



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
159

Box
57

Folder
642

I count my blessings, 1941.

584
I COUNT MY BLESSINGS

Those Things for Which Every Man May Well be Thankful
in These Distressing Times

WRHS



By

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, November 9, 1941

There is much, my friends, to make us take a gloomy view of things, to depress us. There is war all about us and the war seems to be triumphant in so many places. There is so much horror, murder, rapine in so many lands of the earth. Our cherished way of life, our institutions, our ideals seem to be trampled under foot in so many parts of the world. For us Jews there is a double measure of woe in all of this. For our people the Middle Ages has returned. The ghetto has been re-established. Millions of our brethren are being subjected daily to exploitation, degradation, massacre and to slow annihilation. The air about us is full of recrimination, of words of hate, of charges and counter-charges. The poison pen, the poison tongue are everywhere present in the world, ready to incite and to confound.

Our world seems to be in a spiritual vertigo. Our own country finds itself in the midst of great uncertainty. We appear to be on the brink of war. We know that danger lurks for our country in the Atlantic and in the Pacific. We feel ourselves to be in the grip of a Second World War. Our sons are conscripted, sent to military service. Many of us are not very happy about it. Taxes are mounting. And we suspect that they will continue to mount, and all the normal courses of our business activities are interfered with by the priority of national defense.

And so you see that it is not difficult to gather those things in our experience which men would not call blessings. They are plentiful. And most people in this shell-shocked time of ours are inclined to count these things which are not blessings, to enumerate them, to dwell upon them, to the utter exclusion of other things forgetting that there are other things. There are many other things we may well regard as great blessings for which we should be profoundly grateful.

The good things which come to us we accept. We think of them as our just needs, ours by right, and when we miss them, we feel not only deprived, but grieved. We have been treated unfairly. We grumble. We grouse. We lament most bitterly.

We do not try to offset these curdes by the blessings. We do not try to cancel the minuses of our lives by the pluses, nor do we evaluate what we regard as losses, whether it is really a loss, whether we are not better off for the want of the things which we have been regarding as indispensable for our well being.

In adversity, my dear friends, a thoughtful man takes stock of his blessings. He also evaluates his losses. When he does so he frequently discovers that he is possessed of many things he did not suspect he possessed. But he can very readily get rid of many of the things which he does not need. This is the wisdom that cometh from suffering.

What is important, of course, is to determine in our own mind just what really constitutes a human blessing. What is a blessing? What is the definition of a human blessing, and when you search carefully, think it through, you will probably arrive at a definition like this: A human blessing is that which contributes to a man's humanity. A human blessing is that which contributes to a man's humanity, that which enlarges his personality, that which develops him morally, spiritually, intellectually, that which makes of him a better man, a better citizen, a better husband, a better friend. That is a blessing. That is a blessing. That which feeds his soul -- that is a blessing -- that which realizes him as a human being.

Thus the same thing which will prove a blessing to one man may not be a blessing to another. One man's meat may be another man's poison.

Wealth has proved a curse to some people; poverty a blessing to other people. And there are degrees in between. There are people who have been helped by having enough. There are other people that have been spoilt by having too much. The element of strain in a man's life is frequently very helpful. You can only play upon a string that is drawn, taut. A lax string yields no music. The dike which thwarts the flood raises the level. On the other hand, a bow string drawn too taut and which is too long is ruined. It loses its resiliency, its electricity, its comeback.

Some people are ennobled, purified by their sorrows. They are ^{as} good metal. They become tempered, stronger, finer by the hammering they receive. It is of such people that the poet sang:

"Amid my list of blessings infinite
Stand this the foremost, that my heart has bled."

He regards the fact that his heart had bled at times in sorrow, in grief, in disappointment, as the foremost blessing in life. And this thought of the poet is but a paraphrase of what we find in our Bible repeated over and over again. "Blessed is the man, Thou O Lord chasteneth." Here chastizement at the hand of the Lord is regarded as blessed. In the Book of Proverbs you read thoughts as these:

"My son, despise not the discipline of the Lord
And resent not his correction
For whom the Lord loves, he corrects
Even as a father the son in whom he delights."

