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Some of My Favorite Fools, 1965.

SOME OF MY FAVORITE FOOLS

The Temple  
May 16, 1965

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

#148

When I announced our topic, Some of My Favorite Fools, one of my favorite friends said: "I'll be there to see if I make the list." Let me put you at ease. Present company is excepted. Besides, as you will soon discover, though I have little patience with stupidity, my favorite fools are anything but foolish.

Every sermon begins in the Rabbi's experience. Something we have read, something we have seen, something we have heard or overheard strikes home. This sermon was born in the quiet of my study - late one evening, while I was browsing a new English translation of the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha is a library of Hebrew writings from the most recent of the pre-Christian centuries. This literature is contemporaneous with the last books of the Bible. It was not made part of the Scriptural Canon for many reasons. Some of the material did not pass literary or philosophic muster. Some of it was too brief. Some of it duplicated material already accepted in the Bible and would have been redundant. Some was excessive in its eschatology and apocalypse - its dealing with the visionary and the last things. Perhaps the most famous of the books of the Apocrypha are the four histories of the Maccabees which chronicle the history which underlies our holiday of Chanukah. This particular evening my eye was drawn to the fifty-one chapters which constitute the book of Ecclesiasticus, or as it is more commonly known, The Wisdom of Ben Sirach.



Joshua Ben Sirach was an influential and important citizen of Jerusalem, twenty-one hundred and sixty years ago. He was by profession a teacher or rhetor. Towards the end of what was obviously a respected and successful career this wise man set down in proverb and maxim the best of his judgments and clearest of his understandings. The ancients, as you know, delighted in creating aphorisms where the language was rich, compact and suggestive of a wide range of meanings. Joshua's teachings, originally written in Hebrew, were translated into Greek fifty years after his death by a grandson. (The Hebrew original was lost until two years ago). Our modern translations are all taken from this labor of love by the dedicated grandson of this wise ancestor.

But our interest this morning is not to the recensions of the text or to its history, but to the man and to his thought. Ben Sirach was worldly wise, shrewd, a capable observer and eminently sensible. Ben Sirach can be read with profit therefore, by the unsophisticated, the gullable and the naive. He reminds us that we live on this earth not in some angelic heaven. There are calculating and cruel men among us. The wise are on their guard against blandishment and against being beguiled. Yet it's wisdom can be read even if we believe our judgment to be fairly sharp for it is always of benefit to read the capable, shrewd observations of another.

Let me cite two examples of the wisdom of Ben Sirach. The first is an admonition addressed to a father who has a tendency to be indulgent with his family and especially with sons:

"Do not give power over yourself as long as you live. Do not give your property to another lest you change your mind and must ask for it. While you are still alive and



have your breath, do not let anyone take your place, for it is better that your children should ask from you than that you should look to the hand of your sons."

Or consider this monition addressed to those who are tempted to accept well-meant and generous hospitality of another:

"The essentials for life are water and bread and clothing and a house to cover one's nakedness. Better is the life of a poor man under the shelter of his roof than sumptuous food in another man's house. Be content with little or much. It is a miserable life to go from house to house. Where you are a stranger, you cannot open your mouth, you play the host, and provide drink without being thanked, besides this you will overhear bitter words. 'Come here stranger, prepare the table and give anything at hand. Let me have it to eat, or give place stranger, to an honored person, to my brother, he has come to stay with me. I need my house.' These things are hard to bear for a man who has feeling."

Indeed they are - as anyone can attest who has been forced by circumstances to accept protracted hospitality. There is much of benefit, then, in these writings, but I confess that that night as I re-read these chapters I was conscious of a growing sense of irritation. Ben Sirach put me off. The Olympian ease with which he dispensed judgment was just too God-like and omniscient. Life is simply too tangled to be that sure of your judgments.



Then too, Ben Sirach is not above preening himself in print, blowing his own horn, to make sure that posterity will be aware of his importance. "He who is wise," he says over and over again, meaning himself, "he who is wise among his people will inherit honor and his name will live forever." Ben Sirach, for all of his wisdom, was given to the ordinary fault of vanity. He may even have been a somewhat pompous man.

As I re-read this text, I thought to myself how wisdom brings along with itself its own evil. I understood what Jeremiah meant when he said, "Let not a wise man pride himself in his wisdom." Why not? Ghandi provides us the answer. More than any other man in our century, Ghandi had to deal every day of his life with the Ben Sirach's of the world: British functionaries, the governors and authorities in India who, by virtue of an Oxford education and a certificate from the British Foreign Office, knew that they knew what was best for the Indians. They too had this arrogance of intellect. Once during an interview Ghandi was asked: 'what was it that gave him most heartache and trouble in his life?' Ghandi's answer was simple and direct! "The hard-headedness of the educated."

