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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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What is God?, 1953.

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## WHAT IS GOD?

February 8, 1953

The Bible, my dear friends, begins with the words, "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the earth." God is seen as the Creator of the Universe. Our Ten Commandments begin with the words, "I am the Lord, Thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Here, God is seen as working in history.

In the Book of Psalms we read, "Taste ye, and see that God is good." Here God is experienced in the personal life of the individual, and it is by these three ways - God as Creator, God as working in human history, and God in the personal lives of men and women - it is by these three ways that the founders of our faith arrived at their conclusion that there is a God.

It is, my dear friends, by a long, long process of groping and reasoning and vigorous intellectual speculation that the pathfinders of our faith came to this conclusion. The prophets and seers of Israel, who carved a new highway for mankind by giving it the vision of One Universal, spiritual and ethical God - these prophets and seers of Israel were not men given to blind, irrational faith. They were not obscurantists who did not know the disciplines of reasoned thought or the demands of cold logic. Our Bible records not merely the faith of the believer, but also the skepticism and the denials of the unbelievers, of those who said "There is no God," of those who denied either the existence of God or of the possibility of having any real knowledge of God or who denied that there was any real meaning or purpose in the universe. The Bible records the contemplations of those men who, basing their conclusions on what they observed, about them said, "Vanity of anything, everything, all things are vanity."

There were sceptics and cynics and agnostics and atheists in ancient Israel, and in all subsequent ages, just as they are today, and these men did voice their thoughts and argued their positions. The scholars and seers and sages who fashioned our faith confronted these views and these opinions, challenged them and contradicted them, and

in the full knowledge of all contrary opinion and their reasoning, they proceeded to formulate their religious views which we now call Judaism.

These founders of our faith who over a period of nearly 1,000 years, and more especially during the great creative centuries of the prophets, between the 8th and the 6th century before the common era - these men evolved the basic tenets of our faith and they were not unaware of the limitations of human knowledge, and therefore, of their knowledge about God. In fact, they called attention to this fact time and time again.

"Can you, by searching, find out God?"

"Can you ever really get to the limits of the Almighty?" The great prophet, Second Isaiah, contemplating the universe about him and meditating upon the experiences of life and of all its mystery and bafflement, comes to the conclusion, "Verily, Thou art a God who hidest Thyself."

God is beyond the full reach of the mind of man, and man cannot always understand God's government of His universe. "It is the glory of God to conceal things." His infinite wisdom cannot be contained in the limited vessel of the human intellect. They knew it and they were humble, even in the strength and the convictions of their faith.

Moses wanted to see God; Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, wanted to have a complete and visible proof not alone of the existence of God and the reality of God, but of the nature of God.

"Show me Thy glory, show me Thy essence, reveal Thyself to me." And he was told, "No man can see Me and live, no living man can see Me and understand Me." The human being can learn something of God by following the moral law; by striving to perfect himself in all goodness, he will find himself in the all-pervading presence of God, just as by playing the great music of a master, by playing it creatively, understandingly, aspiringly, one comes to approach the heart and the mind of the unknown composer.

In this regard science shares the incomplete knowledge of the religionist. The scientist knows today what scientists did not seem to know in the 19th century, that

men will never know the true nature of matter or energy. Beyond every new insight which is gained by the scientist, there looms an ever-deeper mystery. But by discovering and following the laws which govern the operations concerning which he can gain some knowledge, man can come upon more power and more well being.

Accordingly, the founders of our faith, were not discouraged by the fact that they had incomplete knowledge; the knowledge of man will always be incomplete. What they observed and experienced, however, was sufficient to give them a confident faith, to live and work confidently in a world which they concluded on the basis of what they saw and of what they experienced, to be not chaos, not blind, irrational, unmoral nature, but a cosmos created by a supreme intelligence for a good purpose. That is religion. That is faith.

I indicated a moment ago the three bases for their faith. In the first place, they saw the Universe as an ordered universe, an organized universe, vast and baffling in its immensity, undoubtedly, and incomprehensible in so many ways, and yet clearly, a universe which was held together by some design and in a strong, unfailing hand, and this fact, this order, this organization, this seeming design vaguely glimpsed by them declared unto them the reality of a universal creative mind.

"Lift up your eyes on high and see, who created these? He who brings out their numberless host, calling them all by name, and because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is ever missing." They lifted up their eyes and saw the marvelous universe about them, and they asked themselves, who created all this, who keeps it all in order, who is responsible for the recurrent cycles.

I read to you out of the magnificent chapters of the Book of Job this morning. They develop further this basic idea. The theme, of course, of all of this is announced in the great Psalm 19,

"The Heavens declare the glory of God,

and the firmament declares His handiwork." Creation bespeaks a Creator.

