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

Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

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New year sermon, The Jewish World (Cleveland Jewish newspaper), 1927.



Monday, September 26, 1927.

## A New Years Sermon

By Rabbi A. H. Silver

The older we grow, the more we lament the passing of the years. As these depart, one by one, slowly at first, and then ever more swiftly, they seem to take away much that we hold dear, our youth and our vigor, our hopes and our rich expectancies. We regret the vanishing years, for they seem no longer to be our own. And yet these vanishing years really do not vanish. Our past never leaves us. Nothing in life disappears. Our past is absorbed in our present. The manifold experiences of all the yesterdays are the materials out of which the mosaic of today is fashioned. Time brings us wisdom and heartaches, and weariness and understanding. It leaves us altered, but not diminished.

As we grow older, we are confronted with a two-fold danger. With the gathering of the years, our habits accumulate and begin to burden us. Their weight retards our progress, so that we advance more slowly until we weary altogether of life's hard march. We halt. We no longer wish to progress. The past has now completely mastered us. The first danger then is not that our past vanishes beyond recall, but that it remains beyond banishment.

The other danger lies in disregarding our past completely, in permitting the receding years to depart without exacting a blessing from them. Every dying day should bequeath a legacy to each new-born day. In a sense, the past should continue to live as a creative memory in the present. The dead are dead only when they are forgotten, and our past is past only when it is no longer remembered.

Pathology knows of two sad maladies which afflict the race of man,—total forgetfulness and total recall. In the one case the person suffers complete loss of memory. He is severed from his past and he knows only the present. In the other instance the person is overwhelmed by every detail of the past, so that he can think of nothing else. He is monopolized by his memory. Both cases are pathological. A man who has no past is like a tree whose trunk and branches have been cut away.

There are men who in their moral life suffer from one or the other of these maladies. There are men who forget their pasts, who are never guided by their own experiences. Each day is

lived and drained and cast aside as no longer useful. "Why think," they say, "of what is no longer here?" "Why retrace our steps? The past is burned-out embers—ashes—dust."

But those who think little of their past, must think less of their future, for no one can plan his future who has not surveyed his past. A man must sit at the feet of his own past failures and errors and sins, and from them learn the bitter lessons of life ere he attempts, with any fair promise of success, to obtain the course of his future.

On the other hand, there are those who live only in the past, who are the slaves of memory, of some past regret or some past success. That which was alone matters. That which is or ought to be is of little moment. They are tethered to an afterthought. They are the pitiful subjects of their own epitaphs. An early failure, or an early mistake, an early sorrow or hurt, or even an all to early victory, engulfs their whole life. It proves the fatal gravity which pulls all their ascendant efforts downward.

The human race, or particular segments of it, often falls victim to one or the other of these maladies. It lives through whole epochs during which it is completely dominated by the past, shackled by traditions and precedent. It makes no headway. It discovers no new truths. Certain time-honored notions, certain long-honored notions, certain long-established customs or dogmas, because of their very age, are universally credited and accepted. No one questions them. The creative energy of such an age seeks in prophetic anticipations, but in outlet, not in new discoveries or the refinement and consolidation of existing knowledge. This spells degeneration.

Europe knew such an age of hapless retrospection in the Middle Ages. For a thousand years certain traditions tyrannized over the minds of Europe. Aristotle in Philosophy, Galen in Medicine, Augustine in Theology, the Ptolemaic system in Astronomy. The Middle Ages were a case of total recall. Their creative energy went to waste in pouring over the old, in repeating and elaborating upon the errors of the ancients.

What is true of ideas is true also of institutions. They arise in response to some pressing need of human life. When that need

disappears, the institution does not as quickly disappear. It hangs on. It encounters life. But mankind is content, out of deference to the past, to endure the abuses of the old rather than to create the new.

Feudalism, for example, arose out of the chaos of Europe following the disintegration of the central authority of the Roman Empire. Life was then uncertain, travel precarious. Cities were at the mercy of marauding bands. Instinctively men grouped themselves around their strongest leaders for mutual protection. Feudalism arose— islands of safety in a sea of turbulence and anarchy. Order and discipline were maintained. Feudalism, for generations served the highest interests of mankind. After a time the need for it disappeared, but Feudalism continued, and like all institutions unrelated to life, it soon degenerated into an agency of oppression and exploitation. The nobles ceased to be protectors and became plunderers, and the masses ceased to be vassals and became serfs. But so dominated is mankind by custom and tradition that it endured Feudalism for centuries after it ceased to function. For centuries it remained tied to this dead and decaying body, until the French Revolution severed them asunder forever.

So with Nationalism. In response to a legitimate urge towards self-expression nations have, since the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, sought their independence. National cultures, once utterly disregarded by rulers, who added country to country as if they were mere stretches of territory, asserted themselves. Nations began to rediscover their pasts, to develop their national speech and literature, to integrate their group personality. This tendency was particularly strong in the last century. All of which was as commendable as it was inevitable.

But here, too, the tradition of nationalism soon became inadequate. New conditions arose, requiring new adjustments. It was found that unrelated national self-determination and independence lead to rivalry and hostilities, to war and to destruction of nationalism itself. It is clear that the world now needs a new conception of international dependence—of mutual self-restraint coincident with self-development. But so enamored are we of the past, of past shibboleths and past superstitions, that we cannot take this new and unavoidable step without the compulsion of universal war and horror.

On the other hand, there are movements in history where a people breaks with its past completely, when it disinherits itself as it were, and begins to reconstruct its life on lines entirely new, on ideal conceptions unrelated to precedent and experience. Such revolutionary efforts are not rare in history and they are as pathetic as they are dramatic, for they are doomed to failure. No people begins life as of today. It begins with ten thousand yesterdays, with the load and the leaven, the pull and the push of the past. The world is already too old for nations to start de novo. Life is already too enmeshed and snarled for idyllic experiments in Arcadia.

