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Man and his ambitions, 1940.

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MAN AND HIS AMBITIONS

The First of a Series of Discourses on the General Theme:
"What Is Man?"



By
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, December 1, 1940

It has been truly stated that the proper study of man - is man. And yet, the study of man is a very difficult one. Although man has been with himself every since the days of Creation he knows less about himself than about the world outside of himself. That microscopic universe inside of man is a greater mystery to man than the microscopic universe outside of man. The sciences of the physical universe outside of man were developed far earlier than the science which has to do with man himself - Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, mechanics developed earlier to a larger extent than the sciences of Biology, Psychology or Sociology. For man is so manifold, layer upon layer, deep below deep. Man is a compound of so many elements, a being of so many facets. And he is so changeful. Man is so different in the different stages of evolution. Man alone, of all created beings, marches on higher. All the rest practically stand still.

But, what is man? You can study man from different viewpoints. You can study man from the viewpoint of Biology - man as the living organism. You can study man from the viewpoint of Psychology - man as a mental process. You can study man from the viewpoint of Sociology - man as a member of society, in the interplay of the associated life of men. You can study man from the viewpoint of Economics - man as a producer, consumer and distributor of wealth. You can study man from the viewpoint of Politics - man as a citizen. You can study man from the viewpoint of Art - man in terms of skills and tastes, and from many other viewpoints.

One can also study man in terms of his character and his destiny - man in terms of values, judgments - that is, you also study man from the viewpoint of Religion. And it is from this last viewpoint that I approach the subject: "What Is Man?". In a sense, this last viewpoint is a summary of all the others. It is their unification in one composite picture and it is their evaluation interpreted from the viewpoint of eternity, as it were, from the

viewpoint of man's relation to the external universe and the processes of the universe - man in terms of character, destiny.

This morning I will speak of man as revealed in his ambitions. Man marches on while all the rest practically stand still. This is the first great fact to remember about man. There exists a hard, indurate mold in which all other forms of organic life can change and evolve, but beyond which they can emerge. But the emergent life of man in his spiritual and in his intellectual phases knows no unyielding barriers. Man marches on quite irresistibly from one age to another age, on new journeys of adventure, into new better undiscovered continents of knowledge, truth, power.

There is a leaven in the race of man, a leaven which ceaselessly agitates it. It is a cry in the human race for wings - wings. That is what the Bible means by "God breathes into man the spirit of life. Man has never resigned himself to the limitations of his body or to the inadequacies of his senses. Man has always reached out for more power, for more energy than his own body can summon up, for greater speed, for further vision, for subtler and more distant auditions. Man has always refused to accept time and space in relation to his own slow pace. Man created tools and techniques to re-inforce his limited strength, to enable him to master his environment and to alter the environment and circumstances which surround him. In other words, very early in his career, man began to rise on his toes, as it were, to touch the stars.

And in each individual human being, unless he is a sluggard or sloth, there is something of this ferment, there is something in his heart of the beating of the wings seeking to rise towards the sun, sometimes inadequately, but still seeking ceaselessly towards the sun. "I lift up mine eyes to the hills". That is something every individual can do - unless you belong to the mentally and physically lazy and slothful.

Some people channel this adventuresomeness of man - this quest - this

longing into rather lowly and quite unworthy pursuits, into covetousness, into avarice. And then it becomes a great evil to themselves and an evil to society. Other people channel this same spiritual restlessness into nobler pursuits - into pursuits for self-improvement, into a consecrated quest for knowledge, goodness and beauty. And then it becomes a great good, for it elevates the human being itself, and it enriches the social life of that human being, of society.

That is the sole distinction between ambition and ambition. Ambition in itself is neither good nor bad. It is the object of our ambition which determines the quality and worth. The same ambition can destroy or serve. It can make a patriot as it makes a slave.

Ambitions, my friends, which end with the individual and are realized only at the expense of other individuals - such ambitions are a personal and social bane. Men who strive for fame or wealth or power as ends in themselves, in order to aggrandize themselves, bring no happiness either to themselves or to society.

