



## 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  
157

Box  
56

Folder  
530

Happiness - and its Difficult Conquest, 1937.

480

HAPPINESS - AND ITS DIFFICULT CONQUEST

"Great peace have they that love Thy law."

WRHS

By  
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At  
The Temple



On

Sunday morning, April 2, 1937

6th in series of lectures on:

PROBLEMS OF HUMAN LIFE REFLECTED IN THE BIBLE



In preparation for this address, the sixth in the series on "Problems of Human Life Reflected in the Bible", we go to the problem of happiness and its difficult conquest. I cast over, in my mind, all the outstanding characters of the Bible and asked myself which one of them may truly be said to have been happy, completely and uninterruptedly happy. I must confess that I did not find one. Rather amazing when one stops to reflect. From the original of the race, Adam, right through the whole luminous group of real, vital, full-blooded characters of the Bible, you hardly find one of whom you can really say: 'He was a happy man!'

Adam was driven from Paradise and doomed for the rest of his life to wrest from the hard soil his sustenance by the sweat of his brow. Cain and Abel fought with each other. Abraham, the rabbis said, was subjected to ten vast tribulations during his life. Isaac's life was over-shadowed by the tragedy of a family feud - the feud between his sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob was compelled to spend the declining years of his life in bitterness. Joseph, too, spent the early years of his life in slavery and in prison. Moses, the richest figure of the Bible, Moses knew all the bitterness of leadership, envy, rebellion, war, conflict. Oft-times Moses cried out: "Good God, I cannot bear it any more!" And he died a lonely man on the top of the mountain overlooking the Promised Land into which he could not enter. The Prophet Samuel's life, too, was shot through with struggle against his own people, against the king. His own sons, we are told in the Bible, were addicted to rivalry, to lust. He died a disappointed man and even in his death he was not allowed to rest in peace. "Why dost thou disturb my rest? the ghost of Samuel said unto the distraught and unhappy Saul. And of Saul, himself - he was



driven through life by an evil spirit, a spirit of melancholia fed by envy and hatred of his young rival, David. David was beset by wars. He was saddened by the death of his beloved son. He was, the rabbis tell us, a man of sin, penitence and suffering.

So, throughout the Bible, almost every character, while not so sorely tried as Job, while not so wracked with pain as Job who went from the heights of prosperity to the depths of agony, nevertheless not one character is altogether free in his life of some defeat, some dismay, of some tragic disappointment. "Man is born to trouble and like the sparks fly upward inevitably.

So, this is the first lesson really which the Bible teaches us about happiness - that it is never continuous, that it is not always present in human life, that this earth is not a Fools's Paradise, that God did not create that kind of a world for men to live in.

The second lesson which the Bible seemed to stress was that there is a large measure of happiness within the reach of man and the degree is largely within the order of man himself. While the Biblical writers do not picture life as a mountain ~~or~~ peak-always bathed in sunshine and in peace - on the other hand they do not picture life as a vale of tears forever wrapped in suffering and gloom.

And here again you have that remarkable sanity and balance which I tried to point out to you in all these lectures that distinguished the writers of the Bible. The sages of the Bible do not disparage life. They do not negate the value of existence or frown upon human happiness. With the exception of Kohelleth who is answered out of his own mouth or by the mouth of a later teacher who edited his work thought it within orthodox or classic Jewish spiritual tradition. The writers of the Bible do not urge men as the other great religions do, to regard the enjoyment of the pleasures of life and the pleasurable sensations of human life as



unworthy of them. "God loves life and light and rejoices in the laughter of his children upon earth." God wants to be worshiped in joy and in happiness and in hearts overflowing with happiness. Hence the author of the Book of Deuteronomy denounces his people because they do not work in joy. He regards it as a sin not to worship God cheerfully and joyously.

Later the Rabbis carried on the same tradition when they said "The spirit of God does not rest upon a man when that man is sad, depressed." There must be a buoyancy of spirit and an uplifting in mood before the spirit of God can descend upon man. What the writers of the Bible looked forward to was a day of such peace, such well-being in the world that all men would be happy. "God will wipe away the tears from all faces." They did not want men to suffer here upon earth in order to lay up for those merits in the world to come.

