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Where would you rather live?, 1934.

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WHERE WOULD YOU RATHER LIVE?
The Human Yearning for Other Horizons

Delivered by
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

at
The Temple

on
Sunday morning, November 11, 1934.

There is something of the unsubdued nomad in every one of us. There is no man so settled and civilized and urbanized who does not experience from time to time the wanderlust -- that primitive hunger to migrate. No man is so domesticated that what he experiences from time to time the urge to adventure, to go in quest of new horizons. The whole history of civilization is the record of the struggle, so historians tell us, between the settled city dwellers and land dwellers and the adventuring nomadic peoples. And the whole history of the soul of man is the history of the struggle between these nomadic impulses and the mandates of responsible civilized existence.

All of our forefathers, all the forefathers of the human race were wanderers upon the face of the earth. And something of the urgency of their movements and something of their mass restlessness is in our own blood, somewhat changed, of course, but not entirely subdued by centuries of civilized living.

We are never quite at rest with ourselves. We cast our eyes beyond our own environment and we think that the country over there is far more attractive and desirable than the country here. Beyond the hills, at the turn of the road, there is a land far more glamorous than our own. Of course it is the distance which lends the enchantment. The image is there -- the appeal. Here is the drab destiny. Beyond, across the river is the Promised Land.

Or we cast our eyes backward and we think of the good old days. It was much better then, we are sure. Life was much more peaceful and stable and noble than it is today. The lives of our fathers and our grandfathers, we are sure, were much nicer, kinder and more noble than our own. We think of our own past. We cast our eyes backward over our own youth. We are sure that those were the happy days. We experience a yearning, a sort of romantic nostalgia for the days of our youth.

Koheht whose wise words I read to you this morning advises people:

"Do not say that the days that were were better than these days, for it is not out of wisdom that thou sayest this." Nevertheless we do say it.

Or we cast our eyes if not backward,  forward, to the future, and we say that the future will be brighter and better than the present. We all assume that there is a sort of far off divine event toward which the whole creation moves -- something delectable in the future invisible in the past. We all believe in human progress. That is to say, that the imperfect of the present will yield, in some way, to the perfection of the future. Today is full of misery and suffering and unhappiness. But tomorrow -- tomorrow will be full of happiness, peace, justice and well being.

I suppose if we were to send a questionnaire to a hundred people and ask them: "Where would you rather live?" that you would get an astounding variety of answers, perhaps a hundred different ones. One would like to live in the South, and another would like to live on the Western Coast. Another in England, another in France -- on the Riviera -- another on some beautiful uninhabited island in the South seas, or somewhere else.

If you were to ask say a hundred people: "In what age would you rather live?" I am sure that you would get the same diversity of answers. Some would choose to live in the last century, some in the next century, some in the dignified, quiet ~~restive~~ Victorial Age, some in the glamorous age of the Renaissance, and still others in the Golden Age of Pericles. Everyone would choose a different age. Very few, this age.

And if you were to ask these same people: "In what station of life would you rather live?" you would get a startling diversity of answers. The lawyer would like to be a doctor, the doctor would like to be a merchant, the merchant would like to be a contractor, the contractor would like to be a manufacturer, the manufacturer would like to be a merchant, the merchant would like to be a banker. The banker, of course, certainly doesn't want to be a banker. So it is. The poor want to be rich, the rich want to be richer. The young want to grow up, the old, of course, want to get younger. And so it is. The young men see visions and the old men dream dreams. Always there is restlessness.

Throughout the ages people have dreamed of utopias -- some place, somewhere where there will be perfection, where all the shortcomings and injustice and misery of the present would be done away with and where beauty, goodness and justice will reign universally. Strange to say, the word utopia means "nowhere". For nowhere has such a condition been created, however distant.

Some sixty years ago, Samuel Butler wrote a very interesting and intriguing book -- also a utopia -- which he calls significantly enough

"Erewhon" or "Beyond the Range." And it is the story of an imaginary land where all the evils of his day were unknown. And the word "Erewhon" the word spelled backwards, spells "nowhere."

Always mankind imagines that the golden age was in the far distant past or in the far distant future. Nevertheless, among the ancients, strangely enough, the golden age was put way back in the past. They believed that mankind had gone through a definite cycle of degeneration. They knew of four ages through which the human race had passed, going down all the time.

The first, according to the classic belief, were the men of the Golden Age, when men lived like gods, knew nothing of care and toil, when men lived happily, gloriously like gods. And even death came upon them like a sweet slumber. That was the Golden Age. That was long, long ago.

Then came the Silver Age. The Silver Age was far inferior to the Golden Age. Life was not so glamorous. It was not so full of ~~the~~ sunshine and happiness. They already knew conflict and struggle.

