



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
168

Box
61

Folder
1063

When the odds are against you, 1962.

984

WHEN THE ODDS ARE AGAINST YOU

DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

Sunday Morning - December 16, 1962

The author of the monumental work: "The Story of Civilization", Will Durant, when discussing the Renaissance, writes:

"In every age and nation civilization is the product, privilege and responsibility of a minority. The historian...perceives that only a small proportion of any generation can be so freed from economic harassments as to have leisure and energy to think their own thoughts instead of those of their forebears or their environment.

"So in renaissance Italy civilization was of the few, by the few, and for them. The simple common man, named legion, tilled and mined the earth, pulled the carts or bore the burdens, toiled from dawn to dusk, and at evening had no muscle left for thought."

This, of course, is true. The path-finders of civilization are the few, not the many, and it is the select few who leave their mark on civilization. It is they who unlock the doors through which their age advances into a new era. The new insights of the minority, whether they be social, political, economic, religious or artistic, may, for a long time, remain unacceptable and unpalatable to the majority. The majority frequently attempts to suppress them and to punish or destroy those who are responsible for them. A majority can become very brutal and ruthless when its orthodoxies and its long cherished traditions, prejudices and beliefs are challenged and threatened. If successful, and for as long as they are successful, such stubborn and intolerant majorities retard the progress of civilization. In such cases, a minority, if its

convictions are sufficiently strong, or its grievances sufficiently great, will resort to violent revolution to break the power of the majority.

Now, minorities are not always right, and majorities are not always wrong, and neither is ever completely right or completely wrong. Because a minority champions an idea which is new, it does not follow that it is true, and just because the majority defends an idea, or an institution which is old, it does not follow that it is wrong. Minorities must not claim automatic halos. Nor should one lose sight of the fact that time and again, minorities, when they come to power, become as oppressive and tyrannical as majorities. Witness the intolerance of the small, persecuted religious sects of the old world after they founded their own settlements in the new world. Witness the odious dictatorship of the erstwhile hounded and outlawed communistic minority once it seized power in Russia.

Wise governments have, therefore, decreed that there shall be constitutional safeguards for both majorities and minorities, and that while majorities must rule as a matter of expedience, minorities must never be deprived of their right to vote, and freely to express opinions.

Abraham Lincoln summed it up in his inaugural address of 1861: "A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinion and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people."

But one must never be afraid to belong to a minority, even to a minority of one -- if he is persuaded that he is in the right.

It was Wendell Phillips, who declared: "One, on God's side, is a majority." One must never run with the crowd just because it is a crowd. The crowd may be misled, may be in a panic, may not know where it is going or why. A man should stand by his truth -- even alone ! It has happened over and over again in the history of mankind that -- to use the words of the prophet Isaiah "The smallest has become a thousand, and the least a mighty nation. I, The Lord, hasten it in its time."

The Jewish people was always a minority people. Our ancestors were early taught not to be impressed or intimidated by size or numbers. Soon after they were redeemed from Egypt, and were covenanted at Sinai, and commissioned, as God's servants, to bring His truth to the world, they were admonished: "The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people -- for, indeed, you were the fewest of all people"--

And when they stood on the threshold of the promised land which they had to conquer before they could possess it, they were again admonished not to say in their hearts: "Those nations are more than I, how can I ever hope to dispossess them?"

Our people moved through the pagan world, the Christian world and the Islamic world, always a minority -- and a very small minority. Nevertheless, it did not fail to make its significant contributions to civilization, in nearly every sphere of human endeavor, in spite of it. There are those who would even say, because of it. For it is true that the precarious position of a minority, and the many

disadvantages which its status imposes upon it, forces its members to mobilize their best talents and to rely upon their signal intellectual and spiritual energies and inventiveness if they wish to survive. Members of a minority group are prone to develop independence of judgment and a valuable patience and persistence. Because of what their group experienced, they are likely to entertain a greater passion for social righteousness, for brotherhood, for humanity, for peace.

One should, therefore, not lament the fact that he belongs to a minority group -- provided that group is vital, progressive, and draws from its memories of the past inspiration and challenge for the future.

The odd thing about the Jews is that the odds were always against them. And odder still is the fact that they always knew it -- and were never fazed by it. The role of David facing Goliath -- the unarmed shepherd lad confronting the armored Philistine giant equipped with the weapons of sword, spear and javelin, is symbolic of the role of Israel among the nations. David, you will recall, rejected the helmet of brass, the coat of mail and the sword which King Saul gave him for his battle against the Philistine. The reason which he gave was: "So that all may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's." The people of Israel, likewise, did not believe that it could rely in any crisis in its history upon any preponderant military might which it never possessed. It, too, relied upon Him "who gives power to the faint, and to him that has no might, He increases strength." It firmly believed that they "that put their trust in the Lord, shall be clothed with new strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary, they shall walk, and not be faint."