God is the Creator of Nature, but God transcends nature as the artist transcends his handiwork. God is not identical with nature. God is not a nature-God as the primitive religions knew their deities. God is not the God of the mountains or the God of thunder or the God of rain. God works through nature. He employs nature for His purpose. In the visible world, man can behold the glory, something of the glory and the majesty of God, but the visible world does not fully exhaust the essence of God.

Elijah fled to the wilderness from the wrath of Jezebel, who sought his life, and he fled to Mt. Horeb centuries before Moses received his revelation. Elijah was heart-sick and discouraged, so much so that he wanted to die. He was the only one left of all the prophets who had been slain. He wanted some reassurance if he were to carry on his mission. And the word of the Lord came to him. "Go forth and stand upon the mountain before the Lord. And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still small voice, . And when Elijah heard that still, small voice, he knew that God was speaking to him. He went back to his work."

That which is invisible is as much proof of God as that which is visible. The founders of our faith saw God in nature. They saw Him also in history. Humanity is part of the world which God created, and Israel, of course, is part of that humanity. And in the history of humanity and in the history of Israel, they again saw an unfolding purpose, a developing process, a steady, upward climb from ignorance and superstition and slavery and oppression to higher levels, steadily mounting levels, of truth and justice and brotherhood, a steady advance to a distant perfection. And in this, too, they saw a design; in this unbroken process from the caveman to the servant of God, from the imprisoned mind to the adventuring intellect of man, never ending. They glimpsed here again, however, the hand of a great designer, God.

God is the Creator of the Universe, the ruler of men and nations, and God is also experienced in the inner life of the individual, of a man who truly lives the spiritual and moral life.

"The upright shall see His face." "Taste he and see that the Lord is good," said the Psalmist. That's a profound phrase, that.

The deep satisfactions which come to a man who does what is right, who fights the good fight, who makes great sacrifices for noble causes - these very things are proof first of all, of the reality of purpose and goodness in the world, which belong to the source of purpose and goodness, which is God; and they are proof also that man, who strives to be identified with that purpose and goodness is a child of God. And that is why the nearest and truest revelations that have ever come to man of God, come to him when he is in pursuit of truth and righteousness, of justice and of love.

The sense of deep joy which men find in doing what they call the will of God, and the strength which begins to pur into them when they are so engaged, and the very will which men sometimes feel to do the right thing even at the cost of great sacrifice, even at the cost of martyrdom - that belongs to a higher order of being, of existence. This to them, is a supreme proof of the reality of God - the joy, the satisfactions, the peace of mind which men experience when they do the work of God.

"The Law of the Lord is perfect restoring the soul; the testimonies of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart." They are more precious than fine gold and sweeter also than honey on the honeycomb. The inner experience of human beings, of the reality, of the good, of the true in the world is a proof of the existence of God who commanded truth and goodness.

And so, these are three ways by which our faith reaches the conclusion that there is God through nature, through history, through human experience.

The highest reality known to man is mind. Mind belongs to nature. God is Supreme Mind. We are not able to define the nature of mind in man. How much less can we define the nature of the mind in God. But we have an awareness of it because we have an awareness of the working of mind in ourselves. And our mind has its source in the divine mind.

We are aware of and do experience, in a limited mortal way, life. Nobody knows what life is and how it originated, but we do experience in our own human way, life, just as we experience mind. Nobody has seen mind, nobody has seen life except in its operations. God is Supreme Life., life boundless and eternal, life which knows no cycles, life eternally creative, and our life has its source in that life.

We experience will and intent and aim. Those are the driving forces of our lives. Nobody has seen will or intent or aim, and yet they move us, drive us and direct us. And the stronger we are, the stronger our will and the farther our intent and the higher our aim. God is Supreme Will and intent and aim. In Him all things are ultimately fulfilled.

We human beings are limited to time and space. God is unlimited. Time and space concepts do not apply to Him. Where is God? The answer is, where is He not. The Roman emperor, Pompey, when he conquered Jerusalem, entered the Temple, he had heard that the God of the Jews dwelt in that Temple and in one room of that Temple, the Holy of Holies. And so he tore down the curtain before the Holy of Holies and entered that room, seeking the God of Israel, and of course, there was nothing there but an empty room. He was astounded. Had he seeing eyes, he would not have looked for God in any one room, in any one Temple or shrine, for the whole earth is full of His glory.

No symbol can represent God, no form can express Him, no body can incarnate Him. He is spirit, mind, energy, life. God is not confined to any one space, that King Solomon knew when he built the Temple in Jerusalem and said, "How can God dwell in this place? The heavens and the heavens of heavens cannot contain Him." Nevertheless, God is near to all who call upon Him in truth. God is near to human need, God is near to the praying heart, God is near to the aspiring soul, God is near to all who have tuned their lives to Him, to all who listen in. Men who really seek Him will find in Him a shepherding hand - "The Lord is My Shepherd" - they will find in Him a light in the darkness of their days - "The Lord is My Light" - and He will make them always unafraid - "The Lord is with me, I will never fear."

