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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Five tests of character, 1952.



## FIVE TESTS OF CHARACTER

November 23, 1952

405

In the weekly reading of our Torah in our synagogues, we completed this last week the story of the first Jew, the story of Abraham, who died in a good old age and was gathered to his people. The Bible says that Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac, and of course, it was not of physical or material things that the Bible speaks. And it is, therefore, interesting to inquire just exactly what did Abraham give unto Isaac. What was the legacy which Abraham left to his descendants? What were the outstanding qualities of this first Jew? What were the attributes of his character? What was his vision and his hope which he transmitted to his children? Abraham had lived a long life, had seen and experienced much. Just what was it that enabled this first pilgrim of the ages, this first pilgrim of the human spirit, to found a religion and to found a nation which has endured for nearly 4,000 years?

Well, let's look at the story of his life as it is recorded in the Bible, and see what the sacred biographers who wrote Abraham's story seemed of sufficient importance to note, to call attention to, in the telling of his story. There are full 13 chapters of the Book of Genesis devoted to the story of Abraham.

Well, the first important fact which is recorded about Abraham was that he left his native land, Babylon, and wandered away into a far country, Canaan, on the distant shores of the Mediterranean so that he could practice his new-found faith unmolested. Abraham rejected the idol worship of his day, of the world about him, the world in which he was born and reared. Abraham recognized the One True God, the Creator of the Universe, the God of all mankind, and in order to escape persecution and possible death, he became an exile in a foreign land. The new vision which had come to him was over-powering; the new insights which he gained proved so compelling that he was prepared to leave his home, his native land, his kith and kin, face the dangers of a new world, and the hostility which always confronted strangers in a new world. He was content to alter his entire way of life, just so he could be true to himself and just so



he could teach that new truth which had come to him to others.

Now, Abraham transmitted this tradition of pilgrimage, this tradition of "Get thee out of thy home, of thy native land," for the sake of a great ideal. He transmitted it to his descendants.

Those people who prefer to remain where they are, not to inconvenience themselves, and even when they have found a new, revolutionary truth, prefer to hide their light under a bushel so as not invite criticism or persecution - such people are never numbered among the pilgrims of the ages who open up new continents for the mind and the spirit of man.

Of Abraham the Bible says:

"And Abraham journeyed and he continued to journey all the time to the Negev." And an eminent Jewish mystic, Shner Zalman, commenting on the phase "He kept on traveling, he kept on journeying," said that he kept on traveling

"from one level to a higher level, from one plane to a still higher plane", of life and thought and experience.

Now, the history of Abraham's descendants, the history of the Jewish people, has been a record of pilgrimage - from place to place, from country to country, never hiding their light, never surrendering conviction to convenience, even when it meant inviting persecution and hostility.

In a few days our beloved country will celebrate Thanksgiving Day, and Thanksgiving Day recalls another group of Pilgrims, Pilgrims who prided themselves, by the way, of being the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who likewise left their native land to come to the forbidding and hostile shores of the Atlantic, to a wilderness, to endure trials and tribulations, most of them to perish within the first year of their arrival upon these shores just so they could be true to themselves, to the new light which had come to them, just so they could worship God according to the light that was in them.



And these Pilgrims, too, because they dared to become pilgrims for the sake of the truth, helped to found a great nation and to establish a great tradition for us and for mankind.

And so here perhaps is the first quality of character that was characteristic of the first Jew, which he hoped to transmit to his descendants - the quality of daring to adventure into the unknown, into danger, for the sake of truth! Then the biographers of Abraham further tell us that Abraham was a man of peace. The shepherds of Lot, his nephew, and his own shepherds were in the habit of grazing their flocks on the same land and the land, as the Bible says, could not support both of them. There was not enough grazing ground in the immediate vicinity for both the flocks of Abraham and the flocks of Lot, and here was a real struggle for "Lebensraum"; here was a real cause for war. One wanted and demanded and claimed, and the other possessed. "And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham's cattle and those of Lot's cattle," says the Bible. There was strife, which tended to break up the tribe and lead to bloodshed.