And the extent of the happiness that is available for mortal men not is/in the willful order of Omnipotent God who says to man - 'You will be happy. You will be sorrowful.' That is largely in the order and achievement of each and every man.

There are numerous suggestions found in the Bible how to find happiness and how to avoid unhappiness and these admonishments have been tested by them and not found wanting. The writers of the Bible my friends are not philosophers and their approach of the whole subject of happiness is not from the metaphysical approach. They do not find a need to ask themselves to debate the subject whether happiness is the only good, the supreme good, whether it is to be gained through social service, etc. There is very little formal philosophy in the Bible but there is much profound wisdom distilled out of human experience and inspired by faith.



They offer to men and to women a code of private and public conduct and a pattern of attitudes which if followed will yield to man and to woman as large a measure of happiness as is possible to attain in this mundane existence. And of some of these I wish to speak this morning.

First I refer to the thought pattern, the frame of mind which one must acquire in order to receive happiness - those things which must be in the soul of man to make for his happiness. It is important for a man to maintain a righteousness of heart. And this righteousness of heart, this proper frame of mind, if you will, comes to a man as a result of his of man himself contemplation of the universe, out of the knowledge - the individual knowledge/- the racial knowledge, out of knowledge steeped in faith which the writers of the Bible call wisdom - "Chachma". "Blessed, happy is the man who has found wisdom". Unto them wisdom was not merely knowledge of the objective world, scientific truth. To them the first and primary fact of knowledge is reverence of God. It is knowledge made significant by wisdom and it is this "chachma" that righteousness of heart of which the Psalmists ~~wright~~. And to those who have this uprightness, this righteousness of heart comes joy.

What constitutes righteousness of heart? In the first place all the writers of the Bible seem to agree. First of all he must be a humble man. Humility, humbleness of heart is a prerequisite for man who wants to enjoy life. "The humble, the meek will inherit the earth." The writers of the Bible over and over again admonish man to forego conceit, pride/and arrogance. Why? Because these qualities of mind or heart inevitably doomed an individual to sorrow, to a colossal defeat. Life can never give the layman all the the things that he thinks he needs in order to be happy. Nature and society simply will not accomodate themselves to our overwhelming sense of our importance. That type of man is forever parched. That kind



of person who is lustful for pride, who thinks that he is so important that he must be constantly on top - that man suffers from discontent and there is no cure for him.

One of the founders of Hebrew literature, one of the truly great spiritual figures in modern Jewish history, , makes this observation: "Lust for honor is more of an impelling force than all other longings and desires. Were it not for this lust, a man would be willing to eat whatever he might get, to wear whatever might cover his nakedness and to dwell under whatever roof might protect him from the inclemencies of the weather. He would easily earn enough to live on, and would not feel the need to work hard in order to become rich. Yet a man assumes tremendous burdens, and there is no limit to his exertions, because he does not want to be regarded as inferior to his fellows."

The Rabbis said: "Envy, cupidity and ambition take a man from the world." They admonished us: "Seek not greatness for thyself, and court not glory." That is marvelously, profoundly true.

It is good for people who are conceited and proud and who feel themselves superior in their hour of obsession with these ambitions to pull themselves in if they can and if it is not too late and to say to themselves as Job said:

Humility, my friends, does not mean subordination. Humility is a kind of realization which gives us a sober perspective on ourselves and on life. It teaches us moderation, temperance. It cools off our excessive ardor. It dissipates some of our angers and our hates. It keeps us from consuming energy to arrive at goals which when attained mean nothing. And it is this humbleness of spirit, my friends, which the writers of the Bible advise us to take up unto ourselves which saves man from that deadliest



of diseases today which enslaves man more than any other disease - "worry".

Why do men eat out their hearts? Why do men go down broken to an untimely grave? Because they worry! And what is it that they worry about? Not that they haven't enough good or garments or shelter. They worry because they will not be able to keep up with the Jones' or the Cohens. They worry that men will think them inferior to their friends. That is the kind of worry that drives men to nervous break-downs. They have not acquired that contentment of spirit that comes from a humbleness of heart and the knowledge that even if they were a thousand-fold richer they would still be less than a grain of dust in the scheme of things. There is no cure for that kind of worry, my friends.

It is only after a man realizes how small he is and when he comes to understand his littleness - "What is man that thou art mindful of him" - that he becomes a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory therein." It is out of this humbleness, this reverence that he is linked with God.

