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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The importance of family, 1951.



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THE IMPORTANCE OF MY FAMILY

December 9, 1951

In speaking to you last Sunday on "The Importance of Myself", you may recall that I said that no man is an island unto himself, that a man is born to a family, and grows up in a community. And/<sup>when</sup> man was first created, according to our sacred tradition, it is said that the Lord declared, "It is not good that a man should be alone. I will make him a help-mate." A man does not fulfill himself in total isolation. A man needs a help-mate to complete him; someone so close to him in devotion and in identification that it will seem as if she were, to use the Biblical phrase again, "bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh"; and to whom he will be in such single-minded affinity that he "will leave his father and his mother", again using the Biblical phrase, "and shall cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh".

The family is the biologic unit of society. But it is more than that. The family is the little world, the microcosm where the individual man, woman and child can find status and importance, which in the great world outside, the great world which they cannot master or control or influence to any degree, cannot give them. A home and a family are small enough to give the individual in it spiritual security, as well as a sense of importance and dignity which are so vital to development of personality, so vital to every human being. If a man does not feel important, he is completely defeated.

It is no wonder then that all those systems of thought and all those governments which seek to subordinate the individual to the authoritarian state or to the class which wish to abolish private property and individual human freedom - all of them attack and denounce the family institution. The philosopher Plato, who advocated a communist society which was to be ruled by philosopher kings, advocated also community of wives and the rearing of children by the state, the abolition of the family.



The Communist Manifesto, which was issued a little over a hundred years ago by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, and which has become the classic pronouncement of revolutionary communism, speaks with contempt of the family.

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.

The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labor, etc.

When the Bolsheviks came into power in the Soviet Union, they tried at first to follow this doctrine, to put it into practice, but life forced them to retreat. It was leading to unspeakable chaos and social corruption, and it was resisted by men and women themselves, and so the government abandoned it - in fact, has since developed many laws to strengthen the family ties. It is clear then that the hard core of individuality, of individual human rights and freedom, and therefore, the strongest defense of the free society is the sound, economically secure and morally undergirded family unit. "My home is my castle." Dictators will never accept this doctrine, never tolerate it, any more than they can tolerate any free human organizations, free social units.

Now, the disintegration of the family in modern society is, therefore, the weakening of the dykes against the onrush of totalitarian philosophies, against communist and fascist control of the lives of men. Family cohesion is a prerequisite of democracy. People very seldom think of it in that way. The family, too, is the carrier of social traditions; the culture of a people is nurtured and transmitted by the family. It is in the family that the children are trained, or should be trained in the obligations of social living, in the prerogatives and in the



disciplines of citizenship. And a mark of the weakening of our family structure is the ease and the readiness with which parents today disencumber themselves of the responsibility of being the moral guides and teachers of their children, and attempt to unload these responsibilities upon the school, upon the church, upon the community. Now, this is unconscious communist procedure. Just as the home has ceased to be the center of material production and the earning of a livelihood, as it was in the days before the industrial revolution, and in its place has come the factory and the plant and the office, removed from the home - so the home unfortunately is ~~now~~ ~~ing~~ ceasing to function as the center of spiritual production, the moulding of character, and the cultivation of moral habits. But whereas individual production in the home can be profitably replaced by mass production in a factory, there can be no mass production of character, no assembly line for the manufacture of personality. It must be done, character-building, personality development, moral training, must be done in the intimate, close, immediate and unfailing circle of family life. The loving heart must speak the loving heart. One affectionate and sympathetic spirit, earnest with the solicitude of love, must enkindle another. The subtly pervading example must be there at all times. "Mouth to mouth do I speak with him, manifestly and not in dark speeches, and he beholds the image of God." This is how truth, how revelation, is transmitted from God to the prophet Moses, from parent to child - direct, immediate, constant.

"And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children. And thou shalt speak of them when thou sittest in the house, when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down and when thou risest up," we are admonished. But what is it that "thou shalt teach unto thy children"? Why, the commandments of life, the ordinances of a social being, the duties and responsibilities of a human being in society, that "thou shalt teach diligently unto thy children". "Thou shalt teach!" It is not enough to give our children an education in a school or in a college or in a religious



school a few hours a week. It is a day-by-day ministry in the home, to instruct, to guide, to correct, to train - always in love, but always with earnestness and firmness.

