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The Sayings of the Fathers, 1958.

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THE SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS

Ancient Wisdom for the Modern Man

#26

THE TEMPLE April 20, 1958

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

An ancient wise man once remarked that youth is the seed-time of hope. Our Bible observes that in youth the young men see visions. Certainly when we begin life we are filled with exuberance and with enthusiasm. There seems to be no peak we cannot scale, no goal we cannot achieve, no vision which we cannot materialize. We tend, when we are beginning the long road of life, to be a little bit patronizing towards the efforts and the failures of our predecessors. We are tolerant of their mistakes but we feel that somehow we will succeed where they failed. Our talents will not be found wanting where theirs were found to be insufficient. Now of course experience tends to throw cold water upon this messianic conviction of youth. The older that we get the more we realize that there are mountains we will never climb, goals we will never reach. The more we realize that our talents too are wanting and deficient, that we too will be frustrated, short of the mark. Experience tells us that our ancestors were not so naive and incapable as we once conceived them, but that they were honest in their struggle and that they achieved against their human predicaments as much as we will achieve against ours. Now there are some who when they face the realities of life become disillusioned and disheartened. A grownup for instance in Europe in the decade since the end of the Second World War, a generation of completely despairing, despondent young people, who feel that all effort is doomed to failure, that all men must somehow eachew the arena of human passions because all the activities there are senseless and purposeless. They despair of life. They refuse themselves the benefit of hope. They live in a world surrounded by the gray and black monochrome of dispiritedness. Now this is of course not a new mood. Its first great literary reflection is found in the Bible itself in the Book of

Ecclesiastes. A man, an author whom we do not know, a man whom traditions says may have been King Solomon in his old age, a man who had lived too much and seen too much. has also despaired of life. He feels that the crippled could never be made straight. He feels that most of our efforts should be designed at extricating our individual selves from the stresses and the struggles of life rather than involving ourselves in the crusades and the passions of existence. And when those who are life-excited come to him he counsels them thus: "That which has been is that which shall be. That which has been done is that which shall be done. There is nothing new under the sun". I do not agree. Judaism does not agree. I prefer the spirit which the great Italian-American contemporary philosopher Georges Santgyana expressed in verse: "It is not wisdom to be only wise and on the inward vision close the eyes. But it is wisdom to believe the heart." It may be worldly to be pessimistic, but it is not wise. It does not reveal true understanding of the human situation. For there has been progress since man began his slow and tortuous journey into history. We have only to look back and see the many discarded superstitions and fears which man - early man, primitive man - was surrounded by and beaten by to realize how much hope and how much more happiness and how much more freedom from fear we enjoy in this, our generation. Certainly scientifically and technically we have come far. The auto by which we drove here this morning, the television which we may have watched last night, the telephone by which we communicate with one another were unknown a century ago and inconceivable in biblical days. Scientifically certainly then, there are some things which are wholly new under the sun. I think too that man has won for himself a freedom - a freedoms of fear, a freedom of tension - unknown centuries ago. For

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most of the early millenia of his history man lived tottering on the brink of starvation. Each year his survival depended upon the success of the harvest, upon the seasons and the weather. Today with the advanced science of agronomy we have learned much about controlling the production of food for human survival, and we no longer live from harvest-time to harvest-time in fear. Today we no longer fear the darkness, nor the firey nor the storm, nor the tempest, nor the sea. We no longer fear disease. We understand a great deal of its origin. We can control its spread and we can assuage many of its symptoms. All this man has won for himself through his mind. through his talents, through his experimentation, through his struggles to achieve the better life. All these are new things which have been created under the sun. At most the Book of Ecclesiasts speaks here a half-truth. Not that we should minimize these partial truths. For in the realm of human psychology it is in the main true that there is nothing new under the sun. Our ancestors, like we, are struggling and have struggled with the human predicament, with learning, with love, and with worthwhile living. These they sought to achieve, these we seek to achieve. Their struggles in large measure reflect ours. We can see ourselves in their teachings and their failures and their triumphs. We can recognize our own lives often in the volumes of wisdom and of lore which they have left to us. Perhaps above all that is the reason that a classic education is still an important part of becoming an educated man. It reveals to us how men of great mental capacity, men of great power and vision, struggled to become something of which they could be proud, studied to achieve their goals in life, and we can learn much from what they learned of life. Now the ancients left us many different types of this wisdom, many different types of literature, in which they set down for future generations what they had learned of life. There are books of philosophy, theater, epic poetry, religious poetry, religious theosophy, esoteric cabbalistic lore. But perhaps the most beloved and the most familiar to us are the Proverbs, the axioms, the aphorisms which these ancient teachers set down, in which they compacted and compressed their outlook on life. At first in all probability these proverbs were passed about by word of mouth.

