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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Where God can be found, 1954.



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WHERE GOD CAN BE FOUND

December 5, 1954

My dear friends, I read to you this morning from the (Hebrew) something of the story of Jacob, one of the great figures in Jewish history. We derive our name as a people from Jacob, who came to be called Israel. What I read to you this morning out of a story found in the Book of Genesis is very profound if you think yourself into it. It seems that in this unsuspected spot in the wilderness, alone, sleeping on a stone, Jacob had a dream and he saw angels and heard a voice and a promise and on waking up he said, "How full of awe is this place. This must be the house of God, and this the gate of Heaven." What happened? Surely the Bible does not mean to suggest that at that one particular spot on Beer- the way from Sheba to Haran was the dwelling place of God upon which Jacob, by chance, stumbled. Surely the whole earth is full of the presence of God.

When the great King Solomon built his beautiful temple in Jerusalem and dedicated it in that superb prayer of dedication which is recorded in the first Book of Kings, he said, "Can it be true that God dwells on earth altogether? The heaven and the heavens of heaven cannot contain thee, how much less this house which I have builded."

They were not naive children who wrote the great stories of the Bible and the Bible is not a collection of outmoded and meaningless legends and tales. What did they intend to suggest, those who wrote this story of Jacob - that in the silence of the night this homeless refugee, fleeing from the wrath of his brother, whom he had deceived, and he threatened to kill him - this refugee who had left behind him the pleasant comforts and the security of his home - what did the story mean to suggest when it said that in this spot in the wilderness alone, at night, Jacob found the gate of Heaven.



When you think yourself into the story, what is really suggested here is that Jacob had finally begun to confront himself in the fearful place of his own conscience, alone with himself, and had begun to realize that he had grievously sinned. He had wronged his brother and robbed him of his birth-right and of his Father's blessing out of selfishness and ruthless ambition; he had deceived his own blind father; he had trampled upon the lives of others in order to advance his own; and Jacob, fleeing from his past, had begun to realize that all that he had done had been wrong and sinful and blameworthy, and that he was beginning a long and lonely ordeal of contrition and repentance which was to last some twenty years - twenty years of affliction and hard labor . "By day the heat consumed him," as we read in the Bible, "and the cold by night," and sleep fled from his eyes - a long ordeal of years when he himself came to suffer the humiliation of deception - the very thing which he had practiced on his brother Esau. Jacob, that night in the wilderness, torn loose from his past, facing a future of uncertainty, began his upward climb to spiritual maturity, which was symbolized twenty years later when he had completed his ordeal and was returning home, again in the darkness and in the stillness of the night he wrestled with an unknown stranger, who, at the break of dawn, blessed him, and said to him, "No longer will your name be Jacob. From now on your name will be Israel, because you have struggled, you have wrestled with Gods and with men, and you've overcome. And now you are a new man, and a new name is yours, and a new dawn of life is breaking for you."

"Verily, God is in that place, and I did not know it," said Jacob. When Jacob turned in upon himself and honestly faced and appraised his own life and found it wanting and resolved to be resurrected into a new life, that's when Jacob found God. That's where men do find God always - in recreating themselves, in re-shaping their lives for a new and a nobler pattern. It is that which brings



a man very near to the image of God in him. It is the acknowledging, the regretting, the rising above, and the climbing rung upon rung away from sin and vice and guilt and human infirmities - that is the royal highway which leads to God, and at some one moment in the arduous, often painful pilgrimage, there will come a song in the night - the vision of a ladder whose top reaches to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it, and behold, God will be standing beside you! In repentance, all kinds of repentance, God is to be found, in the real sense. The great Hebrew poet in the Middle Ages - the greatest poet since Biblical times - Halevi - has a superb poem which says "God, where shall I find Thee? And where shall I not find Thee? When I seek Thy presence, when I call Thee with all my heart, when I go out to meet Thee, I find that Thy hast been coming out to meet me." "God is near unto all who call upon Him, who call upon Him in truth." But the call must first come from the heart of man. And it is in this act of moral initiative that the divine in man is to be found - that the nearness of God in the life of a man is to be detected - in moral initiative. Redemption begins with self-redemption. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; then though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

There was another leader of our people who left home as a pilgrim and found God. He was the grandfather of this very man Jacob; he was Abraham, the founder of our people. Abraham had been born in a home of idol-worshippers in Babylonia. At some stage in his life a voice summoned him: "Abraham, get you out of your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation." So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him, and when he had come to Canaan, the Lord appeared to him.

Abraham found God in Canaan. God was also in Babylonia. Why did he find him in Canaan? It wasn't that he found him in Canaan, particularly, but that



Abraham found God in a new world. He had dared to separate himself from the world of superstition and idolatry and evil in which he was born and reared. He had the call of a new idea, and for it he was prepared to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house, and seeking a new world, he built a new world for himself, for his descendants, for mankind. He gave man a clean, new faith, and a new vision of morality - of a universal God and a vision of the brotherhood of men. He built a new altar, even as Jacob had built an altar at the scene of his revelation.

