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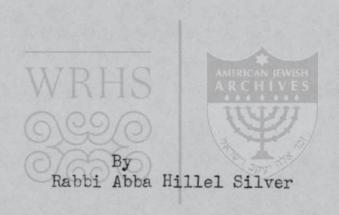
MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel	Box	Folder
157	56	519

On Letting our Children Grow Up, 1937.

Western Reserve Historical Society 10825 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106 (216) 721-5722 wrhs.org American Jewish Archives 3101 Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220 (513) 487-3000 AmericanJewishArchives.org 469 ON LETTING OUR CHILDREN GROW UP



At The Temple

On Sunday morning, January 10, 1937 The subject of my address this morning was suggested to me by an article which I read in this month's issue of Harper's by Miss I. A. R. Wylie called "Here and Now:" " Word to Parents".

The thesis of this article of Miss Wylie is that children are being held back too long. They are now allowed to grow up. Both the home and the school tend to retard the development of the child into full maturity, to deny the child those upbuilding experiences which prepare one for the real business of living.

The author's contention is that at ten, any normal child should be able to take on full responsibility; that at sixteen, a child should be fully equipped with the attitudes of life in other words, that the coming of age of the rising generation should be pushed forward at least five years.

Let me quote from the article itself. "To my mind it is tragic to see full-grown adults (physically speaking) still hanging round their parents' necks (very often draining the life out of them), as dependent on them for support and even for ideas and convictions as when they were children. It is not their fault. Their parents, from one motive or another, encourage them even to passionately resenting their first efforts at independent thought and action. The weaker yield to the pressure and take the line of least resistance. Hence our Peter Pans, our Depressions, our World Wars, our Dictators, and other manifestations of infantile paralysis."

"I believe," wrITES the author, "that children should stand and co-ordinate their movements, take responsibility, accept the bitterest consequences of ill-judged and anti-social actions, and generally face themselves and their world squarely, quickly, and without illusions."

The writer is particularly severe with our schools. The author says: "Our children are playing a delightful game." Even our children in our so-called higher institutions - our colleges and our universities. "Our children are playing a delightful game a million miles removed from reality. A boy's academic career is in fact nothing but an extended childhood, complicated by physical adolescence but with all his childhood ideals and values preserved and even exaggerated. A real intellectual achievement in these schools is at a discount."

Parents fall an easy prey to this program of protecting the child. I quote again from the article:

"Sir James Barrie immortalized and glorified our most modern weakness. He did us small service. We were already prone enough to believe that there is something beautiful in a perennial childhood and that it is the loving duty of parents to keep their children (for ever if their means ran to it), hiding them from the facts of life which are many and various and not all related to sex. To this end, and in spite of all accusations to the contrary, they still sacrifice their own lives, putting off their own "here and now" for the sake of their children's tomorrow, which never really comes. Sometimes the unselfishness - as is more often the case than we like to think - is a form of egotism, a desire for power and possession. Sometimes, having failed to live successfully themselves, they try to pass on the task to the new generation by "making life easier." But often the sacrifice is a pure and honest one. I am thinking now of two friends who have themselves a talent for living.

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They are not rich. They have had to fight hard for what they have. They are real adults of value to themselves and potentially to the community. But in order that their son, Johnny, shall not grow up they have denied themselves everything to which they have denied themselves everything to which they have earned the right, travel, adventure, books, their own development. Instead of the longplanned trip to Europe, Johnny goes to a summer camp. They don't buy the little place in the country on which they had set their hearts, in order that he shall enjoy the luxuries of an expensive school. They work harder than they should because Johnny must go to college, where his dull and unwilling mind will clutter the classroom of some luckless professor. They themselves have lost ambition, personal desires, and almost the beauty of their original relationship to each other.

"And what of Johnny? Johnny is a very ordinary youth. With a reasonable upbringing he might be a successful and happy car-washer in a garage. He believes that he is a highly educated, highly gifted man because he plays football well and is popular with the fellows and has wangled a degree of sorts. He believes, further, that the world which breathlessly awaits him is a glorified schoolcum-summer-camp-cum-college, and that he knows all about it. If he were more intelligent he would at least guess that it isn't and he doesn't. He would expect the unexpected and brace himself to meet it. As it is he will muddle through life a disgruntled schoolboy, producing other schoolboys and wondering why he does not get the "breaks."

