



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
158

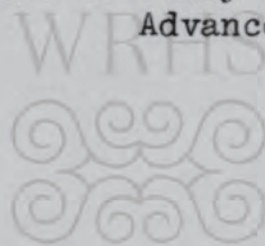
Box
56

Folder
566

Why our Age must return to Religion, 1938.

516
WHY OUR AGE MUST RETURN TO RELIGION

The Failure of Every Other Motif to Conserve and
Advance Civilization



By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, November 27, 1938

It is difficult to say that the men and women are more religious today than they were in other days. But certainly they are taking it more to heart than heretofore. There is more of a searching and a questing going on. So many things ^{on} which people have founded their hopes, are broken down. So many seemingly strong and sure foundations upon which people had built their lives' hopes have been shaken. Men and women are coming to ask themselves whether these foundations upon which they had relied are really strong and sure foundations, whether the only foundation upon an individual, a people, a whole race, mankind, is not, after all, the old foundation of faith in God.

That optimism which attended the whole life of men all through the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, that optimism which fed the truly remarkable achievements of men in the fields of science, discoveries, the spread of education, that optimism seems to have entirely vanished from the habitations of men today, leaving the human being in a morass of confusion, in despair. I venture to say that the world has seldom been less happy, less hopeful, less tranquil than it is today.

While records are brought to us continually of new discoveries in the fields of chemistry, physics, medicine, these discoveries have somehow failed to thrill us. This piling up of time saving, labor saving inventions leave us rather without enthusiasm. They simply don't mean anything. It will certainly not contribute to greater happiness, to more wisdom, greater security, orderliness, peace, decency among men.

Great and marvelous were the vistas which opened up before men in preceding generations. Men could dream then and dream unabashed of mankind's uninterrupted progress, of man's unending conquest of nature, of man's subjugating of the resources of nature to his will and needs.

Men could dream of building in a world of abundance a civilization free from poverty, free from ignorance, free from strife and war. And men did dream that dream.

Our generation, however, seems to face a blank wall. The vista which stretches before us is a vista which ends at the edge of the wilderness. We face the future with grave apprehension. Somehow it seems as though some cataclysm awaits mankind, some swift descent into some catastrophe. For twenty years, now, we have lived in the midst of a world of revolution, of the creation and fall of empires, changing and shifting of national boundaries. For twenty years now, we have lived in the midst of a world wherein free institutions have collapsed. The ideals which we treasured for so long have been scrapped and destroyed. For twenty years now, we have lived in a world of hate, intolerance, bigotry, embittering and embroiling the lives of men so that people have come to suspect that this thing called civilization is a disease, or perhaps that civilization in itself is a disease.

In the midst of this truly resplendent pageantry of breath-taking inventions in the avenues of radio, wireless, air-planes, streamline means of communication, in the midst of millions of schools and colleges and scientific laboratories, the human spirit today instead of being thrilled, is dimmed by disillusion, awaiting somehow some crash or doom.

Why? Albert Einstein was asked not so long ago to write a brief statement which was to be placed in a capsule and buried on the site of the New York World's Fair, which capsule was to be excavated and its contents revealed five thousand years hence. He was asked, in other

words, to write a letter to posterity describing the present life in which the world lived so that people five thousand years hence would know what kind of an age in which we lived. He wrote the following brief statement:

"Our time is rich in inventive minds, the inventions of which could facilitate our lives considerably. We are crossing the seas by power and utilize power also to relieve humanity from all tiring muscular work. We have learned to fly and are able to send messages and news over the entire world through electric waves.

"However, the production and distribution of commodities is entirely unorganized, so that everybody must live in fear of being eliminated from the economic cycle. Furthermore, people living in different countries kill each other at irregular time intervals, so that anyone who thinks about the future must live in fear. This is due to the fact that the intelligence and character of the masses are incomparably lower than the intelligence and character of the few who produce something valuable for the community.

"I trust that posterity will read these statements with a feeling of proud and justified superiority."