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Familiarly they were passed on from father to son, from mother to daughter. Later editors compiled these sayings and set them down so that teachers and sermonizers phrase might refer to these compilations and derive a new inspiration-hrane lesson for a teaching. Our Bible contains a whole book which is a compilation of such proverbs and aphorisms. It is known as "Hightaff", as the Book of Proverbs. By tradition it is ascribed to King Solomon, whose legendary wisdom was famous throughout the old world, as it is still famous in our own day. In all probability this Book of Proverbs is rather a compilation of the best of Jewish aphoristic wisdom set down over a period perhaps of a half millenium, from, say, the year 800 B. C. E. to the year 300 B. C. E. We are familiar with many of the sayings from this Book of Proverbs, so familiar in fact that we often forget that their source is in the Bible. "Spare the rod and spoil the child". "Pride cometh before a fall". "A merry heart is a good medicine". "Hope deferred makes the head sick". "Boast not thyself of tomorrow for thou knowest not that tomorrow may come".

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A second great compilation was made of Jewish proverb about a hundred years after the book of Mishnah. It is not included in our Bible, but is to be found rather in the Apocrapha, that collection of books which were not deemed to be on a par with the caliber of the books included in the Bible canon. It was written by It a man named Joshua ben Sirah, whom is known to us as Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of ben Sirah. He lived around the year 180 B. C. E., and in some forty chapters he has compiled and edited much of the aphoristic wisdom of his day. It lacks the preciseness and the succinctness and the picturesque language of the Book of Proverbs. It is sometimes rather verbose. But still to read the Wisdom of ben Sirat is to gain a great deal of insight into the Jewish life and view, the view which the Jews took towards the many practical, mundane, daily problems. Let me read to you one or two lines taken at random from this text.

"My son, do not spoil your good deeds. When you make a gift do not cause pain by what you say. A present begrudged makes the receiver cry his eyes out.? "Do not indulge in too much luxury. Do not be tied to its expense. Do

not become impoverished from feasting on borrowed money when you have nothing in your purse."

(Travel now, pay later.)

"Question a friend, perhaps he did not do it, or if he did, so that he will not do it again. Question a neighbor, perhaps he did not say it, or if he did, so that he will not repeat it. Question a friend, for often there is

slander. You must not believe all that you hear. A man may make a slip without intention. Who among us has not sinned through abuse of his tongue?" We must go down 400 years in Jewish history to find the next great compilation of Jewish proverbial wisdom. These four centuries were turbulent ones in Jewish history. They were not always politically successful or triumphal ones. They begin, however, in . Shortly after ben Sirah set down and compiled this book of proverbs and of quotations, the Maccabees arose and freed the Jews from the dominion of the Syrian-Greeks, an independent Jewish State in 165 B C E was established in Palestine. But in less than a century Rome had tacitly achieved dominion over Israel. Rome then set up puppet kings, and slowly but inexorably there grew that inevitable conflict between the spirit of freedom and an democracy of Israel and the imperial Vox Romana. In the year 68 B C E a terrible revolt broke out, to be crushed by the year 70. In the year 72 after the Common Era another great revolt broke out and was crushed in three years, again by the Romans, so that by the end of the second century of the Common Era the Jewish population in Palestine was decimated. Jewish prosperity was devastated. Jewish civilization in Israel was smashed into a thousand bits. Though these four centuries were not one of unmitigated triumph and success politically, in the world of the spirit, in the world of faith, they were among the most creative, the most dynamic, the most important in all of Jewish history. For these four centuries see the growth of the great Pharisaic or rabbinic movement in Jewish life, that movement by which the Temple was transformed into a Synagogue, a hereditary priesthood became a rabbinate of choice and of learning, a great system of universal public school education was founded in Judea, and on its

