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

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Reel  
158

Box  
56

Folder  
554

Laugh, If You are Wise!, 1938.

504

"LAUGH, IF YOU ARE WISE!"  
A Sermon in the Spirit of Purim

WRHS

By  
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At  
The Temple



On  
Sunday morning, March 13, 1938



There is a legend told that Rabbi Baroka once entered the market place and met the prophet Elijah, the Biblical legendary prophet. And he asked of the prophet Elijah, "Of all these people who at this moment fill the market place - priests, noblemen, richmen, commoners - of all these people, who of them will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven?" Who of them is worthy to inherit eternal life?

The prophet Elijah looked around and looked again and answered, "Not one!" Just then two humble folk came into the market place and Elijah said: "Behold these two will inherit the Kingdom of God."

Baroka approached these two men, humble folk and said unto them, "Who are you?"

And one answered, "I am a carpenter. I am from the neighboring village."

"What extraordinary thing in life have you done? And what great merit have you earned?"

"Nothing," answered the carpenter.

"But surely you must have done something of extraordinary worth. We have just learned from one who knows, that you alone will inherit the earth."

"We are happy people and we try to make happy all those who are sad."

That is a marvelous mission to have in one's life and one great enough to entitle a man a place in the world to come. Unfortunately such people who are themselves happy and try to make the sad happy are not always appreciated in the world. The world is



delighted to build great monuments to those generals and conquerors who through many wars brought death and sorrow upon unnumbered human beings. But they, those who have made men happy, who have filled their souls with laughter and joy and contentment, to those people, very few monuments are erected. Because, you see, those men are foolish. Those men prefer glory to happiness and the competitive pride to a shared and commonly enjoyed tranquility and peace. The scoundrels who incite men to hate, to anger, to belligerency, have been frequently held up as the heroes. But the sage who counsels men in the ways of reconciliation and forgiveness and peace - he is often scorned.

To be happy and to make men happy - that when you come to think of it, is the supreme function of religion. In the eyes of most people, religion is associated with terrific solemnity, with moroseness, with a sort of spiritual dyspepsia. Some people cherish the notion that Religion was created out of fear - that it was out of fear that they worshipped God. Actually it was to escape fear that men turned to God, to escape fear of the unpredictable, of the future life, of death. Men needed a sense of at homeness, a sense of belonging, a sense of security in this universe, so strange and so overwhelming and frequently so relentless and crushing. And so they turned to a God, one they had never seen but without whom they could not live. They had never seen this God, this invisible spirit, this unknown power. He became man's ally, kinsman, a sort of strength his ready help in time of trouble. Upheld by this God, he could confidently cope with his environment and meet his difficulties and solve his problems.



When the Psalmist said: "The Lord is my strength and my fortress and my refuge in time of trouble," he spoke of the experience of the human race which is continually in need of strength greater than its own and forces greater than its own handiwork, and a refuge which our own world does not offer. And those who have this faith can sing, can be happy and can make others happy - and only those people who have such a faith can be happy. That is why the sacred literature of our people, especially that literature which is most intimate, of the devotional type, the lyricism of the psalmist reverberate with the minstrelsy of sunlit happiness.

There are ten words in the Hebrew language for joy - Simchah, Sasohn, Gilah, Rinah, etc. Religion is not sadness and gloom and sorrow and dejection and despair and death. Religion is unleashed love of life. "In the shadow of thy wings, shall I cower?" "No, I shall sing!" And so great is his sense of joy - for the man of faith - that not only his life sings, but the whole of nature sings. "God reigneth that the whole earth rejoice!" "Let the Heavens rejoice and the earth be glad. Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; Let the field exult and all that there is therein; Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy: Because the Lord has come and he has come to judge the earth; He judges the world in righteousness and justly.

The joyous man sees the whole of nature rejoicing with him just as a man looking through black spectacles sees everything in nature black, forboding.

Not only joy, not only the unburdened, merry-hearted, but even laughter - carefree, inextinguishable laughter is the portion of the man of faith.



"God will not forsake the righteous man  
"He will fill thy mouth with Laughter  
"And thy lips with shouting."

And in the audacity of poetic imagery, of poetic license, the great poets even represent God as laughing. God looks over the world and sees these little, strutting individuals who think they are conquering the world, people who trample right over the boundaries of other nations and set up their own flags, and who think they are God, that they rule. "Why do the Heathen rage? And why do people talk like fools?" "He who dwells in the Heavens, laughs at them." "God laughs at him for he knows that his day will come."

My friends, there are all sorts and all kinds of laughter. There is the laughter of ridicule. There is the laughter of scorn. There is the constrained and sardonic laughter. There is the shallow and vacuous laughter. There is also laughter built not upon cruelty, laughter not derived from shallowness. There is a laughter of confidence. "At destruction and dearth thou shalt laugh. Neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth."

That kind of laughter is frequently not far removed from fears. I think it was Shelley who said: "Our sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught." Even in laughter, the heart sometimes bleeds, because this kind of laughter is not unaware of the sorrows of the world and the destruction and the hurts which abound in human life - the pain and the defeat. This laughter is not laughter of inexperience, naivety or innocence of life. It knows <sup>the</sup> wickedness, evils, sin, brutality, injustice, trampling under foot of the weak and the just. It knows all that and yet it is not quenched by that knowledge. It is not destroyed by it. It smiles through the tears and laughs at the sorrow because it is confident that there is a future,



that there is a better day, a better humanity and a better world to come. That is what the Roman poet meant when he said: "Laugh, if you are wise!" The prophet of the Bible said: "There is a time for weeping and time for laughter." There is a time for mourning and there is a time for dancing."