Only such ideals have a chance in life and a chance to advance life, which are reverent of the past, which discover the undeviating lines and the invincible strength of the past, and which follow those line and add to that strength, while at the same time avoiding all the pitfalls and errors and blind alleys of the past. Chesterton is right when he declares that "in history there is no Revolution that is not Restoration, and that all the men that have really done anything with the future have had their eyes fixed upon the past." He points to the Renaissance, where the very word proves his case. "The originality of Michael Angelo and Shakespeare began with the digging up of old vases and manuscript. . . . The Reformation looked back to the Bible and the Bible times. . . . Never was the past more venerated by men than it was by the French Revolutionists. They invoked the little republics of antiquity with the complete confidence of one who invokes the gods."

The seed of the future can only be fruitful when sown in the furrows of the past. The new must spring from the old.

We must not, however, confound the new with the novel and the old with the antiquated. A man putting on a new garment does not by that token become a new man, and an age putting on new manners does not become a new age. Authentic newness in a man or in an age is inward spiritual renewal, new emphases, new sets of values, higher aspirations and higher interests.

Every age has its novelty seekers and its spasmodic hankering after the bizarre and the flamboyant. Every epoch has its false glitter and its cheap and easy cleverness. The young men and women of almost every age, except the excessively repressed ones,

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## A New Years Sermon

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have sought after the sharp relish of the novel and the unconventional, whether in clothes or manners, or amusements. Our own age is especially addicted to this idolatry of the novel. Our young people would break with the conventions and restraints of the past and plunge into what they call the New Life. But this new life is, after all, no new life at all, but an acceleration of the old rhythm—a swifter scansion of an hackneyed melody. The wild music and the wilder dances of today are as old as the jungle, and the late hours and loose talk, the irreverences and the irresponsibilities of our day are no what different from the stale bravadoes of every generation since the beginning of time—the same capers and the same totems. There is nothing new in novelty.

The New Life is not a new excitement, but a new exultation—not a stimulant but a satisfaction. We renew ourselves, not by indulging our appetites, but by improving our tastes. As we acquire keener perceptions, finer discriminations, sounder judgments, newer purposes, deeper loyalties, do we gain in newness and freshness and freedom.

The artist enters new worlds by way of his art, and by that token his life is renewed. As his art is perfected his life is progressively renewed—like an endless drama of resurrection. The musician, the poet, the scholar traverse unexplored continents of beatitudes, untrod by the uninitiated, and to that degree their life is a perennial renewal. Every creative effort of heart or mind is a glorious hazard into undiscovered worlds, bringing light and flame to the eager heart. The man who follows a beckoning ideal is assured of a constant refreshment of soul which will save him from the drab weariness of his advancing years.

Men frequently ask: "How can we keep young?" There is no way of keeping young through the mere care of the body. One can only postpone for a few pitiful years the relentless ravages of age. By hard discipline and self-control we can assist for a time the siege of age—but only for a time. The time comes when the velvet and warmth of youth vanish past recall, when the pride of form and the suppleness of limbs depart, and old age takes possession of our bodies, our minds and our emotions. What then? Is there no respite? Are we to grow old because our body tires and our muscles flag? Is there no refuge of renewal, no sanctuary of eternal youth? There is. By the grace of God there is! There are men who remain young and free in the very midst of crumbling old age. There are

men whose last heart beat is a Song of Spring. Glory be to God Who has not given us over unto death! As their eyes grow dim they see more clearly. Men must often shut their eyes in order to see more clearly—especially their dreams. . . As their ears grow wearied with the jangled sounds of the world, they seem to hear the symphonic melodies of the spheres. . . Taste and touch are dulled by age, but they taste ineluctable spiritual delights and touch the gossamer wings of flaming Ariel. . .

Men have searched for the Fountain of Youth, and men have found it—not in earthly springs which rejuvenate the body, or in the artifice of the surgeon's knife, which gives the aging body a brief respite—but in the sacred springs in which the spirit bathes, emerging young and beautiful. At the confluence of great purposes and brave loyalties, eager quests and worthy discontents, ceaseless enterprise and hard work, stands the Fountain of Youth. All who wish may bathe therein.

Faust grew old. He sought to regain his youth by rekindling the burnt out passions of youth—wealth and love and life and laughter. He sold his soul for one great hour of renewal. He failed. But in the end, writes Goethe, who more than any poet plumbed the depths of the mystery of human life, Faust found happiness and refreshment of soul and a new meaning and interest in life, by engaging in some great social task of reclamation, an enterprise which quickened his mind, warmed his heart and put eagerness in his tired nerves, which made him master of old age by making his servant of that which is ageless.

Life should be an endless process of self-renewal, of spiritual growth and augmentation. Our business or profession should not be so mechanical as to restrict our development and confine us to repetition and monotony. We should, of course, attempt to advance to the very limits of our vocation, explore its every byway, marshal into play every talent we possess, but we must continue our self-fulfillment beyond it and outside of it. No occupation, however large its scope, is large enough to enslave our whole personality. Like a jewel radiating through numerous facets, our spirit should adventure along manifold ways.

Above all, we should seek to outstrip ourselves, to outdistance our highest achievements, to grope into the unknown for the new quality and the new purpose which shall antiquate the supreme quality and purpose of the moment. Thus we shall remain young amidst the aging tool of the relentless years.

And the older we shall grow, the less we shall lament the passing of the years. For our eager pilgrimage of the dwelling place of light will continue along the climbing highways of aspiration, undeterred by the weighted years, and upon our lips shall resound the sweet Song of Ascent, until we enter at last the resplendent fields of Eternal Renewal upon the Pilgrimage Everlasting. . .