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The article closes with this admonition: "The winds of change are blowing about our ears. The storms that we have invoked by our own heedlessness are carrying civilization to the rocks. If it is to be saved it can be only by full-grown men and women. What we need is not adult bodies with adolescent minds, but adolescent bodies with adult minds - young people who have grown up quickly and are mentally and morally ready to take the helm. They have no time to lose. Their task is to live from the word "go" to a good finish. Our task is to set them quickly on the course, letting them go by . living our own lives, seizing our own opportunities, exerting our own capacities, taking our full share of the present. Our "here and now" is our primary concern. The future is not. It belongs to our children. It is their "funeral," their party, their whatever-they-choose-to-make of it. The quicker they fit themselves for the choice and the responsibility the better, the more likely there is to be a future. The call to youth to-day is, in effect, not "play the game," but "stop playing the game and get down to living"!

To all of which I am inclined to give my vigorous assent and to say a loud "Amen". I find in these ideas that good old-fashioned, homespun commonsense which so many parents and teachers today are losing sight of. You know that super-refinement in educational theories and practice is just another form of . There are hobbies and styles in the field of education just as in everything else. There are constant deviations, such deviations are not always harmful. Being experimental, they may yield some new truths and new ideas. They

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become extreme, dogmatic, doctrinaire when they deviate from that basic sanity of the . Every extreme, as you know, is only a form of extortion. An over-exaggerated virtue becomes a vice. That is the trouble with our age and our day. Good, oldfashioned ideals have been over-exaggerated. They have become seed-beds of vice. Materialism, for example, individualism, class egoism, naturalism - not one of these things are sound human values. They are over-emphasized. They become a disease - a sort of spiritual and intellectual elephantiasis.

So with child care, child protection, rights of childhood and the right of children. The underlying ideas are unquestionably sound and true. It is an axion to all social existence.

Parents need not, of course be admonished to love their children, to care for them, to protect them. That is instinctive. I believe it was Professor Lazarus who wrote "Ethik des Judenthumes" and who made this interesting observation: that "the love of parents for their children is nature; the love of children for their elders is ethics." The love of parents is instinctive and requires no command, no inclucation while the love which the child exercises towards his parents does require teaching, indoctrination. That is why in the Ten Commandments you have no command for the parent to love his child. But you do have the commandment "Honor thy father and thy mother. Children forget and must be reminded. Parents think of little else.

Just because the love of a parent to his child does well up abundantly and so spontaneously, it is necessary that this love be applied intelligently so that it does not defeat the very

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objective which it aims to serve - the full harmonious adjustment of of the child to his social life.

We have the phrase frequently used "To kill with kindess, with love". That has a large measure of truth in it. We don't really kill a person with over-indulgence. We destroy his initiative, all manliness, self-reliance, all social-mindedness frequently by that kind of exaggerated pampering, coddling, unintelligibly ministered parental affection.

Our Rabbis had a very wise and profound saying: "He who rears the child is really his parent, not he who begets him." Because the real building a human being consists in the molding and fashioning of character and personality. That is where the art of parenthood - not merely the physical act of parenthood - reside. What is required in this art is not any profound esoteric knowledge. The average parent does not require great learning in order to be able to perform his duties in the upbringing and upbuilding of a child. "hat is required is an enlightened practical intelligence, a steady common sense. In that very beautiful Chapter at the end of the Book of Proverbs there is a very laudatory description given to the ideal mother. The finest attribute ix paid to a mother is "she opened her mouth - wisdom". And that "chachma" - wisdom, doesn't mean learning, scholarship but this practical sagacity, understanding insight. In the same Book of Proverbs, it speaks of a son. It says that "a wise son maketh glad the heart of his father and a foolish son is the grief of his mother." It doesn't mean a son who has a degree from a university, a Ph.D. but a boy who has good common sense in his thinking and in his social attitudes.

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"It is good for a man to bear burdens in his youth". It is good for a man to bear burdens in his youth because burdens, except when they are altogether crushing, but burdens not too heavy for human shoulders, make a human being plan, think, and bring every muscle of his body and every thinking apparatus of his mind into play, to adjust himself to that burden, to remove that burden.