"Hearken, my son, unto the instruction of thy father, and do not forsake the teaching of thy mother," we read in the Book of Proverbs. There is talk here of instruction of the father and of the teaching of the mother. We have lost, I am afraid, the conception of the home as a school, a school for character. From time to time, men and women come to me, as I am sure they come to all ministers and rabbis, to share with me the burden of their hearts. Their children have gotten themselves into some great trouble. They have been dismissed from school for some moral delinquency; they have been caught in the toils of the law for one misdeed or another; they are breaking up their home in the divorce court; their children are neglecting them shamefully in their old age. I listen to them. It is very seldom that one can really help them, and I suppose in coming to a minister the chief purpose is really to unburden themselves and ease the crushing burden of their lives. They are frequently very bitter, unhappy. They blame this one or that one, bad companions, other people, the world, the age in which we live - they blame everyone, but I am afraid, not themselves.

But in many instances - not in all, of course - not in all, by any means - but in many instances, it is a case of "mea culpa" - mine is the fault. They neglected the moral education of their children in their youth; they were too busy; they were too preoccupied in business or in pleasures; they left that responsibility to others, the rearing of their children - to a maid at home, to the school, to the church - they were never teachers of their children, never instructors for their children. They had not prepared themselves for that role. Frequently, they indulged them or over-indulged them, and I am afraid, due only to the fact that they wanted to indulge themselves. It was an easy-going way of self-indulgence, that of never saying "no" to their children. They made it easier for themselves. Many of



them are actually terrorized by their children. The poet Longfellow has somewhere a poem about "The Children's Hour". Our age is "The Children's Age". Many come to understand rather late, I am afraid, the tyranny of children, if uncurbed. Children can be without pity in their selfishness and without gratitude.

"He who withholds correction of his children is the moral enemy of his children." Now, correction doesn't mean severity and correction doesn't mean hardness of spirit at all. What we are talking about is not severity, certainly not indulgence, but correction through love and in justice. And what children need most, of course, is not a critic, as someone truly said, but a model. You cannot teach a child the way that he should go if you go another way yourself.

And it is the kind of instruction that we give our children which ultimately in most instances, though of course not in all, determines whether the children will be the greatest joy of our lives or the greatest torment. Someone once asked my blessed father, a scholar in Jerusalem, the real meaning of the rabbinic phrase, which is rather difficult to understand, "A son is the knee of his father." That's a rather strange saying, instead of saying the son is the heart of his father, the eyes - the son is the knee of the father. And my father, blessed be his memory, said, "The knee is the only limb of a man which can make a man tall or make him very small." It is our children which make us tall or which make us very small.

"Her children rise up and call her blessed," we read in that perfectly beautiful 21st chapter of the Book of Proverbs. Why do her children rise up and call her blessed? Because she is worthily and honorably employed in doing the work of her world. "She worketh willingly with her hands, and she looketh well to the ways of her household and eateth not the bread of idleness. She ~~stretcheth~~ stretcheth out her hand to the poor. Strength and dignity are hers. . . She openeth her mouth with wisdom and the law of kindness is on her lips." No wonder her children rise up and call her blessed. She has given them a blessed example, the inspiration of a



gracious model, a reliable and trustworthy compass to guide them through all the vicissitudes, all the storms of life.

The family is important, not because it stems from important ancestors. I am not speaking here of family pride. Someone truly said, "The man who has not anything else to boast of but his illustrious ancestors is like a potato - the only good belonging to him is underground." Ancestry is important if it challenges one to emulate the example of worthy ancestors, to do like unto them. To come from good stock physically and spiritually is a great asset. Family background and family tradition are important, not because of the dead, but because the living seeks to emulate the example of the ancestors, follow in their footsteps, live by their light.

It is said in our tradition that on the 15th of Ab,<sup>and</sup> on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, after the High Priest had completed his act of atonement and the day was then turned over to joy and celebration in ancient Palestine - on these two days, the 15th of Ab and on Yom Kippur, the daughters of Jerusalem used to walk out in white garments which they borrowed in order not to put to shame anyone who had none, and they came out and danced in the vineyards, and exclaiming all the time while they were dancing, "Young man, lift up thine eyes and see what thou choosest for thyself. Do not set thine eyes on beauty, but set thine eyes on good family." Well, I wouldn't go so far, but certainly good family is very important.

In "Iphigenia auf Tauris" the great German poet, Goethe, said, "Happy is the man who thinks of his ancestors with pride, who likes to tell of their deeds and greatness and rejoices to feel himself linked to the end of their goodly chain. That, I think, is the proper way to look upon family. But let's not brag too much of our families, for it makes for snobbery, and if you go back far enough in any family, you will find there are plenty of fools and knaves and ~~blackguards~~ blackguards and horse thieves.