Early in their history, our people were instructed never to be afraid when faced with unfavorable odds. Prior to their entrance into Canaan, Moses had sent twelve men to spy out the land -- to see what it is, whether it is good or bad, and the people who dwell in it, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the inhabitants live in camps or strongholds. The spies returned after forty days and reported that the land flowed with milk and honey. It was a beautiful fruitful land. Howbeit, the people that dwell in it are fierce. They are men of very great stature. They make them feel small like grasshoppers. And they concluded: "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." Only the voices of Joshua and Caleb from among the spies was raised in refutation. "We should go up at once, and possess the land. We are well able to conquer it. The Lord is with us, fear them not."

The people, on hearing the report, were instantly frightened. They wept, they murmured against Moses, their leader: "Our wives and our little ones will surely be a prey; were it not better for us to go back to Egypt?"

The Lord was angered against these people of little faith, the people who could not face the odds against them, and decreed that they should die in the wilderness. They were not worthy to enter the promised land. Out of such human material no nation, destined for greatness, could ever be built. "But your little ones, that you said would be a prey, them will I bring in, (after forty years of wandering in the wilderness), and they shall know the land which you have rejected."

Over and over again in its long history, our people faced desperate situations when the odds were all against them. In the sixth century B.C., Judea was over-run by the armies of the Babylonian Empire. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. The people, except for the very poor, were all exiled. It looked as though the end had come for the people of Israel. Uprooted in Babylon, the exiles felt themselves abandoned, forsaken, driftwood upon tides which were sweeping them on inexorably to oblivion. "Our bones are dried up", they lamented, "and our hope is lost, we are completely cut off."

But that was only their first, utterly despondent, reaction to the terrible shock caused by the disaster which befell them. They soon recovered their will to resist and their hope to survive. By the river of Babylon they sat down, at first, and wept, when they remembered Zion. But then in a surge of undefeated faith and pride and loyalty, they rose up and renewed their pledge covenant with life, their mission and destiny:

This week our people will begin the celebration of the beautiful festival of Chanukah. Chanukah, too, commemorates a critical moment in our history, more than two thousand years ago, when our ancestors faced tremendous odds. They were overwhelmingly out-numbered. They were out-matched by the military might and the cultural glamour of the Hellenic world, so attractive and so corrupt. They were betrayed by the assimilationists among their own people, who, like certain Jews in all ages, wanted to be like their neighbors in all things --

~~They were in the position of a helpless minority, facing insurmountable odds. Nevertheless, they refused to submit. They~~

They fought valiantly, at first as an underground resistance movement, later as guerrilos and still later as an organized Army for political and spiritual independence of their people. Here again, the miracle occurred of the strong being delivered into the hand of the weak; the many into the hand of the few.

On the eve of the decisive battle, when the people feared and trembled at the sight of the great number of the enemy arrayed against them, Judah, the Maccabee, addressed the people: "With the God of heaven it is all one to save by many or by few."

When the odds are against you, my dear friends, take heart from the life and experience of your own people. There are few men in the world who do not face odds -- some great, some small, some permanent, others temporary. There are people who face the odds of race, religion, environment, lack of education, poverty, looks, convictions. In each instance, these people feel themselves disadvantaged by the adverse circumstances which the odds force upon them, and different men react differently to them. Some succumb; some go under. Some try to run away; some are embittered. Some become rebellious, some spiteful, some vindictive.

Our people had a sound philosophy as regards all adversity. It never rejoiced in it, as some mystic religions do. But it was never daunted by it. In the Book of Proverbs we read: "If thou faint in the day of adversity, ~~thy~~ thy strength is small." And in the Wisdom of Ben Sira, in the Apocrypha, one reads: "Gold is tried in fire, and strong men in the furnace of adversity..."

It is no good to berate your fate when the odds are against you. It does not help you or those about you to become obsessed with what you regard as your unfair handicap and to walk thereafter in the darkness of hate and resentment. That is the way to poison your emotional life, to dull your intellect, to constrict your sympathies, to develop complexes, to become ingrown and unhappy. Hate is a poor counsellor, and envy a worse strategist.

Stand up to your adversary, your handicap, your enemy, and go at him with all your might, with all your skill, with a clear mind and a strong faith. You may not entirely succeed, but you will never utterly fail. Even in failure you will have vindicated your manhood. It was a wise man who said: "The bravest sight in all the world is a man fighting against odds."