Now the authors of the Bible did not advise men to resign themselves. What I am speaking about now is not resignation. Resignation can be a very sorrowful or lackadaisical business. The attitude of defeat - that isn't the frame of mind the writers of the Bible spoke of. They spoke of an independent spiritual and intellectual independence which will enable man to surmount his fate, which will enable him to retain his self-respect, his dignity and which would enable him to continue in spite of his defeat and the depredations to which all men are subjected.

When the Rabbis spoke of a man being satisfied with his lot, this is what they had in mind. They wanted man to understand what is his lot in the world. They wanted man not to bind up his lot completely



with material things exclusively/<sup>but</sup>with things that cannot be weighed, measured and counted - things such as social service - things of God. When one realizes that that is his lot in the world then he is on the way to happiness. That is what the Psalmist meant when he said:

"I have said unto the Lord, "Thou art my Lord"  
I have no good but in Thee..  
The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places  
I have a goodly heritage..  
Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth.  
Thou makest me to know the path of life,  
In Thy presence is fulness of joy."

So much for righteousness of heart. Then righteousness of heart is only one element. There must be also a rightness of conduct. We must know not only what to do but how to act. We all live in society or rather in a complex of societies, small and large, family groups, business groups, factory groups, club groups, national groups, international groups, a whole series of concentric social worlds which overlap and which directly or indirectly affect man. These are the social influences of this world. And no man can escape them. Therefore it is necessary for a single human being to see that there is happiness in all of these social worlds which affect his life.

And the teachers of the Bible advise us that only as we can create a rule of justice, righteousness, love, compassion, tolerance brotherliness in the world can we, ourselves be happy because all these other things - injustice, intolerance, create that unhappiness which devastates human life.

Not one of us was responsible for the depression of the last six years. Yet how many of our lives were touched and affected by the economic disasters of that vast depression. Not any of us was responsible for the last World War and yet ten millions of men were slain and as many more people made miserable - their lives darkened by bereavement, by loss of dear ones in this universal disaster.



What must man do therefore if he wants to secure happiness for himself? He must strive to secure happiness for others too so as to establish the kind of society or societies which will preserve and make happiness secure.

This social approach to the problem of happiness is very important. In the first place we depend, in order to be happy, upon others. What makes us happy in most instances is not entirely the things that we eat, wear, do, the things that are pleasurable - not at all. What makes us happy is that we live in a sphere where people like us. It makes us unhappy when people hate us. Our happiness is therefore tied up with others and even more, the greatest happiness which we enjoy is that which we derive in bringing happiness to others.

What makes a father and a mother happy? The happiness of their children. When they see that something that they have done has brought happiness to their children, why their hearts swell up with joy. There is no joy like it. What makes the heart of a beloved happy? When he can bring happiness to the one he loves. So with everything.

Lastly, my friends, happiness comes to us when we have congenial work, when we do that which we can do, that which we are satisfied to do and that which we ought to do - that is when we are happy. Working faithfully, cheerfully at a task for which we are adequately equipped - that gives one a large measure of happiness. That is self-realization; - When a man is able to go forth to his work, to his labor until the evening worship - "And you will eat of the labor of your hands, the labor of your brain as well as of your brawn." (another quote)



These, my friends, are the Biblical and Scriptural definitions of happiness. These words were spoken long ago yet the changing scene has not changed the intrinsic code of conduct and attitudes which alone can give man happiness and which alone will enable a man to conquer whatever can be had in this world.





In short, the lust for honor is more of an impelling force than all other longings and desires. Were it not for this lust, a man would be willing to eat whatever he might get, to wear whatever might cover his nakedness, and to dwell under whatever roof might protect him from the inclemencies of the weather. He would easily earn enough to live on, and would not feel the need to work hard in order to become rich. Yet a man assumes tremendous burdens, and there is no limit to his exertions, because he does not want to be regarded as inferior to his fellows. The Rabbis said, "Envy, cupidity and ambition take a man from the world" (Ab. 4.20). They admonished us, "Seek not greatness for thyself, and court not glory" (Ab. 6.4)

No reasonable person can believe that the purpose for which man was created is attainable in this world, for what is man's life in this world? Who is really happy here, and who content? "The number of our years is threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years, yet is their pride but travail and vanity" (Ps. 90.10), because of the suffering, the sickness, the pain and vexations which man has to endure, and finally death. Hardly one in a thousand finds that the world yields him true pleasure and contentment. And even that one, though he live a hundred years, passes away and is as though he had never been.

