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The Sayings of the Fathers, 1966.

Sayings of the Fathers
Daniel Jeremy Silver
April 24, 1966

We read together this morning the first chapter of the Pirkot Avot, The Sayings of the Fathers. In so doing we continued a venerated, thousand-year old tradition of the synagogue which is to read these chapters of proverb on the Sabbaths during worship which succeeds on the Passover holiday. As you well know, we have read these chapters together at this time of year and previous years, and I believe that though you have found in them an original flash of intellectual lightning you have wondered why. We are not in the habit of reading books of quotations. We refer to them occasionally to check ourselves up on a dimly remembered reference. A speaker turns to a given topic and skims through it to find a neatly-turned phrase which will cap his argument, but the book of quotations is a book of reference rather than a book to be read. It is the veneer of wisdom rather than wisdom itself and so you may well ask, why is it that the sages of our people instructed the synagogue to make this little book of quotations a part of the ritual. And there are profounder questions which we can ask even than these for a truth, an idea, which is wrenched out of its content, truncated, is not truth at all but a truism. We pass among ourselves these well-known maxims and aphorisms, the familiar coins of the culture, as if they were fact when, indeed, they are only the common sense which is not so common sense of a culture. So you can listen to a neighbor and you will hear him say in the course of an afternoon both two heads are better than one and too many cooks spoil the broth, or else he who hesitates is lost and look before you leap, ^{and will speak} each of these pairs of inconsistent truths as if they were wholly true without any awareness of their inconsistency for they have become a form of cultural shorthand, of intellectual shorthand between us which permit us to exchange ideas, to excuse shoddy logic, which avoid the painful necessity of thought. And even when a proverb is in its beginning astute, pertinent, repeated often enough it can become a stumbling block to change and to progress.

There's a classic example of this in our Bible. In ancient Israel there was the well-known proverb, the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's

teeth have been set on edge. This rather dual proverb explained much of the unhappy experience of life about, how it was that sons were sold into slavery because of the improvidence of their fathers; how it was that the sons and daughters of a city were taken hostage because the city fathers, their fathers, were greedy and eager of conquest. Most of all it explained the existing legal system which assumed corporate responsibility, the financial and physical responsibility every member of a clan or a family, for the acts of violence, of intemperance, of greed, of other members of the clan. If the aging father forgot to tether his ox his son had to pay the treble damages. Repeat, however, an observation often enough and it becomes a justification of existing reality. Reality assumes an air of finality as though it can never be changed. And so every so often, for instance, when we talk of the war on poverty there are those who will quote to us from the New Testament, the poor shall always be among you, as if to justify their rather hopeless view of welfare legislation. In ancient Israel, as it struggled to free itself from this system of law based on clan responsibility, a system of law and of morality based only on the culpability of the culprit, on individual responsibility, those who did not wish to think, those who despaired of change and there are always those who despair of change, simply recited and repeated the ancient proverb. And finally one of the doughty champions of change, the prophet Jeremiah, had to take the very words of the proverb and twist them about to justify the new view: these days, the days that will come, that they will no longer say the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth have been set on edge, but they will say: he who eats the sour grapes, his teeth, his teeth only, will be set on edge.

Often, in other words, the familiar proverb is not true but a smoke screen which hides the truth; not insight but a false illumination which gives little light. We have an example of this in our own society in the well-known phrase, where there's a will there's a way. Now, as an expression of our American ability to tinker with any problem to find some patched-up solution to it, it's an acceptable phrase. As a statement of our rather naive but instinctive pioneering American optimism it's also acceptable. But when it's used by the thin-lipped to attack every bit of welfare legis-

lation, when it's used by those who are opposed to social welfare who as stating the truth, the presumed truth, that if the poor really want to work there is work for them; if they want to raise themselves out of the slums they can raise themselves by their own bootstraps, it's pernicious and false and misguided for even in this most abundant of all economies there are those who simply lack the skills who have been so psychologically or physically damaged they are, to use the jargon term, unemployable. And it is simply not true that in all cases where there's a will there's a way.

