



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Rosh Hashonah, 1914.



The injunction to blow trumpet on this day was to call the people to remembrance before the Lord. In the course of time this ceremony of blowing the shofar became the central feature of the elaborate religious service conducted on the day. Just as the shofar called the people to remembrance before the Lord, so also were its sounds to arouse the people to their short comings and to their duties in which they may have failed. The day is called on this account Yom hazikaron—"The day of Memorial."

Another idea which in time came to be ascertained with the day was that on this day God weighed men's actions in the scale of justice. For this reason another designation of the day is Yom haddin, "The Day of Judgment." The days intervening between New Year's Day and the Day of Atonement are called "The Ten Days of Penitence," during which the opportunity is had to reflect finally on and repair the wrongs done during the year; if the repentance is sincere, forgiveness is gained on the culminating day of the holy season, "The Day of Atonement."

Rabbi Silver's address. Sunday night follows:

"On our onward march through life we are now passing another mile stone. The road we trod stretches far behind us now, dim in the growing twilight of yesterday. And through the fast falling night we, pilgrims and wanderers on life's way, fervently pray for a new dawn that shall unfold to our longing eyes a smoother road and a brighter prospect. For at best, the road of yesteryear was rough and uneven and at worst, it was full of pits and snares into which we blindly stumbled and of sharp stones which cut our bleeding feet. None of us can look back upon the passing year with complete satisfaction. Our expectations far exceeded our achievements and our wide sweeping ambitions were confined to the narrow limits of realization. The dreams we dreamt in the dawn of the year were fast dispelled by the relentless raps of harsh experience. With singing hearts we set out upon our journey in the morning of the year but ere the noon was reached some voices rought the tragic minds strains and at even-tide many voices were silent altogether. Some grew wearied of the road and were laid to rest by the wayside while we, their nearest and dearest, with fears and broken hearts, marched on. So now, in the night which has fallen over the old year we pray that the road of tomorrow be less rugged and hard, that we weary not nor grow tired of the journey and that our pilgrimage end happily in the land of our heart's desire."

And do we we ask for a word of cheer on our way, for a thought that shall sustain and comfort us in those hours of doubt and despair, when scorched by the sum of adversity we stagger through the dust of the road, let us hearken to the words of one who like us was a pilgrim and a wanderer in the Land of Life, and who like us trod with bleeding feet the "Path of Sorrows" of cruel experience, but who, unlike ourselves, saw visions and dreamt dreams, found truth revealed in a potter's vessel, read prophecies in a rod of an almond tree and saw God in the pain and the affliction of his soul. When amazed and bewildered we stand before the towering personality of that prophet of woe—Jeremiah, and we ask ourselves whence had that frail body of his drawn that Promethean strength of endurance and whence that submission to suffering and humiliation which transcends all human limitations, the words of his own mouth, spoken twenty-four centuries ago come to us in full response: "God is my strength, my fortress and my refuge in the day of affliction." Innocent as it may appear at first blush, this expression is in reality Jeremiah's confession of faith, the life-blood of his ideal, the key-tone of his storm-tossed and thunder-thunder-riven life. It is a soul-confession, a revelation of the inner workings of his self, an inference of life-long experiences, "God is my strength." Who had fired his soul and heated his nerves to that pitch of inistrative whereby he tore himself free from the hackneyed life of

an Anathoth priest and huried himself into real storm of a tempestuous life to struggle with the pythonic ills of an age? God was his strength. Whence flowed that powerful impulse that overcame the inertia of the practical. The familiar, the common place in him and propelled him forward and upward unto the dizzy heights of prophetic vision? God was that fire within his bosom whose driving force he could not resist. Then urged on by that divine fire, he left the quiet and peace of Anathoth and entered the swarming marts of men, determined to fight uncompromisingly for the truth; not to perish (or camp) decrying institutions, but to destroy and uproot them then to rebuild and replant.

And when he came face to face with the brute facts of life. The hopeless ignorance of the common herd, the snug complacency of the rich, the bitter antagonism of false prophet and priest, the physical persecution of the lash, the chains and the dungeons and the more powerful persecution and ridicule, mockery and contempt, what kept his poor heart from breaking, what shielded him from the onslaughts of the phalanxes of darkness, what made him the iron pillar and the brazen wall against the king, the princess, the priest and the whole people of the land? God was his fortress!

And when sickened with despair and with the certainty of doom, in the whirlpool which attended the plunging of the nation into the abyss of destruction, what was that plank of hope to which he clung, what was that buoyant force which sustained him in that hour of need? "God is my refuge in the day of affliction!" In the crepuscular dimness of his life, alone and sorrow-laden his hopes shattered and his visions vanished, the prophet whose soul had fed on the fall and the wormwood of life would not surrender.

"He had no earthly hope—but faith."