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basis a new attitude towards religion was adopted. All men were equal before God. One did not need a priest, a Kohan, to be axandiance an intermediary between God and His people. Nor did the people need a priest to interpret the will of God for them. The Bible was an open book, the inheritance of the whole congregation of Israel, and a literate people were able to consult that book and interpret it as they saw fit. The sages, the rabbis, the teachers brought about a great democratic religious

revolution during these four centuries. They set the pattern of Jewish life which we have accepted and sustained even unto our own day. The culmination of this great movement was the compilation of a new code of Jewish law, the Mishnah". It set out a new rule of every aspect of the way of life which was to be Jewish. And as an ethical post-script to this "Mishnah", this code of law, some rabbi at the end of the second century of this Common Era published the "Sayings of the Fathers", a compilation of teachings designed principally and primarily to edify the judges and lawyers and juries who would have the responsibility of carrying this law into practice. He well recognized that the most beautifully conceived legal code needed to be put into action by dedicated, inspired, and morally courageous people. And so he added this "Sayings of the Fathers" to try and teach them the way which the judge and the lawyer should follow, to talk of those matters which cannot be governed by law itself, matters of the spirit and of attitude and of conduct. The bulk of the first chapter or so of the "Sayings of the Fathers", which we read this morning. deals with advice to those who are responsible for the Jewish legal system. "Do not be hasty in judgment. Be deliberate in the questioning of the witnesses. When parties to a suit are before you, consider them guilty. When judgment has been given and both have acquiesced, consider them again to be innocent. Do not put words into the mouths of the witnesses, know by your words they be led to falsify testimony."

Now if the "Sayings of the Fathers" had been nothing more than a compilation of this advice to the legal profession it would have quickly dated itself, especially in the last hundred years or so when Jewish life is no longer legally autonomous and

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the profession of the Jewish lawyer has largely been taken over in a religious sense by the secular law of the State. But fortunately the editor had in mind a second important service in this little book of six chapters. He set out to praise teachers. the great Pharisaic teachers. He set out to winnow from all of their teachings some of the finest aphorisms and proverbs in which they had set down the richness and wealth of their wisdom. To illustrate the brilliance of the men who had conveived

this Mishnah, this Law Code, he set out to show to future generations the aptness of their intelligence, and set it out by quoting from their lore and proverbs and aphorisms. And so we have in the Sayings of the Fathers really the synthesis. the crystallization of the best of Jewish thought culled from some four hundred years of Jewish tradition. The beauty of this thought is its brevity and its succinctness. It compacts so much in so little. Many of us have been troubled throughout our lives with the problem of how much we owe to ourselves, how much we owe to others. Always the pulpit, the schools, seem to be encouraging us to be of service, to be selfless, and sometimes we hear preachers who counsel self-abnegation, complete selflessness. And yet instinctively we know that we owe certain responsibilities to ourselves. A doctor cannot be a competent physician until he has spent many selfish hours in self-training and musi raised his skills and his knowledge to their finest sheen. And so it is with almost everything that we do. To be of greatest use to our community we have to achieve individually. How then shall we balance service and our desires to improve our own selves? "If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I?" We have to provide the commentary, but there is as good a rule for life as any that I know. For though man cannot live by bread alone, he cannot live without bread at all. Our lives, in a sense, work out the commentary to this teaching by Hillel from the Sayings of our Fathers. So many of the basic problems of life are feflected and

in this great collection. We are concerned about the ends and purposes of education. Learning for learning's sake. The Pirke Avoth tells us "It is not the knowledge and erudition which is all-important, but the doing". We

