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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Are you narrow? What is your particular prejudice?, 1955.



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## ARE YOU NARROW?

### What Is Your Particular Prejudice?

January 9, 1955

My dear Friends, none of us wishes to become a victim of prejudice, but we are all more or less guilty of it. We resent bitterly when we are misjudged, when people are intolerant towards us, but we ourselves are frequently even unaware when we are misjudging other people and are intolerant towards them. I am not now speaking of group prejudice, group intolerance - one racial group against another; one religious group against another. These are the grosser and the more public antipathies which are rampant in our world and which have wrought so much evil and desolation in human society - wars and massacres, exiles and persecutions in all ages and in all parts of the earth.

I am thinking at the moment of our private prejudices, of which few men indeed are free - the narrowness of heart and of vision which impair and at times imbitter relationships in our homes, in the circle of our friends and associates, and which interfere with the full flowering of our moral and spiritual personalities.

Now the terms narrowness and prejudice are interchangeable, more or less, though their origins are different, and they have somewhat different connotations. But for our purposes, we will use them in their overlapping connotation, as referring to more or less the same thing.

Now narrowness and prejudice may be of various kinds and are not limited to any one age group. Youth can be narrow because of lack of experience. Age can be narrow because of lack of hope. That is why, as Samuel Johnson once wrote, the conversation of the old and young ends, generally, with contempt or pity on either side. In either age narrowness and prejudice are signs of deficiency, are signs of weakness.



The young who are green in judgment, quick to hope extravagantly, and quick to be deceived by their hopes, are not aware that they are narrow. They would resent being called narrow. They know themselves to be full of enterprise and initiative, ready to experiment and take risks, and so they are, but unfortunately, they are consigned to narrowness by their very immaturity. They are constricted by their own lack of experience. They have not yet acquired what the intelligent among them will acquire in time - a mellowing wisdom, an efficient "know-how" in the business of living which no amount of formal education in school or college can ever give a man.

That is why so many young people in their narrowness are so impatient with the advice of their elders, so hot and quick-tempered in dogmatically defending their views, so unwilling to listen to the other side, or reluctantly and under duress listening to it.

Older people can be narrow too. They have of course acquired much experience, but seemingly some of them have forgotten or conveniently ignore some of their most vital and significant experiences of their earlier years. They have forgotten how they themselves were once young and how they wanted to try out their own wings. They wanted to strike out for themselves and profit, if need be, by their own mistakes. How they themselves fretted under constant guidance, even the most loving kind, and constant censorship. These older people may not really be aware that the years, the trials and mishaps and disillusionments which they brought with them, and what life is entirely free of such trials and disappointments and mishaps - that the years of their life may have drained out of them some of the hopefulness, the idealism, and the zest, and the courage which youth requires to face life with, without which youth is beaten at the very start. Their narrowness, the narrowness of these older people, is not to be attributed to immaturity or to lack of understanding



or to lack of sympathy, but to an over-anxiety to shield and protect those whom they greatly love.

Youth would be well-advised not to brush aside all this solititude of their elders as if it were worthless, irrelevant. A good skipper carefully studies the charts which other pilots, skippers, have made to sail the same waters and the same seas. And age would be well-advised not to press too hard the authority of their experience or position, but to be available whenever sought and to intervene only rarely and only in matters of greatest moment to help avert disastrous mistakes. No, narrowness is not limited to any one age group and is not necessarily the result of bad intentions or lack of character. It is just a by-product of life, in many instances.

There is a common error among young people and also among older people that what is latest is best. What is newest is most desirable, as if the level of civilization were rising steadily year by year so that the men of 1955 and women of 1955 were as a matter of course wiser, kindlier, better-mannered, better cultured, more intelligent than men and women of a generation ago - two generations ago. This is, unfortunately, a gross fallacy. Scientific progress, of course, does advance steadily and frequently at an astounding rate, and the men of 1955 know much more than the men of 1925 or 1825. But human nature does not change from generation to generation much, if at all. It remains fairly constant, so that your great-grandfather, or his great-grandfather, who lived before the age of atomic energy or electricity or gas or steam - those people may have been wiser and kindlier and better mannered and more intelligent than you are, than I am. The latest in music is not necessarily the best music of mankind, nor the latest in poetry, art, or architecture, or standards of life and conduct. There is no reason to assume that because we live today that we know more and are better, that we know more in the ways of life and are better inwardly than our parents or grandparents and those who preceded them.