AMERICAN JEWISH

And that forbode a selfish death. "God is my strength, my fortress and my refuge in the day of affliction." Surely this was the prelude and the postlude of the symphony of Jeremiah's life, the Alpha and Omega of his soul's Epic.

No one of our prophets embodies within himself so perfectly the life history of Israel as Jeremiah. Jeremiah represents not only the incorporate consciousness of Israel but also all its polychromic history.

Israel, too, was entrusted in the dawn of its national life, with the holy office of priesthood, not a priest hood decked out in the finished raiments of formalism, retarded by its own weight, but a priesthood pulsating with the red blood of a new ideal, permeated with an infinite love and devotion to its God and with an undying hatred of all that is ungodly. In the glory of this new ideal Israel went forth, even as that prophet of doom, to be the messenger of God, the harbinger of a new truth to humanity.

And reviewing the history of Israel from that day upon which the last gleam of hope flickered and died amid the ruins of its national life, even unto our own, what better sentiment can characterize Israel's true status among the nations than the one expressed by Jeremiah himself: "A man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth." For the prophet in breaking up the follow ground must endure the pricks of the thorns and the seeds of truth which he sows in the hearts of his fellow men he must sow in tears and in the sweat of his soul. And Israel has shared a prophet's fate.

Not only is Jeremiah's life and experiences a miniature of Israel's life and experiences but the nature and essence of his faith is likewise also the nature and essence of Israel's faith. "God is my strength, my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction."

Whence came that overpowering sense of duty towards God and fellow men that made a people of tradesmen and herdsmen prophets of the living God? Whence came

at feeling of endless resources that inspired the people to cope with the colossal ills of humanity. God was its strength! And in the heat and the press of the bitter struggle, who kept its feet from stumbling, who rendered it immune to the shafts of an hostile world? God was its fortress!

Think of what boundless opportunities in his great faith, in his ideal inspired him with! Not that false optimism, child of ease, and comfort but the optimism amid misery and suffering, the smile that glistens through the tear and the hope that throbs in the veins of the sot. With all his faculties, centered upon and all his energies employed in the realization of his ideal, pain—the necessary attendant of every great ideal became purposeful for him and, therefore, endurable. Pain was no longer an affliction, a punishment but a tribute to his ideal, a sacrifice upon its altar.

And when tired and foot-sore, this vagabond among the nations would feel even like unto that prophet of old, the futility of his endeavors, the fruitlessness of his labors, when a sense of loneliness and wretchedness would overpower him, where would he find that compassionate father to whom he might unfold the bitterness of his soul? God was his refuge in the day of his affliction!

Like unto that sage of Jamnia witnessing the dissolution of Jewish society following the destruction of the sanctuary exclaimed: "Whom have we to fall back upon but upon our Father, who is in Heaven," Israel, throughout the hours of stygian gloom and despair, kept repeating to itself that exorcising formula—"God is my refuge in the day of my affliction"—and at the touch of that magic thought it revived to new ambition and endeavor.

Friends—Strong was the faith of Jeremiah, great was his ideal and mighty were his achievements. Strong was the faith of our fathers, great was their ideal and mighty were their achievements. Is our faith strong enough to have ideals? Are our ideals great enough to warrant lasting achievements? Have we faith? Have we ideals?

Is that great ideal of our fathers—to be the Servant of God, the salt of life and the light of the world, as potent in our lives as it was in theirs? Is it as inspiring, as sanctifying? Can it act as a charm upon us to drain us out of the valley of phlegmatic submission to expediency and urge us on to the heights of truth? Is it still our impulse? Is it still our strength? And is our ideal so great as to render us immune to the slings of an inimical world? Is it our fortress? And, when in the gathering gloom of our setting day we see our visions fading one by one, and our hopes like storm-tossed skiffs lie in wreckage around about us, when in that "day of affliction" we ask ourselves, "what reward is there for the blood we have shed and the life we have sacrificed for our ideal?" Does the reply come to us as reassuringly as it came to our fathers—"God is your refuge in the day of the affliction! Your God for whom you have sacrificed the strength of your body and soul. He is your reward. Your ideal is your reward. Would you gauge the value of your soul-sweating and heart-agonizing by the acclaims or frowns of a mercenary world? Success and failure are human estimates. In the divine scheme of things, success is measured not by achievements but by endeavors, by exertions."

"It is not what man does which exalts him but what man would do."

Ere we set out upon our year's journey let us reflect upon this: For only in so far as our father is strong and our ideals lofty, will we be enabled to cope with the many obstacles that shall meet us in the night that falls over the old year let us pray to Him who was the strength, the fortress and the refuge of our fathers that in our quest for spiritual happiness, our faith may be strong and our ideals worthy. For then shall we in truth be called the favored children of God.