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

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Some Books I Turn to in a Troubled Hour, 1939.

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SOME BOOKS I TURN TO IN A TROUBLED HOUR

By  
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver  
WRHS  
At  
The Temple  
On  
Sunday morning, May 7, 1939



It is good, my friends, to turn away from time to time - it is not only good but it is imperative to turn away from time to time from the confusion and agitation of the daily newspaper and periodical and turn to the time tested books which help to give us a clearer and steadier vision of life and human destiny. Day by day reading of papers magazines today tends to disconcert and frighten men. It is necessary in order to keep balanced and poised to go back to books which can outlast the hour and the hectic moments of the hour, which contain within themselves the distilled wisdom not of a day, of a month, of the age.

Someone has said that "books are the compasses, and telescopes and sextants and charts which other men have prepared to help us navigate the dangerous seas of human life." If ever mankind found itself in dangerous seas and if ever there was a need for compasses and telescopes and sextants and charts to aid us to navigate in these troubled waters, ours is such an age.

We read too much. But we <sup>don't</sup> read enough. And we read too much of the timely books and not enough of the timeless books.

Books, my friends, share the fate of men, and in the profoundest sense, are men's greatest companions in life. Thus, for example, when men are persecuted, books are persecuted. When men are sent to the concentration camp, books are sent to the burning fire. The Nazis celebrated their advent to power by casting hundreds and thousands of books into the flames. Not only men are offered as sacrifices on the auto-de-fait but books, today. Recently some of the most valuable books and precious records of very old Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia were deliberately destroyed and when the five hundred synagogues and temples in Germany were burned and destroyed so were the sacred Books of the Law defiled and burned and trampled under foot.

When men go into exile, their books also go into exile. There are today not only human refugees, but book refugees. Whole libraries, public and private are today homeless and scattered all over the world seeking places of refuge where they, like those who wrote them will be secure from the hands of the destroyers. I suppose that is what our Rabbis meant when they said that when the people of Israel went into exile, the "shechinah" went into exile with them because when a people finds itself in galut, its learning, its spirit, its books are also in galut.

In a way, my friends, it is fortunately that a people's books are its inseparable companions and accompany it on its odyssey. Someone has said that the one invincible thing, the one indestructible thing in the world is a good book. Neither malice nor stupidity can crush it. Physically, it can be torn, defiled, burned. But that which is in the book, the spirit, that is indestructible, for that which is spiritual cannot be destroyed. That is undoubtedly what that Rabbi meant who, witnessing a Jewish martyr being burned at the stake by the Roman Legion after he had been wrapped about with the parchments of the sacred scroll said: I see the parchment burn, but the letters I see floating through the air."

It is out of burned books that ideas rise like so many sparks which ultimately set the whole world afire. Tyrants always want to destroy books and by their act they betray their fear of books because it is always books, in the last analysis which destroy tyrants. The tyrants of our day pay great homage innot only destroying the books which they fear but in putting the presses, the printing presses which they control to the business of turning out numerous other books, ~~like~~ lying books, clamorous books in the hope that the strident and clamorous books which they publish will deaden finally the still small voice of the books of truth which they want to destroy. You know where

you can find today the best reflection of the struggle which is going on in the world. Do you know where you can see the world conflict reflected most accurately? You will find it in books. There is ~~an~~ a war on books going on in the world today. The books which will emerge triumphant from this war will be those books which will mold and determine tomorrow's life for mankind. The books which will come forth out of the conflict, this latest conflict which raging in the world today will be added to the classics of the world.

There are books, my friends, and there are books. There are the books of the hour and the books of all time. There are those books which reflect in inadequate form, some passing mood, some passing affection of an age or of a human life. Those are the books of the hour. Sometimes they are best sellers. But their day is very short. Then there are those books which reflect in adequate form the enduring phases of history, the vital hopes of man, the eternal motivations of human conduct, the recurrent problem of human life and destiny. These latter books, even when they are written well are not necessarily best sellers. There is something in the genius of the race which knows its books to be the end ring books and there is something in the human race which is determined to conserve them for all time and it is these books which have become the sextants, telescopes, and charts of mankind. Men turn to these books in all their troubled hours for guidance, for strengthening, for comfort, for hope.