Not everything that is new is progress, not everything that is old is old-fashioned. The greatest revolutions of history were made by generations which wearied of their own way of life and social and political systems and reached back to the ideals and social forms of the best in earlier civilizations, sometimes in ancient civilization. Every revolution, as someone said, is a restoration.

Modernism, those who made an "ism" of being modern, modernism, may be an expression of narrowness. Those who see in the latest vogue or craze in art or literature or style of dress or interior decoration, those who see in these latest expressions the very apex of the pyramid of civilization, the zenith of perfection are frightfully myopic. They have a prejudice for the passing show, which for all you know, in a year or a decade may not even appear as a ripple upon the waters of human history. The "smart set." It isn't smart at all.

Someone has said that he who never leaves his country is full of prejudices. Well, that's true. He is in danger of remaining insular, being restricted by a low horizon, parochial. Well this is true not only in a territorial or a geographic sense. A person who never leaves his own narrow circle of family and of his immediate friends, his own narrow social set, his own little world, is in danger of becoming full of prejudices, even when he may have traveled as a tourist the seven seas and the six continents. He is imprisoned in his own little island of interests, opinions, of orthodoxies, of conventions, of standards - he has not touched shoulders with mankind, with all classes of society in a continuing and in a consequential way. He doesn't know the world, even though he reads about it in books. He will never understand what is really moving in the hearts of men, the social needs, the hungers, the tragedies, the resentments, the aspirations which agitate the life of the world. The man is narrow through self-isolation. "Enlarge the place of your tent! And let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out!"



Are you doing it? Are you following the advice of the great prophet Isaiah? Are you enlarging the place of your tent and inviting men and women of all strata of society to join with you in the glorious enterprise of living - giving and taking and sharing of ideas, information, or are you narrowing your tent more and more, trying to make yourself more exclusive, hoping to find security of status for yourself or your children in narrow, snobbish sets? When you do that you are narrowing the orbit of your life and your world and of theirs. The humanity in you is not reaching out to touch the humanity in other human beings.

It is told of Abraham Lincoln that he was riding one day through the streets of Washington when he passed a ragged old negro, and this negro, recognizing the President, stopped and lifted his hat and bowed to the President. Whereupon President Lincoln raised his high silk hat and bowed to this poor old negro. The aide sitting next to him said, "Mr. President, do you raise your hat to a ragged old rascal?" to which President Lincoln replied, "I allow no one to be a greater gentleman than I am." He recognized the gentleman, the gentleness, the fineness in this poor old man and the humanity in him instinctively reacted to it, and an electric bond, an electric current was established between this insignificant poor old man and the president of the United States. Most people avoid these electric compacts. They are afraid of them.

Only the humble can inherit the earth. The proud and the vainglorious never know the earth and the fullness thereof - its color, its glory, its rich variety and savor, its challenge and its rewards. Only the humble can inherit the earth. The proud never find their brother, their soul, their God.

"I sought my soul,  
But my soul I could not see.  
I sought my God,  
But my God eluded me.  
I sought my brother,  
And I found all three."



Are you narrow? You belong to that group of people who suffer from narrowness of heart. You may not be aware of it. It's good to look into yourself. Are you per chance ungenerous in your thinking, in your speech, in your appraisal of people- mean, parsimonious; I am not now referring to being uncharitable in giving; I am referring to being uncharitable in attitude, in speech, in evaluating our fellow men. Some people take particular delight in running down, in pulling down, in depreciating, in giving a sharp retort and a cutting remark. That is narrowness of heart. We are all guilty of it at one time or another.

