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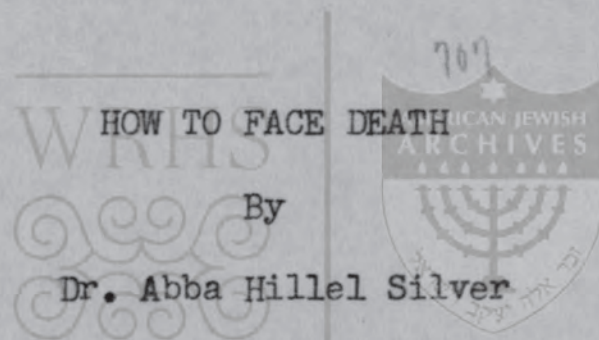
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How to Face Death, 1948.



HOW TO FACE DEATH

By

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

Sunday, December 19
1948

In the problem, How to Face Death, two problems are really involved - how face our own death, and how to face the death of others, those who are near to us and dear to us. And the wise minds everywhere in all lands, among all peoples have had much to say on these subjects, for all men everywhere have had to face the ineluctable fact of death. On these subjects the final word has not yet been spoken for the final insight has not yet been gained by the human race. There is so much that we do not yet know - there is so much that we may never know about the origin and the nature of life, about birth and death and regeneration, about growth and decay, and about the nature and the powers of the human mind and spirit and about the interactions of mind and body that whatever final summation we come to can only be by the postulates of faith and not the conclusions of positive knowledge or reason or logic.

That, you will recall, was one of the questions posed by the Almighty unto Job who complained about the problems of life and death. "Have the gates of death been revealed unto Thee or hast Thou seen the gates of the shadow of death?" But we live not by knowledge alone but also by faith, and time and again faith has amazingly anticipated what science ultimately came to discover. Our own great religion, Judaism, so ripe with the wisdom of human experience and with the wisdom of the ages, has much to say on this subject. We are admonished by our religion to think of death, but not to be obsessed by it, and not to think of death as a catastrophe. There is relatively very little about death as such in our Bible. Unlike the Egyptian Book of the Dead, for example, the sacred book of the Egyptians which consists almost entirely of magical formulae and myth concerned with the netherworld and how the soul of man can live on in a preserved and mummified corpse after death, the Bible is concerned almost exclusively with life and with this world.

As the Psalmists said, "The Heavens belong to the Lord, and the earth He gave unto the children of man." "The dead do not praise the Lord and not those who descent into eternal silence. But we shall praise the Lord." The laws of Moses, the ethical teachings of the Prophets, wisdom of the sacred rights - all of these are directed towards living, struggling man in this world and to the society of man.

Some religions are obsessed with the idea of death. It looms large in their theologies, touching the birth, death and resurrection of their deities. It is central in their teachings concerning the destiny of man. Its emphasis is upon the hereafter and preparedness for it, and upon the fate which awaits the disembodied spirit. There is no such obsessions with death in Judaism. Not that in the 3500 years or more of the development of our religion and in the numerous world-wide impacts which were made upon it, such ideas did not find their way among our people - they did, but they never became the essential pattern of Jewish religious thought. And that is very significant. The exaltation of life was the primary concern of a people whose God was God of Life and whose revered law was a law of life. Death, according to our faith, is not to be viewed as a catastrophe. On the other hand, it was never hailed, as in some religions, as a welcome release from the shackles of immortality or as a welcome escape from life which was a veil of tears. No, that is not true in our religion. Life is looked upon as a blessing from God. Life is sweet and to depart from life is sad, especially since no man knoweth what lies beyond the borders of time and place.

Leaving kith and kin and setting out into the great unknown is sad, but it is not the climactic evil that some have come to conceive of it in their religious philosophies. For example, the death of Abraham, who had completed the cycle of his life, is described without great grief in a very simple impressive words. "And Abraham expired and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years and was gathered to his people." That's all.

There are greater tragedies than natural death for such death is not unexpected, and being common to all men, is not unjust and in a sense nature prepares us for it and we ourselves can lessen its sorrow for those who survive. We are, however, admonished to think of death not so as to sour our lives, but so as to make us appreciate more fully the purposes, the privileges, the rare advantages of life - to treasure and use fully every passing hour, for life is short.

I read you from the beautiful words of the great sage, Ben Sirach in the Apocrypha: "Remember that death will not be long in coming. Defraud not thyself of the good day and let not the part of a good intuition pass thee by. All flesh waxeth old as a garment for the covenant from the beginning is - Thou shalt die the death."