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referred earlier to the question of whether we canaachieve the goals and the ideals and the visions which all of us have for a world of peace and justice and security. We spoke of the frustrations which men feel when they see that their powers and the talents of their generation will fall short of these visions. "It is not incumbent upon you to fulfill the work, but neither art thou free to desist entirely from it." Sometimes the Pirke Avoth brings us up short with a jolt. A bit of familiar wisdom

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is twisted in an unusual way, and in the twisting we see deep into the Jewish soul. All of us have heard that familiar proverb that we'd rather be a make big fish in a small pond than a small fish in a big pond. The Romans had a proverb which said much the same thing: "Better to be the head of foxes", it read, "than the tail of lions." But strangely, in the Sayings of our Fathers, one of the rabbis twists this proverb around and says: "Better to be the tail of lions than the head of foxes." Better always to seek to achieve something more, to set your eyes and your sights ever higher, than to content yourselves with something which is below the level of your capacity and your ability. Better to be the tail among lions than the head of foxes. And sometimes it is simply the play of a brilliant mind upon life. They loved tto play, these rabbis, with numbers. They took the number "four" in the Pirke Avoth and they said that very often you could describe most human emotions by four specific individual attitudes which people reflected in one way or another. Take the attitude of the people toward material possessions. "Four ways", they said, "and you can describe almost all people." There is the man who says, "What is mine is mine, and what is thine is thine." That's the average person. There is the man who mays, "What is mine is thine and what is thine is thine." That's the saintly person. There is the person who says, "What is mine is thine, and what is thine is thine is mine" - that is the meshuga - the man who gets up on his soap-box and delivers speeches. And finally there is the man who says, "What is thine is mine, and what is mine is mine" - that is the greedy person, the selfish person. And similarly taking this number "four" they illustrated the four types of students that have ever sat in a classroom before a teacher by reference to four of the most

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familiar of all household kitchen implements. Some students, they said, can be described as funnels. You pour in education, facts, learning at one end - the learning pours out at the other. Nothing has remained, nothing has been absorbed, nothing has been understood. Then there are some students who are like the sponge. Everything that is said is absorbed - facts, fancy - you have seen students in college who write the lectures of the teachers down word for word including the

jokes. Everything is absorbed, and when the time comes everything is set out again in its fullness without any sense of value, without any sense of what is important and what is secondary and what is trivial. These are the sponges in education the Teddy Nadlers. And thirdly, there are minds which are like sieves. Something is absorbed, but it is the inconsequential, the unnecessary, the trivial, the chaff. The good grain sifts through and is let go. A lesson is thrown out, and these young people remember only that which was completely secondary and tangential to the point which the teacher wanted to get across. And finally the joy of all teachers existant - the child whose mind is like a strainer, who takes the facts and the lectures which are put out to him - retains the bran and the cereal and winnows the chaff and casts it away.

It is a thrilling experience readily to read through the Savings of the Fathers. Every time that you do, some new thought strikes home. You are prepared to receive in a sense some other bit of rabbinic wisdom. I would close by simply taking one of the Sayings of the Fathers and applying it, not as it did to the Bible, but rather to the Sayings of the Fathers itself. Of the Bible one of the rabbis said, "

Turn it over, and turn it over again. Everything is in it." Turn the Sayings of the Fathers over and over again. You are particularly able to do it because the rabbis centuries ago in all of their wisdom saw fit to include the Sayings of the Fathers in our prayer book. It has been there for fourteen hundred years. It is in the prayer book now in your hands. Turn it over, when you come early to the

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synagogue. Look through its pages. I know that you will find great inspiration and understanding from so doing.