### Ps. 16.

*I have said unto the Lord, "Thou art my Lord"*

*I have no good but in Thee...*

*The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places*

*I have a goodly heritage...*

*Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth*

*Thou makest me to know the path of life,*

*In thy presence is fulness of joy"*



2. Is it an over-statement? Hardly. Talk B. character - real, live, full-blood people - one by one - and in each - some defeat, some sorrow, some frustration. No one, however great, or rich or powerful, completely or uninterruptedly happy.

3. First Lesson - Up is not a perfect Paradise! It is not all purple heart.







5- Extend - largely within man's own ordering - <sup>It is not willfully but by man's own ordering</sup> ~~Free will~~ - I have  
numerous helpful suggestions, given - how to find H. & how to  
avoid unH. - Sound counsel - stored test, time -

(a) Very little philo. Speculation as among Greeks on nature, H. -  
<sup>was not aware whether H. is the only, good, or the reference point - End of human activity -</sup>  
B. writer not given to formal speculation on any subject.  
little philo. - but much wisdom distilled out of experience  
and inspired by Faith.

(b) They offer a code of private & public conduct, and a  
pattern of that & attitudes - which, if followed, will yield  
man as much H. as is possible, in mundane existence.  
I only a few, I can speak this morning.

b. First with ref. to that pattern - Frame of mind - <sup>2133/ 2134, 2135, 2136</sup>  
<sup>man to have his rightness, heart & mind - the rightness is in his heart, mind & will</sup>  
all seem to be agreed that a prime requisite for H. is attitude  
<sup>of this rightness</sup> Humility - Humbleness, heart-felt  
honesty, H. then is achievable. <sup>4:10 4:11 4:12 4:13 - whatever</sup>

that comes from pious contemplation of God & His knowers  
from knowledge, individual & racial, steeped in faith - from what  
B. writer call <sup>דמיון - סודיות - דמיון ל'N ע'N יע'N -</sup>  
remembering that <sup>ד' אלו דמיון אלו</sup> —

Humility - not in sense of subordination to other men -  
do otherwise, but in sense of realizing virtues, mystery  
& majesty of Universe - and ones small, tho not unimportant  
place in it - They were men against pride, arrogance,  
conceit, hee. then down men to colossal blarney of  
disillusionment & rebuffs -



4  
Nature <sup>+ society</sup> simply will not accommodate <sup>themselves</sup> to man's <sup>excessive</sup> sense of his importance. Life can never give the vain man and the proud man enough of praise or honors to satisfy them. They are always parched by thirst <sup>for more honors</sup> ~~for more praise~~ and consumed by envy. A mounting fever of discontent - Psalm 110 (Jub) - Moses Chagun suggests 18c 19c

(c) It is sad for a man, at times when he is obsessed with wild ambitions - desires - cravings - to say with Abraham - <sup>+ with Jk</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר וַיֵּשֶׁב אֶבְרָהָם -

(d) It gives us a Sobering perspective on ourselves tho  
It cools off our excessive ardor.

It dissipates some of our anger and our hates.

It makes for moderation - temperance -

7. And makes us fear much worry which kills more men than the most lethal diseases.

Why do men <sup>eat up</sup> break their hearts - from old before their  
time - consume their energies + go down to an early  
grave? Keep up with Joneses - a common

They have not ~~learned~~ acquired that contentment / spirit  
which comes from a humble heart. - from a reality that  
even if they were a king / lord or rich - as we are powerful - they are not happy by  
themselves - they are not happy in their lot -

And in the cosmic scheme - less than a grain of sand -

It is only after man realizes his littleness - "What is  
man that thou art mindful of him - that he becomes a  
little lower than the angels - + cannot with stand them"

Then comes to him a heavy guilt of mind.