Now fond parents frequently think that it is their duty to make it easy for their children, to remove the burdens before the child has had a chance to feel them, to remove the obstacles before the child has even seen the obstacles. I have frequently sooken with successful parents, successful fathers who have said to me: I had a hard childhood. I was deprived of many things. I had few of the things I wanted and I will see to it that my boy gets everything he wants. That parent forgets that perhaps his very success is due to the very deprivations of his youth, the burdens of his youth that brought out the very toughness of his character that made him successful. He now proposes to deny his child of that very discipline that made him successful. I know so many boys and girls who go through childhood and adolescence and early manhood and womanhood with practically not a care in the world. They go through school, to high school, four years at a finishing school or college and university. Their parents provide them with everything they want. They anticipate their every want. I find so many of them undeveloped just as the author found her generation to be undeveloped. Intellectually and spiritually they are still children because they

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were never allowed to wrestle with the dark angel of want, need, of doing without, being defeated in one's effort. They haven't faced the hard, bitter school of existence. They were relaxed. They were relaxed, mentally, intellectually, spiritually and morally relaxed. And a relaxed chord doesn't give forth music.

One must be taut. There must be a degree of striving and effort and tension, a degree of unhappiness in life to mature an individual, to equip one for the real business of living.

Now this burdenless youth which we see all around us is made possible by parents, some of whom are rich and can afford it and by some who cannot afford it but who make it possible through sacrifice. There has always been a question in my mind just as in the mind of the writer, whether the sacrifice is wise, whether parents should deny themselves of what they want in life for the sake of children who are not particularly equipped for the positions in which parents would like to see their children, whether it would not be better to make Johnny a successful carwasher, an earner, than for everybody in the family to sacrifice <u>an opportunity to enjoy</u> themselves in order to give Johnny/intellectual pursuits in higher educational schools for which he is not fit.

Our Rabbis were practical people. The more one studies them the more one understands how practical they were. They said: A father is duty-bound to give his children five things food, drink, clothing, shod him, and has to direct him towards the moral and religious life and towards a trade. And their his duty ceases. And incidentally, four of these duties which parents owe to children are the self-same duties which children owe to parents. All children when they grow up are duty-bound

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to support their parents, to give them food, drink, shelter and sustenance. No further sacrifices are demanded of the children by the Law of Israel and the Rabbis are rather cynical about all other forms of sacrifices wich parents make for their children.

Thus, for example, they are clearly cynical about the idea that parents must leave their children large inheritances. The only inheritance that was necessary, according to the Rabbis was a "good name". That is all. What if your grandson peddles candles in the streets? Why should you make yourself unhappy to provide him with a rich inheritance.

Of course, if a child is unusually gifted and if the happiness of that child lies in the field of intellectual or artistic pursuit, loving parents will assist his child to the utmost to realize his gifts without absorbing all the responsibility of the child. The child should make what contribution he can to his own support.

Parents, furthermore, should not be afraid to guide their children-up to a point, up to an age- out of fear of interferring with their "self-expression". Of all the nonsense about selfexpression, child care, this is the word. This is individualism run wild. It presupposes that every child is born into the world with a completed personality. All you have to do is stand aside and let the child unfold itself without guiding it. This is shere nonsense! Personality is never an endowment. It is an achievement. We build up our individualities through study and learning and training and experience. That is how our individualities are built up. Our inheritance is a part of that individuality but only a

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part but only a small part. And some maintain that it is the least important of the factors which go into the upbuilding of what we call human personality. A child at birth has nothing to express. It is only as we grow, through knowledge, insight, character, experience, that we have something valuable to express.

Some parents actually imagine that willfulness in a child and crabbiness and selfishness and pure cussedness and non-cooperativeness are forms of self-expression that they are required to respect or to tolerate. They are not. They are just kinks in personality and the quicker the kinks can be ironed out the better for the child.

"Do not keep correction away from a child because of the fear of destroying his personality." Of course children differ. Of course children very early manifest different traits, different major interests and the wise parent watches these traits carefully. If they are not anti-social, the wise parent will do well to give the fullest scope and encouragement to these manifestations. Any normal parent can not but help give a normal child the benefit of his experience, counsel, advice, correction. Guidance is not tyranny, not dictatorship, if not prolonged beyond a said point of the childn's life.