But how did Father Abraham resolve this difficulty? How did he break through this impasse? "Then Abraham said to Lot," we read in the Bible, "'Let there be no strife between you and me, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.'" And Lot chose the fertile lands of the Jordan Valley and went there, and Abraham dwelt in the land of Canaan."

Abraham was a man of peace. He was prepared to make concessions for the sake of peace. He was prepared to take risks for the sake of peace. Abraham knew that there was room on God's earth for everybody, and Abraham bequeathed this love of peace to his descendants. "Shalom aleichem." That's the Hebrew greeting through the ages. "Peace be to you."



And the Jewish people were the first to proclaim to the world and to project for mankind the vision of international peace. "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares." These are the words of Isaiah and of Micah, "and their knives into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation or learn war anymore." And that vision was given to mankind at a time when war was looked upon as the noblest occupation of men and of nations - legitimate, divinely sanctioned - and the right to conquer the possessions of a ~~neighboring~~ <sup>neighboring</sup> people or a distant people was a right sanctioned by nature and God.

Rabbi Eliezer of the Talmud declared: "Great is peace, for all the prophets are to do nothing more than to place in the mouth of every human being in the world, Shalom." And so, here is another quality, another attribute of character of the first Jew - a lover of peace, a seeker of peace.

Well, what were some of the other qualities. Abraham was a lover of peace but he was not a pacifist. If need be, he was prepared to fight to protect the innocent. If need be, he was prepared to fight to protect the right. The land which his nephew, Lot, had chosen, the land of Sodom and Gemorrah near the Jordan Valley, was attacked by marauding chieftains who carried away much booty, many captives, including Lot himself, and one who escaped brought the news to Abraham. And what did Abraham do? Did he say, I'm sorry but I can't do anything about it? I do not believe in resisting evil, or, it is not my concern. The Bible says: "When Abraham heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he let forth his trained men, 318 of them, and went out in pursuit as far as Dan, and he overtook them and routed them and brought back all the goods and all the captives." Well, did Abraham do all this for the sake of a reward. The King of Sodom said to him, when Abraham came back with the booty and the captives and all that had been plundered - the King of Sodom in deep appreciation said to Abraham: "Give me the captives but take the goods for yourself as your reward. You have done a mighty deed. You endangered your lives and the lives of your followers to help us. We want to reward you for



it." But Abraham said to the King of Sodom, so reads the Bible, "I have sworn to the Lord God, Most High, Maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, lest you say, 'You have made Abraham rich.'"

Now, this quality of fighting for one's right without expecting any reward - that's another precious quality which Abraham bequeathed to his descendants.

"To perform a "Mitzvah", to do what is right, but you feel you ought to do for its own sake to study, not for the sake of making the study a spade with which to dig or a crown with which to exalt one's self, but to study for its own sake - that became a principle of Jewish ethics. "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like unto those who serve their master, God, without the expectation of any reward."

And what else was typical of the character of Abraham? What is really another test of character? Let's use the word, hospitality, which is a beautiful word but which means much more than inviting guests to your table, to your board for the sake of sociability, of friendship. The Bible and Abraham knew of a much higher degree of hospitality. Abraham, we are told in the Bible, kept his tent at the crossroads open in all directions so that wanderers and wayfarers and the weak from the dust of the desert could come to his tent to find shelter and rest and food. And one day, records the Bible, Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent and he lifted up his eyes and saw in the distance three men approaching, strangers seemingly. Well, Abraham did not wait until they came to his tent and asked for hospitality to the stranger. The Bible says:

"Abraham ran out to meet them and begged them."

"Please do not pass by the humble dwelling place of your servant." "Here is water to wash your tired feet. Here is a tree under whose shadow you may rest, and I will fetch you food." And the story records that Abraham, after the men had rested, gave them food made out of fine meal and meat from a calf, tender and good, and he set



it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. Abraham did not question them who they were, where they were going. Perhaps they were men of evil intent. Abraham saw three human beings who had been wandering across the burning sands of the desert and who undoubtedly were in need of help, of rest, of food, and he gave it to them, without hesitation, eagerly, without questioning. What gracious hospitality to strangers! This was not throwing a morsel grudgingly as charity to the poor. Here was the open hand and the open heart. Here was a glad sharing of what you have. Here was a case where you anticipated the want of man. Here was a case of the love of your fellowman.

