



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel
165

Box
59

Folder
931

The ingredients of a good life, 1954.

THE INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD LIFE

October 31, 1954

In our synagogues, dear friends, over this weekend, there is read from the Torah that portion which tells the story, the legend of Noah and the Flood. The generation of Noah had become corrupt; because of wickedness and violence, the Lord determined to destroy that generation, to wipe it out completely. And as you will recall that legend, which is rather a universal than a specific Hebraic legend, the Lord commanded Noah to build for himself an ark so that he and his family might enter that ark and so that he might bring into the ark two of each species of living things, so that when the flood subsides life will still remain on earth. And in the story in the Bible, Noah receives specific instructions from the Lord how to build that ark. It is to be built of the right kind of wood - gopher wood. It is to be well and strongly built. It is to be pitched within and without with pitch to resist the fury of the waters. It is to be built of proper dimensions - so many cubits in length and so many cubits in width, in height. Provisions were to be made in the specifications for doors and for windows, and the ark was to be of proper arrangements with lower and second and third stories.

Many lessons can be learned out of any legend, and here is one lesson I derived out of the reading of the story of Noah in the book of Genesis - much thought and planning must go into the building of a ship, a ship that is to carry a precious cargo as in the case of Noah, a cargo which would insure the survival of life upon the planet; much thought and planning must go into a ship that will be able to outride the storms and the floods. You need a blueprint for the building of a good ship. You need a blueprint for the building of a good life. For every human life must at some time or other outride storms and floods - to ride safely through the storms.

The ship of one's life must be built of the right material, sound workmanship, proper proportions, proper dimensions, properly arranged, properly organized; else there is always the danger of a shipwreck when the buffeting of the elements sets in.

The building of a good ship is a fine art, and so is the building of a good life. And it takes a fine art and great skill to save a ship. I believe it was Joseph Conrad who wrote "Of all the living creatures upon land and sea, it is ships alone that cannot be taken in by barren pretenses, that will not put up with bad art from the masters." There can be no bluff and no pretense about a ship. It must be solidly and honestly built and competently and skillfully navigated. That is true of a good life.

So when I ask myself what are the ingredients of a good life, what makes up a good life, how do we build a good life, I think of a ship. First and foremost how do we construct a ship? In a way the building of a good life differs from the building of a ship - the building of any structure, for that matter - because in the fashioning of one's life other hands besides our own have a hand, not merely the individual whose life it is. There is, for example, heredity, where you have invisible hands of many generations of the past, who quite unconsciously mold the yet unborn lives which are to spring from them, who mold our lives. Invisible hands of the past, unknown to us, have already had a hand in fashioning and molding us.

There are our parents, who take over the building of our lives, our habits, our character in our early, in our very formative years. There is the social environment - the school, the playmates, the friends, the community tastes, its standards and conventions. They all have a hand in the building of the ark of our life. We do not control all the material which goes into our lives, nor make all the major decisions as to how it should be built, and those are the limitations under which we operate.

Nevertheless, in the last analysis, if we are normal human beings, it is we ourselves who make the great, the decisive, the most important decisions which have to do with the building of our lives. And by the exercise of our intelligent and informed will, it is we ourselves who give the final directions as to the course which our life is to take. If necessary we make basic revisions of what others have tried to do with our lives.

But to go back to the simile of the ship - a good life, like a good ship, must in the first place be built on an even keel. That is important to remember. It must be well balanced. A ship that lists too much, in one direction or another, soon finds itself in grave danger in a rough sea. When the ballast of a ship suddenly shifts from one side or the other, then there is real danger and terror for those who are aboard it. All ships, of course, roll and toss in high seas, but none so badly or so dangerously as a ship that is not balanced, has not been built on an even keel.

To avoid imbalance is one of the surest ways of averting frustration in life and defeat in life. What do I mean by imbalance? I mean not to permit any one of the constituent elements of our lives completely to monopolize us to the exclusion of all the others. We must learn to satisfy all the legitimate needs of our lives, the legitimate needs of our bodies, of our minds, of our souls. And on this both Greek and Hebrew ethical thought are completely in agreement. The Greeks speak of nothing to excess. This is not intended as a mechanical, a calculated counterpoise, as it were, between the extremes of excess and defeat; it is not a matter of computation - how much we give to our bodies and how much to our minds and how much to our souls, but it refers to an intelligent, to a wise technique which we should employ for a continuous and for a mounting life of aspiration and fulfillment.

