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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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New Year, 1963.

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ROSH HASHANAH SERMON  
delivered by  
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver - 1963

We celebrate tonight with song and prayer the birth of a New Year -- the year 5724. This figure is based on a traditional creation calendar which arbitrarily sets the creation of the world 5724 years ago. If we used a calendar which set the creation of the world 50,000 years ago or 500,000 years ago, it would still be an arbitrary one. For no one knows with any degree of accuracy when our world began. In the course of our history, our people employed several calendars.

What is important for us to call to mind on this day is that man's history on earth is very old, and that a New Year is beginning for us, a New Year and, therefore, a new opportunity.

What we should take to heart and earnestly consider is whether our society today is as mature, as advanced, as the years of our calendar would indicate, and, if not, what we should do about it in the New Year which we are entering.

If we were to form a view of our society in the year just ending based on front-page newspaper stories, I question whether we would consider ourselves as a very mature people, or even a civilized people.

When you read of what is happening in Alabama of race riots and bombing and bloodshed, of men, women and children denied their rudimentary human rights, not only in Alabama but elsewhere, because of the color of their skin; when you read of hundreds of thousands of marchers converging on the capitol of our country pleading with our law-makers to grant them their constitutional



rights. A hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, a hundred years after Gettysburg, and the words spoken on that great battlefield by the immortal Lincoln concerning a new nation which our fathers brought forth on this continent, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, one is forced to wonder whether, as a people, we have really moved forward these one hundred years, and whether each new year really takes us a step nearer to the vision which was his.

When we read of the stoning and bombing of homes in white neighborhoods in our Northern cities into which negroes had moved, and of labor unions denying admission and the right of work to a Negro, as was the case recently here in our own city -- are we to see in all this progress, or a shameful throw-back to the dark days of long ago?

Mankind, in ancient days, was far less race-minded than many people in our country today. There was practically no color line in antiquity. The Greeks were conscious of their cultural superiority but they did not attribute it to biology. They claimed excellency on the basis of their civilization, not their blood. The Romans were, in a true sense, racial cosmopolites.

The Jew was proud, not of his race, but of his religion, and the proselyte to the faith was welcomed into the life of the community, regardless of his race. "God created only one Adam", declared a Rabbi, "in order that in future times no man shall be warranted in saying: I came from better stock than you do". And another Rabbi declared, I call Heaven and earth to witness,



be he man or woman, young or old, rich or poor, Jew or non-Jew, according to his deserts will the spirit of God descend upon him".

The Middle Ages knew very little of that racial disease which is so rampant in our society today. It was with the rise of colonial imperialism among the Northwestern European peoples, particularly during the last century, and the consequent exploitation of the backward races that the necessity arose of finding some justification for such exploitation. It soon appeared in the form of pseudo-scientific theories of race superiority. These theories gained prestige and popularity as the European nations proceeded to conquer, subject and despoil backward peoples. Some apologists even employed high church terminology such as "Bearing the White Man's Burden" to savor the miserable mess of imperialistic pottage, by means of which European peoples robbed other races of their birthright of freedom. The "White Man's Burden" became the black man's curse and the brown man's and the yellow man's.

Again when you scan the front-page of your newspapers in this year 5724, and when you read of the prolonged discussions which are going on in the Halls of Congress, in the press and over the air on the limited atomic test-ban treaty -- over the question whether we should consent to a ban on the further poisoning of the world's atmosphere through nuclear explosions --



whether we should take a first step towards checking the atomic race which might well lead, if unchecked, to our total destruction -- you are forced to ask yourself what kind of a world of civilized barbarians is this -- what scientific cavemen have we become -- under what black jungle magic is our age laboring?

Or, when you read of our staggering military budget in this year 5724 -- forty-seven billions -- while our disreputable city slums cry out for clearance and rebuilding, while our schools and colleges, our hospitals and our research laboratories stand in urgent need of funds for expansion -- you are forced to wonder again whether we have really grown up -- whether we are really as old as our calendar would indicate. Have we really lived this long on earth, and have we advanced so little?

Does this anarchy and waste, this cruelty and injustice inflicted on millions of men represent the accumulated wisdom of the thousands of years of living, the legacy of a hundred generations of seers and sages, of heroes and martyrs who, from the dawn of time onward suffered and died for truth and freedom and justice for all men?

To be sure, when we look at our modern technology, at our feats of engineering, our I. B. M. machines, our astronautas orbiting the globe, at all our scientific achievements, we may be proud and regard ourselves as shining as a bright, new tomorrow. We are so far ahead of all our yesterdays -- yes, even ahead of ourselves!....



But there is no consolation in all this, my friends, nor does it correct the menacing evils which exist, nor does it atone for them. Indeed, it almost seems as if our speedy scientific progress is hastening the coming of the day of final retribution, the dread apocalypse of universal disaster.

Take a look at our lives as individuals -- at the appalling increase in juvenile delinquency in our country -- the youth of our nation going berserk because of lack of discipline, lack of care, lack of proper social and recreational environment. Take a look at the mounting divorce rate among our people -- all our people -- including our Jewish people, among whom it had heretofore been so rare a phenomenon. Take a look at the broken homes whose prime victims are the children -- and ask yourselves whether morally we have progressed or retrogressed. Ask yourselves whether with each new year we are building the better society, or whether we are weakening the foundations of the old society which we have inherited.