An interesting passage in the Talmud where a Jew, Job, says: "What did Abraham do that I didn't do? Why is he so acclaimed and called the beloved of God?" And the answer which was given to him was: "How long will you praise yourself Job?"

He didn't anticipate their want. This noble tradition of hospitality, of "tsdokoh", which means more than charity, Abraham transmitted to his children. Jews have always prized

"the bringing of so-journers, of wayfarers into your home, of serving men and providing for their needs in dignity, as one human being to another.

Well, there is another distinctive character trait which the biographers of Abraham found in him and to which they call attention, Abraham's uncompromising sense of justice. If justice in later times became the battle cry of the prophets of Israel

"thou shalt pursue justice all the time", and if justice became the key word in the ethics of Judaism - the fountainhead of that inspiration is the first Jew, Abraham.

I read you the story this morning from the 18th chapter of the Book of Genesis. God determined to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gemorrah because the inhabitants of them had become so sinful, they had stooped so low that they had reached the level of the beast. They deserved to be destroyed. No question about it! But Abraham drew near unto the Lord and said: "Shall not the God of justice do justice Himself?"



"Perhaps you will find in the city of Sodom and Gomorrah 50 righteous men. Will you not for the sake of these 50 save the city? Why should all be destroyed?" And as you follow the reading of that chapter, there were no 50. There were no 45, there were no 40, there were no 30, there no 20, there were no 10! But Abraham pleaded for a city of sinners because he wanted a moral principle to be safeguarded. There is one moral law which is binding upon all, and binding even upon God! The only hope of the world and of mankind is the reign of the moral law.

Upon three things, said the Rabbis, the world stands firm: Upon justice, upon truth, upon peace!

And finally, there is another dominant trait which the biographers of Abraham found in his character. Abraham was prepared to make maximum sacrifices for his faith. The Rabbis said that Abraham was tested ten times to find out whether he would withstand trial for the sake of his conviction, and he withstood them all. The Bible, of course, tells of the greatest of these trials. "And it came to pass after these things that God said unto Abraham: Take thou thy son, thy only son, him who thou lovest, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice upon one of the mountains which I will show thee." The son that Abraham prayed for and hoped for, the son of his old age, the son which was to carry on his name, his tradition to all future ages, the light of his life - he was to take that son and offer him as a sacrifice. And without any hesitation, without any argumentation, Abraham rose up early in the morning and took his son, Isaac, with him and began his journey to the mountain, Mount Moriah. And when - you know the story - it's one of the famous stories of all time - when he was about to put forth his hand with a knife and to kill his son, the voice from heaven cried out: "Put not forth your hand against the lad and do him no hurt, for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man in that thou didst not keep away thine son, thine only son, from Me."



That tradition of being prepared to make maximum sacrifices of one's faith, Abraham transmitted to his descendants. The Jewish people endured the furies of the centuries - persecutions, exiles, inquisitions, pogroms, gas chambers - and remained steadfast so that they could pray as they did pray in the Dark Ages:

"O, God, look down from heaven and behold. We are become a scorn and a derision among the nations. We are like unto sheep led to the slaughter to be murdered, to be destroyed, to be smitten, to be slain. Nevertheless we have not forgotten Thy name. Please do not forget us."

Here, then, my good friends, are tests of character, qualities of character which were predominant in the first Jew, Abraham, called the "beloved of God" and called the "beloved of God" not only by Jews, but also by all the Mohammedans of the world for they trace their ancestry, too, to Abraham, to Ishmael. The quality of daring to smash idols and to embark upon a spiritual adventure for the sake of one's new-found faith; a love of peace, a love of consideration, a love of yielding at times upon what you had believed to be your unquestionable right for the sake of "shalom", peace; courage, nevertheless, to fight when it is necessary, in defense of the right, principally of the right of other people, and to fight for the truth, not in order to be rewarded but for its own sake, disinterest in piety, disinterest in loyalty, disinterest in love; hospitality of the spirit which means love of man, really; the championing of the principle of justice for all men, even for sinners, even for wrong-doers; and the willingness to make sacrifices, if need be, the supreme sacrifices of life, for the sake of one's convictions. Here are tests of character, the highest ideals of humanity, decisive tests, critical tests, and we who are the descendants of Abraham ought to from time to time, apply these tests to ourselves to see how we match up to them. Are we ready when necessary to sacrifice convenience for conviction, or is our religion entirely a matter of convenience? Do we love peace in our relation, one with another, in our business relations, in our circle and group, do we love peace strongly enough