Now some accept the brevity of life as an excuse for unbridled self-indulgence. "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." This is to accept life not only as brief but also as meaningless. This is to empty life out of all content for eating and drinking are a means to life. They are not the life of man who was made in the image of God. Brevity of life speaks to the thoughtful man and tells him to crowd every day with meaning, to fill every hour with purpose, and if possible, with achievement, to make every hour an infinity. Time is relative. We can live more intensively and so live longer, just as we can travel faster in the same time. Some men gain immortality in one hour. The fact of death should, according to our faith, teach us humility to lower our pride for all of us, whatever our station in life, are . We all go to the same place.

Recall those beautiful words of Job, those saddening words and in a sense also those strengthening words: "There in the grave the wicked cease from troubling and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners are at ease,

the small and the great are there alike and the servant is free from his master." Death, therefore, should give us a clear perspective upon our ambitions, on all the foolish pursuits on which we spend our life blood - money grubbing, social climbing and trying to impress our neighbors. How does all this look against the background of all-obliterating death, against the grave which levels all distinctions?

Death should be faced with courage as life itself. Without courage we cannot live and without courage we cannot die decently. He who faces life in all of its uncertainties courageously will know how to face death.

A few days ago there died in our city a man who knew himself to be doomed because he had cancer. Carlton K. Matson, Associate Editor of the Press, was told by his physician that he had a fatal disease, a disease concerning which men and women speak timidly. A few months ago he wrote an editorial upon learning from his physician his true condition:

I've decided to write a piece which will be quite shocking to some people. But it shouldn't be.... I'm writing it because I think it's time that some history be made by being as frank as I'm going to be here today.

Anything anybody can do to free the human race from terrifying and crippling bondage to ancient fears should be done. To that end I aim to make my contributions.

I was told the other day that the back injury which has been bothering me for months involves a malignancy. In plain language, my friends, that of course means cancer.....

What I want to do is to strike a blow against this mysterious, paralyzing hush-hush that surrounds every case of cancer. I don't want anybody having to ask about me, "Does he know what he's got? Has he been told?" Yes, I've been told and I know.

And he proceeds to tell of his knowledge and what it means to him. He knew how to face death bravely. Without four months he was dead, but he died a man. "So live that when thy summons come to join the innumerable caravan which moves to that mysterious realm, where each shall take his chamber in the

silent halls of death, Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night, Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

This is the meaning of "Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me." Some people fear death because they believe that they have not finished their life's work. Well, in a sense all of our life's work is unfinished at any time. But, as the Rabbis said: "Thine is not the duty to complete the work, but neither art thou free to desist from it. Thy duty is to do thy best and leave the rest to God who planned the whole and will see that the whole is completed." The famous Rabbi Eliazar was sick unto death and his friend, Rabbi Jochanan called upon him and he found Rabbi Eliazar weeping. "Why art thou weeping?" "Because I am about to die but my work is undone. There is so much good that I must still do in the world." And the wise Rabbi Jochanan reminded him of our forefathers in the wilderness. They gathered manna, if you will recall, for food and some gathered more and some gathered less, but when the manna was measured, each had the same. And it is so with life, said Rabbi Jochanan. It makes no difference how much you gather in, if only what you achieve, what you gather, is done in the name of God. It is the intent, the motives which guided your actions which are important, not so much your achievements.

Three times a year our forefathers would come to the Temple to bring their offerings. But in the sight of God all gifts were acceptable, each man according to his ability.

Concerning the hereafter, where there is no positive knowledge, it is wise to put one's trust in God who is God of Death as well as of Life, and of whom we are a part, sparks of his eternal fire.

Some 20 years ago I was asked to contribute a thought on immortality towards a collection on immortality. I should like to share it with you now, and if I were asked today for the same thing, I would underwrite it today:

This of all things I can conceive of least - my own death. I have seen death in others many times. Even in them death seemed to me an intrusion or an interlude rather than a finality. Perhaps it is because I have never been able to think of anything as ending - or for that matter as beginning. I know being. I have never experienced non-being. I do not refuse to think of death. I do not know how to think of it.

I have no particular longing for immortality; but I am in the stream of life and I cannot escape it. My life began with the life of the universe and can only end with it. It has surged through infinite cycles and phases of being. It will continue its appointed course uninterrupted. All things are alive and in their transformations only pass into new forms and ways of life. Death is the peak of a life-wave, and so is birth. Death and birth are one.

Of all life-forces thought is the most marvelous and baffling. Of it, I am continuously and sharply aware. In my it is my essential self, my unity and my uniqueness. At the close of its present cycle it may combine or it may scatter and reorganize into a new integration. It cannot disappear.

