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

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How to Face Success, 1948.

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HOW TO FACE SUCCESS

by

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Most people assume that it is very difficult to face handicaps, but it is very easy to face success. In fact, it is so simple and easy that one does not need to be instructed about facing success. But it is really not so simple and so easy. In "Poor Richard's Almanac" Benjamin Franklin says: "Success has ruined many a man." In a commentary on the Bible written by a rabbi in the 17th century, I came across this rather startling phrase: "Most of the successes bring evil to men." One wonders why. One wonders how. How can that which represents the fulfillment of all that man desires - success - how can that be a source of evil and ruination?

Well, in the first place it is due to the fact that most men conceive of success in terms of material achievement. Success means business success. Success means financial success. A successful man is a rich man, and the measure of a man's wealth is the measure of his success. Now, wealth has its patent advantages which everyone knows, but mankind throughout the ages has also come to see considerable spiritual dangers in the possession of wealth. They have come to find in it a definite obstacle in the way of man's moral pilgrimage, and some religious philosophers mark off wealth as an unmitigated spiritual evil.

It is recorded in the New Testament that a young man came to the founder of Christianity, Jesus, and said to him, "Good master, what good shall I do that I may have eternal life?" And Jesus said unto him, "Why, keep the commandments," and the young man replied, "All those things have I kept from my youth up. What lack I yet?" And Jesus said, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast and give it to the poor and come and follow me." And the young man went away sorrowful for he had great possessions. Then the master turned to his disciples and said: "A rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."



An early Christian church preached poverty as an ideal to help men achieve perfection and so did all the Monastic orders and those of many other religions.

A successful man gets used to the comforts and the privileges which wealth brings, and he is unwilling to surrender that wealth, that comfort and that privilege when, at the behest of some cause, he is called upon to sacrifice some of it. A successful man is likely to be opposed to any new social movement or political movement as he believes it will endanger his own possessions, his own status. Rich men as a rule are conservative and frequently they are reactionary. People of the South who blocked and defeated slavery were not bad people - they were not less human, but their whole economic success, status and power came to be invested in slavery. All of the Fascist movements of our day are backed by powerful economic interests which are determined to insure their power and their control and their privileges.

Success means power, and power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Success has a way of making some people self-sufficient, proud, arrogant - qualities which are deadly to man's spiritual life. "Pride goeth before destruction" - before spiritual destruction. How often the successful men are inclined to think in terms against which we were warned in that 8th Chapter of Deuteronomy: "My own strength has gotten me all this wealth." Especially in a land like ours where the success story is quite common, men are prone to ascribe all their success to their own ability, overlooking the abundance of opportunities which this new land provides them, overlooking the great element of chance and luck which is an essential part of every man's success, and brushing aside the help which these men must have received from others, for no man is entirely ever a self-made man. Successful men are in danger of becoming proud and arrogant, and particularly the sons of successful men - the children of these men who themselves did not acquire that success which feeds self-pride. We have



the story in the Bible of the son of Solomon, Rehoboam, a young man of the golden youth of the court, who had nothing to do with Solomon's achievement, and he himself achieved nothing. He took counsel of the youth in the palace and in his pride he said: "My little finger is thicker than the of my father." And he destroyed the empire.

Success tends to make some selfish and isolated from their fellowmen. They come to live in contracting little worlds of their own. They become impatient with the unsuccessful men and are less charitable in their judgments of other men even if they continue, in terms of giving philanthropy in the community.

There is a story told of a man who called upon a rabbi who had been a friend of his youth. One of them entered the field of business and became rich and the other became a rabbi, and later on the successful business man called upon the rabbi and he said: "Why is it in my youth everyone liked me, and now it seems I am a lonely man. With all my success I am an isolated person." "Why," said the rabbi, "that is very simple. Look through that window. What do you see?" "I see human beings - men, women, children." "Come here and look in this mirror," said the rabbi. "Now what do you see?" "I see myself." That is it. The rabbi points out that he cannot see the world because he is absorbed in himself.

Most decidedly, success has its pitfalls. And how you face success is one of the hard lessons to learn in life, and our religion has much to say about it. In the first place, our religion maintains that wealth is not a requisite for success in life. Who is the rich man? A man who is contented with his lot. Unlike other religions ours never preached poverty as a virtue and never advised men to reconcile themselves to poverty. Poverty is not a virtue. There is a beautiful prayer in the Book of Proverbs. "Oh God, do not give me either poverty or wealth. Give me my daily bread. Lest I be full and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord, or lest I be poor and steal, and take the name of my God in vain."



One should face, according to the admonition of our faith, material prosperity with humility, always mindful of how important a share others have had in our success, and particularly, society as a whole, always remembering that the proper appreciation of one's good fortune and success is gratitude expressed in wise stewardship and in ready helpfulness towards others, always mindful, too, that the world is a revolving wheel, that one may be on the top today and at the bottom tomorrow, and always remembering that at the very end we must leave all our possessions behind us. There are no pockets, as someone said, in shrouds.

The great Cyrus, who built the greatest of ancient empires, had this inscribed upon his tombstone: "O man, whosoever thou art, and whensoever thou comest, for come I know thou wilt, I am Cyrus, the Founder of the Persian Empire. Envy me not the little earth that covers my body." After all of the great acquisition of power and wealth, the great Cyrus was fearful that even the little earth that would cover his remains may some day be disturbed.