The great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, said that the middle of the road

is the way of the (Hebrew), the way of the wise man. Take hold of this, for of this too do not let go.

Balance in life. Some men spend themselves in satisfying the demands of their bodies to the exclusion of the legitimate demands of their intellect, their spirits. Others completely ignore their bodies and through practices of asceticism and self-denial think of cultivating perfectly their souls, and others spend their lifetime maximally in intellectual pursuits, neglecting both body and soul. The "wise man" keeps the balance in his life, like a good ship.

That does not mean that our lives must be lives of calculated prudence - not to do anything that will disturb us, challenge us. The second ingredient of a good life is that of aspiration, of ideals, of quest, of fervor, of fine ideals. The good life frequently involves struggle. Sometimes we have to fight for a good cause which will enrich our own lives and the lives of the people about us. Every good life has some beckoning dream, something which beckons and summons and challenges us. Over and over again in our sacred book we are told to press on to know God, to seek justice and pursue it, to seek peace. Time and time again we are summoned to action and mission, and if need be, sacrifice.

Even in the quest of an ideal we ought not to forget balance. We ought to try to bear in mind always what is desirable and what is feasible, what is ultimate and what is immediate. By so doing our quest of an ideal will not suffer from a consuming impatience and a continuous frustration of spirit. And we must always remember to share our burdens with others and to share our burdens with God in the quest of our ideals.

The unbalanced life is the unfulfilled life. It is well, for example, to strive for success; it is a legitimate concern of human life - to succeed. But we should strive not for a narrow kind of success - success merely in our profession or in our business. We should try for a success in relation to our total life.

Success, for example, as a father, as a mother, as a husband, as a wife, as a son, as a daughter, as a friend, as a citizen. These are all areas where men should strive for success, equally as important if not more important than the common success ~~for~~ which most of us strive. It is well to strive, for example, for wealth. There is nothing wrong about striving for wealth; there is nothing virtuous about poverty, and it is as difficult for the poor man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven as it is for the rich man; each one labors under certain severe disabilities. But the concept of wealth should not be limited to wealth in terms of material possessions, of dollars and cents. There is such a thing as wealth of knowledge, for which men should strive, wealth of interests, wealth of respect, wealth of affection, and who knows which, in the long run, gives us the deepest satisfactions in life. Somehow we have a way of emptying such fine concepts as success and wealth of their full content and reduce them to a shadow, and then break our hearts trying to capture these shadows.

Take this matter of ambition: that's a fine thing to have in life; a person without ambition is a clod - an uninspired clod; but, ambition for what? We have only a few years to live on earth. What do we wish to fill these years with? Knick-knacks, gimcracks, tinsel? And then to poison our ambitions by envy of others who may ^{have} more of these tinsels, toys? Is that all that we are capable of? Are they really deserving of all of our precious hours and all the gifts and talents of our hearts and our minds? Or is it more in keeping with the high estate of a human being to be ambitious also to know more, to understand more, to appreciate more, to become better acquainted with this wondrous and exciting world through which we are passing but once and are never to pass this way again?

We starve this concept of ambition to a narrow, barren pursuit; we confound in our minds good with goods; and so we permit this ambition to drive us to premature old age, to ~~ar~~arrenness of spirit, and to bitterness.

The ingredients of a good life: balance, I would say ambition, but I would substitute the word aspiration for ambition because it is a far more comprehensive term. Both of these are vital, indispensable to a good life. Balance and aspiration, and I would add, as a third ingredient, some interesting work to do. If your life is spent in doing what you don't want to do, work which does not interest you, which does not satisfy your craving for self-expression, yours is not a good life. It need not be an unworthy life, it need not be a useless life, but it is the kind of a life which lacks the music, the song, the deep, quiet satisfactions which a good life should yield. When I speak of interesting work to do, I am not thinking in terms of heroic work, or dramatic work, or unusual work, or works of genius. I am speaking of any kind of work. All work is important, all work is holy - which is a challenge to your craftsmanship, to your initiative, to your integrity as an artisan, which contributes to your self-esteem - if you have that kind of work, whatever it is, then you have an essential ingredient of a good life. Balance and aspiration and work, congenial work to do.