Wisdom has a way of breeding its own excess and that excess is arrogance. I doubt that any of us would have enjoyed the company of Ben Sirach. He would have known what was best for us and he would have told us about it. He might have said that he had observed that when philosophers are stumbling and halting in their language, no one listens. You have to speak the truth straight out. There is a certain truth to this. But, personally, I prefer Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." Better a truth unheard than a truth unasked.



As I read Ben Sirach, as I sensed the man, as I found myself put off by his vanity and by his intellectual arrogance, I found that there was a deeper source to my irritation. What was it? Here was an understanding of the human situation which simply was not sufficient. What was lacking? Was it common sense? Good sense? Not at all. Ben Sirach was an eminently responsible and responsive human being. He knew how to bargain and he knew not to take another's promise at face value. He knew how to rein in his dreams. He was an eminently sensible man. What then was missing? Was it good breeding? Manners? Not at all. Ben Sirach might be an Oriental Emily Post. Was it a sense of community, of man's responsibility to his city? Not at all. Ben Sirach speaks often of responsibility to neighbors. I somehow imagine him as a member of the Judean Red Cross and the Jerusalem United Appeal and any number of hospital boards and agency affiliates. What then is missing? Life! A sense of passion, a dash of daring, some enthusias, a willingness sometimes to let the heart rule the head.

I suspect that when Ben Sirach married, he married "well". He carefully selected for himself the wife who had exactly the qualities that a wife of a teacher in Jerusalem should have. I suspect that when it came to politics, his politics were eminently sensible. I doubt that he ever carried a placard or penned an angry protest. He was simply not a rebel. Instead of passion, I find in Ben Sirach the philosophy of caution. "Seek not that which is too high for thee." Or again, "A wise man should be cautious, always." Or again, "Dreams give wings to fools." Or again, "Do not go on a path full of hazards. Do not stumble on stony ground." "Guard yourself, be careful in every act."

Ben Sirach was a stoic, in both the classic and contemporary sense of the word. He was a realist. He was resigned to the vagaries of life and



chance. He was determined to be in control of himself, calm at all times. He was determined to be disciplined, to accept life with sturdy strength and never to whimper. Ben Sirach, and those like him, and they are legion, are courageous men. They are experienced men. They are hard-headed men. What they lack is simply the ability to expose themselves to life in the raw, or rather, to expose their heart to feeling. They cannot see that joining the Peace Corps, or protesting in Selma, or protesting in Washington, changes the affairs of the world. Politics to them is a matter of bargain and arrangement. It is whom you know, and what he owes you - that is the beginning and the end of it.

These men are realists. They feel a great responsibility to their business and to their professions. They feel that those who allow themselves the luxury of causes are foolish. Your causes and your excesses will be remembered. You may be denied a promotion. Far better that you stick to your last and mind your future.

Somehow I can imagine Ben Sirach saying to his son: "my boy, I can't tell you what you ought to do. You know that. But I can't help but believe that being with me this summer will be of a far greater use to you than being in the boon docks on the Mississippi. It's not, as you know, that I have anything against integration, but that's their problem. Boy, this is a dog eat dog world, and if you want to be top dog, you better sharpen your teeth. Stop being the child who brings home every stray mut."

Ben Sirach's voice is the voice of a cautious wisdom. His is a necessary wisdom, for there are men and women to whom excess is the virtue. There are men and women who look on the ordinary responsibilities as restrictive and pointless. Every century, every generation has its Don Quixotes who needlessly, foolishly, and senselessly weary themselves seeking windmills



at which to tilt. But not all causes are trivial and not all passions ludicrous. Cautious wisdom does not build civilization. Only those who are foolish enough to let the heart rule the head, only those who are willing to plunge into life and to reach out for something beyond the ordinary rewards of the daily routine, only these build civilization.

"Dreams," Ben Sirach said, "give wings to fools," and sometimes they do. Just imagine the foolishness of the young man who tells his father, "No, dad, I can't join the office. I'm not ready to settle down yet. I don't know why." I can just see the father turning on his son and saying: "Boy, you've got to settle down. If you had a musical genius or an unusual scientific talent I wouldn't force you to come back here and work with me. I built this up for you but if you had other talents well then I'd say go ahead. But you're just stewing around. You have no set purpose. When I tell you to come back and that I need you, you tell me, 'I've simply got to be left alone. Give me a chance to find myself, I don't know where I'm going but I can't go your way.' What kind of maturity is that?"

The father seems wise and the son somewhat foolish. But was Abraham really a fool? Abraham came of a settled, wealthy tribe in Ur of the Chaldees. Abraham was the eldest son of the clan chief. He could look forward to growing responsibility, ultimately to some measure of power. Abraham had no settled purpose. He couldn't settle down. He left but he didn't know where he was going. He didn't know why he had to go. He simply needed some elbow room to find himself. Was Abraham a fool?