There are many such books in the world, my friends, in the sacred and profane literature of every great people. These books are the bread of life. They are the wellsprings of human salvation. The great plays, novels, poetry the great philosophy, the great essays from the great minds of all races, from the great minds of all times, from the most ancient to the modern - these works of literature which have outlived and are destined to outlive generations

are those of universal appeal and are the vade mecum, the companions, the fellow-travelers of the human race.

And particularly within the sacred, the religious literature of mankind will you find such literature to which men in their troubled hours turn. Whether it be the literature of Confucius, Buddah, Islam or Christianity, they are eternal books which men need.

In Judaism we have a vast literature of this type - the Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, the works of individual Jewish poets, philosophers, saviours, mystics, from the earliest times to the present age. The literature covers perhaps thirty-five hundred years. It is a vast literature, limitless. Therein you will find every conceivable experience under which men can be subjected, wherein you will find a counterpart to every problem, to every situation, to every disaster, trial to which men are subjected today. There is no charge, no attack, no libel upon the Jews today, for example, but you will find the prototype in one or another literary chronicle of the past. "Turn it round and round, this vast literature and you will find everything in it. Names and dates and places may change. They do change. But men and events change very little in this changeless earth of ours. Is there a thing concerning which men say, "See, this is something new!?" That was already over and over again in the days before us. And if you want to understand the experiences of today, if you want to find your way through a badgering problem today, why then go to the books and see how people long ago orientated themselves, how they adjusted themselves to their trials and tribulations - and from them learn wisdom. It is amazing how much of inspiration can come to you from a fugitive word or phrase or sometimes from one of those books.

Recently at the Seminar held under the auspices of The Temple, the speaker quoted a Jewish chronicle book of the medieval times called "Shavet Yehuda" by Solomon ibn Varga. This a chronicle of Jewish persecutions from the earliest days to his day. And among the accounts of the persecutions which he describes, he tells of the horrible persecution of the Jews in the Middle Ages, the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. He tells what happened to that country after the expulsion of the Jews, how it was shattered, with many of them fleeing from Spain and Portugal. Some chartered ships to take them to other destinations. Many of the captains were unscrupulous, robbed them of their few possessions and cast them on uninhabited shores and left them there to die or to be sold into slavery. There is a report of one family which had been very rich and highly honored in Spain but which refused to abandon their religion and chose exiling themselves. They chartered a ship which was to take them to Turkey. In this crowded ship sailing for days on the Mediterranean, a plague broke out, and the captain, after having robbed his passengers of all their possessions, cast them all on a barren shore and sailed away. They lingered, this family composed of husband, wife and two children for a while and then decided to set out in search of some human habitation. Perhaps they would find some Jewish community in that part of the world. The wife sickened by suffering and sorrow, died on the first day of their journey out into the unknown. The father and his two little children started out. He carried them hour after hour. Finally exhausted, they laid themselves down to sleep, and during the night, his two children died. When he arose in the morning, when he saw his two children dead, he lifted up his eyes and said: Master of the Universe, you are doing very much to me, that I may forsake my religion.

But know thou for certain that in spite of what you do, I am a Jew and I shall remain a Jew. And nothing which you have brought to pass over me and nothing which you are likely to bring to pass over me will change me.

When you wade through pages of sorrowful chronicles of Jewish persecutions where in the Middle Ages were daily occurrences, you ask yourself, what happened to the spirit of those people to enable a man who was tried to the greatest possible degree to make him say in a spirit of rebellion: You have done everything to make me give up my religion. In spite of everything, a Jew I was and a Jew I will remain.

Can't you see what a flood of strength, of pride, dignity and courage that cry of five hundred years ago gives to men who may be going through the same experience in 1939? This is not a unique phenomenon - this spiritual grandeur of this bereft refugee of Spain.