And what is the meaning of this story? That in spiritual pilgrimage, in courageous progress, in advancing in the fearless enterprise of the human spirit, God reveals himself - God can be found. God reveals himself in all His power and His glory and His goodness. When men in consecration work for the unfoldment of their minds and hearts and souls, they are coming closer and closer to the divine presence. They are finding God. "And Abraham traveled, and kept on traveling," says the Bible. And the Rabbi said, "He went from one level to a higher level and a higher level." He came closer and closer to God.

There was another great leader of our people who found God in a certain place - Moses found God in a burning bush. Moses had fled from Egypt, and he was leading a quiet life as a shepherd in Midian, far away from the slave pens of Egypt and from the lash of the taskmasters under which his brethren were suffering in Egypt and from their sighing and their groaning - quiet years - a quiet, contented, selfish life. But something must have been stirring in the soul of Moses, something restless - perhaps some great idea was incubating there. And suddenly he finds himself one day before a bush that catches fire and burns and continues to burn, and the fire is ceaseless and unextinguished, and he approaches it, and he



hears a voice: (Hebrew) "You, go! I will send you! You bring out the children of Israel!" The call of a mission. That's where Moses found God. He wasn't sure that he was capable of this mission. He said to God, "I am not a man of words, I'm a man of a heavy speech and a heavy tongue." But he accepted the mission. When men take on the burden and the dread responsibility of a great mission to liberate men, to lift burdens, to serve their fellow men, that's where they find God. That's when a new light comes to them - a flame, an unextinguishable fire within them and all around them - a light which is shone for the righteous; and they become uplifted, and they move on the wings of destiny; they may suffer, but they will endure; they will walk in the light of the Lord. God will always be by their side.

So it is in a mission that men find God, even as men find God in contrition and repentance and in recreating their own lives. God cannot be seen with the eyes of men. Not being physical, God is above, beyond the grasp of our senses and even fully beyond the grasp of our minds. He is the hidden God. But God can be felt as a living presence, and the strength, the lift, the confidence, the compensating joy which suffuses our being when we are engaged in courageously following the clear purposes of God doing his work in the world.

There is another great prophet who had a vision - the prophet Isaiah. In the sixth chapter of the Book of Isaiah, we read a rather startling thing: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the Temple." That's an amazing statement for a Hebrew prophet to say, because God cannot be seen. No man can see God and live. What do they mean by saying that in the year when King Uzziah died he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne in the Temple high and lifted up? But when you read a little further down the chapter you come to understand what these mystic experiences expressed in these terms really meant. The prophet said, "I heard the voice of



the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me!'

Isaiah accepted a mission. He dedicated his life to a great, arduous task, and it was as if he saw God on a throne above him, directing him, sending him forth on his career - a new and dedicated man. It is sometimes very difficult for a human being to express in cold phraseology these tremendous psychical experiences which he goes through and to have to use terms current among human beings which hardly express what the man wishes to express. They can only suggest, and sometimes the metaphor and the simile is of a very material type which is not at all intended by the mystic who voices the inexpressible experiences of his life.

Where is God found? In penitence, in spiritual advancement, in mission, in great and sacrificial love one finds God - as one pours oneself out in great love for others; that is the stream of the divine. In the suffering which cleanses a man and ennobles him one finds God. In fellow-feeling, in charity, in acts of loving-kindness, in honest and devout labor, in the integrity of mind and hand, in the quest of truth and justice and peace. It is along these ways that we approach the spiritual God - the great spiritual force which holds the universe together and directs the lives and the destinies of all who dwell therein.

Finally, our people found God in nature. It is quite remarkable what a lyrical appreciation our people have of the beauty of nature. The Bible is full of the most exalted descriptions and reactions to the phenomena of nature. Very much unlike Greek literature. Greek literature is great in many fields - its drama, its history, its philosophy - but almost always related to man. The Greeks somehow never reconciled themselves fully to nature. There was a mythological war between them and nature. They never lost their fear quite, of the dark forces



which they seemed to feel resided in the natural world. There is very little about flowers and forests and trees in Greek poetry from Homer down. A great sadness pervades the noblest of Greek literature. Not so with Hebrew literature at all. The Bible sings, ecstatically sings, with the glories of the physical world - nature, because in nature, the Jews saw God, the good God, ruling, guiding, in his compassion and in his love, and saw that in ocean, in wind, in stars, in sky, in flower - in everything. The Jews saw beauty and promise and glory.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth  
Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!  
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it -  
The world, and those who dwell in it.  
Let the floods clap their hands.  
Let the hills sing for joy together  
Before the Lord, for He comes to rule the earth.  
He will rule the world with righteousness  
And the people with equity.