Could Judaism have forged the vision of the one God if it had not wrenched itself physically from the paganism and the polytheism of the world about it? History has a way of raising fools into heroes. No sensible man, no cautious man, no reasonable man, comes home after a day's work and



says to his wife, "Dear, I've had a vision, I've got to go out and save the world." Yet Moses was such a fool. Moses had a vision. I can just see his father-in-law Jethroe saying to him, "Calm down. It's the heat. Let Zipporah nurse you for a while. You simply can't shuck your responsibilities on some fool's errand. How can you believe that Pharoah will free several hundred thousands of his best slaves simply because you tell him to? You've been out in the sun too long. Take a few days off. Pharoah will have you clapped into irons. He won't see you. And if he does see you, it will be only to mock at you and to make you today's joke at court. All you'll succeed in doing is to add another widow and another orphan to my responsibilities. Take it easy, Moses. Take a few days off and come back to your senses. Is that too much to ask?"

Well, it was. Moses went.

There are people for whom the conventional responsibilities are restricting - even the extraordinary love that a husband feels for a wife, or a father for a son - and who chuck these over because there is a broader responsibility. They have a role to play in history. Who is to judge?

If Moses had stayed at home, if he had listened to Jethroe's good advice, the slaves would have remained slaves, Israel would have remained in chains, Monotheism might never have been born.

Fools have a way of writing the history of our civilization. Perhaps what I am saying can be best summed up in the Biblical legend of Jonah. You know it well. Jonah would have approved of Ben Sirach. Jonah believed that you should not reach for that which is too high for you, that the way of the wise is a cautious way, that one ought not unnecessarily take the hazardous road. When God came upon Jonah, he probably was busy puttering in his garden or playing with his grandchildren. "Jonah, I have a mission for you." And Jonah answered. "No, thank you, find somebody else." God said, "Go!" and Jonah said, "Aren't there enough rolling stones in the



world, why do you have to pick on me? I pay my taxes, I'm a good citizen, I ask only to be left alone." God said, "Go!" And Jonah went. But he went the wrong way. He schemed to escape God's unreasonable order. But no one can escape responsibility. Jonah was brought back and he went to Nineveh, that great city, and he preached to Nineveh the word of God. The people of Nineveh repented, and God repented of his verdict and the city was saved. Jonah was enraged with an anger beyond that which he had originally known in his garden. The Bible tells us that Jonah went and sat on a hill overlooking this great walled place, mumbling all the while to himself, miserable with frustration. He was shamed. Here he had gone into the streets and onto the public square of Nineveh and he told the citizens, "You have been wicked, God will destroy you." These people had made some notions of repentance, and God had rescinded His judgment. He had had to walk out of the city a discredited prophet - a fool. He had promised destruction and it had not come. So, Jonah sat pitying himself, grumbling, bitter. Finally God took pity on him. According to the legend God caused a great gourd to grow, and the gourd cast some shade over Jonah protecting him from the searing rays of the sub-tropical sun. Despite himself Jonah began to feel some measure of physical relief - better, - but then God brought in a parasite and the parasite blasted the gourd and the gourd withered and the sun again beat down unmercifully and Jonah redoubled his grumbling. Then God said to him, "Jonah, art thou truly angry?" And Jonah answered, "Indeed I am." And God said, "Jonah, art thou angry for this gourd?" And Jonah said, "What else?" So God said to him, "Should I not have pity on a great city of a 120,000 people when thou hast so much anger and so much concern for one little gourd, which thou neither planted nor madest to grow."



What does the legend teach? That the Jonah's of the world, the Ben Sirachs of the world, many of us live in a narrow and circumscribed place. Our concerns are safety, physical well-being, the protection of our family, pay check, promotion. This is our world. Within its walls we operate responsibly. But these are constricting walls. Outside these walls there is a great surging universe. There is a responsibility which we cannot throw over. And when this responsibility comes and reaches in and says, "We need you," you cannot simply say, "I have no time." What you ask is too time-consuming. My first responsibility is at home." No, we must say, "here I am. This is my destiny, do with me as I must."

There is a second meaning to this legend of Jonah. What did God imply to Jonah when Jonah complained about the gourd? He contrasted Jonah's concern for the gourd and Jonah's concern for the city and its people? "Jonah, I would not have disturbed you for a trifle. Ordinarily your responsibilities are those of home and work, but when it is a matter of human welfare, when it is of broad concern, when a city is involved, when peace and justice are at stake, then you must leave off pattering in your garden, then you must expose yourself-brave even ridicule. There is a time for your well-laid plans for advancement and promotion and a time for courage and service.

