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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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When Love Dies, 1951.

WHEN LOVE DIES

*at* The Temple, January 21, 1951

CARAVAN BOND



WHEN LOVE DIES

January 21, 1951

All love, dear friends - All love springs from the need to overcome separateness. Every human being needs at one and the same time to be dependent and independent, to feel protected and yet free and masterful. Every human being, man or woman, young and old, wants fullest self-expression and self-fulfillment as symbols of strength and prestige, and at the same time, they all want affection and a sheltering relationship with others.

Now, this creates many strains and frictions in human experience which frequently lead to tragedy and to the disintegration of the harmony of living. Someone said that "love is the breaking of the tension between the self and the other." True love is that which leads to one-ness without destroying individuality. It is a union with others on the basis of the preservation of individuality. Love as distinct from desire is the affirmation of self and of others. It makes us an integral part of other lives, and at the same time, enriches our own personalities. In true love no one possesses and no one is possessed. One is united and completed. One becomes free in new and emancipating responsibilities. Love is unity, and love is freedom, and such love never dies.

This my dear friends, holds true not only for the love of men and women, but of all forms of love - the love of nature, the love of beauty, the love of virtue, the love of mankind, the love of God. In each and every instance it is the need to overcome separateness, to end aloneness, to unite with a reality which gives us a sense of joyous identification, of confident at-one-ness, as well as a sense of personal worth and dignity.

The opposite of love is hate, and hate and hatred is that which separates and divides. It is that which alienates and disunites. It is the dividing wall. It is that which the Jewish mystic used to call the - the wall of separation. It is that which makes us lonely and embittered.

Religion teaches us to love God "with all our hearts, with all our souls and with all our might." This is another way of saying, to become completely united with God, and in this union to find shelter and protection, as well as significance and esteem. To be one with God, integrally, stamped in His image, is to share in cosmic importance, and at the same time, to find security under His protecting wings. One of the most beautiful of our Psalms, Psalm 90, begins with the phrase:

731 732 "O Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place of old and forever." To dwell in God - that is a form of unity which gives significance to life and confidence. A man's love of God is rewarded by God's love of man, and so the Psalmist declares: "And as for me, the nearness of God is my supreme good. I have made the Lord my refuge."

Now this, my dear friends, is the highest form of religion. It is not based on fear, nor on any expectation of reward. No true love is. It is <sup>not</sup> undermined by adversity or disappointments. No true love is. It transcends all life's unfavorable vicissitudes. All true love does. It is an inner inextinguishable light, as is all true love.

As one of the mystics of Islam said, "It is glory in wretchedness and riches in poverty, and lordship in servitude and satiety in hunger, and freedom in slavery and life in death, and sweetness in bitterness." This kind of love never dies.

And the same religion which teaches us love of God teaches us also love of man, love thy neighbor, love the stranger - yea, love even thine enemy. And this is another way of saying, seek unity with your fellowmen for in that unity you will find protection and fulfillment, the two fundamental needs of human life. It is not in isolation that we realize ourselves, but in the stimulating society of men. Human fellowship makes men free and secure and creative. And the wider its range, the larger is the stage for our life's enterprises.

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Now, this love of man for his fellowmen is not a sentimental love which is blind to the failings and the shortcomings of men. Not at all! It is a recognition that their failings and shortcomings are in no wise different or greater than our own. This insight comes from spiritual maturity and is part of all true love. And when we gain that insight, we are saved from cynicism and disdain or destructive pride. It is a love which understands and makes allowances and surmounts.

A father once came to the great Baalshem and complained to him that his son had forsaken God. "What, Rabbi, shall I do now?" "Why, love him more than ever," was the Baalshem's reply. Now, such a love never dies. It gives shelter and self-esteem.

It is very difficult to love one's enemies, but sometimes men quite unconsciously and unpremeditatedly act in the spirit of such a love as if they were being moved by some invisible hand.

