda. He will not permit himself to be swayed by the momentary aberrations which sweep over a people. He will be critical and sceptical. He will want to investigate. This is the grown-up way.

A grown-up way of looking at life, my friends, is to meet triumph, suffering and loss as things inherent, inescapable. A grown-up man will not become bitter, complaining because destiny has not favored him.

No human being has ever been entirely successful. No human being has ever been a failure. The grown-up way of looking at life is to go through life humbly. Be very humble, first because a grown-up person realizes that his life knows the bitterness of life and its brevity in the cosmic scheme. Man's life is in the world. Dwell in it. A man should be humble in his obligations to other people, to his parents, to his friends, to his teachers.

The grown-up person is humble. He does not regard life as cheap and meaningless. He is conscious of a large measure of humbleness and humanity. He is not arrogant. He is not blustering. The grown-up way of life, my friends, is patience, patience. Life is short and hard and long. The day is short. Work is much.

To sum up in the spirit of the rabbis, I would say that a grown-up person goes through life with a seeing eye and a hearing ear, with an alert mind, a sympathetic heart, a willing hand, a kindly, brave, pleasant fellow traveller for a few brief years upon a long road whose beginning and whose end only God knows.



1. There is a dept. - Represented - Didactic in form - settled prin
2. As literature - It has neither - Not great art -  
It appeals - purely intell - and its form - short - incisive - adds  
It aspires - eloquence - What thoughtful men - summarized - presented  
The wisdom - it - a "Grown-up"  
little compromise here - romantic - wishful thinking -  
pleasant delusions - extreme affirmations or negations.  
Only the facts of life - pleasant and ugly - bitter or sweet - possible,  
It is world-wise - hard and disaffected, against
3. Not Philosophy - in tech. sense -  
Repr. no conscious system of ethics - derived - school -  
No speculation - Plato's "Academy," "Garden" of Epictetus  
"Lycæum" of Aristotle - "Porch" of Stoics  
Accumulation of fragments - from life itself.  
Perhaps highest type of Philosophy.
4. Characterized by a remark. Balance - Calm Serenity  
It is not exactly mystical - preferably logical -  
all sunshine - all shadows - all good - all evil  
It does not adore men: Aristotle, Epicurus, etc.  
Recognizes limitations  
It does not exalt - nor degrade man



And is  $\therefore$  perhaps the highest type of philosophy, a guide to life.

3. Characterized by a remarkable balance & judgment, a calm serenity. It is not exaltingly mystic - or profusely lyrical about life. It is neither pessimistic or optimistic. It does not find all sunshine or all shadows - all good or all evil. It does not advise men to be ecstatic or apathetic, nor solemnly stoic. It recognizes the limitations of human life and freedom, and yet is aware of great free spaces within this frame-work where man can find a large measure of happiness and significance. It does not exalt man nor degrade him.

4. As evidence, this balance I should like to call your attention to a few, the aphorisms of P. A.

(1) Altitra said.  $\text{אֱלֹהִים בְּאֵימָתוֹ וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ}$   
 $\text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ}$

Two age-old theoretical & ethical problems are here indicated and the judgment of the greatest Rabbi, the Talmud is given in answer.

(1) Problem of God's Omnipotence - Man's Free Will.  
"of salvation by grace or by works."

"we reckon  $\therefore$  that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Rom. 3.27.)... For the law worketh wrath, but when there is no law, neither is there transgression"... "God reprobeth righteousness apart from works"

(2) From Theology pass over into Ethics - find same balance R. Gemahel -  $\text{אֱלֹהִים בְּאֵימָתוֹ וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ}$

$\text{אֱלֹהִים בְּאֵימָתוֹ וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ} - \text{וּבְהִתְלַחְתּוֹ}$   
Highest desideratum - study of Torah. Yet - must not exclude work. Man must not live in an ivory tower of academic interests - Root himself in labor.  
Has no roots - becomes unreal, unrelated to life - vain.



the cloistered scholar, the pious hermit, the one-sided man - even if his one-sidedness was on the side of learning & piety - was frowned upon!