It is of interest to know that the word ambition comes from the Latin word () which means "going round". This was derived from the ancient practice of the Romans who used to "go round" seeking votes, seeking personal preferment. Only in that sense, ambition is not a virtue, because such a man who seeks favor, power, wealth for himself, or personal aggrandizement, never has enough of that which he so passionately strives for. For no man ever had enough of fame and power and wealth. It is like drinking the salt water of sea - the more one drinks, the more he thirsts. It is of such men that the preachers of the Bible said: "The eyes are never satisfied with seeing and the ear is never satisfied with hearing." The trouble with such ambition is that it never has the quality of "rest", of spiritual rest within it. It dooms the man to a career of ceaseless self-flagellation, as

as continuously whipping himself restlessly on. His days become days of panting and grasping. His mind becomes what Shakespeare called the seat of "the canker of ambitious thought". In the Chapter which I read to you this morning, there is a very profound distinction made between the two types of ambition - between the enterprising man who seeks great perfection of himself, great equipment of himself so that he can become a more useful member of the community; and the ambition of the man who is impatient, over-zealous, hasty to grasp and accumulate. So the Book of Proverbs says: "The planning of the nobly ambitious man makes constantly for great increase, but all the planning and scheming of this hasty, man makes only for self-deficiency and want." For the avaricious man, when you come to think of it, is perpetually poor because he never has enough. The man who is constantly ahungering and athirsting for honor, public acclaim - that man is always abased because he has no pride in himself, no confidence in himself. The man constantly craving for power, domination of others is forever weak because his strength lies not in self-mastery, but in the mastery of other people which may at any moment pass from his hands. There are some people who are so eager to get ahead of other people that they never catch up with themselves.

Men who are victimized by such ambitions are slaves to their ambitions. Their ambitions break their wings. Their ambition does not belong to that category of human strivings which emancipate him, make him nobler, set him free for a more glorious career of growth, progress and discovery. These people obsessed by these ambitions spend their days as a tread-mill. They don't march forward. They spend days on a tread-mill. And when they die they discover that their shrouds have no pockets either for their money, or their power, or their offices, or their fame.

There are people who rise to eminence, power, affluence on the rungs of other men's lives. They rob, they cheat, they exploit. They maneuver, they manipulate, they cash in on other peoples trust, faith, credulities, weakness. They use their

friends as stepping stones. They disencumber themselves of all basic human loyalties in order to be freer - so that they can climb more rapidly. And they climb. They are smart and clever and so industrious and so ambitious and so successful. These people represent ambition at its worst and at its most devastating type. It were better for these people and for society if they had never seen the light of day, for these people are little forces or big forces who destroy the vineyards of life.

On the other hand there are ambitions which are noble - and I am ^{not} now thinking of rather exalted ambition, of the exceptionally gifted and the exceptionally endowed person. I am thinking of the ambitions of plain folks which can be fine and noble, - the ambition to do better whatever it is you are doing; to be better wherever we are; to know better whatever we know; to be stronger whatever the test. That ambition definitely is in line with the eternal Odyssey of Human Life - the ambition to reach just a little beyond our possible grasp, the ambition to see just a little beyond our nearest horizon - that is part of immortal clamoring of the human soul.

The ambition to advance personally in knowledge, in efficiency, in tastes, in judgments, in independence - first of all to increase personal satisfaction, and also as a means for greater usefulness of the member to his group - that is commendable. It is, in fact, the motive of human progress.

To be not ahead of men, but to be ahead with men, with the best of men in the march towards the good life, towards the blessed commonwealth of life - that is an ambition worthy of an individual.

To be well regarded, to be well thought of by their fellow men not on the basis of sham, deception, but on the basis of our honest labor and our honest craftsmanship - that is a noble ambition. To strive to have enough of the earthly goods for oneself and for one's family so as not to be dependent upon men, to have security in life and at the same time help others to gain that same measure

of independence and security - that is a noble ambition.