Albert Einstein's description of our age is an accurate one. I am wondering, however, whether the reasons he gives for the conditions which exist is the only one or the complete reason. I am inclined to believe that the real reason is ^{not} ~~because~~ that the "character and intelligence of the masses are incomparably lower than the intelligence and character of the few who produce something valuable for the community", but that we have failed to make religious use of that which we do produce and achieve and invent and discover.

We have made discovery and invention ends in themselves. And because of that, they have become the means to our misfortune; whereas the true end of all human life should be the seeking of God and the ways of God. Our civilization has set for itself other goals which lead away from God and the Ways of God and therefore lead to disaster. We fail to remember in the light of new things invented and manufactured, that knowledge is not necessary happiness or goodness, that the learning of facts in itself is not blessed necessarily, that education without Religion, as the Duke of Wellington said, can make of men but clever devils; that truth can make us mad as well as free; that the prolongation of life is not necessarily the improvement of life; that the acceleration of a process does not necessarily insure a better quality in the finished product and that change does not necessarily mean progress.

We relied upon science. Science was to be our Messiah. It was to unlock every door for us - power, wealth and leisure. It was to heal and to protect. But after a whole century in which science did give us new inventions which far exceeded our fondest expectations, we are confronted with a world in which there is vast economic disorganization, depression, unemployment, slums, poverty, industrial strife, class struggle, bitterness, hate. We are confronted with a civilization utilizing its skill to rain down bombs upon civilization, gas, machinery, chemical discoveries to blind and kill men. We have geared our entire industrial apparatus for war and destruction.

We relied upon education, upon the emancipation of the human mind from superstition. We said that this light and reason would give mankind ~~an~~ ultimately happiness and well-being. We built schools and more schools. We stamped out illiteracy. We wrote books and more books.

and enabled every body to read them. We established free public libraries for the distribution of books. We printed newspapers and magazines and more magazines. Yet our muchly educated age seems to have substituted new superstitions or dogmas for old dogmas and superstitions. The new ones are quite as false and vicious as the old. Very frequently our universities are hotbeds of intolerance, of all forms of snobbery, of all forms of divisive attitudes among men.

Germany did not lack schools, colleges and universities. Today it is the hdbed of spiritual barbarism, of all those things which we hoped education would eradicate.

We put our faith in the secularization of life. We subordinated the church to the state hoping to give men greater freedom, enabling the state to adventure unrestrained, unchecked. We have accomplished that. We have made the state dominant.

With what results? Today the state is far more absolutist, tyrannical, conscienceless, cynical than any corrupt ecclesiastical hierarchy ever was. We have secularized the home, school, institutions of marriage. But it is yet to be discovered that we have added any ennoblement to any of these institutions of human life.

We put our faith in democracy. All through the 19th and early 20th century man's faith in democracy remained high. Yet, we have seen in our day how democracy destroys itself, how people can vote themselves into dictatorship and serfdom. We can see how corruption may flourish. In recent years, some peoples in some of the totalitarian states have put their complete faith in nationalism, in patriotism, in racialism, in all forms of blood loyalties which lead to savagery and bestiality.

Why have all these things failed us? Not because they are inherently false. They are not. Not because their opposites are true. That is,

instead of science - ignorance is man's salvation; instead of education, illiteracy; instead of good will, tyranny. All these things are good but insufficient, inadequate. They are excellent tools if employed by skillful people, directed by spiritual intelligence. They are excellent if there is a cultivated inner life in man and a strengthened and disciplined will to control and guide and direct all these values of civilization. Without such a cultivation of the inner life of man, without such a strengthened moral will of man, these things become his mortal foes, his destroyers. And such a cultivation of heart and mind is impossible, my friends, without Religion, without faith in an experimental order, without a belief in the reality of the spiritual values, without submission to mandates of moral self-reliance and moral initiative in man.

What has been missing in civilization to a great extent has been a unifying belief in some great goal to which education and science and invention are means to an end. We have been so absorbed in the goal, the technique of learning and the seemingly great achievements of education, that we have forgotten these great goals. And it's only Religion, my friends which feeds the great goals of freedom, of justice and peace in the world.