Nineteen hundred years before him, we have a record in the Bible of another man who suffered as he suffered, and who reacted in the same way. Job was a man who had everything and who lost everything. Job was also driven from his home, not for political reasons but by a loathesome and incurable disease that forced him to exile himself from his home and city. He was an object of fear and loathing to all men. How was this man who was a righteous man, a just man, how was this man who was once rich and honored, in the midst of a family of beloved children, how was this man suddenly deprived of everything - his possessions, his wife and children, his friends, his situation in life, his dignity, how was he to adjust himself in life? How was he to think? How was he to reason? And of course, like every human being, he at first complained bitterly: Do not cover up my blood. Let the world see the injustice which is being done to me. First

he gives vent to his sorrow because he has become an object of mockery. To his home he can never return. His place shall never know him any more. At times he is moved to surrender himself to spiritual rebellion. The earth has been turned over into the hands of the wicked. At times he is overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness. "Thou, God, hast destroyed the hopes of a man." That thought, I am sure, must pass through the minds of many a man and woman today who have lived honored and just lives in their homelands, and suddenly were cast out from their homes homeless, helpless, refugees. Such thoughts beset the whole people of Israel today.

How does Job adjust himself? How does Job find comfort? Not in a sense of guilt. He does <sup>not</sup>/say: All these things come to be because I deserved them. He will not surrender himself to an abject mood in order to justify the ways of God on earth. He knows it is Satan who has brought all this on him. There are Jews today who are inclined to beat their breasts and say: It is our fault that these things have happened. Job does not do that. He clings to his integrity. He finds comfort, finally, in an intellectual solution to his problem, but in a deep faith, in a confident resignation of his destiny into the hands of a living God whose ways may not always be clear to us but who is all wise, and all good. And to be good to that God, to be true to that God, to his moral law, even if one suffers physically, is to know the deepest good and to taste the deepest satisfactions in the world.

And so, Job is able to say in the midst of his frightful suffering: "I know that my redeemer liveth and that at the ultimate end He shall stand upon the earth. And though worms destroy this skin of mine, yet in my flesh shall I see God. Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."

You hear the echo of this voice nineteen hundred years later in the Spanish refugee on the Barbary Coast: You have done everything to make me give up my faith, nevertheless, I am a Jew and a Jew I shall remain. This is the spirit, this is the authentic reaction of Jewish piety and invincible Jewish faith to the incomprehensible suffering which has been visited on the Jewish people and individuals as such. That is responsible for the amazing survival of the Jewish people inspite of untold suffering, of a people which does not exploit suffering as a reason for surrendering their faith. It is a people rather which is content to say: I do not know, I cannot understand the ways of God. It is beyond me. It is ~~beyond~~ part of the cosmic which I cannot penetrate. As long as God lives, there is meaning and significance to my suffering and my tears and my sorrows.

Therefore, my friends, in a troubled hour, I turn to a book like Job and listen very closely and very attentively to the words, to the mighty strophes of this great drama which today is also the drama of my generation. Sometimes in a troubled hour, men today are beset with the idea of the what futility of God, of a mockery civilization is. Here, for generations, men have built schools and high schools and colleges and universities and have established scientific centers to encourage the domain of human knowledge, to banish ignorance. Here men, and the great among men have labored for generations to bring more light understanding and science into the world, and yet, never has mankind been so stepped in brutality and fear. Never was the sense of unbalance and insecurity in the world so great.

Vanity, vanity, what does it all mean now? What is the use? What is the use? When you get into that frame of mind, that is a good time to go back to books of ancient literature and ancient learning because there you will find people who faced the same problems.

Koheleth, too, despaired of human problems. He, too, said that the

strivings of people is the striving after wind, and the crooked cannot be made straight. "In much Science, there is much grief, and that he that uncovereth knowledge, increaseth sorrow." He, too, saw the cruelty and injustices of the world. Moreover, he saw under the sun, that in place of righteousness, there was iniquity, in place of justice there was wickedness. He knew also all the oppressions done under the sun, the tears of the oppressed who had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors, there was all power." He, too, saw what we see in our day; he saw the slaves riding upon the horses and former princes running before them riding slaves on the ground." And Koheleth, too, envied the dead as some people envy them today.