Amen.

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MY SON DO NOT SPOIL YOUR GOOD DEEDS. WHEN YOU MAKE A GIFT DO NOT CAUSE PAIN BY WHAT YOU SAY. DOES NOT THE DEW ASSUAGE THE SCORCHING HEAT? SO WORD IS MORE POTENT THAN A GIFT. WHI IS NOT A WORD BETTER THAN A GIFT? AFTER ALL BOTH WARK THE CHARTERDER MAN. A FOOL UNCRACICUSLY ABUSES PEOPLE. A PRESENT BEGRUDGED Therewer MAKES ONE CRY HIS EYES OUT. (//

DO NOT INDULGE IN TOO MUCH LUXURY. DO NOT BE TIED TO ITS EXPENSE. DO NOT BECOME IMPOVERISHED FROM FEASTING ON BORROWED MONEY WHEN YOU HAVE NOTHING IN YOUR PURSE. // (Shaul mon, pay lalu)

QUESTION A FRIEND, PERHAPS HE DID NOT DO IT, OR IF HE DID SO THAT HE WILL NOT DO IT AGAIN.

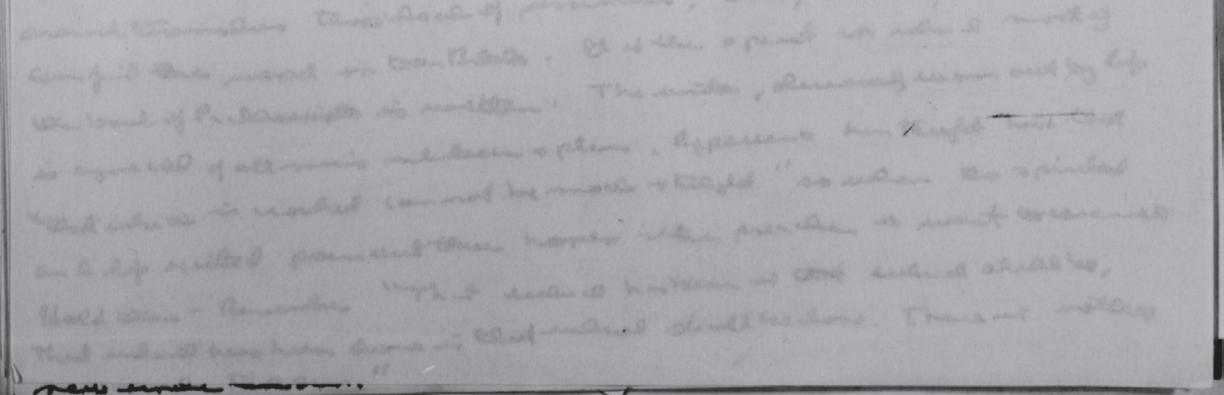
QUESTION A NEIGHBOR, PERHAPS HE DID NOT SAY IT, OR IF HE DID SO THAT HE WILL NOT REPEAT IT.

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Kaddish	Friday <u>APRIL 18</u> Sunday "20			
Uhose who passed away this week CLARICE AUERBACH JACCE FREEDEAMDER YETTA GREENWALD ROSE HUEBSCHMAN CLARA KANE				
ISAAC MARKS NATHAN SCHLESINGER SAMUEL NEWMAN HATTIE S. BRAHAM ROSE MASCHKE MYRON H. MORREAU JOSEPH WEIZENHOF CORA LEDERER FANNIE C.EISENMAN DOLLIE HABER SAMUEL L. HALPER ISIDOR KUTZ MARTIN F. DEVAY MAX E. MEISEL HYMAN B.LEVY	HHEA N. HELLER MARIE MERTZEL ASCHERMAN HENRIETTA WEIZENHOF HERMAN GOTTLIEB ISAAC EVANS MIKE ROSENBERG			