I came across the other day a letter which was written by an Austrian Jew shortly after the second World War. He was in the British Pioneer Corps, and he was attached to a hospital receiving German Nazi wounded. This Austrian Jew had been for nine months in the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald. He had been hung by the wrists to a tree and he had once nearly died of gangrene. He also had reason to believe that his old mother was taken to Poland two years before and perished in a gas chamber. This is his letter:

This is being written in the solitude of a ward in which I am guarding wrecked members of the Herrenvolk. It is so strange a situation that I can hardly describe what I am feeling. Loneliness is perhaps the only word for it. These are men who set out to conquer the world, and they and their kind have done unspeakable things to me and my kind, and I am supposed to hate them with all my strength, and would be right to do so according to recognised standards of human behavior. But I cannot hate, or is it that in the face of suffering hatred is silent? So it happens that the guard (meaning himself) is turned into a nurse, and if a man, from losing too much blood, goes out of his mind and stammers incoherently, I have to talk him to sleep again. And it sometimes happens that men try to hold my hand when I have helped them. That makes me feel lonely.

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Only a few lines. It is midnight, and I am going off duty/having had a busy time with that man who lost so much blood that he went crackers. He had an operation and blood transfusion, and I was the only one able to talk to him. In the end he obeyed my orders instantly with "Jawohl,

Herr Doktor!" Once he said "Sie sind so ein feiner Mensch, and then "Sie sind zu mir wie ein Vater." What shall I make of that? I can only draw one conclusion, which is that I am a terribly bad soldier and I am somehow glad about it.

The man I wrote about has died. The doctors fought for his life as if he were a celebrity.

And this man was somehow glad about it, about what he was doing to the man whom he should hate, but whom he couldn't hate. Of course, he was glad about it. For he had experienced a mystic oneness with the soul of mankind, and he had expressed the deepest and noblest emotions of the soul. He knew affection in a strange place, and he also knew mastery.

And it is so with the love of nature. Somewhere the Indian poet, Tagore, once wrote:

And joy is everywhere. It is in the earth's green covering of grass, in the blue serenity of the sky, in the reckless exuberance of spring, in the severe abstinence of gray winter, in the living flesh that animates our bodily frame, in the perfect poise of the human figure - noble and upright in living, in the exercise of all our powers, in the acquisition of knowledge, in fighting evils, in dying for gains we never can share. Joy is there everywhere. It is superfluous, unnecessary; nay, it very often contradicts the most peremptory behests of necessity. It exists to show that the bonds of law can only be explained by love; they are like body and soul. Joy is the realization of the truth of oneness, the oneness of our soul with the world and of the world-soul with the supreme lover.

Now, this kind of a love for nature and the world and all that is in the world and the fullness thereof really never dies in the heart of those who know it - know it and cultivate it. They may grow old. Their eyes may grow dimmer. Their senses may become less sharp, but the older they get, the more precious and dear to them grow the beautiful shapes of the world from which they know that they must soon depart. Age does not lessen our adoration for the world.

And so, dear friends, it is with the love of men and women. It is oneness, or it is nothing. And if it is oneness, then the quest for unity can never die. "Therefore shall a man leave his mother and his father and shall cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh." One! If it is a love which bestows upon both the man and the

woman the grace of mutual affection and mutual esteem; if it is a love which affirms the personality of each and integrates both in freedom and responsibility, it will be the kind of a love of which the Song of Songs sings: "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it. If a man were to offer the substance of his house for love, it would be utterly contemned."

True love cannot be purchased with substance. Comfort and wealth may reconcile people to a marital situation which would otherwise be intolerable, but it is not love and it need never die, because it was never born. Poverty will not destroy true love. Poverty will severely try and test it. It will create controversy, contention and re-crimination. Love - true love - is not free from periods of unhappiness, and misunderstandings. There will be other matters from time to time which will try and test it - perhaps suspicion, perhaps jealousy.

"There is no love without jealousy." Men and women are human beings, and not angels. Mistakes are made, and sometimes serious blunders, but "Love covereth up all transgression." Many waters will pass over true love, but they will not quench it. If it shelter life in affection, and if it strengthens it in esteem and veneration.