Koheleth, too, understood the tragic accidents of fortune - how people are sometimes caught up in a disaster like fish in an evil net through no fault of their own. First the evil net traps them, or as he puts it, "birds caught in a snare", a world war shatters the lives of three million Jews in a war in whose influence this evil net catches them in. Hundreds of thousands of people find themselves suddenly torn, up-rooted from their former existence. "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor wealth to the poor, but time and chance happeneth to them all.

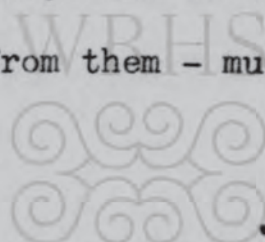
Names may change. Events may change. The names of places may be different. But the actualities are the same. How would he adjust himself to the problem?

Don't you see that this kind of mood makes life impossible? That leads to the edge of the wilderness. That leads to suicide. What is the conclusion of all this meditation? The conclusion is given in the sentence before the last in that book: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments,; for this is the whole of man." I would like

you to give a wiser answer than that. I would like a philosopher of 1939 to give a more direct, a more profound answer than that. Everything being said concerning the unfortunate accidents of life - all the cruelties, the injustices, everything being said, and much can be said - what then?

There is nothing for men to do if they want to live, but revere God. Don't lose hold of the reins. Cling as does a mariner to the mast in a troubled sea. Link up your destiny with the omnipotent and eternal. And then, according to the moral law, in spite of what men do to you, in spite of unrelenting suffering, keep His commandments! Live your life as beautifully and as nobly as you possibly can. This is the whole of life. This is the profoundest meaning of true living.

So, my good friends, turn to these books in a troubled hour. There is much to be learned from them - much strength and comfort to be derived from them.



1/ It is good - imperative - turn away - confusion + agitation  
to Books - time-tested, hold clear + steady vision.

"Books are the compasses, + telescopes + sextants + charts which other  
men have hoped to help us navigate the dangerous seas of human life"

2/ Books share the fate of men. - Companions -  
when men are persecuted - books are persecuted -

Nazis - Bon-fire of Books -

Recently - precious books - records -

500 Synagogues - Books, the law, defiled, burnt + burnt

~~When~~  
When men go into exile - Books also go into Exile -  
libraries - public + private - scattered - scattered  
new homes - Refugees

When a people is in Galut - its Books, too, as in Galut  
- exile -

3/ Fortunate that a people's books are its unseparable companions

"The one invulnerable thing is a good book, neither malice  
nor stupidity can crush it."

- Only philz -

Ideas are sparks which escape + set world aflame  
Tyrants who destroy books - betray their fear, their

\* Pay homage - in putting their own pending presses  
to work - pouring out - countless other books -  
by any books - clammers, student - to deadens  
the still, small voice of the Truthful Book -

The World's conflict to-day is best reflected in the war<sup>(2)</sup>  
of Books now raging -

The Books which emerge triumphant will be those  
which will add to-morrow's life, mankind,  
added to the classics / world's literature.

4/ There are Books & Books - Books, the Hours - Books  
of all time.

Those which reflect in inadequate form a passing  
phase or mood or ~~passing~~ affection of a moment  
in history, or in human life.

Those which reflect in adequately from ~~the~~ enduring  
phases of history, the vital experiences of men, the  
eternal motivations of human conduct, the recurrent  
problems & solutions of human destiny.

The latter Books - are the companion-like companions, sextants  
and charts -

Men turn to them - for guidance - for strength,  
for comfort, for hope - in a Troubled  
Hour!

5/ There are many such - in the literature - sacred  
& secular of all peoples - Bread, Life -  
Wells spring, Salvation - 2nd 1st 1st

~~Particularly~~ the great plays, novels, poetry, and  
essays of all peoples - which have influenced genera-  
tions - & which, too, their universal <sup>struggle</sup> ~~effort~~ have been  
translated in foreign languages -

Particularly - does the literature of the great Hebrews  
& mankind - contain such Books - Vade me-  
cum of men.