Do you perhaps belong to those who see only what they want to see, who listen only to what they want to hear, who like only those people who always agree with them, who are tolerant only in matters which do not concern them deeply and in all matters are illiberal and intolerant and dogmatic and bigoted, opinionated? If so, you are narrow to the point of strangling yourself intellectually. You will never learn anything new. You will never advance. You will never be able to correct your own views. You have sentenced yourself to stagnation. Of course a man should have strong convictions, a man should not be mamby-pamby in his own convictions, stand by them, advocate them, champion them, fight for them, but they should also be tolerant of the convictions of others and try to learn about them and learn from them; learn from your opponent. Merely hating your opponent or shunning him and his ideas will not enrich you and will not impoverish him. It is the free and eager exchange of ideas which is the motive power of human progress. Our age, unfortunately, is moving into ever narrowing orbits of thought-intolerance. This may lead to a new age of - an age of neo-barbarism where we will have a brilliant technological civilization entirely devoid of culture and of the free and liberal and adventuring mind and spirit of man. There are altogether too many people in



the world, my dear friends, who delight in "putting out candles," who want to put blinders and blinkers on men. Are you perhaps joining the ranks of the (Hebrew) "rebels against light?" You have to be on guard, especially in these tempestuous times in which we live when there are terrific contests and struggles between fundamentally antagonistic ideologies. There is the danger of building an iron wall around yourself and shutting out the rest of the world.

Finally, my good friends, do you perhaps feel that your life, your home, your home environment, the set of circumstances in which you find yourself - economic, otherwise - are very narrow and constricting, cramped - you are unhappy about it? Well, the way to solve that problem is to fill that world of yours, however small and narrow it may be, fill it with love, and it will expand and grow wide and spacious. The walls that constrict, my dear friends, are not physical walls at all. The physical walls of Abraham Lincoln did not constrict his life. The walls that constrict us are usually of our own making - our attitudes, our self-centeredness, our impatience, our false ambitions and false standards, our prejudices. Widen the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitation be stretched out by new attitudes, fresher, cleaner, nobler, more generous; by love, sympathy, and narrowness will vanish, and in its place will come (Hebrew) the spaciousness of God. Amen.







(2)

Youth can be narrow here. of its lack of experience  
Age can be narrow here. of its lack of hope.

That is why, as Samuel Johnson, pointed out "the conversation  
of the old and young ends generally with contempt  
or prejudice on either side."

In either age narrowness and prejudice. as signs  
of weakness - of deficiency.

The young who are green in judgment, quick to hope  
extravagantly, and quick to be deceived by their hopes. -  
do not know that they are "narrow". They would  
resent being called "narrow". They know themselves to  
be full of curiosity and enterprise - ready to expe-  
riiment and take risks <sup>and so they are</sup> - but - unfortunately  
they are consigned to "narrowness" by their very  
immaturity, - ~~supported by~~ their lack of experience - They have  
not yet acquired - as the intelligent among them do  
acquire in time - the mellowing wisdom, and that offhand  
"know-how" in the business, living, which is a result  
of broad school and college education can give."

That is why so many of them in their "narrowness" - are  
so impatient with the advice of their elders, so quick -  
tempered ~~to~~ in dogmatically defending their views, so  
unwilling to listen to the other side, or only reluctantly  
or under duress listening to it.



9. Older people too, can be ~~not~~ narrow: They have agreed (3)  
much <sup>to know</sup> experience but scarcely have forgotten or  
consequently ignore now, their most vital & important  
experiences of their earlier years.

They have forgotten that they themselves were once young -  
and wanted to try out their own ways -

They wanted to strike out for themselves & profit, if need  
be from their own mistakes.

They fretted under constant judgments, even, the most  
loving kind, and censures.

They may not, in their older years, be aware that ~~the years~~ <sup>the years</sup> ~~the life~~ <sup>the life</sup>  
and their trials and mischances ~~and what life is~~ <sup>and what life is</sup>  
entirely new, then - may have drained, ~~out of them~~ <sup>out of them</sup> the hopefulness,  
the idealism, the zest and the courage which youth  
requires to face life with. Without which, youth  
is beaten at the very start.

Their "narrowness" is to be attributed not to immaturity,  
or lack of understanding or sympathy, but to an  
over-anxiety to shield and protect those whom they  
greatly love.

Youth would be well-advised not to brush all that  
obscure aside as if it were worthless and irrelevant.  
A good skipper carefully studies the charts which  
other pilots who have sailed the same waters have  
made.



Age would be well advised not to press for hand <sup>14</sup>  
the authority, their experience a position <sup>but to</sup> ~~and so by~~  
be available whenever sought, and to interfere only  
in matters of grave moment to ~~ever~~ help avert  
disastrous mistakes.