When you come to think of it, what is it that human life requires? What is it ~~that~~ that life needs? In my judgment life would be exceedingly livable if it acquired three things - all of which seem to have vanished from civilization today. It needs first of all spiritual aspiration. That is what distinguishes man from the beast. Man can move life continually from lower to higher planes, intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically. There must be an outreaching in life. What should he reach out to? Why

man must reach out to the sum total of all beauty, truth in the world that is conceived by the human mind to be in the world, to the sum total of all that is perfect. That is God, and the ways of God. Therefore the great teachers of religion have always held up before men the vision and the imitation of God. There must be in life this outreaching and up-reaching towards the source of all perfection. That is the first need of human life.

Secondly, the exaltation and the sanctification of human life itself. Man must believe that life is noble, worthy. Science does not postulate that. Religion tells man that life is sanctified. "Man is made in the image of God". Religion tells man that a single individual life is comparable to the whole of life, of class. Religion establishes the worth of the individual. It proclaims his life, his personality inviolable. It exalts man's labor. It proclaims him a co-worker with God. Religion tells him that his relationships are holy sacred - his relationships of friendship. His social relationships they are sacramental. Religion exalts his life. And even if his life is obsessed with defeat, still religion ennobles him with certain postulates of bravery, patience, charity. Religion also exalts his death by proclaiming that death for man is not a finality but a doorway to the imperial highway. Human life needs to have this exaltation and sanctification which only Religion can give.

And thirdly, human life needs a sense of sovereign moral law, a law which is eternal, a law which is binding upon all, a law which can be man's refuge and comfort and consolation. This sovereign moral law is that which over-arches all human groupings, which unifies mankind, which subordinates all nations and all classes to the

concept of humanity "of all the families of the earth". It is this sense of supreme moral law which no one dares defy with impunity that gives to life a sense of security and a sense of magnificence.

Now, my friends, because these three needs of human life have been neglected to a frightening extent, we have the kind of a world which we have. Because the ideal of aspiration, spiritual aspiration, has been clouded out of the minds and hearts of men, we have a world in which ambitions are concerned largely with material wealth, power; a world which knows very little of humility, of beauty, reverence, of unselfishness, of self-sacrifice, a world in which brazenness, audacity, and shameless aggression are dominant but in which still the small voice which said "not by might, but by light", violence; because of that we have a world of struggle, hate, catastrophe.

Because the second need is ignored, that of the exaltation and the sanctification of the life of man, we have a world in which life is cheapened, the stature of human dignity is lowered, human rights are usurped by the state, his labor a commodity having only a market value, his life a statistical item. Because life has not been exalted and sanctified, the individual has come to lose faith in his own self, in his his reliance on his own power to change the world about him and he has thrown his complete hope and reliance upon government and society and economic philosophy, and society forgetting that the beginning of the regeneration of mankind must start with the regeneration of the individual.

Because our generation has ignored the sovereignty of the moral law, themselves we have a world in which men have set ~~themselves~~ up above law and order; where there is no group, upon the power of an individual. A government can rob and despoil a minority and actually feel that it is doing the just and moral thing

because the law which is applicable to the individual does not seem to be applicable to a collective group.

It is not so in the sight of Religion. You may recall from the Bible that once a king coveted the vineyard of a humble citizen of his kingdom. Through crooked ways the citizen was killed and the king took possession of the vineyard. But a great prophet of Israel had the courage to appear before the king and to say to him. "In the place where the dogs licked his blood will they lick your blood" because you have violated the Law of God.

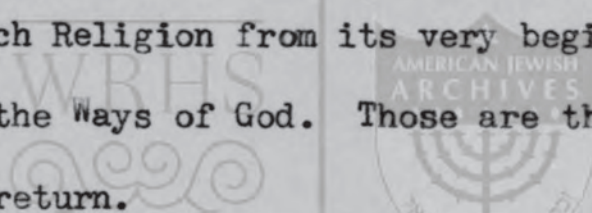
There is no longer a Law of God in the world today. There is a law of duces, fuehrers, commissars, a law of the majority, a law of the classes. But the law of the living God overarching all, mandatory upon all, to whom all must bend the knee, that law has been driven out from our world with the result that we have a broken and fragmentized world in preparation for war, a world rushing headlong to disaster.