The ambition to grow stronger so that one can be more self-reliant, and a more helpful member in the home, among friends, in the community -- all these are up-lifting and ennobling ambitions.

The interesting thing about these ambitions is that they do not exhaust an individual. They do not constrict an individual. They do not distort an individual. They do not make him restless, agitated, fretful. They give his life spiritual tranquility, peace even in the midst of his eager pursuit of them.

This kind of ambition is never in conflict with love, with human sympathy. It never tramples over the lives and rights of other people in order to reach a goal. It does not exclude ^{the} beauty of self-sacrifice. And it is this type of ambition that parents ought to try to kindle in the lives of their children, to prepare them for the days ahead. There is a different kind of a world coming to be - a world in which the lone wolf will have little chance. The world is steadily moving, although painfully, in the direction of the social life, the cooperative life, and only those people will fit in to the new society which is coming to be who have a sense of cooperativeness, who have a sense of self-reliance and legitimate human ambitions which are real and within society and not at the expense of society. It is well to discipline children, young people to striving, struggling and want. The Bible says it is good for a young man to bear the yoke in his youth because these wants evoke desirable responses, reflexes in the mind and in the spirit of the young man. They temper him. They stir him. But these ambitions which ought to be kindled in youth, ought not to be ambitions solely concerned with acquisitiveness, but ambitions largely concerned with self-improvement, the realizations of one's talents and potentialities the products of which will not only benefit the individual but the group in which they live.

1) "Proper study of Man - is Man". Most diff. of subjects. 4
Altho Man has been with himself since Creation he knows less
about himself > abt. the world outside of himself.
That microscopic universe within is a greater mystery
to man > macroscopic universe without. Sc. & Physics,
astronomy, chemistry, and mechanics developed before Biol. - Psych. or Sociology.
For Man is so manifold - layer upon layer - deep below
deep, a compound of so many elements, a being of
so many facets.
And Man is so changeable. He is so different at the diff. stages
of his evolution. He ~~stands out~~ stands out. He alone of
all created beings, "marches on while all the rest stand still".

2/ You can study Man from the viewpoint of
(a) Biology - Man as a living organism
(b) Psychology - Man as a mental process
(c) Sociology - Man as a member of society - in the inter-play of
the associated life of men.
(d) Economics - Man as a producer, consumer & distributor of wealth
(e) Politics - Man as a citizen
(f) Art - Man in terms of skills and tastes.

and from many other view-points. One can also study
Man in terms of Character and Destiny - in terms of Values
and Judgments - i.e. from view-point of Religion.

3/ It is from this last view-point that I approach Subject: "What
is Man?"

In a sense - summary of all other view-points - then unifica-
tion into a comprehensive picture. And the evaluation
or interpretation of that ^{total} picture "in specific actualities".

4/ This morning I speak of Man as revealed in his Ambition. (2)
"Man marches on while all the rest stand still"

There exists an indefinite Model within which all other forms of organic life can evolve and change but beyond which they cannot emerge. The emergent life of Man, in its intel. and sp. Phases, appears to have no irrefragable barriers. Intel. irresistible Man marches forward from age to age on new journeys of adventure into new heights, undiscovered continents of knowledge and truth and power.

There is a leaven in the race of Man - which ceaselessly agitates its mortal clay. There is a cry for "wings" - which is the Spirit of God breathed into Man at Creation.

Man was never reigned to the limitations of his body, to the weaknesses of his senses. He reached out for more power and energy than his body alone could muster, for greater speed, for further vision, for subtler and more distant anchors. He refused to accept ^{any} space in terms of his own slow pace.

He created tools and techniques to re-enforce his strength, and to master his environment, and to alter the given circumstances of his life. He began early to rise on his toes to touch the stars.

5/ And in each individual Man, there is some thing, this permanent - the beating wings. Icarus! 118 16/6
Some men channel this human adventurousness, this quest, into lowly and quite unworthy pursuits. Into covetousness, and avarice and envy. Then it becomes an Evil.