Here discipline, suffering or bereavement is not regarded as a punishment to be resented, but as a correction which helps one, which God imposes upon us to develop us, even as a father is frequently called upon to correct his son not in anger, because he delights in his son, wishes for him so much and feels that the punishment, restraint, discipline will help him to grow up into a better man. That is how our Religion always looked upon suffering -- as a way

of correction.

Among the heathens, whenever misfortune overtook them, they cursed their deities and beat their idols.

Not so with our faith and with our people. "It has been good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn Thy statutes, Thy ways." It has been good for me that I have been afflicted. The hard discipline of life -- that is the way of life. That is the way of unfoldment, ennoblement, enrichment of human life.

On the other hand there are people who do not understand the implications of their suffering, who are beaten and broken into defeat. And helplessness is their misfortune.

What, therefore, is a blessing? What, therefore, is a curse? It is, after all, what you want of life and what you expect of life which determines in the analysis, whether the things which you have are a blessing or a curse. There is no absolute standard except the one that helps a man to his humanity, true stature as a man in the image of God -- that is a blessing. That which pulls him down, inhibits him from reaching up and out to his maximum, his best -- that is a curse.

The great English poet, John Milton, became blind -- and blindness, of course, is not a blessing. Most men regard it as a curse. Yet John Milton did not look upon his blindness quite in that way. Because his chief interest in life was to serve God, that was his blessing. He regarded the serving of God through the serving of men as his chief blessing, as his greatest privilege in life. His one concern, when his life was spent, when he went blind, was whether his blindness would interfere with his service to his Maker which he regarded as the supreme blessing and privilege of his life. And the insight rising from his profound faith soon assured ~~and~~ and comforted him.

"who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state
Is Kingly; thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

Life did not lose its blessing for him because he could continue serving his Maker in spite of his handicap.

If our definition, therefore, is that a human blessing is that which contributes to a man's humanity, then all of us who live in these impressive times have ever so many things to count as blessings, over and above the everyday blessings whose rare and miraculous qualities we overlook just because they are commonplace. Men have a way of overlooking that which is most readily seen. We dramatize, for example, the element of radium because it is so rare and precious and is extracted so tediously and at such great cost -- a thousandth of a gram from tons upon tons of pitch-blende. But Oxygen and Hydrogen are far more necessary and indispensable to life. Our momentary existence depends on that. Yet we don't regard them as so rare. So with the commonplace blessings life. Men often look into the dark for what they can see in plain light, and travel far to find what are present at home.

There is, for example, the blessing of life itself -- just living. How many of us thank God that they are alive? You may recall those beautiful words of Euripides -- they were the loveliest words ever penned by the hand of man:

"Happy he, on the weary sea
Who hath fled the tempest and won the haven.
Happy whose hath risen, free,
Above his striving. For strangely graven
Is the orb of life, that one and another
In gold and power may outpass his brother.
And seethe, with a million hopes, as leaven;
And they win their Will, or they miss their Will,
And the hopes are dead or are pined for still;
But who'er can know,
As the long days go,
That to Live is happy, hath found his Heaven!

The blessing of home, of family, of companionship -- have you them? If you have, you are a blessed man indeed. What if the storms rage without and worlds crumble about you. You have your world -- your world of peace, of security, your place of rest inviolate. You have have to exchange that present home of yours, as so many have had to do over and over again for one perhaps less expensive, for a home more modest. But in so doing, have you lost your home, your family, your companionship? Not at all! Have you lost your rest and security? Not at all -- unless you are a vain and proud man, unless you have false values and bitter thoughts of prestige and competitive standards -- then the necessity of changing a home of greater costliness for one of lesser costliness will bring you heartache. But it need not if you are wise and if you understand the true nature of the blessings which you have. Four walls are enough, one meal and one garment.--if you have love, companionship, respect of your neighbor. Millions of people realize it. If you enjoy friendships, if you have the respect of your fellow men and if you are cheerfully welcomed wherever you go -- you are a blessed man or woman. Though the earth crumble, though the mountains crumble in our midst, your blessing is secure. That friendship, that esteem, that respect will enswathe you as an element.

Have you work to do? Whatever it is -- if it is interesting work which challenges you, which taxes you, which tires you, which thrills you -- something which gives meaning and significance to your days -- why you are a blessed man. "The hand withers that cannot exercise itself in significant work. The mind languishes which cannot wrestle hard with problems. Work isn't making money. Work is making things -- material things, intellectual things, spiritual things. Work is creation. Work is adding something to the world's store of goods. If you have that kind of work, however humble, you are a blessed man. Speculating in the things which other men produce,

living off the labor of other men. That is no blessing though it may surround one with acquired comforts and luxuries. You will never have the blessing of work. These are the commonplace, everyday blessings which we do not recognize just because they are omnipresent and all about us.

If, on top of all these miraculous, commonplace things -- family, friends, useful and interesting work -- you chance to live in a land where you enjoy the additional priceless blessings of freedom and equality -- those blessings which have suddenly become so rare -- for which men are so desperately reaching out today -- I say, if on top of the commonplace blessings you are privileged to enjoy the rare privilege of living in a land of freedom, you must regard this as among the most blessed of your blessings.

Americans have suddenly discovered America. They have suddenly become aware of their priceless heritage like a man who has chanced on an unsuspected treasure. We have taken this blessed land of ours for granted. We have taken its free institutions, our political liberty, our rich opportunities for granted. We forgot that countless men fought for them and paid with their blood for them in order that we might have it. In days of prosperity and not so long ago, we were inclined to be almost supercilious of democracy, of our public officials, of the President, of Congress, of the whole apparatus of democratic machinery of our life. Now that so many nations have lost those things and are shedding hot tears for the loss of them, we are suddenly awakening to what treasures are ours, how fortunate we are in still possessing them.

That is all to the good. That is all to the good.

(Here story told about nose).

Against the background of world conditions today, the universal sufferings of our people, the brutality and dictatorship and tyranny in the world, we have come to look upon our lot as the most fortunate of all.

When we come to count the possession of freedom as a blessing, we should also count among the blessings which we possess, the privilege to fight and suffer and if necessary to die for them. To be free is a privilege. To fight for freedom is an even greater privilege. Freedom cannot be had as a gift. Freedom must be achieved, paid for and almost every generation must be re-acquired. And of course the price is a high one.

You have a son in military training or who may soon go to war. That is of course hard. It is not pleasant by any means. But it is harder still to live for both your son and yourself in a tyrannous world as a slave or to languish in a ghetto.

If you must bear the load of economic dislocation, heavy taxes - that is of course hard, not pleasant. But that is the price which you must pay for the other blessings which make you the most fortunate man in the world. You would have to pay the same price and higher price not for freedom but for slavery today.

But when you are inclined to be depressed, to worry, to feel that life has been cruel and hard, sit down by yourself and take stock -- write out your blessings one by one. Remember what a blessing really is -- that which has helped you to become a fine man or woman, son or daughter, citizen, friend -- that of which you can really be proud of as a human being -- write them down, catalog them one by one and you will conclude, I am sure, with the phrase of the Psalmist: "How can I repay unto the Lord all His bountiful dealings towards me?"

I Count My Blessings

11

1- There is much to make us take a gloomy view of things - depress
war - For everywhere triumphant. Honor, murder, rape everywhere
cherished way of life - institutions - ideals trampled under foot.
For us Jews, was a double measure of woe - middle ages - Shelton's
deprivation - degradation - massacre or slow annihilation
Air full of bitter recriminations - propaganda - hate -
The poison pen - The poison tongue - lung all around -
to incite - to confound - to disrupt - An age in spirit
Vertigo!
Future of our country - uncertain, on brink of war -
Danger lurks in the Atlantic - in the Pacific, we are
in the grip of a 2nd world war -
Our boys are conscripted, we see them have been for
military training - We are not happy about it
Taxes are mounting - and we suspect that they will con-
tinue to mount.
normal courses of our bus. activities interfered by the
priority demands of war Defence.

2- You see, - it is not difficult to count these things in our present
experiences, which few people would call Blessings, they
are plentiful.

And most women in these shell-shocked times are inclined
to count them - and worry over them - and dwell on them
to the exclusion almost of everything else -
Forgetting - there is much else - to which men turn - grateful.

(2)

Pon in Thanks - Baskets - Our just needs - ours by right -
When we miss them - we feel not only deprived - aggrieved -
treated in family. We grumble and grouse in bitterly lament
we do not feel the curses by the blessings, Cursed the misdeeds
by the phrases. We do not examine whether what we regard
as a loss is really so - Whether we are not better off for
the want of some ^{few} things which ^{have been} regarded as indispensable
to our well-being.

3/ In adversity a thoughtful man begins not only to count his
blessings, but also to evaluate his losses - He may find him-
self possessed of much that he did not suspect, and rich in much
that he did not need. "There is a wisdom that cometh
only by sufferings."

4/ What is important, of course, is to determine in one's own
mind what really constitutes a human blessing.

That which contributes to a man's Humanity!

Enriches his personality - develops him morally, spiritually
intellectually - makes of him a better man - citizen - husband -
father - friend - Feeds his Soul!

Thus the same things will not prove to be the same blessings
to diff. people. "One man's meat is another man's
poison!" Wealth has proved a curse to some - poverty
has proved a blessing to others. And there are degrees
in between! There are men who have been helped by
"enough" and spoiled by "too much". Element of shame is
helpful. Play upon sympathy only when lightly drawn. A key

6

strong yields as useless. The dike which threats the flood,
raises the level. — But low-lying drains too faint & too
long is ruined. It loses its resilience — its elasticity — its
come-back.

(a) Some men are smoothed and purged by their sorrows
and hervements. They are good metal, tempered with
fire stuff by the hammering of fortune. I seek the
poet says:

"Amid my list of blessings infinite
Stand this the foremost, 'that my heart has bled'."

This is a paraphrase of Psalmist. וְיִשְׁמַח אֱלֹהִים בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו

Parents } my son, despise not the discipline of the Lord
And resent not his correction
For whom the Lord loves, he corrects

Even as a father the son in whom he delights"
Pagans + Heathens — curse + bent their Gods — וְיִשְׁמַח אֱלֹהִים בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו
And again: וְיִשְׁמַח אֱלֹהִים בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו

"The hard disciplines — they are the way of life"
וְיִשְׁמַח אֱלֹהִים בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו וְיִשְׂמַח בְּעַמּוֹתָיו

(b) Other men are broken & broken into helplessness
and defeat by their suffering + disappointment

(c) It is what you want out of life which in last
analysis determines whether the things which you have a
lose are a blessing or a curse —

(d) John Milton Blind — Certainly a curse!

And yet he did not look at it quite that way.

It is good for
us that I am
afflicted. That
I am put among
the statutes

(4)
His chief interest in life was to serve God = his blessing.
His own concern: "when his light was spent" whether his blindness
would interfere with his service to his Master - And the
insight rising from his profound faith soon ~~reassured~~ reassured
and comforted him.

"who best
Bear his unkind yoke, they serve him best; his state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait"

5/ If our defn. is correct that a human blessing is that which
contributes to his humanity - then all of us living in these
distressing times have many blessings to count on and adore
those numerous common-place, every-day blessings whose
rare and miraculous qualities we overlook just because they
are common-place and every-day. We dramatize the element
radium - bec. it is so rare + precious and ^{is} extracted so
laboriously + at such great cost ^{- a thousandth of a grain} from tons upon tons of pitch-
blende. But oxygen + hydrogen as far more ^{unobtainable} necessary to our life
than our very life depends upon them momentarily - tho they are exceedingly
common + present almost everywhere. How often look in
the dark for what is plainly visible in the light and travel
to distant land to find what they have left at home!

5B) Blessings of Life - Euripides - "Bacchae" - London (Doubt)
6/ The blessings of home - of family - of companionship - how rare then?
Why you are a blessed man indeed! What if the storms rage
without - + words crumble! There is your world of peace and
security! There is your place of rest in a restless world -

does not contribute to a man's humanity - to the development of his inner life -

7/ If on top of these innumerable common-place blessings of home - family - companionship - friendship - esteem and interesting & useful work - you chance to live in a land where you enjoy the additional & precious blessing of freedom and equality - suddenly ^{so rare} ^{+ so desperately sought} in the world then you are among the most truly blessed of mankind.

✓ Americans have suddenly discovered America suddenly become aware of their precious heritage - like one who chanced upon an unexpected treasure -

✓ We had taken this blessed land - its free institutions - its ^{political} liberties - its ^{freedom} - its rich opportunities - for granted. We forgot that men were once persecuted & died for them - that we might persecute them. We ^{have} been cynical, superficial, hypocritical by our part - its election - its ^{early} public trials - its ^{unforgotten} sufferings - and now that men warily everywhere have lost their precious things & are ^{being} ^{blindly} ^{to} ^{renew} ^{the} ^{freedom} ^{things} ^{we} ^{have} ^{suddenly} ^{awakened} ^{to} ^{realize} ^{how} ^{fortunate} ^{we} ^{are} ⁱⁿ ^{still} ^{possessing} ^{them}. (Now)

That is all to the good.

8/ But when we count the possession of freedom etc. among our blessings - we should also count among our blessings the privilege to fight and suffer & die for them! To ~~be~~ be free is a blessed privilege. To fight for freedom is an even greater privilege.

(7)

If your boy goes to the army - or to war - it is
hard to come, but harder still, to live as a slave -
and languish in a ghetto.

If you must bear the load of econ. dislocation,
a heavy taxes, or other burdens - that is part
of the price which ~~we~~ ^{free men} must pay for the blessing
of Freedom! Others pay that price & ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~for~~ ^{unwillingly}
the cause of Slavery!.

{ "How can I repay unto the Lord all His
bountiful dealings towards me?" }



Happy he, on the weary sea
Who hath fled the tempest and won the haven.
Happy whoso hath risen, free,
Above his striving. For strangely graven
Is the orb of life, that one and another
In gold and power may outpass his brother.
And men in their millions float and flow
And seethe, with a million hopes, as leaven;
And they win their Will, or they miss their Will,
And the hopes are dead or are pined for still;
But who'er can know,
As the long days go,
That to Live is happy, hath found his Heaven!



FROM THE ADDRESS OF RABBI SILVER DELIVERED AT THE TEMPLE ON SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 9, 1941

sermon
584

I COUNT MY BLESSINGS

What is important is to determine in our own minds what really constitutes a human blessing. Perhaps this will prove a helpful definition: A human blessing is that which contributes to a man's humanity. Everything which enriches his personality, develops him morally, spiritually, intellectually, makes of him a better man, a better citizen, a better husband or father, a better friend, in a word, everything which feeds his soul -- that is a blessing.

If our definition is correct, then all of us living even in these distressing times have many blessings to count, over and above those numerous commonplace everyday blessings whose rare and miraculous qualities we overlook just because they are commonplace and everyday. Men often look in the dark for what is plainly visible in the light, and travel to distant lands to find what they have left at home.

If on top of the miraculous commonplace blessings of home, family, friendship, esteem and interesting work to do, you chance to live in a land where you enjoy the additional and priceless blessing of freedom and equality -- suddenly become so rare and so desperately sought after in the world -- then you may count yourself among the most truly blessed of mankind.

Americans have suddenly discovered America! They have become aware of their amazing heritage like one who ^{has} suddenly chanced ^d upon ^{some} unsuspected treasure-trove.

We have all taken this blessed land of ours, its free institutions ~~its political~~ its political liberties, its religious tolerance and its

~~rich~~ ^{abundant} opportunities for granted. We forgot that ~~men~~ ^{men} once fought and died for them that we might possess them. ~~Some~~ ^{Some} even grew cynical, ~~and~~ ^{about America} supercilious, and our intelligentsia grew slightly contemptuous of our democratic government ^{and} at what appeared to them to be ~~its~~ ^{our} inefficient and cumbersome democratic ~~machinery~~ ^{apparatus}.

But now that men almost everywhere have lost these precious things and ~~are weeping~~ ^{are weeping} blinding tears for the loss of them, and ~~shedding~~ ^{shedding} their blood to recover them, we have awakened to a realization of how fortunate we are in their possession.

That is all to the good. But when we have come to count the possession of freedom and ~~democracy~~ ^{equality} among our rarest blessings, we should also count among our blessings the privilege of fighting, ~~and~~ suffering, and if need be, ~~dying~~ for them. To be free is a blessed privilege. To fight for freedom is an even greater privilege. Freedom must be ~~re-acquired~~ ^{conquered} by every generation, and paid for. It is not a gift but an achievement and the price is very high, but never too high.

If your son must go to military training or even to war, it is of course a hard price to pay. But it would be harder still for you and for him to live as a slave in a tyrannous world, ~~or to languish~~ ^{or to languish} in a ghetto.

If you must bear the load of ~~economic~~ ^{economic} dislocation, heavy taxes, or other severe burdens, that is ~~hard~~ part of the price which free men must pay for the boon of freedom. Most peoples today ~~must~~ ^{are} paying that price for slavery!

~~I COUNT MY BLESSINGS~~

A. T. N.

What is important is to determine in our own minds what really constitutes a human blessing. Perhaps this will prove a helpful definition: A human blessing is that which contributes to a man's humanity. Everything which enriches his personality, develops him morally, spiritually, intellectually, makes of him a better man, a better citizen, a better husband or father, a better friend, in a word, everything which feeds his soul -- that is a blessing.

If our definition is correct, then all of us living even in these distressing times have many blessings to count over and above those numerous commonplace everyday blessings whose rare and miraculous qualities we overlook just because they are commonplace and everyday. Men often look in the dark for what is plainly visible in the light, and travel to distant lands to find what they have left at home.

If on top of the miraculous commonplace blessings of home, family, friendship, esteem and interesting work to do, you chance to live in a land where you enjoy the additional and priceless blessing of freedom and equality -- suddenly become so rare and so desperately sought after in the world -- then you may count yourself among the most truly blessed of mankind.

Americans have suddenly discovered America! They have become aware of their amazing heritage like one who ^{has} suddenly ^{some} chances upon an unsuspected treasure-trove.

We have all taken this blessed land of ours, its free institutions ~~its political liberties~~, its religious tolerance and its

Abundant

~~rich~~ opportunities for granted. We forgot that many once fought and died for them that we might possess them. We even grew cynical, supercilious, and our intelligentsia grew slightly contemptuous of our democratic government at what appeared to them to be its inefficient and cumbersome democratic machinery.

But now that men almost everywhere have lost these precious things and weep blinding tears for the loss of them and shed their blood to recover them, we have awakened to a realization of how fortunate we are in their possession.

That is all to the good. But when we have come to count the possession of freedom and democracy among our rarest blessings, we should also count among our blessings the privilege of fighting, of suffering, and if need be, of dying for them. To be free is a blessed privilege. To fight for freedom is an even greater privilege. Freedom must be re-acquired by every generation, and paid for. It is not a gift but an achievement and the price is very high, but never too high.

If your son must go to military training or even to war, it is of course a hard price to pay. But it would be harder still for you and for him to live as a slave in a tyrannous world, ~~or to languish in a ghetto.~~

If you must bear the load of ~~economic dislocation~~, heavy taxes, or ^{economic} other severe burdens, that is ~~just~~ part of the price which free men must pay for the boon of freedom. Most peoples today ^{are paying} ~~must pay~~ that price for slavery!