And there is a fourth ingredient: I will put the love and the companionship of a wife, and children, centering in a home; it is that love which will give your life a pride wherein your soul can rest secure and happy. A life without love is a barren life. Whatever else you have will not compensate for the warmth of love. And love, my dear friends, is a thing - is a gift - and yet it is more than a gift - it is something achieved, something nurtured, something carefully tended, something builded up day by day and year by year through common experiences, common enterprises; by intelligence, by maturity, by give and take; it is not the froth and the frill of a sentiment. It is the bread and wine of an enduring human relationship. When you have that you'll go singing through life.

And so I speak of the ingredients of life as balance and aspiration, good work, and a deep abiding love. And finally, I regard courage as an essential ingredient of a good life - the courage that comes from faith - not to be afraid, not to be

afraid of the impossible, not to be afraid of the unknown, not to be afraid of the adventure. The Lord is with me, I shall not fear. That is the key note of a life possessed of faith. No man is alone. No man need fear to be alone. In any great enterprise, in any new, fresh enterprise of his life. (Hebrew)...Moses entered the great darkness where God was. Courage to stumble and rise again - seven times seven times. Courage to be wounded and by our wounds to be healed and made whole again. Courage to move forward, always to advance, always to overcome not so much obstacles outside of us, and there are many, but the far more formidable obstacle of weakness and lack of confidence within ourselves -unwillingness to explore all the potentialities, all the capacities of our inner selves, to tap the deep resources of our own lives - no one knows how profound and deep those resources may be. Courage to overcome our own self-limitations, always to be a king in quest of a throne, if I may put it as boldly as all that.

Our Rabbi said that there are four crowns in life: there is the crown of the Torah, there is the crown of the priesthood, there is the crown of royalty, and there is the crown of a good name. Now when you interpret their phrasing of it in your own words, you have all the crowns that a human being ought to strive for. The crown of the Torah means the crown of learning, studies, wanting to learn more, to understand more, to gain deeper insights into life. No one knows what heights he can reach if he sets out to employ all the equipment of his intellect. The crown of learning. The crown of priesthood - the crown of service - service of God, service of man; that's a crown worthwhile striving for; that's a throne worthwhile ascending. Everyone within the sphere of his life's influence can be a priest serving those nearest to him - his friends, his community. Who knows how far your act of service will reach. To kindle fires on the altars of life - that's the function of a priest, that's the function of a layman too. The crown of royalty means the

crown of mastery, but not the mastery over others, but the mastery over yourself. That's the most difficult mastery to achieve. And worthy indeed of a crown is the man who is able to be the kind over his own life, over his own ambition, over his own interest and activities in life. And finally, there is what one of the Rabbis said is the noblest crown of all - the crown of a good name. So to live in such kindness and friendliness of spirit and such usefulness and helpfulness that men come to speak well of us, and bless us in their hearts that our names are sweet upon their lips - that's the crown of a good name. Well, these are four very noble ingredients of a good life, if you will - Torah, Priesthood, Royalty, and the Good Name.

If I were to equip a young man as he sets out in the world, I would give him a few things: I would give him a pair of wings with which to soar (that's aspiration); I would tell him to try to walk, of course, but sometimes I would ask him to try to soar; I would give him a spade with which to dig, to work, a soul to plant; I would give him a lamp to guide him through the darkness and to guide others through the darkness; I would give him a banner for courage, and

I would put a song of love in his heart. With such equipment this young man will go forth, I believe, and find in life all that man can find in life, and that is much, very much indeed. You will have high hopes of his youth, and achievement in his maturity, and blessed memories in his old age. And what more can anyone ask out of life?

Well that's the story of Noah and the building of an ark; it's the story of the building of the ark of life. Amen.

1) Noah - Flood - River - corrupt - desecrating.

Ark - in structure - right kind of wood - Gopher; Well and thoroughly built - pitch it within and without with pitch - to resist the fury of the waters. Of proper dimensions - so many cubits in length - so many cubits in breadth - and so many cubits in height. - Provision to be made for windows & for doors - And it was to be of proper arrangements - with lower, second and third stories -

Much thought and planning must go into the building of a ship that would carry such a precious cargo - of human life & animal life to across the mineral life of the earth - a ship that could outlive the storms and floods.