8/H. does not consist in repressing as one's state - but  
in a sp. & intell. independence, which summarizes one's life  
- which enables a man to retain his self repect his  
dignity, his conscience, his will & meaning in spite of certain  
denials, handicaps and defects. To be in the world and not entirely by it  
is not being a slave to one's appetites - that is  
1/2 the rule -

9/ In other words, when one's lot is not concerned  
\* of a being bound up with material things exclusively,  
with things that can be weighed, measured & counted -  
- but bound up with character - development, with human  
service, with deeds, thinking, and work being - with God -  
then one can always rejoice in his lot - for there are  
available and ready at hand for all men, rejoicings,  
their status in life -  
(Ps. 16 - David)

9/ But we need not only a right frame, mind for H. but right  
code & conduct - and opportunities for work which is congenial  
to us - and which liberates our energies and powers, and the  
function of our being. H. depends not only on his lot but on  
what we do - it is a consequence or concomitant of action -  
(a) then we live in society - or in a complex of societies - small  
& large - family group, business group, factory group, club group,  
community group, national group, inter-group - a whole  
series of concentric social circles - which interact.  
H. must pass from one to another, thus under - There are  
the influences of the spheres in the subhuman world - the physical  
as social life -

(b) Our social writers have admitted as that in all these  
under - a code of justice, fairness, mercy, love, compassion







Nature & Soc. - simply accommodate Es. - otherwise our  
Life can never give Vain man - enough honors...

perched - Fever -

only show - 100% proof etc. -

It is good - stressed - not at all -

Sobering perfection - covers it - dissipates - Moderation

7. And gives us from much Worry - deadly diseases

Why do men eat out - grow old - consume

No humbleness - Keeping up with Jones

They have not acquired Contentment which comes from  
a thousand times still not at all not  
in cosmic schemes - less > grain & gold

It is only after man realizes - nothing

little lower > angels

8. H. does not exist in "Resignation" - sample -  
"Independence" - mundane lot - Retains

To be in the world - & get out of

To be master & fate - by not being slaved by not at all

When one's lot is not bound up - (Romanian)

character - dev't - human science - clear thought - Not

with God - always rejoice (Just Ps. 16)



Their God loves life - light - laughter

Deut. 22:17 וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁפָּט ה' אֶתְכֶם וְהָיָה אֲנִי וְכָל הָעָם אֲנִי וְכָל הָעָם

Rabbis -

אֲנִי וְכָל הָעָם אֲנִי וְכָל הָעָם

Wanted men to be H. -

אֲנִי וְכָל הָעָם אֲנִי וְכָל הָעָם

Did not want men to suffer in this world - so as to lay up

4) Extent of H. within men - Not wilfully restricted

Numerous suggestions - test of time

{ Very little Philos. Speculation - Practical - nature of H  
Debate - only of ord - Supreme - End - Perfection - Service  
Little Phil - Much Wisdom - distilled -

They offer a Code - and a Pattern - which of follows  
- of only a few -

5) Pattern - Frame of Mind - "Rightness of Heart" וְהָיָה לְכָל הָעָם

This "Rightness" comes - Contemplation - Knowledge - וְהָיָה לְכָל הָעָם

וְהָיָה לְכָל הָעָם וְהָיָה לְכָל הָעָם

6) All seems to agree - Humility -

וְהָיָה לְכָל הָעָם וְהָיָה לְכָל הָעָם

Not subordination, prerequisites -

Realization Vastness - men small

They warn against Pride, Arrogance, Conceit - down

colossal blows - rebuffs



1/ Take B. characters - in each some -

No one, however, great, rich, powerful, - completely, uninterrupted. H

Adam - driven -

Cain - Abel -

Abraham - נדב -

Isaac - tragic family feud

Jacob - Exile - פניו אל ארץ -

Joseph - slavery - prison

Moses - leadership - Every

Rebellion - Grace

Samuel - Sons - here -

King - למלך למלך למלך

David -

Saul - למלך למלך למלך

David - Wars - Abraham  
Death - Sin -

And so throughout - Not all but Job - None without

פניו אל ארץ פניו אל ארץ פניו אל ארץ

2. First Lesson - Not Fools Preacher! Ginger-bread!

Cake and icing

Sustained and unending H - simply - reach

God did not build

3/ But a Measure of H - is - and, to a great extent, how large

If B. writers - With Real - Value

Here, as ever, remarkable sanity -

B. writers do not disparage, - negate, from

Kohélet -

Do not urge men - regard innocent foes - simple