



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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New Year, 1921.

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And so another year is gone, and a New Year is come again. How quickly the year has run its course ! How swiftly it has joined the endless caravan of vanishing days ! It seems but a while ago that we met here and greeted each other and wished each other a happy and blessed New Year - and yet here we are again at the milestone, silently watching the recessional of another year.

One cannot help but experience a sense of sadness in the contemplation of the swift passing of the years. How brief are the glorious hours of our youth, the imperial years of our manhood ! How fast the cold meagre years of age come upon us ! And how soon the silver chord is parted and the golden bowl is broken, and the dust returns to the dust

And were our days so fatefully fugitive, all of light and gold. Did they but move gently without pain or discord to their appointed end, how few would murmur. But, oh, how full of storm and shadows they are - how jarred and entangled; how helpless they seem amidst the sorry traffic of a confused world.

In moments such as these, on a New Year's Eve one often experiences the emotions which steal upon men in the twilight of an Autumn day when sky and sea are one cold monotone of grey - and the leaves fall, and the wind is loud and mournful and in the air is the solemn litany of death,

What thoughts, strange and unbidden, crowd our mind then, and linger like unwelcome guests in the chamber of our souls - thoughts of life's unutterable sadness - its futile struggles - the slow martyrdom of hope, and all life's hunger and heartache, ending ⁱⁿ the tragic desolation of death.

The end of a year may find us in such a solemn mood - but it will also, if so we read life aright, quicken us to a brighter prospect. For even as New Year marks the death of one year, it also

marks the birth of another year; and each new year brings with it all the stirring promises, all the sweet expectancies of an undiscovered country. What fields of splendor may it not reveal unto us - what opportunities - what adventures ! Let the dead past bury its dead ! The future is prophetic of new hope - new trails - new horizons.

What if our past sinks lower with the burden of days and our future rises even higher in the balance of life ? We shall imprison a whole life-time in one crowded day and teach each brief hour to enfold all the glories of an age. A full life is the equal of a long life and its peer. So whether our hair be gold or grey, or our step be light or faltering, we shall gather all our yesterdays together and build them into one high pyramid and on its topmost height will we enthrone To-morrow ! And we shall sing. We shall sing on our heartstrings, a psalm to life resurgent - a psalm to our yearly resurrection- and greet each other as of yore *La Shono Tovo Tikosevu.*

That the festival of the New Year is to awaken the happier mood of hope and enterprise, rather than the sadder mood of retrospection is clearly indicated by the fine symbolism of this day. The Shofar is sounded, and its clarion notes echo majestically through the ritual. Whether it be the wild blasts of the ram's horn, or the more disciplined tones of the challenging cornet - the symbolism is the same. "Shall the Trumpet be sounded in the city and shall the people not be stirred ?

We are summoned, marshalled, challenged. No mournful introspection, no weariness, no indolence, no desertion from the ranks ! Tekiah, Shebarim, Teruah ! The blast - the wild echoing cry, the loud alarum. Arise, advance, attack ! Find life in death ! faith in sorrow, peace in struggle - "Tears abide in the eventide, but joy commeth in the morning !"

Shall the trumpet be sounded in the city and shall the people not be stirred ? Truly this day

is purposed to stir our souls; to awaken the slumbering spirits, to quicken to new endeavor the laggard, and the weary, to make us contritely conscious of the sins of our yesterdays and of the way of salvation.

How well the Shofar symbolizes this call to duty and to labor. At Mt. Sinai, too, it sounded. At Mt. Sinai, you will recall, this martial horn sounded its imperial blasts amidst thunder and lightning and rolling clouds of smoke and fire, and challenged the hosts of erst-while slaves to submit to the yoke of a new duty, of a new law and to the will of a new master.

"And " the voice of the Shofar grew mightier and mightier - and the people were startled and moved away ! They hesitated. The slaves who had but recently lost the chains of servitude were fearful of yielding to the new chains of duty and law and the new obedience. They did not know - they could not understand that submission to law is the highest freedom, that the curbing of primitive passions is the first step to our real emancipation. They hankered after the fictitious freedom of unrestraint, the unbridled freedom of the desert.

Our Rabbis pointedly tell the legend that at this moment of hesitation, God bent the towering mountain over them and said, "If you accept my law, it is well - if not, here I make your graves !" For no people can live or enjoy its freedom unless its life is guided by law, and the individuals thereof prompted by a sense of duty and controlled by motives of the highest social good.

The Shofar then is the challenge to supreme duty and obedience. This obedience, may be slavery to the ignorant, but it is the highest freedom to those who know and understand.

You sometimes hear of men complaining about the restraints of social life, about the rigorous code of Hebrew morals, how straight laced and circumscribed life is.

They voice a hankering for the spacious freedom of pagan life. But pagan life, my friends, was the most disciplined of all; else it could not have produced the marvellous art, and the philosophy and the literature which it did. The self-restraint of paganism went in one instance to the point of stoicism and in another to cynicism which is a search for inner freedom through rigid, complete self-denial.