That is why I say, my friends, that if salvation is to come to our world, it must come through the way of returning to Religion. We are moving very fast today. The faster a train moves, the firmer must be the roadbeds and the stronger must be the rails so that the train will not be derailed. Our age is moving so fast and things are changing so rapidly that unless that movement takes place on strong rails built upon strong bedrock, and on enduring and universal alws of the spirit, civilization will head for a wreck.

Lights are going out in the world my friends, because the "Ner Elohim" from which all other human candles must borrow their illumination has been permitted to grow dim, almost to extinction. The lights whoch

should be burning bright in a civilized society are, I am afraid today just as "tapers keeping their lonely vigils over a dying world". We need a return before it is too late. Mankind is beating its breast in repentance of faith. "Bring us back, O Lord, so that we may return!"

The rising generation must be imbued, my friends, not with more patriotism and not with more vivid ideology of nation and race, not so much with an unquestioning faith in the all beneficence of scientific gadgets. The rising generation must be imbued with a reverent and strong faith in the supreme worth and values of spiritual things of integrity, of honor, of self-sacrifice, of justice, of humility, of compassion, of brotherhood, of tolerance, of good will, of charity, of the cooperative life, those things which Religion from its very beginning tried to hold up as goals - God and the Ways of God. Those are the things, my friends, to which our age must return.



a retreat back to the border land of man and beast. How much
that borderland ^{of the man and the beast} is represented in ~~that~~ pagan art and mythology.
Satyrs, Kins, Hyas, Minotaurs! Paganism ~~which~~ which had
reached the second stage in rel. devel - that ~~man~~ anthropom.
deities, could not quite free itself from the ~~earliest~~ memories
of ^{earlier} + more primitive worship of animal deities. The later
conflict in paganism between heart and man is reflected
in the legends myth, the Perseus and the Minotaurs, and ^{in the struggle} the
Titans against the gods - Judaism reached the third ^{stage} in
rel. devel., wanted, and ~~exactly~~ ^{exactly} for as pure spirit, above all
human attributes.

No Law! "Every anarchist is a dictator who has missed his" - Anas.

The pious paper whose music so fascinated us.

Tentative leather down

When men are fresh - superstition touches Religion - Upper classes

- & stored with Abraham

Religion in Present Day J. life.

① Do not know whether we are or not - More not searching.

So many - broken down - (see address)

14 Cultural positions
not wanted

② So many substitutes in J. life failed (1) Cultural Assimilation

② Philanthropy ③ Prophesy - don't need religion. ④ Zionist. nat. + Jewish.
nat.

③ only strength - solace - suffering!

Our grandeur - our ideas again battle-cries Manhood - Paganism
Our youth - fight for them will gain strength - for struggle

Else - meaningless spectacles assault & degradation -

④ Turn for that strength - God - Prayer - firm drive! - Superstition
superior to things

Leaders - should lead way back to God - The example

should inspire others - practice. youth!

Jews don't use so many, your character, your heights,
your asphages - heed example & your faith, your

piety, your reverence for Sp. Theories, Israel / The

Rel. requires of the reb. discipline!

The choice is bet. x 12/11/18 or 12/11/18

When God is de-throned - the throne is left unoccupied for long!

Holiness & Messianism are living realities but, in a larger sense, they are
also symbolic abstractions - our Kabbalists understood perfectly how an
historic individual person could at the same time be a formula and an ideogram.

1/ Many factors - secondary

R. generally - pushed - subordinate

S.C. usurped its place.

Increase of sec. knowledge - extension - exalted - eclipsed

Discernment - tended to refute - concepts.

Separat. of Church + State - Growth of functions - Secul. of Educ.

+ in real of Spec. alliance - diminish

(a) Other forms of Loyalty - clamored -

These found sanctions - with in ess - + constructed
systems, that with out ref.