to forgive, to overlook, to be conciliatory, to forego false pride and face-saving? Have we the courage to stand up and fight for the truth, fight for the right, live for it, even if there is no reward in the fighting for us personally? How hospitable are we, really? Are we content merely to give grudgingly some charity once or twice a year? Does that discharge all of our obligations to the principle of "Love thy neighbor as thyself"? Or does our heart open in hospitality to all men? Do we go out of our way, seeking an opportunity to serve, to help, not always be giving, but sometimes by word, by counsel, by a show of friendliness? Do we stand up for the rights of men, not merely for our own rights, but for the rights of the stranger, the colored man, the foreigner, for all men who are wronged?

And finally, how ready are we to make sacrifices. Thank God, we are not called upon to make these supreme sacrifices frequently which tear a life apart, but in every situation in life, daily life, frequently we are called upon to make sacrifices which test our sincerity, the sincerity of our faith, of our religion, of our way of life! Are we ready to make those sacrifices? If we are, and if we have these other qualities to larger or smaller degree - for none of us can be as perfect as Abraham - we are the true descendants of Abraham, the children of a spirit. It is a great pride to know that at the headwaters of our faith is the dawn, the very beginning of our history as people and of our faith, there stood this majestic human being, Abraham, who possessed these beautiful qualities in such an extraordinary measure and who gave a light and a meaning to his descendants throughout all subsequent ages. Amen.







where always confronted the stranger - (No one consistent to change) (2)  
his ~~whole~~ way of life - just so he could be true to himself - and  
to teach his truth to others -

Abi. transmitted this tradition of judgment for the sake of a  
great ideal - to his descendants -

Those who prefer to remain where they are - not to disturb  
the - not to be inconvenienced - and even when they have found  
a new, a novel truth, prefer to hide their light under a  
bushel, so as not to attract critics or persecution -  
these people - never ~~became~~ <sup>remained among</sup> the pilgrims of the ages who  
open new continents for the mind or spirit of man.

Of Abi. at the Kith nap - 1151 1161 1171 1181 1191 1201  
And Abi. journeyed - from one and on still toward the "Nepes"  
and a J. mythe - (Shimon Zelman) - 1211 1221 1231 1241

The hist. of Abi. descendants - has been a long ~~series~~ <sup>record</sup> of pilgrimages  
- from place to place - never hiding their light - never  
surrendering conviction to convenience -

Thanks, my Day ~~series~~ <sup>results</sup> other pilgrims - who  
prided less upon being the 1st descendants of Abi. - who ~~had~~ <sup>had</sup>  
left their native land - to come to a ~~place~~ <sup>place</sup> of hiding & ~~hiding~~  
wilderness - as the Hart-sher, the R. H. - just so they  
could be true to God - and worship God according to the light which  
was theirs.

And they ~~too~~ <sup>helped to found</sup> a great nation and a  
great tradition.



3. The Biographer of Ah - further told us that he was a man of peace, the shepherds, Lot his nephew - and his own shepherd were grazing their flocks on the same land, and the land could not support both, them - for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together -

There was a real struggle for 'Lehem-saun'! - a real saun billi! 'And, there was strife bet. the shepherds, & their cattle and their Lot's cattle'.

How did Ah. resolve the impasse!

Then A. said to Lot: "Let there be no strife bet. you and me - for we are one Kinsmen! Is not the whole land before you - Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right. If you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." Lot chose the western valley, and Abram dwelt in the land, Canaan.

Ah. was a man, peace - He was prepared to make concessions for the sake, Peace - to take notice for peace's sake & There is room enough on the earth for everybody!