A family grows in social importance and grows in importance to those who live in it. When it practices the virtues of good, cooperative life, when it prepares its youth for responsible citizenship in a free society, when it becomes a place of refuge and refreshment for the tired hearts of men and women, when it is, as the rabbis put it, "a migdash me-at" - a little sanctuary dedicated to the living God.

Now, our teachers gave us some very sound advice on how to build such a family and such a home, and I believe that all modern psychology and all the psycho-analytical erudition and researches of our day have added very little to their vast wisdom. Our sages advocated early marriage, and they urged that children should be assisted by their parents financially to make possibly early marriage. They advocated marriage for love, and not for money. "He who marries a woman for money, they will have children of whom they will not be proud." For naturally, the example set in the home is such as will not contribute to the spiritual development into excellence of their offspring.

A man should marry into a good family. A man should sell all that he has, say the rabbis, in order to enable his son or his daughter to marry into a family where there are traditions of social service, of responsibility to the community. Men and women should marry within the same age level. "An old man who married a young woman," say the rabbis, "the Lord will not forgive him." What is equally important is that he probably will never forgive himself.

And in marriage, above all else, there should be honor, mutual honor, mutual reverence. Marriage is a sacrament, as God enjoins man and woman. Always should a man be very careful about the honor of his wife, said the rabbis, for no blessing comes into the home of the man except through and because of his wife. He who loves his wife as himself and honors her more than himself and trains his sons and his daughters in the way that they should go and he marries them close to their marriagable age, concerning him the Bible says, "Thou shalt know that thy tent will be in peace."



Men and women must exercise all the gifts of their hearts and their minds to keep their home together, functioning properly, to adjust all their difficulties, to solve all their differences, and every home has its differences and its difficulties - for all human relationships are, in the last analysis, a question of mutual adjustment. To adjust these difficulties and to solve these differences in great heartedness and humility, so as not to disrupt what God has joined together. Divorce is an evil. It is permitted by Jewish law, but it is highly deprecated. "He who divorces his wife," say the rabbis, "even the altar in the Temple sheds tears over him."

A democratic home - I spoke of the family as a bulwark of a democratic society - but the family itself must be the example in practice of the democratic way of life. No dictatorship in the home, either of husband or of wife or of child. No exploitation of one for the sake of the other. Sacrifice is not exploitation. Nor need there be needless sacrifices. Each member of the home is important, and each life is as intrinsically as important as the other. Parents frequently make foolish sacrifices for their children. No selfishness in the home - no favoritism in the home. Democracy - give and take - mutual responsibility - mutual helpfulness - prompted by a sense of love, not calculated give and take. Reverence, love - children more than anyone else must be taught this principle of what is involved in a democratic life in the home.

The Ten Commandments sets aside one commandment directed not so much to the father or to the mother, but to the children. "Honor thy father and thy mother." That is the most important as it is the most difficult.

Comradeship and cooperation - that is what preserves the family - that is what makes the family important. Comradeship and cooperation. The Jewish people prided itself through its long history upon the high quality, the spiritual nature of its family life. It served as the example to the world. And others not of our



faith would point with a certain degree of envy to the Jewish home and to Jewish family life, its cleanness, its character of fine dignity. Thank God much of that tradition still prevails in our midst, but I am afraid some of it is beginning to give way to the influences around us.

We are falling in line with the process of disintegration which one sees everywhere and which is reflected so tragically in the appalling record of divorces in our courts. It will be a sad day for the Jewish family and the preservation of the Jewish people if that process continues unchecked. And the way to check that process is to do exactly what our rabbis have counseled us to do, to become, we father and mothers, to become again what we should be - instructors, teachers in our homes, to prepare ourselves for that role, not to be intimidated or terrorized away from our responsibilities, not to be persuaded by children who say, "Well, everybody's doing it, and therefore, I should be doing it." We are cruel to them, faithless to our duty when we disencumber ourselves of the responsibility of being teachers of the moral life in our home. We must learn to say no; we must learn to insist upon the yes. In the long run this will be a blessing ~~xxx~~ to our children, and our children will rise up and call us blessed.

The family is very important in society today, far more important than the community, far more important than government, far more important than the state. The ultimate source and reservoir of your happiness, of your peace of mind, of your self-respect, of your dignity as a human being, is in your home.