③

6. This is the sole difference! Ambition in itself is neither good nor bad; it is the objects, our ambitions which evaluate them.

"The same A. can destroy or save
and makes a patriot as it makes a slave."

7/ Antitheses whose objectives end with the individual and are realized
at the expense of other inds. are a personal and a social
bane.

have.
Men who strive for Fame, or Wealth or Power, as ends in eos,
and in order to aggrandize eos. bring us happiness
to eos and to society. Latin - "Ampli Tru"
Such men never have enough, that which they so passionately
strive for, for no man has ever had enough of fame, or
wealth or power. They are like the salt water, the sea,
the more one drinks, it, the more he thirsts.

Of them it is said:

Such A. has no quality of "rest" in it. It looks as if his days become his days become to a career of self-plagiarism. His mind becomes days of panting and grasping. "the center of the seat," what Shakes. called "ambitious thought". The bi - rational G.D.N.T. & L.B.N.N. "diligent" - increase - Holy - Decease never has

ambitious thought ^{to} the ambitious man is perfectly poor; for he never has enough. And a thirst for Fame, for Honor

enough.
He was a-hungry and a-thirsty for Fame, for Honor
for publicity is always abused, for he has no
confidence or pride in himself.

The man craving for power, ~~control~~ ^{and} domination over others is never weak, in his strength lies not in self mastery but which he can control, but in the mastery of others which may at any moment pass from his hands. Wishy to get ahead of all others - he never caught up with himself! Their ambitions broke their necks.

8/ These men are slaves to their ambitions, and therefore do not act at all, ^{belong to} ~~that~~ ^{same} category of human strivings and aspirations, which far from enslaving men, set them free for noble and more glorious careers of growth, progress and discovery.

They spend their days on a treadmill, and when they die they discover that their rhinoceros have no profits either in money, or power, or glories, or fame. ^{they never march on -}

9/ There are men who rise upon the anxieties of other people's lives to power and wealth. They rob and cheat and exploit. They maneuver and manipulate. They cash in on other people's trust or faith or credulity or weakness. They use tricks for stepping stones. They will disseminate lies to the public. They are smart, clever, and so industrious and am- bitious - and successful.

They represent A. in its worst & most devastating forms. Better for them & for society if they had never seen the light of day. They are the little foxes, & the big foxes which destroy the vineyards, life.

10/ There are noble ambitions. And they need not be rare and exalted ones.

To do better - whatever it is - To be stronger - whatever the Test we are
To be better - "
To know better - wherever we know
this is in line with The eternal Odyssey, the Human Race

- To reach a little beyond our possible grasp.
-To see a little beyond ~~the~~^{our} present horizon — that is
~~to~~ pass the unmistakable clamoring for a crisis.

Personal advancement in knowledge, in efficiency, in ~~one's own~~ judgment ⁱⁿ ~~and~~ taste, in independence as ~~a~~ means for ^{increased} ~~greater~~ univer satisfaction as well as for greater usefulness as a member of society - that is a supremely commendable ambition - It is in fact, the aim of modern social progress.

To be, not ahead of men but ahead with men -
with the best of men, as the man forwards the Lord
Life, the blessed commonwealth man - that is an
ambition worthy of a man.

To be well-represented by ^{our} ~~the~~ ^{store to} ~~fellows~~ ^{to keep} ~~in~~ ^{the} ~~labor~~ ^{hand} and craftsmanship; to show enough ~~of~~ ^{material} things for independence and security, ~~and to keep~~ ^{others} to run strong in service and helpfulness in our home, ^{and} our community — these are uplifting and ennobling ambitions.

— These Asper sp. rest and changeability, to the man even in the mind, his own present, there.

- These are wise As. They do not enslave or exhaust or construct the world - They do not harm or exploit other men. They are not in conflict with love of others. They do not exclude the glory of sympathy & self-sacrifice.