Ah. bequeathed ~~that~~ the love, peace to his descendants. and with his idealization, he -  
was as desiring  
Jews were first to project - (1 x 11)

R. Eliezer declared: בן יצחק ילדו של אברהם  
אלה הם ילדיו

4. What were some, the other qualities, Character, Father the 2

Ah. was not a prospector? If need be he was prepared to fight to protect the innocent - to defend the right

The land where Lot his Kinsman dwelt, <sup>Sodom & Gomorrah</sup> was attacked by wandering chieftains - and Lot, his <sup>brother</sup> taken captive and all his goods and their possession



And no who escaped came + ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~the~~

What did Ab. do? Too bad! I do not believe in visiting evil!

or it is not my concern!

"When Ab. heard that his Kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, 318, them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. - He overtook them and routed them and brought back all the goods and all the captives.

Did Ab. do all this for the sake, reward?

The King of Sodom said: G. is on the captives - but take the goods for yourself.

But Ab. said to the King, Sodom: "I have sworn to the Lord God that I will not take a thread or a shoe-thing or any thing that is yours, lest you say, 'I have made Abram rich'."

This quality of fighting for what is right without expectation of reward - another precious quality which Ab. he wanted for his descendants.

וְלֹא יָרָד מֵעֵינָיו וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלָאִשְׁתּוֹ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלָאִשְׁתּוֹ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ

5. And what else? Hospitality -

וְלֹא יָרָד מֵעֵינָיו וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלָאִשְׁתּוֹ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלָאִשְׁתּוֹ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ

- Strangers - Hot - drink - Perfume

וְלֹא יָרָד מֵעֵינָיו וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלָאִשְׁתּוֹ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְלָאִשְׁתּוֹ יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאִשְׁתּוֹ

328 - Water to wash your feet - But even the shadows

of the fire - Food - the fine meal - meat from a calf tender

and food - set it before them - "and he stood by them under the tree while they ate"

What precious hospitality to strangers! No charity!



is a moral judgment given - the pen heart - the pen heart.  
This glad sharing, what you have - to anticipate want - To look man!

② (Job) 2, 11 וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיָחִיד אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶת-יֹסֵף  
לִי הָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיָחִיד אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶת-יֹסֵף

③ This noble tradition ab. transmitted the children  
Jews have always prized this practice of אֲבוֹתָנוּ - אֲבוֹתָנוּ in highest sense - of anticipating human want and providing for it - in dignity

6. Another distinctive character - trait - the biography, Ab. - draw attention to his unimpaired sense of justice - if justice is in later times the battle-cry, the prophets, Isaiah - Isaiah the fountain-head, their inspiration is in the first Jew! Ab. God determined to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom & Gomorrah. Their sin is very grave - violated every moral law-hearts.

'But Abraham was (unto the Lord) and said: (Isaiah) (18, 23-23)  
I in the name, justice Ab. was prepared to challenge even God; shall not the Judge, all the earth do regard? - On moral law - bridging after all men - bridging even after God! -

The only hope the world - is the region of moral law!  
אֱלֹהִים הָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיָחִיד אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶת-יֹסֵף וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶת-יֹסֵף



7/ And finally - the readiness to sacrifice <sup>to with stand Tyranny</sup> for the sake of our faith. לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - (6)

לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו

(a) Endured <sup>Ten Tribes</sup> ~~tribes~~ the antenae -

(b) Dark Ages! לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו

a scorn and a derision - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו

לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו  
 - called the "beloved, God" also Karay

8/ These qualities <sup>character</sup> were predominant in First Jew - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו

(1) Sp. Adventure (2) <sup>conviction</sup> Love of Race (3) Courage to fight for the Right and to fight for it ~~without the expectation~~ for its own sake

(4) Hospitality and love of man - (5) the Championing of Justice - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו

and (6) the willingness to make sacrifices - if need be the supreme sacrifices of life for the sake of your country

9/ How are Tests, Character! <sup>highest ideas, humanity</sup> לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו

Applied to ourselves - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו - לרדוף אחר אמונתנו עד מותנו