The Rabbis have two very profound sayings: That a man should go easy with his son until he is 12; from then on he goes on through his very life. That is to say he begins to live like a grown up man. Another saying of the Rabbis is that a man must concern himself with his son until he is thirteen. From then on he should say: "Blessed is God who relieved me of responsibility for the moral acts

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Here the coming of age is set a little earlier than set by the writer, who sets it at sixteen.

It is hard for parents to relinquish full control of their children. Oftimes parents experience a real pang when they see their children grow up because they know that their children will go away. But that is the way of life. The best thing that parents can do to enable their children to embark on their own ships is to give them a compass and their blessings. As the ships recedes on the sea, all the parents can really do is to stand on the shore and watch and pray.

What, then, do I mean when I say "Letting Our Children Grown Up"? I mean by "Letting our Children Grow Up" that we should enable them as early as possible to learn the fundamental truth of all human existence - that what is worthwhile must be earned. What is really worthwhile must be achieved. The price must be paid by one's own efforts. It can't be gotten as a gift or as a legacy. This is not harshness nor niggardliness on the part of the parent but sanity, ruggedness, if you will. There is all too much "Give me! Give me! on the part of certain yoying people toward their parents. Many of them grow up to be chisellers, grafters and parasites.

I have had many parents come to me and say: "All I and my wife exist for is to provide our children with all the things they need and want.

What I mean by "Letting Our Children Grow Up" is that children be impressed with the load of family responsibility which is a prerequisite of social responsibility and that is

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Jewish tradition. This is a basic Jewish contribution to morals and ethics. In Judaism, the unit is not the individual but the Family. Our history is a patriarchal history and our religious values and ethical concepts are rojections of family values.

God is the Father! Men are Children! All are brothers! The whole of the people of Israel is the Family of Israel. In fact, all the peoples of the earth are the Family of the world. When a great prophet wanted to appeal to the world he said: Have We not all one Father? Are we not all His Children? Prophets of Israel: "It was the superior unity and harmony of the social life of th ancient Jews, especially of their family life, which produced their superior ethical and religious concepts."

The trouble with world today is that it has drifted away from this Jewish ethical concept. There exists what I may call a pagan concept. In the Greek philosophy the ethics were largely subjective. The goal was personal happiness. Jewish ethics is group ethics whose goal is the Kingdom of God and the approval of God.

And because the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have over-stressed the idea of self-reliance, self-development, individualism, individual destiny, it has suffered such a terrible moral and spiritual decline.

We Jews ought to, in our own homes if we have a certain degree of influence, to stress to the rising generation the idea that each exists for the other, for the family group well-being. That is the sumum bonum - that is the objective in life.

What do I mean "By Growing Up?" - by "Letting Our

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Children Grow Up"? By letting our children grow up into a man-sized adult view that the goal of life is the service ideal of life; to make children understand what is the real purpose and meaning in life; to grow up into people who see wider horizons in life not grabbing, acquiring, exploiting, but in terms of creating, contributing, helping, assisting in the great effort in which suffering mankind is engaged; to build a world, a little better, a little kindlier world and in which men can live a little more happy than they have lived heretofore.

No child that is over-indulged, who is made the focal center of al the interest in the home, and for whom parents make needless sacrifices will ever grow up to have a correct philosophy of life. He is more likely to go through life a drifter, a parasite, a ruthless exploiter, a selfish exploiter of others.

Good common sense, my friends, will enable every normal father and mother to look after the rearing of their children in such a way that it will be a blessing to themselves and an honor and joy to their children. 1. "Here and now - a world to parents" - Miss I.A. R. Wylie Thesis - children are being held back too long They are not allowed to grow up Home and school conspire to protract - to deny Her contention is that at 10 - any normal child-responsible At 16 - the facture "Our coming of age should be pushed forward at least five years" Quote (a)

Quote (b)

Author severe in her criticism of schools - pupils are playing a

delightful game - a million miles from reality. A boy's academic career is nothing but an extended childhood, complicated by physical adolescence, but with all childish ideals **† Values** preserved and even exaggerated? Intellectual achievement is at a discount.

Parents fall easy prey to this program

Quote (c)

Closes her article Quote (d)

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