In the face of great odds, a man should not seek escape in subterfuge, in excuses, in explanations, in apologies, in complaints. Whining has never ennobled a man's life.

The famous Rabbi, Akiba, was born in the most abject poverty. He was an Am Ha-Ha-aretz -- an ignorant peasant until the age of forty when he first began to learn the Hebrew alphabet. But watching one day how water perforated the rocks with its slow, relentless persistence, he said to himself, "Why cannot the waters of the Torah penetrate this hard head of mine?" He began to study, day and night. He was encouraged to do so by his devoted wife, Rachel. For twenty-four years he studied with single-minded concentration, until he became the foremost scholar of his day -- the greatest legal interpreter of the Torah, the founder of Rabbinic Judaism. All the odds were against him, but he was against them all.

Bravery in war-time is commonplace. Faced with the threat of death, men will often counter-attack with heroic abandon. They will bring into play all their hidden reserves of manhood and courage.

But courage in the face of day-long, year-long and life-long frustrations, injustices and discriminations is of an even higher order. To be fenced in on all sides by untoward circumstances, whether social, economic, racial or otherwise, and yet to remain unconfined and unimpaired in mind and spirit, free from the self-imprisonment of bitterness and resentment, fighting resolutely against the handicaps but remaining always self-possessed and imperturbable, that is to display manhood at its noblest.

Odds should never persuade a man to abandon his convictions and his ideals, for in so doing, he destroys himself. Our people understood that well. To the daily morning service of the synagogue there are added for special occasions some additional supplications, following the eighteen benedictions and prior to the conclusion of the service. Among these supplications there is one superb prayer which majestically sums up the heroic posture of our people in the face of all the overwhelming and tragic odds which faced them in the dark ages. This prayer was composed in the thirteenth century, when, as a result of the accusations brought against the Jewish people during the terrible days of the Black Plague, four-fifths of all the Jewish communities in Germany were destroyed and their inhabitants massacred. "Look down from heaven and see how we have become a scorn and a derision among the nations; we are accounted as sheep brought to slaughter, to be slain and destroyed, to be smitten and reproached. Yet, despite all this, we have not forgotten Thy name. We beseech Thee, forget us not. "

This is a moving and exalted prayer. The prophet Isaiah paid this tribute to the people of Israel: "I have refined you, I have chosen you, in the furnace of affliction." Surely the martyrs of the Middle Ages deserved it. Our survival was made possible by such unconquerable souls. This is how brave men face the world, when the odds are against them.

Reel #91
no. 984

WHEN THE ODDS ARE AGAINST YOU

DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

Sunday Morning - December 16, 1962

THE AUTHOR OF THE MONUMENTAL WORK: "THE STORY OF CIVILIZATION", WILL DURANT, WHEN DISCUSSING THE RENAISSANCE, WRITES:

"IN EVERY AGE AND NATION CIVILIZATION IS THE PRODUCT, PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF A MINORITY. THE HISTORIAN... PERCEIVES THAT ONLY A SMALL PROPORTION OF ANY GENERATION CAN BE SO FREED FROM ECONOMIC HARASSMENTS AS TO HAVE LEISURE AND ENERGY TO THINK THEIR OWN THOUGHTS INSTEAD OF THOSE OF THEIR FOREBEARS OR THEIR ENVIRONMENT.

"SO IN RENAISSANCE ITALY CIVILIZATION WAS OF THE FEW, BY THE FEW, AND FOR THEM. THE SIMPLE COMMON MAN, NAMED LEGION, TILLED AND MINED THE EARTH, PULLED THE CARTS OR BORE THE BURDENS, TOILED FROM DAWN TO DUSK, AND AT EVENING HAD NO MUSCLE LEFT FOR THOUGHT."

THIS, OF COURSE, IS TRUE. THE PATH-FINDERS OF CIVILIZATION ARE THE FEW, NOT THE MANY, AND IT IS THE SELECT FEW WHO LEAVE THEIR MARK ON CIVILIZATION. IT IS THEY WHO UNLOCK THE DOORS THROUGH WHICH THEIR AGE ADVANCES INTO A NEW ERA. THE NEW INSIGHTS OF THE MINORITY, WHETHER THEY BE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, RELIGIOUS OR ARTISTIC, MAY, FOR A LONG TIME, REMAIN UNACCEPTABLE AND UNPALATABLE TO THE MAJORITY. THE MAJORITY