4/ J. ~~the~~ left shells at time - unfolding

They emerged from world - all pervasive - whose

But they yielded - new temper - + intell. attitudes of type.

Many J. not only caught up - sec. word -

(a) but only were these movements - Reform

Strong centrifugal - away - apostasy -

negativism - indiff. - Expressed - non-affiliation

renunciation - total R. & reg. men.

3/ Added to above - Complete Assimilation

All thru 19c - J. struggled -

They that - distinctive rel. beliefs - customs - find way

segregated - disadvantaged them among men.

Answer lay - assimilating - rest of pop.

If J. Rel. stood in way - abandoned.

This practical motif - later rationalized - phils. which
extolled secular - proclaimed R., anywhere, anywhere.
All-right for unenlightened - cultured - dispersed

In New Ages - Sc. - Progress - all diff. hypotheses -
common brotherhood

Thus Eu. Romance - even the Piel Piel - ancient legends

(a) Rich J. spoke - paraphrased with comforting doctrine

Richer they got - less use for R.

Upper classes - proximity - fringes - most

upfront & superficial

When one is profane - earns to dispense with God

4/ Fortunately - not all of same opinion

Many refused to exchange

Did not see need - wisdom

Believed that if Freedom & Equality - as a right

natural endowments - payment for unwarlike

Suspected Millenium - history - planned - shattered

shelterers - Out of Habit - J. not lost.

~~air planes~~
but 9 million other machines; in the midst, ~~horror~~ millions, ~~shaking~~ call. Our -
and so. ~~barbarism~~ - the Human Spirit ~~comes~~ to-day in fear, shaken by
disillusionment, awaiting the crash down, ~~harrow~~ ~~delens~~ —

2/ Why? Answer guilt simple. We have not made Rel use, what we learned,
or discovered, or achieved. Learning discoveries, achievements, became ends in
themselves - means to Human misfortune. Whereas the End of all human
endeavour should be God and the life acceptable to God - men set up other
goals which led away from God and towards disaster.

We failed to remember that Knowledge is not Happiness, nor Goodness - that
the learning of facts about nature is not in itself a blessing - that educa-
tion, without religion, as the Duke, Wellington said, can make of men but
clever devils - that the truth can make us mad as well as free,
that the prolongation of life is not necessarily the improvement of life, and
that change does not always mean progress and improvement the quality of the
elevation of the product of a process does not mean spell a more worthy

3/ We relied upon Science. It was to be our messiah. Unlock every
door. Make us masters of the resources of Nature. Abolish all
that made man's life upon earth hard, insecure, unhappy. Rebuild
our poverty-stricken world. Give us power, wealth, leisure. Heal us
and protect us - But a century of sc. progress - exceeding progress us
vast depression - unemployment - slums - econ. insecurity -
class - struggles - every world apart. Industry stagnant
bombing planes, & poison gas, & chemical warfare -
Our sc. apparatus, geared up for war & destruction.

4/ We relied on Education. Emancipation from dogmas from superstitions from ignorance.
The life person would live by light of Reason - We built
schools & new schools - Stamped out illiteracy - broth turns
broth newspapers by the myriads -

And yet - men have substituted new superstitions for old - new dogmas for old - just as harmful and vicious - The Universities are nests of all forms of nat. conceits - racist chauvinisms - intolerance, snobbery -

(Ger.) is a country which lacked no school. Her Italy And yet - their professors have underwritten - a acquiescence in all their vicious & arrogant manufactured dogmas -

5/ We put our faith in Secular Govt - vs. Ecclesiastical Govt. We subordinated the church to the state. We thought that would give men greater freedom. - To-day - the state has more absolute - & governmental - supremacy - than any corrupt ecc. hierarchy ever was -

We secularized the school - the home - ~~all the~~ marriage - and we ~~are the~~ ^{impaired} it is not noticeable that we imparted any elevation, ^{or} enlightenment to any.