This is from Psalm 98, and there are many such Psalms. When you read those magnificent chapters in the closing part of the Book of Job, or you look at those superb little vignettes in the Song of Psalms, you get a remarkable insight of what deep faith does to the eyes of men. All men see the same thing but see it quite differently. The Jews saw nature as the creation of a good God, and therefore everything - the qualities and the attributes and the goodness and the majesty of the creator God. And so our people was able to find God in nature.

During the dark centuries, of course, huddled together in dark ghettos, far removed from God's beautiful world, our people somehow lost their direct contact with nature except through their books, through their Bible. Once the ghetto walls began to break down and our people went forth, they brought to nature again the eyes of faith, and our great Jewish artists and our great Jewish poets and painters are beginning to see again with that same, clear, confident vision the glory of God in the nature which he created. And so to the question, "Where Can



God be Found?" Why everywhere where men seek it. In their inner life especially. In their aspirations. In their idealism. In their desire to advance, to rise, to accept missions and find tasks in life. That's God, working, through us, and going through the world as confident pilgrims and seeing all the beauty of nature around us with clear eyes we see and discover God. And we are able to say in great moments in our life, "Verily, this is the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven."









... out of selfishness and with his ambition - had decided his  
kind father - had trampled on the ~~rights~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~love~~ of  
others to advance his own - and that it was all in vanity  
and sinful and damn worthy. Jacob had ~~been~~ ~~to~~ ~~repent~~  
his long sinful and unrighteous and unlawful and unjust and unrighteous  
life and in ~~the~~ ~~20~~ ~~years~~ ~~of~~ ~~his~~ ~~life~~ ~~and~~ ~~in~~ ~~disappointment~~ for  
21 years "by day the heat scorched him and by the  
cold by night" - ~~year~~ ~~x~~ when sleep fled from his  
eyes - year when he himself suffered the humiliation  
having been deceived as he had deceived Esau the father -  
- Jacob that night in the wilderness - ~~repelled~~ ~~from~~ ~~turn~~  
~~from~~ ~~his~~ ~~past~~ - facing a future of uncertainty - began  
his ~~new~~ upward climb to Sp. Manford, which was  
symbolized 20 at the beginning of his return home, he ~~wrestled~~ ~~with~~  
in the dark, the night with as he wrestled with an  
unknown stray with the break down - who then  
blest him - Isaiah. Isaiah 20 at the beginning of his return home  
Isaiah 20 at the beginning of his return home - a new name! a new man! - a new  
down!

3. Verily - for as in that place - when Jacob found in  
upon himself - and ~~lost~~ ~~and~~ ~~affrayed~~ ~~his~~ ~~life~~ - and found  
it wanting - and resolved to be renewed with  
a new life.

When do men find God? In renewing 20 at the beginning of his return home!  
In renewing 20 at the beginning of his return home - often a new and better father!



near to the way, God! The acknowledging the repenting, the rising above, the claiming, <sup>as if they were</sup> very poorly of our sins - our vice, our guilt, our infirmities, - that is ~~the road which~~ royal high-way to God. At some moment in our painful pilgrimage, there will come a long in the night - ~~then~~ there will be the vision and a ladder whose top reaches to heaven - and the angels shall ascend and descend on it - And behold, God will be standing beside us!

4) Halevi - ? לִבְנֵי דָּוִד וְלִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבְנֵי כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבְנֵי כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

וְלִבְנֵי דָּוִד וְלִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבְנֵי כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבְנֵי כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבְנֵי כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבְנֵי כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

"God is near unto all who call upon Him, who call upon Him in truth." (Ps. 145.18). But the call must come from man. In this act initiation is the divine in man. Redemption begins with self redemption.

"Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow"  
(a) only from God - but not works -

5) Another leader, our people - left home as a pilgrim, and found God. He was the Prophet, the very Joshua Abraham. He had been born in a home, not workless - in Babylon - and at some stage in his life - a voice summoned him. Abraham











8/ Isaiah had a vision: "In the year that King Uzziah died  
I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up: and  
His train filled the temple" - An amazing and amazing statement!  
How can one see God? No one can see God and live!

(a) I heard the voice, the Lord saying - Whom shall I send -  
and who will go for us? Then I said, Here I am! Send  
me!"

(b) He dedicated his life to a great, arduous mission -  
and it was as if he saw God - as a throne - sending him  
forth on his career - a new and dedicated man -  
Isaiah saw God in his prophetic assignment!

9/ In great, merciful love, one finds God  
In the suffering which ~~causes~~ and ~~removes~~ -  
In fellow-feeling, in charity, in acts of loving-kindness  
In honest labor - in integrity of mind and hand -  
In the quest for truth and justice and peace -  
It is along these ways that we approach God.

10/ In Nature. - "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth  
Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!  
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it  
- the world and those who dwell in it.  
Let the Reeds clap their hands;  
Let the hills sing for joy to the Lord  
Before the Lord, for He comes to rule the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness  
and the people with equity." Ps. 98.