



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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Western Reserve University, Thanksgiving, 1949.

It is not only the written and spoken words which have meaning. Words are perhaps the least successful to convey deep meaning. Music and painting, sculpture and landscape frequently convey far deeper meanings to us. "Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night declareth knowledge, though there is no speech, though there are no words." Human acts speak and human relations have meaning. Our attitudes, ambitions, pursuits, careers all have meaning or should have meaning.

This age in which we live is full of activity, but I am afraid is possessed of little meaning. We travel very fast in our day and are eager to travel even faster. We can speak further, see further, hear further almost every day. The tempo of life has been amazingly accelerated, but what is the meaning of all this stupendous exertion of mind, this furious movement, these phenomenal advances which we are making in speed and power?

There would be a meaning to all of our phenomenal activity if it was all related to some essential good, but is it? With the coming of these numberless inventions and discoveries and the vast accumulation of new scientific knowledge, death through wholesale slaughter has come to dwell more intimately with the human race, and wars on a scale unknown in the past have become a commonplace in our lives, and political and economic strife and conflict are tearing our world apart, and ~~for~~ we are beset with insecurity and fear.

Ought we not pause and ask ourselves, whither are we bound? What is the meaning of what we are doing? What meaning do we ascribe to the fact that we are what we are and where we are? In a hundred ways we are different from our neighbors. What meaning do we ascribe to this distinctiveness? What specific challenge, what summons, what mandate?

What does living in the year 1949 mean to you? What does being an American mean to you? America is surely more than a country. It is an idea, an historic idea. It is more than land and population and wealth. It has a meaning. Those who founded this Republic spoke in the name of a meaning inherent in the new government which they were

setting up. They spoke of certain self-evident truths, certain fundamental ideas concerning freedom, human equality and the rights of man. America has always been more than a fact. It has also been a revolutionary and enkindled idea. America is Bunker Hill and Valley Forge and the Bill of Rights. America is Gettysburg and the Second Inaugural and the Emancipation Proclamation. America is the covered wagon, the pioneering spirit, the undefeated confidence in endless human progress. America is the fair deal and the square deal and the sharing of the things which we have with those who have not. America is tolerance and good will and cooperation between all men of all races and creeds. Assuredly America has meaning!

But how many Americans are aware of this meaning in their daily lives? Certainly the bigot is not. The fomenter of racial hatreds is not. The champion of the poll tax and Jim Crow laws is not. The demagogue and the political witch hunter is not. Certainly those who abuse our free institutions to serve foreign dictators or those who have lost their faith in America so that panic by fear and apprehension they would blindly destroy the very institutions which they wish to conserve - certainly they are not aware of the meaning of America. Nor the economic exploiter, the corrupt labor agitator, the grasping cleric who would confound church and state, the professional militarist who would make of our country an armed camp and pour out our national resources to arm half the world against the other half! Certainly these people, while Americans living in America, do in every way ignore or betray the essential meaning of America.

Let us in our daily lives learn to reach out for the meaning of things and live by the light of these meanings. Let us not be too busy ^{for} ~~in~~ inquiry and for quest. Let us not be too busy for wonderment. Without meaning our days may be long, but our years will be empty. The purpose of religion is to open our eyes to see through things into the heart of things and to infuse all knowledge with the glow of ethical purpose.

Without the university, the church and synagogue are repositories of superstitions and their essential truth is marred and distorted by ignorance and fear. Without church and synagogue, the university is a dynamo of power which may destroy mankind.