God needs man, else He would not have created him. Man needs God, else man would not be thinking of Him or speculating about Him and reaching out for Him or worshipping Him. There is the essential and unbreakable relationship between God and man. Man represents on earth the Supreme form of the evolving thought-life of the universe, whose infinite source, thought and life are God. "Thou hast made him a little lower than God."

God is the God of all men, finally. He is the Creator of all nature. God favors no nation, no race, no class of people. "God is no respecter of person." Each man has his own work to do in the world and that work, whatever it be, must be done in justice, in love and in humility. Those who seek justice and brotherhood and peace are doing the will of their Heavenly Father. Those who do injustice and sow the seeds of hate and strife among men have estranged themselves from God, from exiled themselves from the face of God. They have become the enemies of the good society which God would have men for themselves and by their own labors here upon earth.

"This is our God. "This is the God for whom we hope."

"And He will help us, we can be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

In the simplest form, clearly inadequate, because there is no adequacy possible - this is the answer of Judaism to the question, what is God. And the answer has been sufficiently convincing for it has kept a race of men for 4,000 years, living by that faith, enduring for that faith, suffering for that faith, triumphing in that faith. In that faith they were able to evolve a code of ethics for men and nations, a way of life which is the way, the only way, of life, happy, creative as children of God. It is the answer to this problem which was adequate enough for our fathers at all times to say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they will save me."

1) Bible begins with 10 - God <sup>is seen</sup> as creator of Universe.  
Ten Command. begin - <sup>with</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>is seen</sup> ~~God~~ <sup>is seen</sup> working in History

The Psalms - (34.9) "El is <sup>the</sup> God - God is experienced in  
the personal life, the individual

It is by these 3 ways that our faith arrived at the conviction  
that There is a God!

2) It was by a long process of probing and reasoning - and renewal  
intellectual speculation that they came to their conclusions.

The prophets and seers of Israel - who carved a new highway  
for mankind - by seeing at the vision of One Universal,  
spiritual and ethical God - were not men of blind,  
irrational faith - obscurants - who did not know  
the disciplines of reason that - in the demands of logic.

The Bible records not merely the faith, the beliefs, but  
also the scepticism and denials, the unbelievers; <sup>who</sup> ~~there~~ <sup>who</sup> ~~there~~ <sup>who</sup> ~~there~~  
- who denied the existence of God, or of any real knowledge  
[God; ~~who~~ ~~proposed~~ ~~that~~ ~~there~~ ~~was~~ ~~any~~ ~~real~~ ~~knowledge~~  
meaning or purpose in the universe - who over  
conclusion from what they observed that <sup>2123</sup> ~~2123~~ <sup>2123</sup> ~~2123~~

There were sceptics, enquirers, agnostics and atheists in ancient  
Israel, and in all subsequent ages, just as there is today -  
and they were active in voicing and defending their  
positions.

The thinkers who forbore on faith expressed their views and opinions, challenged and contradicted them, and, on the full knowledge of all contrary opinions and their reasoning, proceeded to formulate their opinions views - which are all judgments.

3/. These founders, our faith, who are a friend & perhaps our  
 yes. - and especially in doing the great, creative act  
 of the prophets - from & to the future - evolved the basic  
 units of our faith - were not unaware of the limitations  
 of human knowledge and therefore of their knowledge about/for.

(c) In fact they call themselves the lost time and as an "Find the lost time" - Who hidest they self  
 (Is. 45.11) -

God is beyond the full reach of the mind / man - And  
man cannot always understand ~~the vast~~ God's sacrament.  
the universe - It is the play  
of God to ~~hide~~ conceal things - His infinite wisdom  
cannot be contained in the limited vessel / the human  
intellect.

intellect.  
 (Moses) wanted to see God - to have complete & visible  
 proof of His existence, but His nature -  
 17/2/10 was left - Man can have something of God  
~~design & purpose by living a moral life by following the~~  
 moral law ~~which~~ By striving to perfect himself in  
 all virtues - he will find himself in the all pervading  
 power of God - By playing <sup>the</sup> music, a <sup>great</sup> ~~creation~~  
~~creation~~ <sup>one</sup> ~~can~~ appreciates the heart and mind, the <sup>instruments</sup> ~~instruments~~.

The scientist now knows that man will never know the true nature<sup>(3)</sup> of matter and energy. By and every new weight joined, there comes ~~change~~ deeper mystery. But by discovering & following the laws which govern their operation, man comes after new sources of power, and helpfulness.