2) You need a blue-print for the building of a ship.
You need a blue-print for the building of a life.
For every life must out-ride storms & floods - at one turn and another - And to rich reality - it must be built, the right material & proper proportions - proper dimensions - properly arranged and organized +

Else there is the danger of a ship - wreck - when the life of the elements sets in -

The building of a good ship is a fine art. So is the building of a good life.

And it takes fine art and much skill to ~~construct~~^{save} a ship; (c)
Of all the living creatures of land and sea, it is ships
alone that cannot be taken in by barren pretenses, that
will not put up with bad art from their masters."

3/ What are then the ingredients, a good ship? - ^{Joseph Conrad} - must be built solidly
and handsomely
no bluster or bluff ^{in the building} - How do you
construct it?

Many ~~hands~~ people have a hand in the building of a ship!

Not merely the indiv. whose ship it is.

There is Heredity - ^{possible} ~~hands~~ many generations, the port - who
first variously marked the ~~boats~~ yet vulgar lines
which were to spring from them - makes an effort

Then ~~is~~ ~~Environment~~ ^{as parents} - who take over the building of our
lines, our habits, our character, in an early but very
formative years

Then is the Social Environment - School, the playmate, the friend,
the community tastes, standards and conventions -

All have a hand in building the Ark, our lives -

We do not control all the material - nor decide alone
on how ~~the~~ it should be built.

4/ Yet ^{nevertheless} ~~the~~ if we are normal, the most decisive &
most important factors in the situation. By the exercise
of our intelligent will, we ^{nevertheless} ~~may~~ make the most vital decisions
- give the final direction, and make the necessary reversals

3
st. a good life, like a good ship, should be well-balanced.
Built on an even keel - a ship that lists too much
finds itself in danger in a rough sea, a ship's ballast
that suddenly shifts from port-side to starboard - in a storm
is a terror to those who sail on it. all ships for and
roll in high seas - but none so badly or so dangerously
as the ships that are built off-balance.

① To avoid imbalance - is one of the surest ways of averting
frustration and defeat.

To satisfy the legitimate needs of our bodies - needs -
souls - and not to permit one to monopolize us to the exclusion of the other.
Both Greek & Hb. Ethical thought are in agreement on this

modern man - nothing to excess!

This is not intended as a mechanical, mathematical, calculated
counterpoise between the spheres, excess and defect.

It is not a matter of computation - but a wise
behaviour for a life of continuous and meaningful operation
and fulfillment.

The wisdom to lead - in the way, the good - (Harmonious)

— to be —

② Not a mechanical of calculated procedure - deals - harmonious

Great and heavy - The good life involves struggle -
- something to fight for - some meaning desires
leads on to new ideals; seek him - seek further
- summons - to action & mission - sacrifice

But in quest ~~of~~ ^{the ideal} ~~idiot~~ - one should not neglect - these near at (4)
home - ^{the ideal} ~~the ideal~~ ^{growth} ~~growth~~ ^{development} ~~development~~ ^{one} ~~one~~ ^{his} ~~his~~ ^{burden} ~~burden~~ ^{with} ~~with~~ ^{other} ~~other ^{men} ~~men ^{twice} ~~twice~~ ^{as} ~~as~~~~~~

(3) The outlook life in the un world life - (a) well to live for
success - but not a narrow success - in bus. or professional
success also as father - mother; husband wife - son - daughter - citizens
(b) Wealth - but not in dollar cents only - wealth thought wealth & respect and affection

(c) We empty such fine concepts as success & wealth, then
full - content - reduced them to a shadow - and then break
our hearts trying to capture them.

(d) Well to be ambitious - did - but ambitious for what?
We have only few years to live - What do we wish to fill
them with? Knowledge - wealth and generous and good character
and wisdom? Age to live for ambition with success?
desiring for freedom hours and all our gifts and
talents?

Or is it more in keeping with our high estate to
be ambitious to know more - to understand more - to
appreciate more - to become better acquainted with the
harder & exacting world than which we are living
to pass but once - and never to pass this way again?

(e) We stare the concept ambition - to one narrow personal
present which drive us to pro - material old - age - to become
and to bitterness

8/ If I were to equip and send out a young man ~~as a messenger~~ (6
into the world I would give him -

a wings - to soar with
a grade - to ~~step~~ ^{step} with
a lamp - to walk unafraid thru the darkness, and to keep the
way to others
a compass - to guide him
a banner - for courage and
a song of love in his heart -