FREQUENTLY ATTEMPTS TO SUPPRESS THEM AND TO PUNISH OR DESTROY THOSE WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEM. A MAJORITY CAN BECOME VERY BRUTAL AND RUTHLESS WHEN ITS ORTHODOXIES AND ITS LONG CHERISHED TRADITIONS, PREJUDICES AND BELIEFS ARE CHALLENGED AND THREATENED. IF SUCCESSFUL, AND FOR AS LONG AS THEY ARE SUCCESSFUL, SUCH STUBBORN AND INTOLERANT MAJORITIES RETARD THE PROGRESS OF CIVILIZATION. IN SUCH CASES, A MINORITY, IF ITS CONVICTIONS ARE SUFFICIENTLY STRONG, OR ITS GRIEVANCES SUFFICIENTLY GREAT, WILL RESORT TO VIOLENT REVOLUTION TO BREAK THE POWER OF THE MAJORITY.

NOW, MINORITIES ARE NOT ALWAYS RIGHT, AND MAJORITIES ARE NOT ALWAYS WRONG, AND NEITHER IS EVER COMPLETELY RIGHT OR COMPLETELY WRONG. BECAUSE A MINORITY CHAMPIONS AN IDEA WHICH IS NEW, IT DOES NOT FOLLOW THAT IT IS TRUE, AND JUST BECAUSE THE MAJORITY DEFENDS AN IDEA, OR AN INSTITUTION WHICH IS OLD, IT DOES NOT FOLLOW THAT IT IS WRONG. MINORITIES MUST NOT CLAIM AUTOMATIC HALOS. NOR SHOULD ONE LOSE SIGHT OF THE FACT THAT TIME AND AGAIN, MINORITIES, WHEN THEY COME TO POWER, BECOME AS OPPRESSIVE AND TYRANNICAL AS MAJORITIES. WITNESS THE INTOLERANCE OF THE SMALL, PERSECUTED RELIGIOUS SECTS OF THE OLD WORLD AFTER THEY FOUNDED THEIR OWN SETTLEMENTS IN THE NEW WORLD. WITNESS THE ODIOS DICTATORSHIP OF THE ERSTWHILE HOUNDED AND OUTLAWED COMMUNISTIC MINORITY ONCE IT SEIZED POWER IN RUSSIA.

WISE GOVERNMENTS HAVE, THEREFORE, DECREED THAT THERE SHALL BE CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS FOR BOTH MAJORITIES AND MINORITIES, AND THAT WHILE MAJORITIES MUST RULE AS A MATTER OF EXPEDIENCY, MINORITIES MUST NEVER BE DEPRIVED OF THEIR RIGHT TO VOTE, AND FREELY TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN SUMMED IT UP IN HIS INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF 1861: "A MAJORITY HELD IN RESTRAINT BY CONSTITUTIONAL CHECKS AND LIMITATIONS, AND ALWAYS CHANGING EASILY WITH DELIBERATE CHANGES OF POPULAR OPINION AND SENTIMENTS, IS THE ONLY TRUE SOVEREIGN OF A FREE PEOPLE."

BUT ONE MUST NEVER BE AFRAID TO BELONG TO A MINORITY, EVEN TO A MINORITY OF ONE -- IF HE IS PERSUADED THAT HE IS IN THE RIGHT. IT WAS WENDELL PHILLIPS, WHO DECLARED: "ONE, ON GOD'S SIDE, IS A MAJORITY." ONE MUST NEVER RUN WITH THE CROWD JUST BECAUSE IT IS A CROWD. THE CROWD MAY BE MISLED, MAY BE IN A PANIC, MAY NOT KNOW WHERE IT IS GOING OR WHY. A MAN SHOULD STAND BY HIS TRUTH -- EVEN ALONE! IT HAS HAPPENED OVER AND OVER AGAIN IN THE HISTORY OF MANKIND THAT -- TO USE THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH "THE SMALLEST HAS BECOME A THOUSAND, AND THE LEAST A MIGHTY NATION. I, THE LORD, HASTEN IT IN ITS TIME."

THE JEWISH PEOPLE WAS ALWAYS A MINORITY PEOPLE. OUR ANCESTORS WERE EARLY TAUGHT NOT TO BE IMPRESSED OR INTIMIDATED BY SIZE OR NUMBERS. SOON AFTER THEY WERE REDEEMED FROM EGYPT, AND WERE COVENANTED AT SINAI, AND COMMISSIONED, AS GOD'S SERVANTS,

TO BRING HIS TRUTH TO THE WORLD, THEY WERE ADMONISHED: "THE LORD DID NOT SET HIS LOVE UPON YOU, NOR CHOOSE YOU BECAUSE YOU WERE MORE IN NUMBER THAN ANY OTHER PEOPLE -- FOR, INDEED, YOU WERE THE FEWEST OF ALL PEOPLE" --

אם לא נבחרנו על ידי ה' כי אנחנו הרבה יותר מכל עמ
כי אנחנו מעטים מכל עמ

AND WHEN THEY STOOD ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE PROMISED LAND WHICH THEY HAD TO CONQUER BEFORE THEY COULD POSSESS IT, THEY WERE AGAIN ADMONISHED NOT TO SAY IN THEIR HEARTS: "THOSE NATIONS ARE MORE THAN I, HOW CAN I EVER HOPE TO DISPOSSESS THEM?"