4. Accordingly the founders, our faith, were not discouraged from their faith by the inconsistencies, their knowledge -

What they observed and experienced ~~and~~ was sufficient to give them a confident faith - to his and some confidence in a world - where they concluded an not chance, not blind, irrational, universal nature - but ~~the~~ cosmos, created by a Supreme intelligence - for a good purpose.

5. I indicated a moment ago the three bases, their faith.

① They saw the Universe as an ordered universe ~~and that~~ an ordered universe - vast and baffling in its immensity and incomprehensible in so many ways - and yet held together in a magnificent design - and in a strong, unfailing hand. - This declared unto them the reality of a

Universal Creative Mind. Job 102 in Job 10:18 Job 10:18

"Lift up your eyes on high and see, who created them? He sits at the right hand of the Most High, calling them all by name, and he covers the heavens, the waters, the earth and the strength, his power, who over them is ever working."

The magnificent 38 and 39 of Chapter 1 Job - develop this

there is surely - which is answered a ~~them~~ <sup>them</sup> - in Ps. 14. earth <sup>(4)</sup>  
וְיִדְּבָק 3114 לִבִּי מִלֵּב אֶרֶץ 2120 עֲשׂוּ 2000 (Joth)

6/1. God is the Creator, Nature - but He ~~transcends it~~ <sup>as the artist transcends his handiwork</sup> He is not  
identified with it. God is not a nature-God - as the  
primitive religions knew their deity. It is not God, themselves.

He works through nature - He employs it for His purpose.

In the visible world man can ~~behold~~ <sup>behold</sup> the ~~majesty~~ <sup>glory and</sup> of God -  
but ~~God cannot be~~ <sup>the visible world does not exhaust</sup>  
His essence -

~~Exodus~~ <sup>Exodus</sup> - in the wilderness - fled from wrath, Joseph <sup>ant. Frank</sup> ~~wanted~~  
to do ~~alone~~ <sup>alone</sup> ~~all the tribes~~ <sup>all the tribes</sup> - ~~God appeared to him.~~ <sup>God appeared to him.</sup> ~~Had~~  
the Lord come to him - So forth and stand upon the mount  
before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong  
wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord,  
but the Lord was not in the wind - and after the wind an earthquake,  
but the Lord was not in the earthquake - and after the earthquake a  
fire. But the Lord was not in the fire - and after the fire - a still  
small voice <sup>וְיָשָׁר 2403 לֵב</sup> - And when Blyth heard -  
he knew that God was speaking unto him - for he felt his  
weakness!

7/1. They saw God in Nature - They saw Him in history.  
Humanity is part, the world which God created - and  
Israel is part, that humanity.  
In the history of humanity and in the history of Israel - they saw



... tell man that is to them the supreme proof of the reality of God.

לפי האמת - משהו  
הוא זהו - משהו  
הוא זהו - משהו

9/ ~~But~~ The highest reality known to man - is Mind.  
God is Supreme Mind. ~~But we are not~~  
able to define the nature of mind in man. If we could  
we can we define the mind of God - But we  
have an awareness of it - all about us! and our minds  
~~has its source in the divine mind.~~

We are aware of and do experience in a limited  
mortal way - Life!! God is Supreme life - life  
boundless and eternal - ~~life which knows no end~~  
our life has its source in that life.

We experience Will and intent and aim -  
and the things are as the things are, well, the power is  
intent, the higher are aims - God is Supreme Will -  
and intent and aim - In Him all things are ultimately  
prejudged.

We are limited to time and space - God is  
unlimited - Time and space concepts do not apply  
to Him. When is God? The answer is - When is He  
not! Compassion Love - found an empty room!  
Had he intended to see - he would have found for him

7

Knew - but He is very near to all who call upon Him earnestly - He is near to human need - to the fraying heart - to the aching soul - He is near to all who attribute their lives to Him.

Men who seek Him will find in Him a Shepherd  
 hand, and a light in the darkness of their days. He will make  
 them unafraid.

God needs Man - else He would not create him.  
 Man needs God - else he would not be thinking - speculating  
reaching - yearning. Man represents on Earth - highest  
 form of evolution that is

11). ~~God~~ God ~~is~~ is the Father, all men - <sup>for men & devils that - by the work done</sup> the creator of all nature. He ~~forms~~ <sup>forms</sup> in nature, no race and no class, people <sup>each</sup> has its own work to do in the world - and that work, whatever it must be done in justice in love and in humility. Those who seek justice and brotherhood and peace on doing the will of their Heavenly Father - Those who do injustice and sow the seeds of hate and strife among men - have estranged themselves from God, they are the enemies, the first enemy which God would have men build for themselves on earth and by their own labors on earth.

התרגום האחרון - זה תרגומי - אוגליה - 12