And then mankind descended to the third cycle, or the Bronze Age, when men were strong but brutal and violent and waged war with one another, when men knew strength but no pity and when men violently destroyed one another.

And life descended still further, to a fourth cycle, to the men of the Iron Age, when the gods placed all their burdens upon the shoulders of mankind, when man knew no real happiness and much suffering, when justice,

nobility and truth were unknown. That is the present.

In our own Jewish tradition there is an echo in this belief in the progressive decline and degeneration of the human race-- the story of Paradise, when the first man was born. In Paradise there was no toil, labor or unhappiness. But because of disobedience, man was driven from this Garden of Eden and forced out into the world to work, to till the soil.

But our religion corrected and supplemented this belief in the progressive degeneration of mankind with the program of regeneration. There is going to be a Messianic Age also in the future, far off. There is going to be an end to all this, when all wrong, injustice and war will be wiped out....It will be a world in which there will be nothing but Sabbaths (think of it) and peace forever. But always in the future. In the present there is dissatisfaction.

In a sense, of course, this is as it should be. A person who is so easily satisfied quickly declines. A soul that is not exercised frequently is like a muscle of the body quickly atrophied. A life that has not its calls and its summonings is a drab life, a monotonous life which dies quickly in its own complacency. Human life must have its noble discontents. The great Roman philosopher, Seneca, writes to one of his pupils: "Just as the flame springs straight into the air and cannot be obtained or kept down any more than it can repose in quiet, so our soul is always in motion, and the more ardent it is, the greater its motion and activity."

A human soul must have its aspirations. But aspiration, my friends, are movements not in time and space. They are movements forward and upward, in a world of being, in quality of being, in self-cultivation,

in self-perfection. It is not enough, my friends, merely to be urged on, to feel oneself exercised and driven. That is not enough. One must know clearly what is driving, what is summoning him. If it merely your appetites that are driving you, that are making you restless, merely your whim, your omnivorous hunger for excitement, your unwillingness to submit to discipline, to responsibility, then you are unfortunately the prisoner of a mood, of a distemper which will never yield you happiness -- a mood and distemper which are the curse of our race and our day.

If, however, you are urged on by a definite and morally sound vision, if you know what you are seeking and whither you are bound and if you are moving strictly and undeviatingly toward your goal, seeking not a new excitement in life, but a new spiritual exaltation, then you are free, you are likely to be at peace with yourself even though your quest be accompanied by hardship and struggle. You will have a scheme of life. You will have a program of living. That scheme of life, that program of living will give to your life an evenness, a steadiness, a direction, because you realize that a man may be peaceful and contented even though he is engaged in the most desperate enterprises of his life. If he has found himself, if he knows exactly what he is seeking, then he will experience nothing of that cursed fever of restlessness which is the affliction of so many people today.

Men have suffered greatly for great ideals and yet they were not victims of that demoralization, that helpless drifting through life which so many people are victimized by today.

There is a beautiful poem by John Masfield, called "The Seekers", all about men who also look beyond and who were not satisfied with the era now but who were seeking something worthy:

Friends and loves we have none, nor wealth nor blest abode,
But the hope of the City of God at the other end of the road.

Not for us are content, and quiet, and peace of mind,
For we go seeking a city that we shall never find.

There is no solace on earth for us -- for such as we --
Who search for a hidden city that we shall never see.

Only the road and the dawn, the sun, the wind, and the rain,
And the watch fire under stars, and sleep, and the road again.

We seek the City of God, and the haunt where beauty dwells,
And we find the noisy mart and the sound of burial bells.

Never the golden city, where the radiant people meet,
But the dolorous town where mourners are going about the street.

We travel the dusty road till the light of the day is dim,
And sunset shows us spires away on the world's rim.

We travel from dawn to dusk, till the day is past and by,
Seeking the Holy City beyond the rim of the sky.

Friends and loves we have none, nor wealth nor blest abode,
But the hope of the City of God at the other end of the road.

And yet the hope of the City of God, gives to this people, seemingly bereft of everything, some major contentment which compensated them for all that is lost. But most of us, my friends who are not seekers of the City of God seek some happiness which is tied up with our own personal ambition, or personal success or sheer excitement.

When, therefore, you ask me --- when I ask you: "Where would you rather live?" if you are wise, you would answer affirmatively, "I would rather live Here and Now." First, because you can't help yourself. You have to live Here and Now and it is of human wisdom to recognize the

the finality of a situation.

Secondly, because the age in which you live is worse and in many ways better than other ages. If you think that this age, let me remind you that others were much worse. There is much that is marvelous about this age. There is much in it which is a challenge to all that is strongest and most enterprising in us. It is an age which is full of problems great and momentous, which holds within it many of the solutions of its problems, an age which calls you and me to help with them.