כי איך אפשר יהיה להדיחם מארצם. הלא הם רבים ממנו.

OUR PEOPLE MOVED THROUGH THE PAGAN WORLD, THE CHRISTIAN WORLD AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD, ALWAYS A MINORITY -- ^{and} A VERY SMALL MINORITY. NEVERTHELESS, IT DID NOT FAIL TO MAKE ITS SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVILIZATION, IN NEARLY EVERY SPHERE OF HUMAN ENDEAVOR, IN SPITE OF IT. THERE ARE THOSE WHO WOULD EVEN SAY, BECAUSE OF IT. FOR, IT IS TRUE THAT THE PRECARIOUS POSITION OF A MINORITY, AND THE MANY DISADVANTAGES WHICH ITS STATUS IMPOSES UPON IT, FORCES ITS MEMBERS TO MOBILIZE THEIR BEST TALENTS AND TO RELY UPON THEIR SIGNAL INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL ENERGIES AND INVENTIVENESS IF THEY WISH TO SURVIVE. MEMBERS OF A MINORITY GROUP ARE PRONE TO DEVELOP INDEPENDENCE OF JUDGMENT AND A VALUABLE PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE. BECAUSE OF WHAT THEIR GROUP EXPERIENCED, THEY ARE LIKELY TO ENTERTAIN A GREATER PASSION FOR

SOCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR BROTHERHOOD, FOR HUMANITY, FOR PEACE.

ONE SHOULD, THEREFORE, NOT LAMENT THE FACT THAT HE BELONGS TO A MINORITY GROUP -- PROVIDED THAT GROUP IS VITAL, PROGRESSIVE, AND DRAWS FROM ITS MEMORIES OF THE PAST INSPIRATION AND CHALLENGE FOR THE FUTURE.

THE ODD THING ABOUT THE JEWS IS THAT THE ODDS WERE ALWAYS AGAINST THEM . AND ODDER STILL IS THE FACT THAT THEY ALWAYS KNEW IT -- AND WERE NEVER FAZED BY IT. THE ROLE OF DAVID FACING GOLIATH -- THE UNARMED SHEPHERD LAD CONFRONTING THE ARMORED PHILISTINE GIANT EQUIPPED WITH THE WEAPONS OF SWORD, SPEAR AND JAVELIN, IS SYMBOLIC OF THE ROLE OF ISRAEL AMONG THE NATIONS. DAVID, YOU WILL RECALL, REJECTED THE HELMET OF BRASS, THE COAT OF MAIL AND THE SWORD WHICH KING SAUL GAVE HIM FOR HIS BATTLE AGAINST THE PHILISTINE. THE REASON WHICH HE GAVE WAS: "SO THAT ALL MAY KNOW THAT THE LORD SAVES NOT WITH SWORD AND SPEAR; FOR THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S". THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL, LIKEWISE, DID NOT BELIEVE THAT IT COULD RELY IN ANY CRISIS IN ITS HISTORY UPON ANY PREPONDERANT MILITARY MIGHT WHICH IT NEVER POSSESSED. IT, TOO, RELIED UPON HIM "WHO GIVES POWER TO THE FAINT, AND TO HIM THAT HAS NO MIGHT HE INCREASES STRENGTH." IT FIRMLY BELIEVED *that* THEY "THAT PUT THEIR TRUST IN THE LORD, SHALL BE CLOTHED WITH NEW STRENGTH; THEY SHALL MOUNT UP WITH WINGS AS EAGLES; THEY SHALL RUN, AND NOT BE WEARY, THEY SHALL WALK, AND NOT BE FAINT."