6/ We put our faith in Democracy - It was to ~~not~~ ^{at} make straight all that was crooked - we have witnessed how democracy can destroy itself - & how men can vote themselves into servitude and despotism. We have seen the inequalities & injustices & corruptions which can flourish under a democracy

6 1/2) Some put faith - Nationalism - Patriotism - Race - Degradation & Intolerance - War

7/ Why have all these failed us? Not here. they are not true & desirable. But insufficient! Not enough in us to save them! - as their opponents ignore, looking at them as bitter enemies - trying to kill them

They are good tools - & serviceable if used by the skilled hand of a directing spiritual intelligence!

They are good & beneficent if informing purpose, ^{& method} and goal are

God and the things of God.

Without the cultivation of the ^{inner} spirit, man - ~~this~~ the education of his moral will - to control and direct them - they are his greatest foes.

Without strong, mystic faith in the reality of spirit ~~and~~ of values, ^{in the sublime nature of certain ideas} is the mandate of moral self-reliance and initiative, and in the great ^{challenging} power of the human will, ^{to} ~~to~~ control and direct ^{is} are indispensable.

8/ Science, ~~just~~ education and art. has lacked the unifying and orienting power of a great Belief, which ^{transcends} them. They have become so absorbed in their ^{and solving} specific ^{problems} ~~occupies~~, that they have lost sight of the great goals.

No great goals only religion sets - only faith in a spiritual order of life ~~can~~ ^{can give rise to a passionate devotion to} ~~which~~ ^{regimes} further, brotherhood, peace and freedom - which alone can save human life from destruction - The Long View -

9/ What does Human life need? ~~to be~~

① Aspiration - Distinguishes man from beast - ^{man can move} Higher planes of intell. life & aspires to a well as material living.

There must be an out-reaching - to what? to Whom?
^{to the total conceivable goodness & truth & beauty}
to the Supreme Source of all perfection - to God Himself!

Imitates God - - ~~the~~

② Exaltation & Save to the other of life - with higher heart - Worthy!

Science does not portend that. Religion does!

It exalts man - ph 2 -

Center in Creation - 31/10/50 L
Safeguards his individuality - unviolable - Tyranny Nation, class, race, etc. -
Exalts his labor - co-worker - Inner Reliance -

" his relationships - Family, marriage - Italy - Sacramental
Exalts his life ^{even in defeat} - Exalts his death - does way

③ A sense of Sovereignty ^{which is} Moral Law - External - Binding on all - Gauts -
Main Refuge Main consolation Main hope - State can Robstink etc.

Over-arches ^{all} human groupings :
- Unifies mankind thru Religion & Law - 13/10/50 pl/r pl/r
- subordinates pol. & social groupings, even to solidarity
- human families ^{subordinate} governed by the universal law &
justice, love, of fair-dealing and unselfishness -

14. Because these sp. needs of human life have been ignored
- sp. aspiration - Exaltation stands prayer of life - and the
sovereignty of Moral Law - we have the kind of a need as see!

see = aspiration

① A world whose ambitious ^{an} sweetened laughter with material possessing
wealth, power, size, speed, a world knowing little ^{the sp.} of
values, humility, piety, reverence, self-sacrifice - a world nothing
into little conflict, struggle, resolves, hate stagnation.

② A world wherein individual cheap - status preserved
personality ignored, rights usurped by state etc - his labor,
a commodity having only a market value, his life a statistical
item and his death the unimportant des of
no inner reliance - no sp. responsibility - Reliance
on Soc - Groups - not Self - Moral Regeneration

Sovereign moral law

(3) A world - where men have set on above the law -

where man is without Refuge a comfort or Refuge Power -
where there exists no curbs on man's exercise of Power -
a broken, fragmented world - full of war & preparation for war

11). We must return to Religious Truth - to God - the way of God

"So as to see life steady and see it whole"

We are moving faster & faster - the faster a chain moves - the
further over the the road-bed, the steeper the rails - the
road-bed along which man's ^{can} ~~must~~ ^{without desisting} move forward is the firm
solid ground of Religion - for which there is no substitute -

12). Lights going out - circle 21 , then

These deeds: "Tapers keeping their lonely vigils on a
dying world"

21st July 1914