(c) If Bolshak. first tried to follow this doctrine <sup>in practice</sup> but he forced them to retreat - unspeakable chaos - corruption - resisted

(d) But it is clear that the hard core of individual integrity and rights & freedom - & i.e. the strongest defense of a free society is the sound, secure, and usually undisturbed family - "my home is my castle" - Dict. cannot tolerate individual differences - any form of

4) The disintegration of the F. in modern life is the weakening of the disciplines against the onrush of total. phil. & Commun. - or faint ~~disintegration~~ control of the lives of men. ~~thus the Fam~~ cohesion - is a prerequisite of democracy!

5) The F. is the carrier of social traditions. The culture of a people is nurtured and transmitted by the F. It is in the F. that children are trained - as should be trained - in the obligations of social living - in the prerogatives & disciplines of

6) <sup>as Durkheim</sup> mark the weakening of our F. structure - is the loss and reversal - with which parents to-day discover the responsibility of being the moral guides of their children and attempt to inculcate them in the School, the Church or the community.

- There is increasing communitarian <sup>procedure,</sup> ~~structure~~  
- Just as the home has ceased to be the center of material production and the earning of a livelihood as it was in the days before the industrial revolution - and its place has come the factory, the plant, the office - <sup>the home, unfortunately,</sup> is closing to function as the center of sp. production - and the molding of character - & the cultivation of moral habits - But, I am afraid there can be no mass-production of character - no assembly-line for the maintenance ~~construction~~ of personality!







bad companions - ~~the~~ other people - the world - the one as which is  
in him - every one but themselves.

But in many instances - not in all - not in all - it is  
a case, "mea culpa" - they neglected the moral educat. of their  
children in childhood. Too busy - Too preoccupied - left that  
resp. to others - the maid - the school - the church - They  
were never teachers, instructors. They had not prepared as -  
They indulged them - an easy-going indulgence of never saying  
no to their children, and so making it easier for themselves  
- Many of them were actually frustrated by their children. Displeased  
with "the Children's Hour". One of - is "the Children's Eye".

Many come to understand, rather late, that children the tyranny  
of children, if unchecked; children can be without pity in their  
selfishness - and without patience.

(a) Our greatest Torment - Joy - 2/12/13 (1913) (1913)  
- He who withholds correction - is the mortal enemy of his child

Use the severity - not indulgence - but loving and just!

- And what children need <sup>more</sup> than the critic is the model  
"You cannot teach a child the way that he shall go - if you go another way."  
Her children rise up and call her blessed - Why? She is worthy  
and humbly employed in doing the work, her place, she works  
willingly with her hands - she looks at the way, she has <sup>the</sup> strength and wisdom  
Strength & dignity are her doings ... the growth her worth with  
wisdom and the law of kindness in her life.

No wonder - her children rise up & call her blessed. She has  
given them a blessed example - an inspiration & a practical model -  
- a constant companion to guide them through the temptations of the



8/ My fam. is important, not bec. it stems from important ancestors 15

"The man who has no anything else to boast of but his illustrious  
ancestors is like a potato - the only good belonging to him is underground"

Ancestry is important - if it challenges one to emulate their noble  
example - TO come from good stock - <sup>phys. & spirit</sup> is a great asset;

Family background and traditions are important -

(a) 15th + 20th - daughters of Jerusalem - used to walk out in white garments  
when they bowered in order not to put to shame any one who had none.  
They came out and danced - on the vineyards - gathering, at the same time: "Young  
man, lift up thine eyes and see what thou choosest for thyself: Do not  
set thine eyes on beauty - but set thine eyes on good family!"

Well I wouldn't go so far - but certainly good family -  
is very important -

Goethe: "Iphigenia auf Tauris": Happier the man who thinks  
of his ancestors with pride, who likes to feel of their deeds and greatness,  
and rejoices to feel himself linked to the end of their godly chain."

9/ But lets not brag too much of our families - that makes for  
a feeling of snobbery - If you go back far enough in every  
family you will find, <sup>there</sup> plenty of fools, knaves, black guards  
and low-things:

10/ A family grows in <sup>social</sup> importance & to those in it - when it produces  
the virtues of the old, cooperation etc - when it prepares the youth  
children for citizenship in a free society - when it <sup>seems to be</sup> a place  
of refuge & refreshment for the hearted men - when it is a  
sanctuary, the living God







14). A democ. home - no dictatorship - no exploitation - no (7)  
paranoia - no selfishness + no needless over fees - Each member  
is important - this is her life intrinsically as a whole.

(a) Children should be taught to understand it - only one kind  
art in 10 Commandments - 320 - most important & most different.

(b) Comradship & Cooperation - this will make your family  
important and blessed.