(a) 21237 p. 62a1b - never any monks in Talmud.

(3) In the same way Talm. insisted upon a balance between learning and moral conduct. It ~~was~~ not enough to be wise, <sup>or cultured</sup> one must be good. It is not enough to know a great deal. One must do a great deal in the world.

(4) The Sophists - a sect, phyl. in ancient Greece, taught learning. Sophia - wisdom.

but they prostituted their mental powers. They became <sup>They took either side of an argument, being</sup> vendors of fallacies or sensationalists. They became <sup>to display their intellect</sup> impostors, and flatters, rich youths for hire. <sup>repudiated</sup> "Millions of athletes in controversy"

(b) R. Chanina b. Dosa: אמר ר' חנינא בן דוסא  
אין אדם יכול ללמוד תורה  
אם לא יאמץ עמו

... אין אדם יכול ללמוד תורה

(c) Conduct - character - come first.

Knowledge is not enough. Power is not enough. Art is not enough. - They must enhance, enrich and ennoble human life.

5. This is a pragmatic way of looking at life  
(1) I call your attention to yet another counsel of ethical symmetry.

Hillel. אין אדם יכול ללמוד תורה

Here is another, these age-old ethical problems answered in the characteristic way. - Egoism vs. Altruism



What is the supreme end of human conduct? in ourself?  
 in our own happiness? or in others? In serving others?  
 Can one realize himself best & fulfil his largest destiny by  
 thinking, planning, calculating, always - or by working  
 for others? - Both is not an extremity. Both! Man should  
begin with himself - that is his very own - first step to  
 him - but reach out & try and himself to embrace the  
 world - The larger sympathies! - belongs to man - that  
 has history - of Past - Future - Social Destiny!  
 (h) - 2/2 5/11

6. I call your attention to yet another.  
2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 - 2/2 2/2  
R. Tarphun.

Here again is an age-old ethical problem. Also life's  
breath justifying every ethical question on man's part?

(a) - 4/10 to 1/11 13 -

(b) he says the wisdom you have! - "The day is short,  
 and therefore the work is great. - There is not the  
 duty etc"

(c) "Opfermann" - from Feuerhagen -

(d) 1/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2

7. And so throughout our wisdom life - Balance - a way of life for  
 people who are grown up - not adolescents, immatures -  
irrational.

Such people will

(1) look after their physical and their spiritual & mental life  
 in such a way that one is not an underman to the other.

(a) will not turn away from pleasures - sinful - "God will  
 hold accountable" -

(b) grossly indulgent - pauper - body craves out mind & soul.



(2) will work - but not make a pet of work, work leisure and play and recreation are just as sacred as work. Die in harness!  
2.2.11.1932

(3) will look to himself family but also to mankind  
struggle is element in life will not miss glory of crusading  
for great cause

(4) will keep his mind clear and free - slogans-propaganda  
protect myself against ignorance and propaganda.  
Oneable

(5) will work for peace, construction, abiding ideals, civilization  
justice - peace. No momentary aberrations will  
sway him from classic course.

(6) will meet trials, suffering, loss bravely - as inherent  
and inescapable in human destiny. will not grow  
bitter or complain. No man has ever been entirely successful  
" " " " " afterwards

(7) He will be humble - knowing the littleness of his life & its  
breath in the cosmic scheme. - not let its 31st day  
Sense of obligation but will not regard his life as meagreless or cheap. Disparity

(8) He will be patient in the knowledge that whole time is  
short - art is long - There is not the duty -

(9) He will go through his life - so with a seeing eye, and  
a hearing ear, a mind alert, a heart sympathetic,  
a hand ready to help - a kindly brave and  
pleasant firm - hand on the road which  
leads from earth to eternity -  
whose beginning and end only God knows.