5). There is a common error among <sup>and not only the young</sup> young people, that  
the latest is the best, as if the level of ~~culture~~  
~~and~~ civilization were rising steadily. I can and by you -  
and the men <sup>1950</sup> ~~turnover~~ <sup>TV-day</sup> <sup>men</sup> <sup>have</sup> <sup>wiser</sup>, kinder, better-  
mannered, better cultured, than men <sup>many</sup> <sup>intelligent</sup> <sup>men</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>past</sup> <sup>generation</sup>  
~~ago~~ or two ago. This is <sup>an</sup> ~~an~~ <sup>entirely</sup> fallacy! Scribbles figures  
may be advancing at an alarming rate, but human nature  
does not change from generation to generation <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>it</sup> <sup>remains</sup>  
fairly constant. Your grandfather or great grandfather who  
lived before the age of the atomic bomb, or electricity or  
gas or steam, may have been a wiser, kinder, <sup>better-mannered</sup>  
more cultured and more intelligent man than you are.  
The latest music is not necessarily the best music, <sup>marked</sup>  
nor the latest poetry, nor art, nor architecture; nor standards  
of life and conduct -

Not everything that is new is progress! Not everything  
that is old - is ~~old-fashioned~~. The greatest revolutions  
man has known were caused by generations which marked  
their way of life their social & political systems and  
marked back to the ideas & social powers, the best in



earlier, frequently, in ancient civilization. Every evolution is a restoration."

~~It is just "narrowness" -~~  
Modernism may be an expression of ~~just~~ "narrowness" - Those who ~~believe~~ <sup>see in</sup> that the latest vogue or craze in art or ~~fiction~~ <sup>literature</sup> or style, dress, or decoration represent the apex of <sup>evolution</sup> ~~the~~ pyramid, the zenith of perfection are frightfully myopic. They have a prejudice for the passing show - which, for all I see now, may in a year or two, be as dead as two, not appear even as a ripple on the sea of human history.

6.) Sun-on has said: "He who never leaves his country is full of prejudices." - He remains circular. His outlook remains ~~parochial~~ <sup>parochial</sup>, restricted by a low horizon. But not only is this true of territorial or geographic seclusion. He who never leaves his <sup>circle</sup> ~~circle~~, his social set, his little world - is full of prejudices - even tho he may have travelled as a tourist the seven seas and the ~~four~~ <sup>six</sup> continents. He is ~~often~~ <sup>often</sup> imprisoned in his own little island of interests, opinions, orthodoxes, conventions & standards. He has not touched <sup>with</sup> ~~any~~ <sup>any</sup> ~~one~~ <sup>one</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> all ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~world~~ <sup>world</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> ~~any~~ <sup>any</sup> ~~way~~ <sup>way</sup>. He does not know the world even though he reads about it in books. He will never understand what is really moving in the hearts, ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> men - the social needs and hungers, the tragedies, the resentments, the aspirations which agitate the life, the world. He is narrow though self-education







- In all other matters - important, personal, religious, political, etc. -  
them deeply? ~~##~~ If so - You are narrow to the point  
of strangling yourself culturally and intellectually; ~~and~~  
You will never learn anything new - You will never advance -  
You will never be able to convert your views - You have  
reached yourself to staywaters.

A man should have strong convictions, but should not  
any tolerate the convictions of others - but try to learn from them.  
Learn from your opponent - merely looking or shunning  
him and his ideas, will not enrich you or improve him!  
The free & open exchange of ideas is ~~at~~ the mother power of human  
progress. Our age, unfortunately, is moving into an open  
warring abt. of thought-intolerance. This may lead to an age  
of neo-barbarism - a technological age devoid of culture!

There are all too many people in the world to-day  
who take delight in "blowing out candles..." who want to  
put blinders and blinkers on men -  
Do not join the ranks of the "rebels against light"  
the 1/16 13/11 ...

9/. Finally, do you think you are too narrow - ~~transformed~~ <sup>you are too</sup>?  
Fill it with love - and behold it will expand then wide  
and spacious!  
The ~~men~~ <sup>men</sup> are usually of an open making, of an attitude,  
- our self-centeredness, of an intolerance, a prejudice.