EARLY IN THEIR HISTORY, OUR PEOPLE WERE INSTRUCTED NEVER TO BE AFRAID WHEN FACED WITH UNFAVORABLE ODDS. PRIOR TO THEIR ENTRANCE INTO CANAAN, MOSES HAD SENT TWELVE MEN TO SPY OUT THE LAND -- TO SEE WHAT IT IS, WHETHER IT IS GOOD OR BAD, AND THE PEOPLE WHO DWELL IN IT, WHETHER THEY ARE STRONG OR WEAK, WHETHER THEY ARE FEW OR MANY, AND WHETHER THE INHABITANTS LIVE IN CAMPS OR STRONGHOLDS. THE SPIES RETURNED AFTER FORTY DAYS AND REPORTED THAT THE LAND FLOWED WITH MILK AND HONEY. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL AND FRUITFUL LAND. HOWBEIT, THE PEOPLE THAT DWELL IN IT ARE FIERCE. THEY ARE ^eMAN OF VERY GREAT STATURE. THEY MAKE THEM FEEL SMALL LIKE GRASSHOPPERS, AND THEY CONCLUDED: "WE ARE NOT ABLE TO GO UP AGAINST THE PEOPLE, FOR THEY ARE STRONGER THAN WE." ONLY THE VOICES OF JOSHUA AND CALEB FROM AMONG THE SPIES WAS RAISED IN REFUTATION. "WE SHOULD GO UP AT ONCE, AND POSSESS THE LAND. WE ARE WELL ABLE TO CONQUER IT. THE LORD IS WITH US, FEAR THEM NOT."

THE PEOPLE, ON HEARING THE REPORT, WERE INSTANTLY FRIGHTENED. THEY WEPT, THEY MURMURED AGAINST MOSES, THEIR LEADER: "OUR WIVES AND OUR LITTLE ONES WILL SURELY BE A PREY; WERE IT NOT BETTER FOR US TO GO BACK TO EGYPT?"

THE LORD WAS ANGERED AGAINST THESE PEOPLE OF LITTLE FAITH, THE PEOPLE WHO COULD NOT FACE THE ODDS AGAINST THEM, AND

DECREED THAT THEY SHOULD DIE IN THE WILDERNESS. THEY WERE NOT WORTHY TO ENTER THE PROMISED LAND. OUT OF SUCH HUMAN MATERIAL NO NATION, DESTINED FOR GREATNESS, COULD EVER BE BUILT. "BUT YOUR LITTLE ONES, THAT YOU SAID WOULD BE A PREY, THEM WILL I BRING IN,(AFTER FORTY YEARS OF WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS),AND THEY SHALL KNOW THE LAND WHICH YOU HAVE REJECTED."

OVER AND OVER AGAIN IN ITS LONG HISTORY, OUR PEOPLE FACED DESPERATE SITUATIONS WHEN THE ODDS WERE ALL AGAINST THEM. IN THE SIXTH CENTURY B. C., JUDEA WAS OVER-RUN BY THE ARMIES OF THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE. JERUSALEM AND THE TEMPLE WERE DESTROYED. THE PEOPLE, EXCEPT FOR THE VERY POOR, WERE ALL EXILED. IT LOOKED AS THOUGH THE END HAD COME FOR THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL. UPROOTED IN BABYLON, THE EXILES FELT THEMSELVES ABANDONED, FORSAKEN, DRIFTWOOD UPON TIDES WHICH WERE ~~IN~~ ^{inevitably} SWEEPING THEM ON TO OBLIVION. "OUR BONES ARE DRIED UP", THEY LAMENTED, "AND OUR HOPE IS LOST, WE ARE COMPLETELY CUT OFF."

BUT THAT WAS ONLY THEIR FIRST UTTERLY DESPONDENT REACTION
TO THE TERRIBLE SHOCK ~~OF~~ ^{cause by} THE DISASTER WHICH BEFELL THEM! THEY
SOON RECOVERED THEIR WILL TO RESIST AND THEIR HOPE TO SURVIVE.
BY THE RIVER OF BABYLON THEY SAT DOWN, AT FIRST, AND WEPT, WHEN
THEY REMEMBERED ZION. BUT THEN IN A SURGE OF UNDEFEATED FAITH
AND PRIDE AND LOYALTY, THEY ROSE UP AND RENEWED THEIR PLEDGED
COVENANT WITH LIFE, THEIR MISSION AND DESTINY: *וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמְעוּ*

THIS WEEK OUR PEOPLE WILL BEGIN THE CELEBRATION OF THE BEAUTIFUL FESTIVAL OF CHANUKAH. CHANUKAH, TOO, COMMEMORATES A CRITICAL MOMENT IN OUR HISTORY, MORE THAN TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO, WHEN OUR ANCESTORS FACED TREMENDOUS ODDS. THEY WERE *overwhelm-*
ingly OUT-NUMBERED. THEY WERE OUT-MATCHED BY THE MILITARY MIGHT AND THE CULTURAL GLAMOUR OF THE HELLENIC WORLD, SO ATTRACTIVE AND SO CORRUPT. THEY WERE BETRAYED BY THE ASSIMILATIONISTS AMONG THEIR OWN PEOPLE, WHO, LIKE CERTAIN JEWS IN ALL AGES, WANTED TO BE LIKE THEIR NEIGHBORS IN ALL THINGS -- *והיה*