And thirdly, you ought to answer the question: "Where would you rather Live?" in the affirmative because in the Here and in the Now are the opportunities for finding peace and contentment if you only have the compass to lead you to it.

And that compass is inner illumination. You must illumine your way in life by clarifying your own ideas, by making up your mind through study and reflection what it really is that you are looking for in life. What are you trying to get out of life? What finished product are you aiming to produce out of the labors and efforts of your day? What is your conception of what a real man ought to be? What is your summum bonum of life? The highest good which you think is worthy of making a man in the image of God? What is the philosophy of life which you have found for yourself? Have you a scheme of living? Have you a program?

If you have that illumination, then you will have no trouble at all in finding endless opportunities to achieve your goal in the Here and Now, for most, if not all the opportunities, are really to be found in the Here and Now, in Cleveland, in the United States, in this age. And you will have no trouble realizing yourself, your program to the utmost.

For after all, your world, your true world, is in your heart and mind, not in a period of time -- in the 20th century or in the 19th century or in the 21st century. Your true world is within your mind, within your heart. And your real dynamo, the real energy you are looking for is within yourself. Your will power, your determination are your real tools, and also perseverance, industry and work. And your reward, why that is also within yourself,--that proud satisfaction which comes to a man as a result of his will, his perseverance and his industry, his efforts, his steadiness, the satisfaction which comes of approximating and fulfilling the program of his life without making false starts, the same satisfaction which comes to an artisan who day by day sees the thing which he is building become a more perfect thing.

Am I talking in mystic terms? Not at all. I am talking to you of the most practical common sense things in the world. You ^{may} achieve that measure of contentment which is possible for a mortal man. A full measure is impossible. Any mortal may achieve that measure of happiness, peace and contentment which is within the grasp of human people. You don't need to travel across the mountains, to hanker for a different set of environment which you may never get. What you need is to look within yourself. Ask yourself, "What am I making of myself?"..... You will not then be seeking the bluebird in the land beyond. The real bluebird is within yourself.

I close with a paragraph from this same philosopher, Seneca. He writes to his pupil. This was written more than two thousand years ago:

"But how," you ask, "does one attain that goal?" You do not need to cross the Pennine or Graian hills, or traverse the Candavian waste, or face the Syrtes, or Scylla, or Charybdis, although you have travelled through all these places for the bribe of a petty governorship; the journey for which nature has equipped you is safe and pleasant. She has given you such gifts that you may, if you do not prove false to them, rise level with God. Your money, however, will not place you on a level with God; for God has no property. Your bordered robe will not do this; for God is not clad in raiment; nor will your reputation, nor a display of self, nor a knowledge of your name wide-spread throughout the world; for no one has knowledge of God; many even hold him in low esteem, and do not suffer for so doing. The throng of slaves which carries your litter along the city streets and in foreign places will not help you; for this God of whom I speak, though the highest and most powerful of beings, carries all things on his own shoulders. Neither can beauty or strength make you blessed; for none of these qualities can withstand old age.

What we have to seek for, then, is that which does not each day pass more and more under the control of some power which cannot be withstood. And what is this? It is the soul, --- but the soul that is upright, good, and great. What else could you call such a soul than a god dwelling as a guest in a human body? A soul like this may descend into a Roman knight just as well as into a freedman's son or a slave. For what is a Roman knight, or a freedman's son, or a slave? They are mere titles, born of ambition or of wrong. One may leap to heaven from the very slums. Only rise

And mould thyself to kinship with thy God.

This moulding will not be done in gold or silver; an image that is to be in the likeness of God cannot be fashioned of such material; remember that the gods, when they were kind unto men, were moulded in clay. Farewell."

"Mould thyself in the image of God, not in gold or silver" but through the exercise, the ennoblement of your own soul. That is the wisdom of life.



We all want something new. But we must not confound the new with the novel. There is nothing new in novelty! Authentic newness is a man or in an age is inward spiritual renewal - new sets of values - or new emphases, higher interests, higher aspirations -

We renew ourselves, not by indulging our appetites, but by improving our tastes, as we acquire keener perceptions, finer discriminations, sounder judgments, newer purposes, deeper loyalties, do we gain in newness, and freshness and freedom.

Every creative effort, heart or mind is a glorious adventure with ^{new} unfamiliar worlds, which brings heat and flame to the eager heart.

There is work to be done - the most exciting, the ages. We have to rebuild a whole civilization.

A new civilization must be built. Spurs, domes and monuments are not religion. Neither are radios, airplanes, and warfare, living cities. Civilization. The essence of civil. is a free, secure and creative social life. The criteria of civil. are not the wealth, nor size, nor speed, nor invention, but the values which it places upon human personality, the rewards which it grants to labor & merit, the quality of its intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic interests, and the rewards which it gives to those social agencies which make human life more confident, more joyful. Measured by these criteria, our present-day civil. is but an unhappy, unenjoyable expression of barbarism! And the sharp contrast which exists between its social backwardness and its scientific progress only makes the fact even more glaring, and at the same time, more menacing.