Men most readily & most often turn in their  
troubled hours.

6/ Judaism's - Bible - Age - Talmud - Midrash - etc.

to them an age should turn -

✓ For no problem - counterpart in them

no Experience - no baffling situation - no

total tragedy - desires

no charge - attack - like - slander -

על שם על שם על שם על שם

Names, dates, places change but men & events

very little in this ~~world~~ changes ~~with~~ with

of men!

על שם על שם על שם על שם על שם על שם

על שם על שם על שם על שם

7/ Recently - 31st Feb - same problem -  
450 yrs. later - same experience more than by same lesson -  
bitterness - resentment -  
And what a charge of pride, prejudice, hostility & strength  
came from that cry!  
What an example for us to-day!

8/ Job unique - within stream of authentic J. sp. experience.

1900 yrs. before - Job -

How shall a man - a people - react to unmerited suffering?

Job - lost all - Job - 1st - 2nd - 3rd - 4th - 5th -

How shall he adjust? What should he think? Reason?

Of-course, being human, he complains bitterly. no 100% of Job

He gives vent to his sorrow: "An object, mocking - children"

"His way is hedged in". He is in flight from his own  
home - He can never return - this place will not know  
him anymore -

He is at times in sp. Rebellion: לֹא יִתְּנוּ לָּךְ כֹּחַ וְעֹז

He is overwhelmed with Helplessness: אֵיךְ אֶפְשָׁר לִּי

Such Thoughts - Refugees - Our People - Calamity after Calamity

Anything shadow of Death -

When does Job find Comfort?

Not in sense of self - guilt - Sinful - Satan -

Tears - blame too -

Job finds comfort <sup>finally</sup> ~~not~~ in an intellectual solution of problems  
but in deep faith + confident resignation to his  
destiny into Hands of a living God - whose ways  
may not always be clear to us - but who is  
an all-wise and all-powerful God.

✓ To be True to Him - His moral law - even tho one  
suffers physically - is to know the greatest  
Good - + deepest satisfaction in life

"For I know that my redeemer liveth and that ~~he shall~~  
~~stand~~ at the ultimate end ~~he~~ shall stand upon  
the earth. And tho ~~as men~~ destroy this <sup>skin</sup> ~~body~~ of  
mine - yet in my flesh shall I see God. -

"Tho he slay me, yet will I trust in Him - ~~this~~  
~~shall be my~~ (Hear the Voice, the Spanish Refugee  
on the Barbary Coast)

- I turn to Job in a Troubled Hour - and I  
direct my closely ~~attention~~ <sup>attention</sup> to the ~~revelation~~  
echoes of that great drama - the drama of also  
of my generation!

9/Robert F. Kennedy - Civilization -

1/27 577

⊙ He, too, despised / human Progress

- Striving after Wind

- Civilized cannot be made straight

"In much science (SWD) there is much grief  
- and in that unenlightened knowledge in man's search for  
He saw the cruelty & injustices, world

"And whenever I saw under the sun that in place of  
justice there was wickedness, in place of righteousness,  
there was unrighteousness" -

He knew 'all the oppression that are done under  
the sun, the tears of the oppressed, who had no  
- computer; and on the side of the oppressors there  
was all power" -

~~He knew~~ the deceit /

Accidents of Fortune (9.11) 'The rain is not to the

swift - nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the  
wise, nor wealth to men, understanding, nor power  
to men, still - But time & chance happeneth  
to them all"

Refugees - "Fish that are taken in an evil net

- Birds caught in a snare -

10/

פ' 23 ד' ה'תשס"ג - אג' הא/היום יצא - אג' 13/1/1984  
למנוח - מ' ד' ה'תשס"ג -



רצון העולמים - הינה אהה עולה שחזקו צמ .  
גדו טמנה לא כוחם לא יולדו למי - וְהַלְלוּ  
אני וְהַלְלוּ וְהַלְלוּ . וְהַלְלוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְהַמְלִיךְ אֶת־מֶלֶךְנוּ  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ

