



## 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  
161

Box  
58

Folder  
750

The Things we want out of Life, 1946.

THE THINGS WE WANT OUT OF LIFE

By  
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At  
The Temple

On  
Sunday morning, November 3, 1946



Things we want out of life. It would be very interesting if a poll were taken of a group of men and women on this very subject -- Things we want out of life. We would learn how much of similarity there would be of response and how much of diversity..... (Many would stay single -- G.I.'s would want to get back to civilian life, etc.).

It would be interesting to find out to what men give priority to the answer to the question, "Things we want out of life." What would be the scale grade of other things they want out of life.

It is a very interesting question which has been in the minds of people, the most learned and the least learned throughout the ages. That is at the heart of all ethical speculation, the basis of almost every system of philosophy. The sophic systems are built on kinds of answers people give to this question. This was a most favorite topic of discussion. The question of course was often differently phrased. Some put it: What is the end of human life? Still others put it this way: What is the Highest good in life? Is it pleasure, knowledge? Is it communion with God? What is the summum bonum that men seek in life -- throughout the ages and still continuing to this day?

Cicero jokingly recounts that once a Roman consul decided to call a world conference to settle this matter. Much discussion sprang from it reaching to this day. For there were various schools of thought in ancient days.

The Epicureans maintained that pleasure is the highest good, ~~and~~ a thing is good if it contributes to the enjoyment of your life, if pleasure is derived from it. Of course by pleasure they meant pleasure rightly understood -- prudence, honor, justice -- not just mere physical self-indulgence. But to them and to their followers the highest good was the enjoyment of life.

There was another school -- the school of stoics who believed in the exercise of the moral will, to do our stern duty, to control and master our passions and desires, to yield neither to joy or sorrow and to conform freely to our destiny.



Another school of thought was that of the sceptics who believed in the highest good, the tranquility of the soul, peace of soul and mind. That is to be maintained by avoiding all dogmatism in the world by means of maintaining an attitude of suspended judgment as it were, and reasonable probability, not to get over-excited in our assertions, nor champion great causes because you are really not so sure what is true or whether the cause you are championing is really something worth championing. Seek rather tranquility of life. Don't get yourself too enmeshed and embroiled.

Then there was a school of ascetics -- men who maintained that the highest good in life is to be achieved by detaching yourself from the world and from the flesh by ~~diverting~~ <sup>devoting</sup> yourself to a life of spiritual concentration. Not to want things. That seemed the secret of happiness, to have few wants. It is amazing to them how many things human beings can really get along without. Turn your back on longings and desires. Detach yourself from it all. So there it is.

One of the things that men want, I presume, after all is said and done, in all these schools of philosophy and around many others -- the highest good they are talking about is human happiness. They differed only as to the manner and method by which Happiness can be achieved, and what constitutes happiness. Unconsciously we mean, what things will really contribute most to my happiness. And everything that contributes to our happiness is good.

There was a very ~~old~~ famous scolium song that was frequently sung at banquets which attempts to give the answer to the question: "What we want out of life." It read something like this:

Health is the best, when all is done,  
The gift of beauty is next in worth.  
The third is riches fairly won.  
To be young with comrades is the fourth.

In other words, according to the song, health, beauty, riches, youth -- those are the things men want out of life -- and in that order. And I think most of us would agree on that -- and why not? The foremost things you want are health and beauty and richness and youth. We want all of them.



Now really some of those things are beyond our order. Now take physical beauty. We are born that way. If we were all born beautiful we would not have to sell so many cosmetics, beauty parlors would be less frequented to improve upon the <sup>in</sup>different hand of nature or to preserve what time has decreed shall pass away. It is just not within our ordering.

And youth -- youth certainly is a fleeting thing. We all have it, but not for long. But it doesn't at all follow that youth is a happy period in life. It is very often one of ~~the~~ great tempestuousness, considerable unhappiness in youth until one has found equilibrium. Despair, considerable disillusionment -- that goes with youth, and of course an amazing amount of inexperience of which youth is not unaware.

Health, too -- while we do much to conserve it. Sickness, pain are out of our control often.

And as for riches -- only few men can attain it and fewer can retain it.

So that if these four things were the only things which contribution to our happiness in the world, happiness would be within the reach of few people and for a very short time.

It should be remembered too that we want different things at different times of life. What we regard as most highly desirable when we are young may not at all be regarded as highly desirable in middle age or in old age. Our intellectual perspectives, our emotional perspectives and our needs change. Thus, for example, when we are young, the greatest need of our life is for adventure. When we are older, one comes to think less of adventure and more of security. For example, the life span of the American people was shorter than it is today. The average life span of man has been lengthened considerably. When ~~the~~ America itself was younger and its frontiers both of land and of opportunity were still open, the emphasis was placed The whole complex of ideas reflected the youth of the American people and the youth of man. ~~not~~ on individual initiative, self-reliance, independence and pioneering. / As people grew older because of the lengthening span of man's life, and the frontiers were already reached,



the thought of the American people has come to be centered more and more around old age pensions, social security, social insurance, upon efforts to reduce the incident of economic unpredictability. The American people wants more security. It is one of the definite needs today. In this unsettled world of ours, of depressions, panics, in the midst of these cycles of abundance and poverty, we want a measure of stability for ourselves and our families. Even those who are well off are concerned with stability, because they saw how many rich and well-off individuals were suddenly impoverished. Their wealth disappeared over night as it were by economic upheavals not in their control. People are again talking about the coming industrial recession, depression. That means far more than a drop of stocks -- vast unemployment, vast unhappiness. And men today want, above all, a large measure of security so that they can plan ahead, so that careers will not be rudely interrupted and broken.

I think security is the thing most wanted out of life today. Many of the revolutions are directly traceable because of the new technological development which has taken place.... Man must have a measure of social and economic security.

But beyond security -- what other things? A secure life can be a very dull life and men can languish in boredom on a comfortable bank book and three square meals a day. Man wants a sense of adventure in life. There isn't a man on earth confronted with the unknown, even at the cost of considerable risk, who will not <sup>grapple</sup> ~~wrangle~~ with new problems. That is what makes up man. That is the glow, in a sense that is the tragedy of humanity. Man was never satisfied with what he was. He always wanted to be more. He couldn't see far enough. So through the long long centuries he experimented and perfected telescopes, microscopes. He was tied down to earth. He didn't want to be tied down, so through long centuries he experimented, he groped until, like the birds, he learned how to fly, to fly faster than any birds can fly. He wanted his voice to be heard. He developed machinery whereby his voice could instantaneously be carried to the furthest parts of the world.... The atom ... music. Man is restless and must find self-expression, the opportunity to explore the depths and capacities within themselves, and when this opportunity to explore is denied human



beings, they can be very unhappy in spite of food and shelter that they may have.

Now it is difficult in this urbanized, civilized life of ours, this provincial, routinized life -- it is very difficult to find adequate adventure. It doesn't have to be found by going to far distant places, undiscovered continents, in jungles. It can be found, I believe, in getting away from yourself, in avoiding all exclusively self-centered interests, in dwelling too much on yourself. Many of us are. Becoming interested in other folks and other things. You can adventure in human associations and ~~human~~ friends, in various enterprises of human cooperation, civic enterprises, zest for life new situations, new problems. I think this is one of the things we want out of life.

Another thing which we want -- that is <sup>esteem</sup> ~~prestige~~. We all want to be well regarded by ourselves and well regarded by others. If you have no high esteem of yourself, if you don't think well of yourself, then you will be a very unhappy human being. If you know yourself to be mean and cheap and unworthy then that will cause you to be unable to live with yourself, everywhere, at all times, regardless of what happens. If you know yourself to be worthwhile, if you know that you will try to do that which is fair, if you know you are trying to do right, then even the misunderstanding, the attacks of the world can't change your standing square. Young people -- that is what you need most in the world -- self-esteem and also the esteem of those about you, your immediate circle. I read you a chapter from the Book of Proverbs: "A good name is more to be preferred than great wealth. And the good opinion of your neighbor, look upon it with favor.... The esteem of your neighbor -- that doesn't mean a reaching after, coveting, securing of preference, authority -- not at all. Those who seek that lose it. ~~Then~~ It is something that can't be purchased. But those who lead a life of helpfulness, kindness ~~sweetness~~, of integrity, inevitably come to reap without any effort on their part come to win the esteem of the people about them. And that is worth more than bread and wine in the world. That is what sustains life.



It is shocking what is happening to family life today. I think that a good measure of the unhappiness in the world today is due to the fact that homes are being destroyed. I read the other day that from 1932 to 1945 divorces increased from 18% to 64%. This year the increase was 145%. These are cold figures. What do they mean? That homes are being broken up. Men and women and children are being separated. Why? There are too many factors. There is a lack of drawing people together which can only come about by loving and respecting one another, and to make supreme sacrifices in behalf of that mutual esteem and love. It is a failure to understand what the demands of love are in the world. Failures of marriages are due to lack of the understanding of the sacrifices concerned. For love to succeed basically in the home there must be esteem of husband for wife, wife for husband, children for parents, parents for children. Unless a man and woman and child can feel that the home is the only place where they can be completely free, completely understood, completely at home, then the home cannot exist.

And so what men need in the world, what men want out life besides security, <sup>+ esteem</sup> zest for living, there are perhaps other ideas.

One is work -- interesting work to do. Somewhere it was stated that scientists are the happiest people in the world because they are so absorbed in their work. Their work is progressive...You have an interesting job -- it need not be world-shaking, but of importance to you. If you have interesting work to do, congenial to you, that expresses you -- that is what men need and what is important. When you see a man diligent in his work, exercising his gifts as a fine craftsman, he can sit before kings regardless how humble he is. In the sight of God nothing is greater ~~and nothing is smaller~~ than work....

Koheleth was King in Israel. According to the Bible he had everything. He had everything out life -- wisdom, wealth. He had sampled everything, tasted everything. He had servants in abundance. He had everything and yet he said, he ends up by saying: "Vanity of vanities -- all else is vanity." What was wrong?

Of two men in the Bible it was said they died of good old age, satisfied.



One was Abraham and the other was Gideon. Why ~~w~~<sup>h</sup>ere they different than Koheleth, completely satisfied? Because each one of them had a calling which he served, which ennobled him. Abraham served God and because of his love of His God and service to his God he was happy. He was happy because of the cause which he served. He befriended strangers. He championed the cause of the oppressed. Because of his faith he went through the world making peace between enemies, resolving conflicts. Because of his faith he was prepared to make the supreme sacrifice, to bring his son Isaac to his God. And when his long deeply rich and deeply interesting life was about to end, he knew that he had lived well. He was satisfied. He had ~~served~~ <sup>served well</sup> ~~cause.~~

Gideon had a cause <sup>for</sup> -- he loved his people. When his people was oppressed, he pleaded their cause. He was a man of lowly origin. But he loved his people. And he summoned his people <sup>who were</sup> groaning under the oppression of the Mideonites to throw off their yoke.... They came to offer him a crown...No, I don't want it -- I am a happy man. I have served my people. When he died, he died happy.

That is what we mean beyond wealth and security -- beyond an opportunity to adventure in life, beyond the esteem <sup>of</sup> ~~for~~ family and friends, beyond the chance to express oneself -- with all those things, interesting work to do, to have a cause -- something beyond ourselves, greater than ourselves which we can serve -- then life will be worthwhile regardless of what happens and when we come to the end of our days then we will be able to say: I have lived. I am satisfied. ~~I am happy.~~



1. Things we want out of life?

It would be very interesting if a poll - A Place to live in  
I wonder how much of similarity - diversity -  
To what things you would give priority - & what  
would be the graded scale of the other things which

2/ It is a question which intrigued the minds of  
men - the least learned & the most learned - It  
is at the heart of all ethical speculation. Phil.  
Systems are built on the answers - ~~chief topic of debate~~  
It is differently phrased: What is the end of life?

What is the highest good - "Summum Bonum"  
Is it Pleasure - Virtue - Knowledge - Concerning which?  
Cicero jokingly recounts that a Roman pro-  
consul - Cinyres - to settle the matter

The Epicureans - "pleasure" was highest good - - a thing is good in pleasure that is  
pleasure, rightly understood. - (Hedonism)  
in which prudence, honor & justice were vital  
factors.

The Stoics - the exercise, the moral will - - stern duty - to  
control & master our passions & desires -  
to yield neither to joy or sorrow and conform  
freely to ~~our~~ destiny =



the Sceptics - tranquillity of soul, won them avoidance (2)  
of all dogmatism, ~~and~~ uncertainty of as-  
sertion, suspended judgment - & reasonable  
flexibility.

The Esoterics - detachments from the world & the flesh -  
and the spiritual & contemplation life  
NOT to want things - Fewer wants Fewer cares

2/ But I presume - that what all, then we're saying -  
is that highest good is "human happiness" -

They differed only ~~in~~ as to the manner & method by  
which Happiness can be achieved. what constitutes  
real Happiness

And I suppose that in choosing the things we want  
out of life - we have in mind - ~~what~~ <sup>those</sup> things  
which will contribute most to our happiness.

Everything that contributes to real H. is Ford!

9/ There is a very old & famous scotium - survey at  
Langnau - which attempts to give the answer  
to the question - 'Things we want out of life'



~~There is a famous sermon.~~

Scale of goods

Health is the best, when all is done,

The gift of beauty is next in worth.

The third is riches fairly won.

To be young with comrades is the fourth.

(1) Health (2) Beauty (3) Riches (3) Youth.

5/- I think most men would agree to this sentiment.

Among the foremost things we want out of life are  
Health, Beauty, Riches and Youth - <sup>and for all time</sup>

But some of these things are beyond our ordering - like  
(Physical Beauty) - It is we are born that way -  
If we all had it - cosmetics & beauty parlors  
to impress upon the indifferent hand, nature or to  
preserve what time has decreed shall pass away

Youth certainly is fleeting - we all have it, but for  
how short a time - <sup>and it has its drawbacks</sup>  
<sup>inexperience, awkwardness & passion</sup>

Health too, while we can do much to conserve  
it - is not constant thru life. <sup>Sickness, pain, an old age</sup>

And as for Riches - only some can attain it - &  
fewer ~~do~~ do retain it for long -



Were these the ~~only~~ things which contribute to our (4)  
happiness — Happ. would be within the reach of  
a few — and for them — only for a short time.

6/ It should be remembered, too, that we want diff. things at diff. times of life - What we regard as most desirable when we are young, may be quite diff. from we desire most in middle age, or in old age - Our intell. + emot. perspectives change - as our needs change. Thus when we are young we think more of adventure. When we are older - of security.

older - 9 security.

(1) When the life span of our people was shorter than it is to-day, and Amer. deep was journeying, its frontiers both of land and of opportunity still far open - the emphases were placed in our heart. They lay upon individ. initiative, <sup>enterprise</sup> <sup>and</sup> pioneering. As our pop. grew older, <sup>with</sup> the longer span of life enjoyed to-day, & the frontiers were marked, emphases - Social security - Social insurance - to <sup>protect or guard</sup> reduce the vicissitudes of <sup>depression</sup> unpredictability.

7/ Security is def. on the things we want out of life today.  
In this unstable world - wars - depressions - panics -



- <sup>9th</sup> cycles of abundance and poverty - we want a measure (5)  
of security for ourselves & our families.  
- Even those who are well-off - crave for it - They saw  
fortunes vanish one night, leaving forces beyond their  
- Experiments, & these men are <sup>even now</sup> discussing the coming  
of an involunt. recession, or depression - this means for  
them a drop in the value, mis-stocks - unemployment  
- ruined careers - defeated lives - unhappiness

8. Men also want Adventure - a secure life can  
become a very "dull life" - & men can languish  
in "boredom" as a comfortable bank book and  
then squander much a day.

- There is in man an urge to explore, to ~~risk~~, to  
confront the unknown even at a considerable  
risk, to meet new situations, the challenges new  
problems. See - Space - Fly - atom - Moon - Self-expression  
- There is not from all men - but many - the  
propensity, the ~~urge~~ <sup>urge</sup>, to ~~take~~ <sup>take</sup> the pathfinder.

- Men who are cabineted & confined - lost zest -

- Difficult to go on adventures - unbalanced  
9). To become interested in people - in life things  
(~~for the "The Great Happiness"~~) - stagnant  
~~How~~ To avoid self-centered interests - dwelling  
always on self -







Beyond Health - & Security - one want out of (7)

- ① Life, Adventure - chance to express Es
- ② Esteem - family & followers
- ③ Work -
- ④ Cause -