Our religion teaches us that real success does not consist in acquiring things - not in acquiring, but in being and in doing. It is not what we put in our coffers, but it is what we put in our minds and in our hearts, and what we invest in the lives of others. We are put on earth not to accumulate objects, for we need very few to live by, but to fulfill our destiny as children of God, and our destiny consists in learning all that we can, in developing our personalities in all directions, and in cooperating helpfully in the life of humanity. How much knowledge and wisdom we acquire, how sensitive we grow to beauty, how much good we do in the interests of our families - in other words, how much we grow into wisdom and goodness - that is the true measure of one's success. And this true measure is not free at all from what men call failure,



for a man never quite succeeds in acquiring all that he seeks in life. The higher and nobler our strivings, the less possibility there is of our fully realizing them. Our highest aims are never achieved. Those who are satisfied with paltry prizes may achieve them, but those who soar on high may never reach the highest peaks, for these are the people who are the salt of the earth. They are the children of the sun, the pathfinders, the dreamers of all great dreamers, the pioneers of humanity, the men and women who build society.

Moses never entered the Promised Land. Very few of the great emancipators ever enter their promised land. But can we really call them failures, or are they truly the successful children of mankind?

I read not long ago a very beautiful poem called "'Io Victis" which I should like to read to you because it gives us the proper perspective upon what we call success and what we call failure in life. It is written by William Wetmore Story.

I sing the hymn of the conquered, who fall in the Battle of Life,-  
The hymn of the wounded, the beaten, who died overwhelmed in the strife;  
Not the jubilant song of the victors for whom the resounding acclaim  
Of nations was lifted in chorus, whose brows wear the chaplet of fame,  
But the hymn of the low and the humble, the weary, the broken in heart,  
Who strove and who failed, acting bravely a silent and desperate part;  
Whose youth bore no flower in its branches, whose hopes burned in  
ashes away,  
From whose hands slipped the prize they had grasped at, who stood at  
the dying of day  
With the wreck of their life all around them, unpited, unheeded, alone,  
With Death swooping down o'er their failure, and all but their faith  
overthrown,  
While the voice of the world shouts its chorus, - its paean for those  
who have won;  
While the trumpet is sounding triumphant, and high to the breeze and  
the sun  
Glad banners are waving, hands clapping, and hurrying feet  
Thronging after the laurel crowned victors, I stand on the field of  
defeat,  
In the shadow, with those who are fallen, and wounded, and dying, and  
there  
Chant a requiem low, place my hand on their pain-knotted brows, breathe  
a prayer,  
Hold the hand that is helpless, and whisper, "They only the victory  
win,  
Who have fought the good fight, and have vanquished the demon that  
tempts us within;



Who have held to their faith unseduced by the prize that the world  
hold on high;

Who have dared for a high cause to suffer, resist, fight, - if need  
be, to die."

Speak, History! Who are Life's victors? Unroll they long annals  
and say,

Are they those whom the world called the victors, who won the success  
of a day?

. The martyrs, or Nero? The Spartans, who fell at Thermopylae's tryst,  
Or the Persians and Xerxes? His judges or Socrates?

The great religions of the world tell us that the truly successful are they  
who are strong enough to let God use them for a purpose greater than themselves.  
The truly successful are those who are prepared to place themselves as willing  
tools in the hand of God for the fulfillment of His purposes which lies far be-  
yond their modern ken and their own finite lives. The truly successful are  
those who seek not so much personal success, but the cooperative success, the  
fellowship success, humanity success, and who trust God and history and society  
to evaluate their lives accordingly.

My good friends, we are partial successes and all partial failures, and  
we do not always know where we are successful and where we are failures. There  
was a medieval Hebrew poet named Ibn Ezra who regarded himself as a total and  
complete failure. In one of his most charming poems he complains of his bitter  
lot and he says: "If I were a merchant or a peddler selling candles, the sun  
would never set." He regarded himself as a "schmiel", a total failure. And  
yet if you were to ask anyone the names of the 10 greatest Hebrew poets, Ibn  
Ezra would be included among them.

I know many men who think themselves very successful because they have very  
successful factories, or shops or stores - beautiful homes, cars, and all the  
things that people desire. They are successful and I suppose those who know  
them from the outside know them to be successful, and yet, I think that they  
themselves, in their moments of reflection, they will probably mark themselves



off as tragic failures in other basic human relationships as fathers, husbands, sons. I know wives who regard themselves as great failures because they have not the things other women have. They are compelled to live in very modest homes. Sometimes their hearts are filled with envy because they see other women who have the things they are deprived of, and they would mark themselves off as failures, and probably include their husbands. And yet, if they would pause a minute and take stock of themselves, they would come to realize that they have been wonderful successes as wives, and mothers - they have won the love and devotion of a life companion, the affection of her children - they have made the greatest contribution which any woman can make to society - they have been magnificently successful.

Who knows really when one is successful or when one is not? I think the best test to measure success and failure is to ask ourselves, "How far are we seeking and how far have we gone in doing good in the world?" And the answer to that is the true answer to the question of one's success. How to face success? First, with a clear understanding of what real success in life is, and secondly, to face all manner of success - material or otherwise - in a spirit of utmost humility.

I have spoken of three problems - How to face Life, How to face Handicaps, How to face Success. Our answer to the first problem is that the way to face life is a philosophy which says our destiny on earth is to seek perfection. The answer to the second problem was a philosophy which tells us that mind is always greater than matter and that the undefeated spirit of man can translate the severest handicaps of life into stepping stones for self-fulfillment and great spiritual victory. Our answer to the third problem, How to Face Success, is also a philosophy - a philosophy which tells us that success must be measured not in terms of things, but in terms of growth into knowledge and into service, and with an attitude of complete humility, and we shall discuss next week the subject of how to face death.