מלחמה *לכ*. THEY WERE IN THE POSITION OF A HELPLESS MINORITY, FACING INSURMOUNTABLE ODDS. NEVERTHELESS, THEY REFUSED TO SUBMIT. *Start* THEY FOUGHT VALIANTLY, AT FIRST AS AN UNDER-
later as guerrillas and still later as an organized army ~~THE~~ GROUND RESISTANCE MOVEMENT, FOR POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL INDEPENDENCE OF THEIR PEOPLE. HERE AGAIN, THE MIRACLE OCCURED OF THE STRONG BEING DELIVERED INTO THE HAND OF THE WEAK; THE MANY INTO THE HAND OF THE FEW. -- *מלחמה 312 מלחמה מלחמה*

ON THE EVE OF THE DECISIVE BATTLE, WHEN THE PEOPLE FEARED AND TREMBLED AT THE SIGHT OF THE GREAT NUMBER OF THE ENEMY ARRAYED AGAINST THEM, JUDAH, THE MACCABEE, ADDRESSED THE PEOPLE: "WITH THE GOD OF HEAVEN IT IS ALL ONE TO SAVE BY MANY OR BY FEW."

WHEN THE ODDS ARE AGAINST YOU, MY DEAR FRIENDS, TAKE HEART FROM THE LIFE AND EXPERIENCE OF YOUR OWN PEOPLE. THERE ARE FEW MEN IN THE WORLD WHO DO NOT FACE ODDS -- SOME GREAT, SOME SMALL, SOME PERMANENT, OTHERS TEMPORARY. ^{There are who} ~~SOME~~ PEOPLE FACE THE ODDS OF RACE, RELIGION, ENVIRONMENT, LACK OF EDUCATION, POVERTY, LOOKS, CONVICTIONS. IN EACH INSTANCE, THESE PEOPLE ^{feel} ~~themselves~~ ~~ARE~~ DISADVANTAGED BY THE ADVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH THE ODDS FORCE UPON THEM, AND DIFFERENT MEN REACT DIFFERENTLY TO THEM. SOME SUCCUMB. SOME GO UNDER. SOME TRY TO RUN AWAY. SOME ARE EMBITTERED. SOME BECOME REBELLIOUS, SOME SPITEFUL, SOME VINDICTIVE.

OUR PEOPLE HAD A SOUND PHILOSOPHY AS REGARDS ALL ADVERSITY. IT NEVER REJOICED IN IT, AS SOME MYSTIC RELIGIONS DO. BUT IT WAS NEVER DAUNTED BY IT. IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS WE READ: "IF THOU FAINT IN THE DAY OF ADVERSITY, THEY STRENGTH IS SMALL."

^{וְאִם בְּיָמֶיךָ אֶדְוָרָה} AND IN THE WISDOM OF BEN SIRA, IN THE APOCRYPHA, ONE READS: "GOLD IS TRIED IN FIRE, AND STRONG MEN IN THE FURNACE OF ADVERSITY..."

^{when the odds are against you} IT IS NO GOOD TO BERATE YOUR FATE. IT DOES NOT HELP YOU OR THOSE ABOUT YOU TO BECOME OBSESSED WITH WHAT YOU REGARD AS YOUR UNFAIR HANDICAP AND TO WALK ^{thereafter} IN THE DARKNESS OF HATE AND RESENTMENT. THAT IS THE WAY TO POISON YOUR EMOTIONAL LIFE, TO

DULL YOUR INTELLECT, TO CONSTRICT YOUR SYMPATHIES, TO DEVELOP COMPLEXES, TO BECOME INGROWN AND UNHAPPY. HATE IS A POOR COUNSELLOR, AND ENVY A WORSE ~~TACTICIAN~~ *Strategist.*

STAND UP TO YOUR ADVERSARY, YOUR HANDICAP, YOUR ENEMY, AND GO AT HIM WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT, WITH ALL YOUR SKILL, WITH A CLEAR MIND AND A STRONG FAITH. YOU MAY NOT ENTIRELY SUCCEED, BUT YOU WILL NEVER UTTERLY FAIL. EVEN IN FAILURE YOU WILL HAVE VINDICATED YOUR MANHOOD. IT WAS A WISE MAN WHO SAID: "THE BRAVEST SIGHT IN ALL THE WORLD IS A MAN FIGHTING AGAINST ODDS."