On Rosh Hashanah, it is proper that we should look at ourselves with open eyes. This penitential season is a time for stock-taking and having looked at things as they are, we might then well ask ourselves whether the solution of these problems is beyond us. Shall we acknowledge that we are forever in the grip of an iron law of eternal recurrence which decrees that "that which has been is that which shall be, that which has been done is that which shall be done, and there is nothing new under the sun", that the evil is here to stay and to multiply? I think not! The repetitious cycle which may be observed in the



physical world, in the revolving seasons, which time and again come round again, does not imply that a similar cycle of non-progressive repetitiveness exists also in the moral and spiritual life of mankind. The moral standards of human life can be raised. A good society, free from war, from poverty, from exploitation and hate can be built. Man can progress and has progressed through the ages. This is the very essence and meaning of Hebraic prophecy. This is the message which we brought to mankind.

Undoubtedly there have been periods in human history when a people proves incapable of bearing further on its shoulders the weight of its culture, and it collapses. There have been periods of social retrogression and decay.

Time and again, a people runs away from its moral responsibilities and seeks refuge in all forms of social and political aberrations -- in dictatorship, in bigotry, in all forms of intolerance. But this is not a solution. It is an aggravation of the problem. It is the result of moral cowardice, of lack of faith in man and in the democratic process.

What is wrong in our collective life or in our individual lives must be faced squarely, and the best that is in us must be challenged to do our utmost to correct it. The task is not a simple one and the strength of no one of us is equal to its enormity and complexity. It is not easy to make straight what is crooked, to make right what is wrong, but, as our Rabbis said, "Yours is not the duty to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it". This applies to individuals, to generations, to peoples.



We must begin with ourselves! We must thoroughly house-clean our own minds and souls of all our prejudices, of all attitudes unbecoming a mature person. We must check on our personal conduct before we point an accusing finger at our neighbor! Take the matter of Civil Rights. The President of the United States correctly said the other day:

"We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities; whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. Legislation cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the homes of every American in every community across our country."

How do you yourself stand on the question of allowing a Negro family to settle in your neighborhood? When you talk of brotherhood, do you include everybody or only your own kind? How inclusive are you in your human sympathies? How much of snobbishness and status-seeking is left in your make-up?

Have you set your own house in order? Are you doing all that you can to create peace, harmony and happiness in your own home? In your own family? Teen-agers, we are told, are on a rampage in our society. You deprecate it, of course. But what of the teen-agers in your own home, your own son, your own daughter? Are you giving them the care, the guidance, the supervision and the discipline which they need and really wish, failing which they feel themselves adrift and insecure? Or do you find it easier to be what is popularly known a pal, a relationship which, in your case, your children do not need, instead of a parent which they desperately need?



Whatever is morally wrong with us, we can correct by an act of will. This is the solemn message of this day of self-examination and self-judgment. We can grow up to our responsibilities in the New Year. We can rise in all our relationships to the purer air and the wider view.

Thus, beginning with yourself, work with other men of good-will, and make your voice heard in the councils of your community and your government. Speak up and do not be afraid! The greatest threat to the moral integrity of men, especially of men in comfortable circumstances, is their unwillingness to take sides in controversial issues. Why should I invite criticism? Why not remain at ease in Zion? This is the unpardonable sin of spiritual complacency which is the besetting sin of many people, and of many leaders of men, who "are not grieved for the hurt of Joseph" --- "The people who put far away the evil day and by so doing cause the seat of violence to come near". By such calculated silence, such men compromise with sin and evil which beset their community or their nation.

As we step into a New Year, let us take to our hearts the convictions of our historic faith.

Man's science is great, but man, himself, must be greater. Not long ago, we ticker-taped down Broadway the Astronaut who orbited the globe. We hailed, and properly so, this scientific achievement of first water. But should we not also acclaim the lone white man who walked in faith down the dark roads of hate in our Southland to his certain death, and by so doing demonstrated a man's true love for



his fellowmen? That was a moral achievement of priceless quality, of exquisite spiritual grandeur, and I do not know which achievement will, in the last analysis, prove of greater worth to mankind! And had he consulted me, I would most humbly have suggested to Governor Wallace of Alabama on the occasion of the burial of the four innocent little girls, that he walk in penitence, bare-headed and bare-foot behind the hearse carrying their poor mangled bodies. Perhaps the Lord would have mercy on his soul for the evil which he incited and the murderous hate which he aroused.

As we step into the New Year, let us bear in mind that man's weaknesses are many, but man must discover within himself the strength to conquer them. We owe it to ourselves -- as children of God. We owe it to our faith, which summons all men to brotherhood. We owe it to this gracious and beautiful land, a land of noble heritage and tradition, which until recently has been the hope and pride of free men. Let us not defile its image in the sight of the world. It is our beloved home - Let us make it a happy and beloved home for all our people.



## NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS -- 1963

I SEND MY WARMEST GREETINGS TO ALL THE MEMBERS OF OUR COMMUNITY ON THE OCCASION OF THE NEW YEAR. I HOPE THAT IT WILL BE A GOOD YEAR FOR OUR BELOVED COUNTRY AND FOR MANKIND, A YEAR WHICH WILL SEE THE SOLUTION OF SOME OF THE GRAVE PROBLEMS OF CIVIL RIGHTS WHICH HAVE DISTURBED THE LIFE OF OUR COUNTRY DURING THE PAST YEAR, A YEAR WHICH WILL BRING CLOSER TO THE HEARTS OF MEN THOUGHTS OF TOLERANCE, BROTHERHOOD AND PEACE.

I PRAY THAT IT WILL BE A YEAR OF CONTINUED PROGRESS AND PROSPERITY FOR OUR PEOPLE IN THE STATE OF ISRAEL AND A YEAR OF FULFILLMENT FOR ALL OF US.

ABBA HILLEL SILVER



September 9, 1963

Dear Mr. Weidenthal:

Enclosed is a copy of Dr. Silver's New Year's  
Greeting for publication in your paper.

Cordially,



Beatrice F. May  
Secretary to Dr. Silver

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