I would not lose my zest for living or my purpose in life, if there were no immortality but I would be deprived of the only intelligent conception of life of which I am capable.

If we were strong enough to face death without sorry we could come to face immortality without joy. For the life we enter through death, if it be conscious life, must of necessity have its pain as well as its peace, its defeats as well as its victories. Death is not the last station of the soul's Calvary. "The righteous have no repose either in this world or in the worlds to come...."

My comfort and my sustenance is not immortality, but God. His universe is perfect and my destiny is part of His perfection - even my tears and all my broken hopes.

I always bear in mind when I think of this subject the perfectly amazing saying of one of the great rabbis of our people: "More beautiful, more meaningful is one hour of good deeds in this world than all the life of the hereafter." And this is a very orthodox rabbi who uttered these words.

And when we think of immortality it is also wise to remember what our Rabbis said, and I quote them so often because they were so wise in the wisdom of life that one should not erect the tombstones over the graves because deeds are their memories. The immortality of a human being lies basically in the influence which survives his life on earth,ⁱⁿ the meaning of his life which he bequeathed after his life to those who survive him.

I said that the problem of how to face death is two-fold: How to face death in ourselves, and how to face the death of others. This is frequently far more difficult than to face our own death - that of children, husband, a wife, parent, brother, sister. And on that subject, too, our faith has much to say to guide us. First of all, we are advised not to mourn too long - not to mourn too long. He who does not mourn at all, said Maimonides, is called a cruel man because it is unnatural not to mourn, but he who mourns too long is casting a reflection upon the justice of the Almighty. For it is God who ordains death even as life. Three days of weeping, seven days for mourning, 30 days for mourning dress, and no more, and then the anniversary of our dear departed.

When King David's beloved child was dying, he mourned and prayed for him, and when the child died, he arose, removed his garments, dressed himself, went into the Temple, partook of his food, and to his amazed courtiers said: This is the way it must be. When the child was yet alive, I prayed. Perhaps God did remain alive, but the child is now dead.

Resignation - one must bless God for the evil in life even as for the good. One must learn to say:

If there is any better philosophy in life, I should like to know it. If strength can come from any other source to sustain one, mankind has not yet found the source or that strength.

The remembrance of our dead should be used for inspiration, for a strengthening of our lives. We must learn to rise upon the rungs of pain. The first man, Adam, when he saw the first sundown, darkness, and he believed, not knowing any better, that the eternal night was setting upon the world - eternal darkness and eternal death - and he was afraid and God told Adam to take two rocks, one called Death and the other called the Shadow of Death, and to strike them and from smiting these rocks of death and the shadow of death, sparks of fire of light must be gotten. A new light was revealed unto Adam and he offered his first prayer: Blessed be God who creates light." There is a beautiful lesson in that for all men to learn how to bring forth light of faith and trust and confidence and hope, and how to wait for the coming of another dawn.

And so, my good friends, we have discussed during these last few weeks the most interesting problems - How to Face Life, How to Face Life's Handicaps, How to Face Life's Successes, How to Face Death. And if you distill all the wisdom of the ages on these subjects and if you distill all the wisdom of our great faith which gives the most illumination on these subjects, you will come to this conclusion: Man should face life as a joyous, confident, co-workers of God seeking to imitate his perfection, relying upon the spirit of God in him to overcome all difficulties, working confidently but humbly with other men to establish God's wisdom on earth and facing life's termination without fear for "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." That is a wholesome philosophy. That is a livable philosophy. That, my good friends, is the philosophy of your faith - of Judaism.

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The Temple December 19th, 1948

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I have no particular longing for immortality; but I am in the stream of life and I cannot escape it. My life began with the life of the universe and can only end with it. It has surged through infinite cycles and phases of being. It will continue its appointed course uninterrupted. All things are alive and in their transformations only pass into new forms and ways of life. Death is the peak of a life-wave, and so is birth. Death and birth are one.

Of all life-forces thought is the most marvelous and baffling. Of it, I am continuously and sharply aware. In my it is my essential self, my unity and my uniqueness. At the close of its present cycle it may combine or it may scatter and reorganize into a new integration. It cannot disappear.

I would not lose my zest for living or my purpose in life, if there were no immortality but I would be deprived of the only intelligent conception of life of which I am capable.

If we were strong enough to face death without sorry we could come to face immortality without joy. For the life we enter through death, if it be conscious life, must of necessity have its pain as well as its peace, its defeats as well as its victories. Death is not the last station of the soul's Calvary. "The righteous have no repose either in this world or in the worlds to come...."

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On immortality

Dec 19, 1948

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Written for an anthology
~~on~~ on immortality, about
1928