IN THE FACE OF GREAT ODDS, A MAN SHOULD NOT SEEK ESCAPE IN SUBTERFUGE, IN EXCUSES, IN EXPLANATIONS, IN APOLOGIES, *in complaints. Whining has never enabled a man's life.*

THE FAMOUS RABBI, AKIBA, WAS BORN IN THE MOST ABJECT POVERTY. HE WAS AN AM HA-ARETZ -- AN IGNORANT PEASANT UNTIL THE AGE OF FORTY WHEN HE FIRST BEGAN TO LEARN THE HEBREW ALPHABET. BUT WATCHING ONE DAY HOW WATER PERFORATES ^d THE ROCKS WITH ITS SLOW, RELENTLESS PERSISTENCE, HE SAID TO HIMSELF "WHY CANNOT THE WATERS OF THE TORAH PENETRATE THIS HARD HEAD OF MINE?" HE BEGAN TO STUDY, DAY AND NIGHT. HE WAS ENCOURAGED TO DO SO BY HIS DEVOTED WIFE, RACHEL. FOR TWENTY-FOUR YEARS HE STUDIED WITH SINGLE - MINDED CONCENTRATION, UNTIL HE BECAME THE FOREMOST SCHOLAR OF HIS DAY -- THE GREATEST LEGAL INTERPRETER OF THE TORAH, THE FOUNDER OF RABBINIC JUDAISM. ALL THE ODDS WERE AGAINST HIM, BUT HE WAS AGAINST ^{them} ~~ALL THE ODDS.~~

ODDS SHOULD NEVER PERSUADE A MAN TO ABANDON HIS CONVICTIONS AND HIS IDEALS, FOR IN SO DOING, HE DESTROYS HIMSELF. OUR PEOPLE UNDERSTOOD THAT WELL. TO THE ^{daily} ~~CUSTOMARY~~ MORNING SERVICE OF THE SYNAGOGUE THERE ARE ADDED FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS ^{some} ADDITIONAL SUPPLICATIONS, ^{עשרת הדיברות} ^{following} BETWEEN THE EIGHTEEN BENEDICTIONS AND ^{prior to} THE CONCLUSION OF THE SERVICE. AMONG ^{these} ~~THE~~ SUPPLICATIONS THERE IS ^{one} ~~A~~ SUPERB PRAYER WHICH MAJESTICALLY SUMS UP THE HEROIC POSTURE OF OUR PEOPLE IN THE FACE OF ^{all} THE OVERWHELMING AND TRAGIC ODDS WHICH FACED THEM IN THE DARK AGES. THIS PRAYER WAS COMPOSED IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, WHEN, AS A RESULT OF THE ACCUSATIONS BROUGHT AGAINST THE JEWISH PEOPLE DURING THE TERRIBLE DAYS OF THE BLACK PLAGUE, FOUR-FIFTHS OF ALL THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN GERMANY WERE DESTROYED AND THEIR INHABITANTS MASSACRED. "LOOK DOWN FROM HEAVEN AND SEE HOW WE HAVE BECOME A SCORN AND A DERISION AMONG THE NATIONS; WE ARE ACCOUNTED AS SHEEP BROUGHT TO THE SLAUGHTER, TO BE SLAIN AND DESTROYED, TO BE SMITTEN AND REPROACHED. YET, DESPITE ALL THIS, WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN THY NAME. WE BESEECH THEE, FORGET US NOT.

וְיִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְּנוּנוּ וְאֶתְּנוּנוּ

THIS IS A MOVING AND EXALTED PRAYER. THE PROPHET ISAIAH PAID THIS TRIBUTE TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL: ^{וְיִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְּנוּנוּ} I HAVE REFINED YOU, I HAVE CHOSEN YOU, IN THE FURNACE OF AFFLICTION. SURELY THE MARTYRS OF THE MIDDLE AGES DESERVED IT. OUR SURVIVAL WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY ^{such} ~~THESE~~ UNCONQUERABLE SOULS.

^{one} This is how brave men face the world, when the odds are against them.

Bravery in war-time is commonplace. Faced with the threat of death, men will often counter-attack with heroic abandon. They will bring into play all their hidden reserves of manhood and courage.

But courage in the face of day-long, year-long and life-long frustrations, injustices and discriminations is of an even higher order. To be felled in on all sides by untoward circumstances whether social, economic, racial or otherwise, and yet to remain unconquered and unimpaired in mind and spirit, free from the self-imprisonment of bitterness and resentment, fighting resolutely against the handicaps, but ^{remaining} ~~always~~ ~~with faith~~ self-possessed and unperturbed, that is to display manhood at its noblest.