You hear often of writers and poets and artists complaining of the conventions of their professions. They fret under them; Their individuality has no play; their originality is stifled. And from time to time there are outbreaks of this subjectivism in art and literature. These creations as a rule, do not endure. They are, what may be called artistic "sports", unrelated to the fundamental laws of reality.

There is an apparent confusion of ideas in these demands for freedom. When an artist has discovered a deeper truth and must therefore find a new technique to express it, what he seeks is not aimless freedom, but the exact opposite, the appropriate form to embody his truth. That form will probably be more severe and exacting than the older one. It is a new freedom but with it also a new law. Every true artist is afraid of anarchy as he is of death, for the very aim and purpose of art, as of all expressed truth is to bring significant order out of formless chaos.

To those who live intelligently, it is quite clear that in the measure of our submission to law, moral law, do we gain freedom. It is only the letter of the law which sometimes kills. The spirit enlivens and emancipates. The Commands "Love thy neighbor as thyself" and "Justice, Justice shalt thou pursue" enslave only the blind primitive passions which have survived from man's archaic days and which lurk in his subconscious self, but they set free the higher gifts and hopes of man for endless adventure among the spiritual immensities of the world.

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The highest moral law is love, and yet there is no bondage like that of love, but withal there is no freedom like unto it. The mother who loves her child is by that love apparently enslaved. She lives for her child. Its needs, its care, its health are her one concern. Those who have seen mothers at the bed-side of their sick babes during the silent anxious watches of the night, know how one can surrender ones whole life to that of another. That love shuts out every other interest. It is absolute. And yet in this apparent servitude does the mother realize herself, and in this self-realization lies her greatest freedom.

No one has lived his own life unless he has devoted it to another. No one is free who has not known the chains of love. That fine mystic of the middle ages - Thomas A. Kempis, so truly defines this freedom; "Many live under obedience, rather from necessity than from choice. Such are discontented. They cannot attain the freedom of mind, unless they willingly and heartily put themselves under obedience for the love of God "..... and again, "He that loveth, flyeth, runneth, rejoiceth, he is free and cannot be held " ✓

All men would like to be free. We sometimes call it being independent. You hear men say "He has an independent income ". He is therefore fixed for life. This apparently is regarded as the summum bonum, the highest good. And many a man slaves his whole life so that he might enjoy this independence in old age. But no financial competence has ever given a man true freedom, soul freedom. Christopher Sly, the tinker in Shakespeares "Taming of the Shrew" remains a tinker even though he has been miraculously transported to a palace and attired in princely garb. You recall his fatuous cry " I smell sweet saviours and I feel soft things. Upon my life I am a Lord indeed, and not a tinker ". But poor Sly is as much a tinker as he ever was - in spite of the sweet saviours and the soft things - For sweet saviours and soft things don't make us Lords or free men.

On the contrary we become often possessed by the things we possess just as the watchman becomes the servant of the things he watches. The wealth which we accumulate ultimately determines our thinking our conduct, our tastes, our friends, our whole outlook. The bars of the dollar-sign are often as confining as prison bars.

Neither in wealth nor in poverty, nor in things at all, is true freedom to be found, and true delight; but in the life of honor and duty, in the struggle to achieve the true, the good and the beautiful, in the quest for the inner harmony, the peace which passeth understanding.

✓ It is to this high adventure that the voice of the trumpet calls us, and it is to this purpose that our Holy Day is dedicated. There is so much, my friends, that must be done in the days to come. The year which is passing has not been an exceedingly happy one for mankind. Wars raged in many corners of the earth, and starvation and disease stalked over vast domains and took their black toll of millions - hatreds and prejudices seethed furiously in the cauldron of universal suspicions. A mad world indeed !

✓ Watching the palpable stupidities of the human race, and the crazy vicious antics it was playing, a sage and a cynic remarked not long ago - "If I were God, I would put humanity under water for three minutes and begin again with crocodiles or something substantial " . The ancient beasts of the jungle are on the prowl again. We are still the hopeless slaves of ancient feuds and jealousies, of fear and hate, of superstition and Chauvenism of darkness !

✓ Millions of men the world over are out of work, cold and hungry. There will be great suffering in our land as a result of unemployment. There will be work and opportunity for service for every true son of man. By sacrifice and service, by justice and love, by plain living and high thinking, we may each help in our small but not insignificant way to alleviate suffering, to restore men and nations to their rightful patrimony of freedom, freedom from strife and hate and economic

wrongs, freedom for the sacred arts of peace, for the full and abundant life.

✓ What vast opportunities there are in this age for all of us, the old and the young, especially the young. A new age has begun, a new civilization is emerging out of the welter of war, and revolution and the fall of empires. The old landmarks are passing, old faiths are dying. A new age is crowding, seething, struggling, for new expression, new forms, and new institutions. All about us there are new visions, new voices, new leaders of men ! Shall we not hearken to the trumpet call of the age.

"God moves on the waves of the blasts, the Lord speaks through the voice of the Shofar ". "Blessed are the people who will take to heart its message.