Ben Sirach said, "Reach not for that which is too high for thee. Dreams give wings to fools." Indeed they do. And if we are truly foolish and fly uselessly, we pointlessly endanger our lives. But thank God for the dreams which draw us out of ourselves. Thank God for the dreams which remind us that we are part of something called humanity. Thank God for the teachings which remind us that our fate is interdependent. Our four walls



will not protect us when upheaval shakes the society, when war is waged, when poverty cries out for redress. I commend to you the wisdom of Solomon.

"Far better than all the riches in the world and all the honor that man can bestow upon another, a little of folly." This is what Heine meant when he said, "Who ne'er has been foolish, he ne'er has been wise." This is what Jeremiah meant when he said, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his right, let not the rich man glory in his wealth, but let him that glory, glory in this, that he understandeth, and knoweth me that I, the Lord, hath executed mercy and righteousness and justice in the earth, for in these things do I delight."

In the doing of mercy, in the executing of justice, in the joining in righteous cause, we are foolish. We are going against our immediate self-interest. But this is the way that delights God. This is the way that validates our birth. This is the way that is ultimately the glory of human life.

"Far more precious than riches and honor, is a little bit of folly."



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 the evolution list (Department do not have operation who make  
 and evolution ~~law~~ at ~~the~~ primo evolutionary ~~at~~

Caps on a nucleosome pulled a helix on a rail of polystyrene  
Catalase ~~unstable~~ <sup>after 10 min.</sup> ~~in water~~ <sup>in buffer</sup>. Dr. B.S.

~~under the same conditions as the first~~ 2 cm. long R. J. Telle

*[Faint handwritten notes at the bottom of the page, including "Mississippi" and "American Jewish Archives"]*

~~B. S. [unclear]~~

and do not resemble over a long period

To be sure these are these to under suppose is a way of life

had been several in a series of Doan's Kidney Pills

would be needed to reach D.S. and  
not well suited to machines -  
D.S. - the more!

$\frac{1}{2}$  it held it as a representative of the whole

The ~~we~~ could not have imagined such a very bad road



The experienced tell us "Pragmatics must be fulfilled", Certainly, yes, no body  
in his right mind thinks any security and fulfillment - for the longing of studies  
but on his own - Oh, I suppose if he's a mercenary gambler on a traded  
society and he can see clearly that good - that make some - good just  
to tell me "I'm just to understand a bit" when I told you the time to  
have come to understand - why, yes, I'm thoroughly sure in some other  
would give the eye could put - Verily then, yes, you must be fulfilled -  
to our riches includes with business and possessions and more, as it  
he will your head to business.

Was abandon a goal? where was your goal was related and  
is related, as it was the goal of the future. Un but  
position and relatively new  
we must have a goal of the future and it is the goal of the future  
ambitions - Verily the goal of the future is the goal of the future  
new phase of life - For the future is the goal of the future  
- the ambitions of the future is the goal of the future  
should be the goal of the future is the goal of the future  
the pragmatics and ambitions?

Civilization is the triumph of fully over a selfishness which is of  
the same kind of ambitions

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pulling in his son's, play, will his child, never by for  
his friend. When last disturbed his mother - he never was  
quiescent to the point. "No, don't you see!", he might say and  
pursue B. S.

Do not go on a full field of hazards  
and do not stimulate one's own general  
beard yourself in any way.

Why should I suddenly have money to get a fund of  
and pay, young, <sup>have</sup> ~~lost~~ all interest. I'm literally now  
had, but no more. We must not let him alone and  
in the case "CAUTION ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~be~~ ~~careful~~ ~~to~~ ~~not~~ ~~lose~~ ~~it~~"

The first - but he wanted me to accept. I accepted him, he  
 submitted me to the public. I was successful - I was  
 happy. I reported of the meeting. I continued to write  
 "I had never met him before. I was not  
 in my own country. I knew you would  
 forgive - but really, I would have to be  
 but I was not your own and I was not."

[illegible]







is an expression of human nature. Dreams give us a way to feel!  
That's good!  
But there are many dreams as well as significant visions -  
It is one thing to build a 2nd or to build a school - quite  
another to build a house of cards - It is useless to expect to  
have cards quite under to  
win

Ben must write

Reasons to be beginning of any yearly see quite -  
and several precepts very indistinctly -

and he was right - and he will feel - perhaps he will feel for  
the sake of theology - but never retrograde - never regress

in our religious conscience - it will be allowance for

the possibility of unilateral protest and theology should be revised - The

fully showing another

We must add to it, the importance of theology in the life of the people

Let not the new man play in his mind

" " " might now play " " right

" " " and " " " rules

But let him that should play the game

That he understand the game and the rules

That some of the game, who are not new

justices, in the game

For the new man is a subject

It is the right to be allowed to play, just,  
in the game - because it is the game - but



and thus provide our glory and the eternity  
mission of human life!





14 units with <sup>Olympian</sup> long unbroken on any one smaller selection and search.

No one better to the timidities of a difficult and overlooking principles.









