



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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

Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

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Youth and ideals, 1915.

Y. M. H. A. MEMBERS ATTEND SERVICES IN A BODY TO HEAR SPECIAL ADDRESS.

"Youth and Ideals."

“But youth, because it has visions, has also doubts. The vision of youth is often a vague, flitting, elusive thing. The clouds of cruel experience often come between the young man and his vision. The intense enthusiasm which the vision inspired in the heart of the youth is often followed by a fearful aftermath when doubts and misgivings harass his soul. Youth, moreover, is impatient and impatience itself is the mother of cruel doubts. Youth is intolerant of opposition and temporary failure will often hurl the young man from the heights of hope into the depths of despair. He will lose faith in his vision and will thereafter and throughout his life grope blindly in a visionless world.

"Our age is so built and our life so constituted that they hold many disillusionments in store for the young man who begins life with a vision. The imperfections of the world will sear more deeply the innocent soul of the youth than the calloused soul of the aged and the experienced. Our political institutions are often hotbeds of corruption. Our social life is shot through with unspeakable evils. Our industrial order is much too frequently the source of crime and injustice. Our religious life is still tight-laced in the swathing clothes of ancient civilizations. In short, the

young man enters a world "which is Rome and London, not Fool's Paradise." "But happier by far is the lot of him who has a vision with all its concomitants of doubts and struggles than he who is without doubts and struggles but also without a vision. The life of him who is visionless is dull and vapid. Life holds no deeper mysteries than no tantalizing harmonies for

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could not resist. The first manifestation of the presence of an ideal in Jeremiah's life was an inspiration, an urge forward, a breaking with the past.

"And when Jeremiah came face to face with the brute facts of life, the hopeless ignorance of the common people, the snug complacency of the rich, the bitter antagonism of false prophet and priest, the physical persecutions in the form of the lash, the chains and the dungeons and the more crushing persecutions in the form of ridicule, mockery and contempt, what kept the poor heart of Jeremiah from breaking, what shielded him from the onslaughts of the phantoms of darkness, what made him the 'brazen wall and the iron pillar' against the king, the princes, the priests and the whole people of the land? His ideal, God, was his fortress! Here, then, is the second proof of an ideal: the iron will, the strength of endurance. Here also is evidence of the transforming power of an ideal. It made a life of most bitter misery liveable by its mere presence in it.

"And when the soul of Jeremiah became sickened with despair and with the certainty of doom, in that whorlpool which attended the plunging of his nation into the abyss of destruction (for Judea was laid waste and his people exiled during his lifetime), what was that plank of hope to which he clung? What was that buoyant force which sustained him in that hour of need? His ideal, God, was his refuge in the day of affliction! In the crepuscular dimness of his life, alone and sorrow-laden, his hopes shattered and his visions vanished, this prophet whose soul had fed on the gail and wormwood of life found solace and comfort in his ideal, in his God. This is the third and last great criterion of an ideal. It is its own reward.

"Jeremiah, then, by word and act, has defined an ideal to be the strength, that is the inspiration, the fortress or the endurance and the refuge or the reward of the idealist. The people of Israel subscribed to the same definition.

"When" came that overpowering sense of duty towards God and man that made a people of tradesmen and herdsmen prophets of the living God? What inspired the handful of men on the banks of the Jordan to cope with the colossal evils of a world? His ideal, God, was its strength! And in the heat and the press of the bitter struggle, what kept its feet from stumbling? What rendered it immune to the shafts of an hostile world? Its ideal, God, was its fortress.

“And when tired and footsore, Israel, the vagabond among the nations, would feel even like that prophet Jeremiah, the futility of his endeavors, the fruitlessness of his labors, when a sense of loneliness and wretchedness would overpower him, where would he find succor from sorrow? His ideal, God, was his refuge in the day of affliction! The knowledge of being the servant of God, the salt of life and the light of the world, was in itself the balm for his aching heart, the comfort for his sorrowing soul. Both Jeremiah and his people knew the secret of life. Both Jeremiah and his people found contentment and happiness in a world that shrieked with hate and teemed with enemies. Both Jeremiah and his people were idealists. And the lessons which they had learned from their experience they are proffering to you, young men, who are entering the arena of life. This is what they say to you:

"Young man! Do you crave for a life that shall be meaningful and purposeful? Have an ideal! Do you ask for an alchemy that shall transform the dross of experience into the golden glory of happiness? Get thee a vision. And the nature of your ideal must be this: it must be your strength and inspiration—it must act as a charm to draw in out of the valley of comfort and expediency and urge thee on to the heights of truth; it must also be your fortress; it must make you endure the things of an inimical world and lastly it must be your refuge in the hour of affliction. Your ideal must be so strong that when in the hour of affliction, in the gathering gloom of your setting day, when you see your visions fading one by one and your hopes like storm-tossed skins lie in wreckage round about you, when you ask yourself, 'what reward is there for the blood which I have shed and the life which I have sacrificed for my ideal?' the reply must be: 'My ideal is my reward!' I would not gauge the value of my soul-sweating and heart-agonizing by the frowns or acclaims of a mercenary world. Success and failure are human estimates. In the divine scheme of things success is measured not by achievements but by efforts, by endeavors.

"Friends, anchor your lives to an ideal, be it what it may, and you will be spared the horrors of aimless drifting, the pains of a scattered soul. Do not permit your God-given souls to wallow in the slough of the mean and petty things of life. Rather bathe them in those great currents of idealism that echo 'round the world.'

"Ceaseless aspiring,
Ceaseless content,
Ever in motion,
Blithesome and cheery
Still climbing heights