I stress the idea of veneration, of reverence, of respect, of esteem as so important. Religion has always surrounded marriage and family life, as it has surrounded all basic human institutions, with reverential beauty or with the beauty of reverence because they require it for buttressing and for support, for many are the waters which sweep over them. That is true of the whole moral life of man. Religion challenged man to aspire and to reach the heights of moral perfection by reminding him constantly that he is a child of God. "I have said: Ye are Gods, and all of you are children of the most High!" we read in the Psalms. "I have said: Ye are Gods, and all of you are children of the most High." Because man is highly placed in the scheme of things, because he can become one with all the grandeur and majesty of creation, and one with the Creator, man ought not to stoop and degrade himself. In every one of life's activities,

and especially in the fundamental relationships which a man <sup>or a woman</sup> establishes in life or a ~~woman~~, and what is more fundamental than marriage, there must be a quality of reverence, a spiritual dignity.

Unfortunately, there is less and less of it in life today, and as a result, more and more marriages go on the rocks and more and more of them break up in divorce. There is an appalling increase of divorce in our country, and there is an increase of divorce even in our own Jewish people, where in olden days it was very rare. We prided ourselves on the quality of Jewish family life, and the non-Jewish world envied the Jewish family. That is fast disappearing. Many factors are, of course, responsible for it - social and economic. But in my humble judgment a prime factor is the loss in the hearts of men and women of reverence for the institution of marriage, which is another way of saying, the loss of dignity and reverence for life and love.

The collapse which is taking place all around us is due only partially to external and environmental factors. The collapse is from within. It is a collapse of right attitudes. Our age is seeking moral freedom in anarchy and economic security in dictatorship. And that is poisoning the whole spiritual life of the human race. Men and women are clamoring for the right to live their own lives and ignore the fact that without being integrated into the lives of others - the family, the group - and sharing in its responsibilities, no human being can lead a life which is complete and self-fulfilling.

There is no cure for this situation in psychiatry. What we are witnessing is not the malady of a person, but a malady of an age. Our age has <sup>ch</sup>apened life and lowered the status of the individual and his own self-esteem, even while it has helped him to greater physical wellbeing. And religion does not seem strong enough today to correct that situation.

When love dies, my friends, it means that much else has preceded it in death. A reverential attitude towards life and its mandates and its responsibilities; an appreciation of what really constitutes human dependence and human independence. Preceding it in death is also the spirit which valiantly and perseveringly strains to

overcome separateness in life, and longs for true one-ness with all things. The divorce court is the graveyard not so much of incompatibility, but of irreverence and irreligion and of spiritual defection on the part both of men and of women.

The sage of our people, Rabbi Akiba, said that the Hebrew word for man, "ish" and the Hebrew word for woman, "isha" have in common the letters, <sup>Aluf, shin</sup> oluv, shi, which means fire, but they have not in common at the outset the yod he - ya - God. "If they prove themselves worthy, if they merit it, God unites them and they become one. If they do not merit it, a fire consumes them."

Love, my dear friends, like freedom, like all other valuable assets of human life, is something which must be achieved and <sup>nurtured</sup> ~~maintained~~ and sheltered, and it must be reinforced continuously by affection, mutual affection, by esteem, mutual esteem. And it must be braced and refreshed by keeping one's self, man and woman, culturally alert and advancing. To allow one's self to become intellectually and spiritually dowdy and unkempt, is to doom an exciting adventure in living to boredom and stagnation. An interesting home where the crossroads of the world meet, an interesting home, a live home, an eager home, is a congenial atmosphere for enduring love. It is good for the parents. It is wonderful for the children.

True love, my dear friends, really never dies. "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety." It begins in exultation - in youth. It continues in adoration - in middle age. It closes in beatification - in old age. This week, the anniversary of Robert Burns, the great Scotch poet, is being celebrated throughout the English-speaking world. I know of no better way to close than by reading a few lines of Robert Burns:

John Anderson my jo, John  
When we were first acquaint,  
Your locks were like the raven,  
Your bonnie brow was brent;  
But now your brow is bald, John,  
Your locks are like the snow;  
But blessings on your froty pow,  
John Anderson, my jo.

John Anderson, my jo, John,  
We clamb the hill together,  
And many a canty day, John,  
We've had wi' ane another;  
Now we maun totter down, John,  
But hand in hand we'll go,  
And sleep together at the foot,  
John Anderson, my jo.