You know, my friends, there are various ways by which men retaliate against misfortune, against depression. Some men retaliate with hate, others with rebellion, still others with cynicism. Again, others retaliate against depressions with dull insensate indifference. There are still others who seek refuge in flight from reality into the psychic cities of refuge, into abnormalities of all kinds.

There is another way of retaliating against what is hurtful, shameful in the world - that is by way of laughter. It is a catharsis for the over-charged and over-burdened soul! It helps to clear and cleanse. And it is good for an individual to laugh at times. And it is good for a people to know how to laugh. Why think what would have happened to the people of Israel through these twenty centuries of persecution and abuse if our people could not, from time to time, relieve the burden of its spirit in humor, in wit, in laughter, in festival occasions and at times, even in ribaldry - and that is Purim. And that is why the Megillah says that these days shall never depart - because that is one of the secrets of survival.

What might have been one of the greatest tragedies in Jewish history, the destruction of all the Jews in one hundred and twenty-seven provinces is narrated in the Bible in the Book of Esther. This holiday has been celebrated by our people for hundreds and hundreds of years in a carnival mood of singing and



dancing. And why? Because the horrible tension of this fact in our history which might have become one of the great tragedies in our history released itself in over-flowing merriment and joy. Here is a mad, fantastic story of ancient Persia, plots, intrigues, a queen who is deposed, a humble Jewess who takes her place. There is the proud vice-roy who would hang Mordecai, the Jew, on the gallows and who instead is hung on the gallows after being led through the streets by Mordecai who proclaimed: "Thus shall be done to the man whom the king wishes to honor!" It is a topsy-turvy story, as fantastic as any of the "One Thousand and One Nights". Running through it all are two threads: one the dark thread, the threat which hung over this defenseless minority, our people living an insecure life in exile, our experience not unique in Jewish history and not unique to Persia, the dark thread - where Jewish destiny depended on the casting of lots, on a vice-roy, a Feuhrer, a Duce, a Commissar.

Right along with that other thread ran the thread of supreme confidence in the ultimate outcome. You know the outcome You know when you read the first chapter/what is going to happen in the last chapter when you read the first. For you are at once face to face with that which is hard, enduring in Jewish life. You sense at once the stiff-neckedness of our people, the toughest among the people of the earth. And you know, before you have worked your way half through the mess of intrigues and plots in Persia that ultimately as has happened before that there will be a turn from sorrow to joy, from mourning to a day of rejoicing.

My friends, Persia was not only land where there arose a Haman against our people. From Pharaoh to Hitler - a long stretch of time, a long stretch of 4000 years. You have seen them all -



all forms and manners of conspiracy, endeavors to destroy this people, so much so, that for us who find ourselves in another such world where so many governments and parties are planning and conspiring to destroy the people of Israel, this thing has lost its novelty. It is not only a twice-told tale but a hundred-fold told tale of our people. Always there was a Purim and there will be Purims in the future. Always we were able to laugh and we shall laugh again.

And ours is a Messianic faith. Ours is a messianic way of life. We believe in that which is to come. That faith has saved us from despair and destiny.

The Rabbis say that after Mordec i was elevated to power, a new coin was made in his honor in Persia. And on the outside of the coin there was sack-cloth and ashes and on the other side was engraved a crown. That, my friends, is Jewish currency through the ages. On one side sack-cloth and ashes - and on the other side, a crown. One side - conspiracy, death staring us in the face. On the other side - joy, courage, Purim.

Babylon, Assyria, Rome - they triumphed over us for a moment. But we survived. The Cross and the Crescent could not prevail against us! Nor could the fury of intolerance, violence of the Fifteenth century. They could not break us down. Nor will the pogroms of the Twentieth century. Nor will the barbarians and pagans today triumph over us.

Everywhere they are building gallows - but not for us - for themselves. "That the days of Purim shall not be forgotten in 1938." Remember the days of Purim and remember to laugh. The day of retribution is at hand and the day of vindication is at hand. If we are as faithful and loyal and unafraid as were Mordecai and Esther, we shall win through.



"Laugh, if you are wise!" The hour calls for wiscom, for patience,  
for faith, for unbounded faith and loyalty.





ABSTRACT OF ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER AT THE TEMPLE  
ANSEL ROAD AND EAST 105TH STREET ON SUNDAY MORNING? MARCH 13, 1938

"LAUGH, IF YOU ARE WISE!"

There are all sorts of laughter. There is the laughter of ridicule, of scorn, the sardonic laughter and the shallow vacuous laughter of fools. But there is a laughter which derives neither from cruelty nor conceit nor shallowness. There is the laughter of confidence. Frequently such laughter is not far removed from tears because it is not unmindful of the sorrows and the hurts ~~xx~~ the pains and the defeats of life. Nevertheless it knows now to smile through te rs for the confidence which gives rise to it looks forward to a better day.

There are many ways by which men retaliate against misfortune and oppression, hate, rebellion, cynicism, misanthropy, insensate resignation, or flight from reality into the psychic cities of refuge, into abnormalities of all kinds. But there is also the retaliation of laughter. It is a cartharsis for the over-charged and over-burdened soul.