(H) We are still in our dark ages - we live in a system of ruthless competition, at times bordering on anarchy and we expect such a system to yield us those advantages which only a socially motivated and socially organized system can yield. Only the first, hesitant steps have as yet been taken by our people to provide our people with a secure and adequate

standard of living and with weapons against the ^{new} disabilities of unemployment, sickness
and old age. Our civil is shot thru to-day with a bitter class struggle.
-fanning in poverty and cruelty. - Nations are rent by ^{hunger} class war, but of
this struggle. - the mental access - ~~they do not~~ Then who have
called to mind - Mr. hunger -

(2) There is war! annihilation! This century must - Modernizing
for may help - task of ages

(3) Elements challenged - here Phil - her system ^{Mr. his her!} for the Revolution
and adjustment to new conditions of machine age - & need for centralized
econ. thinking & action.

A different, challenging, "crucible" age - an age of frustration, frustration,
and new beginning!



Source. ~~invoke~~ To thee
Fashioned - image; implanted; Seekers
In our mortal

Help thou - in all our seeking; Strengthen
- may we grow -

Bless thou this great institution - dedicated
increase. Officers.

Bless Thou - our Country - enable - dignity
- fulfil our destinies - exercise

May the light - Thy wisdom - Thy strength
in your camp

Source - to the wisdom in this hour - sanctify

May ancient truths revealed -

May we never forget that we are forever

Help the in mortal to be worthy of the divine

Stamp - Fill us with spirit of humility
& love, of wholeness -

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sermon 414

ABSTRACT OF ADDRESS DELIVERED BY RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER AT THE TEMPLE, ANSEL
ROAD AND EAST 105TH STREET ON SUNDAY MORNING, NOVEMBER 11, 1934.

WHERE WOULD YOU RATHER LIVE?

If you were to send a questionnaire to a hundred people on the subject:
"Where would you rather live?" it is likely that you would receive an amazing variety
of replies. Some would rather live in the South, others in California, still
others in England, France, on the Riviera, or on some beautiful uninhabited
island in the South Seas.

If you were to ask these same people: "In what age would you rather live?"
you would receive the same variety of answers. Some would choose to live in the
last century, others in the next, some in the solid comfortable Victorian Age,
others in the glamorous period of the Renaissance, still others in the Golden
Age of Pericles.

If you were to ask them: "In what station of life would you rather live?"
most of them would probably choose some other station than the one in which they
actually are. The doctor would want to be an engineer, the engineer, an explorer;
the explorer, an architect; the architect, a contractor; the contractor, a
manufacturer; the manufacturer, a merchant; the merchant, a banker. And the banker
would, of course, not choose to be a banker today. The poor would want to be rich.
The rich would want to be richer. The young would want to grow up and get older.
The old would want to get younger.

Always mankind imagines that the Golden Age of the world was in the far
distant past or will be in the far distant future. And always there is dissatisfaction
with the present. In a sense this is as it ~~want~~ should be. Were men easily
satisfied they would quickly decline. A soul that is not frequently exercised is like
a muscle quickly atrophied. Human life must have its noble discontents, its high
aspirations.

But aspiration is a movement forward and upward not in space or in time, but
in quality of being -- in self-perfection. It is not enough merely to be restless,

urged on and driven. We must know clearly what is driving us. If it is merely our appetites, our whimsiness and our dislike for discipline, routine and responsibility, then we are the helpless prisoners of a spiritual distemper. If, however, we are urged on by a definite and morally worthy vision, if we know what we are seeking and whither we are bound, and straightly and undeviatingly move on to our goal, hoping to find there not a new excitement, but a new exaltation of spirit, then we shall be free and at peace with ourselves even though our quest be accompanied by hardship and struggle. One may be spiritually at rest even when engaged in the most desperate enterprise of his life if only he knows what he is struggling for is really the good, the worthy and the desirable.

When you ask yourself: "Where would I rather live?" Answer affirmatively, "Here and Now." First because you have to live Here and Now and it is part of wisdom to recognize the finality of a situation. Secondly, because this age is worse and in many ways better than other ages. And thirdly, because one can find his happiness and peace even in the Here and the Now with all its imperfections if one has a true compass to guide him. That compass is Self-illumination. One must know what he really wants of life, what finished product he is aiming at. If that finished product is a human being developed spiritually, intellectually and esthetically to its fullest capacity, then no man need feel that the present day will deny him all the opportunities which he needs to reach his goal.