Now in no area of thought are we so prone to pass between ourselves the proverbial coin as in the area of faith. Talk with a neighbor about religion for any length of time and you'll find that he's reduced his thinking to one or two maxims or proverbs pulled out of the Bible which he repeats endlessly as a justification for his indifference or his inattention. More likely than not it's one of the more familiar phrases of the Bible: love thy neighbor as thyself, or it has been told ye, o man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee only to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with thy God. He cites these phrases not as the beginning of a serious search as to the implications of doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God, but because of the little word, only. It is an excuse for him for lack of attention, for indifference, for carelessness in spiritual disciplines. It justifies for him his absence, his absence from worship, his absence from learning, his absence from all that is part of the spiritual enterprise. It is the simple statement of a garden variety morality, that which is good enough for the ordinary man is religion. That, of course, is absolute nonsense. All of us, I am afraid, whether it be in matters of faith or politics or economics or matters academic are guilty of passing between ourselves these aphorisms, these maxims, which because of their familiarity we assume to be factual. Wise is the man who checks himself whenever someone else's words pass his lips to make sure that within the context of his argument, within the logic which he is seeking to present, the phrase which he is about to use, makes sense.

Now, I hold it as a simple presupposition of any historical research that those who create the customs which last among a people were not ignorant or innocent. I take it as a simple matter of truth that our fathers knew all the dangers implicit in bringing a book of quotations into the ritual of the synagogue, and so it is a matter of some interest to ask ourselves why, why did they bring the *pirket avot* into the ritual of this worship? In the first place, there are books of quotations and there are books of quotations. When Bartlett set out a hundred years ago with scissors and paste to gather his book of American-English quotations, the standard of inclusion which he set for himself was common usage. He did not judge an idea on its merits, only whether it had currency in the community. He set out, in other words, to set down the phrases which we pass among ourselves. But seventeen hundred years ago when an unknown rabbi set down to edit the Sayings of the Fathers this was not his standard of inclusion at all. Indeed, most of the quotations in the Sayings of the Fathers became famous because they were included in the book. They were not famous before the inclusion. What then was his principle of inclusion, of editorship? Simply this. He was determined to present a legal justification and defense of rabbinic Judaism. I am going to try in the next few minutes to establish this point.

First, let me tell you a little bit more about the book itself. It's six short chapters long. It was originally a part of the large collection of law and of religious discipline which we call the Mishnah. The Mishnah was finally edited in the early third century of the Common Era and except for these 200, 250 maxims, contains only a religious manual, law, statement, rule, precept, exception, case history. The question before the house really is this: why did those who edited the Mishnah include this intrusion, these short six chapters, in their text? Why, in the middle of a discussion of damages, do we suddenly find these six chapters of proverbs and axioms? Well, some have sought the answer in the title of the book, *Pirket Avot*, chapters or paragraphs by the fathers. *Avot* in Hebrew is a father, the plural *avot* is the simple meaning of fathers, but it can have a denotated meaning, the fathers. In this sense it is equivalent to the Greek, the patriarchs, the more important, the more

outstanding of the ancient progenitors, the first leaders, the foremost leaders of the past. And the word avot can also have a derivative meaning. It can mean an epitomy, the key ideas which suggest a whole line of thought, a whole area of knowledge. The Pirkot Avot by its title then is simply an anthology of the key ideas, the statements which epitomize the philosophy of the leading rabbinic sages of the post-Biblical era. There is a suggestion in the word, avod, that there is more here than simply what the newspapers would call quotable quotes. What is more? The answer is to be found in the structure of the book itself. Most books of quotations are arranged topically or by author. The structure of the Pirkot Avot is chronological. It assumes an unbroken chain of tradition from Moses receiving the revealed law of God on Mt. Sinai to the final editors of the Mishnah, Pirkot Avot, as we read this morning, begins: Moses received the Torah on Mt. Sinai and he conveyed it to Joshua and Joshua conveyed it to the elders and the elders conveyed it to the prophets and the prophets conveyed it to the men in the Kennesset Avodolah of the great assembly of the fourth century and the men of the great synagogue were wont to say, and then there follows the first maxim:

And the second proverb begins, Simon the just, among the survivors, among the last of the men of the Kennesset Avodolah was wont to say. And then as each of the subsequent paragraphs takes us, generation by generation, down through Jewish history assuming an unbroken ordination, an unbroken chain of authority and of tradition. Now, the Torah which Moses received at Sinai and handed to Joshua is not simply the Torah in our Ark, the simple, superficial statement which appears when we read the five books of Moses itself, but it is the Torah and the right to interpret Torah. It is the text and the implication which later generations were to derive from the Torah, for the simple truth is that rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism of the mishnah, the Judaism of the Talmud, the Judaism which lasted almost to our own day was as radical a reformation of Biblical Judaism as our modern Judaism is a radical reformation of rabbinic Judaism itself. By making Moses the patron, the founder, of rabbinic Judaism the rabbis were establishing its authenticity. Biblical Judaism, the Judaism

of the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth century B.C.E., Biblical Judaism shared our view of man and our view of morality and our view of God. God is one. God can be known essentially through His ethical attributes. Man's most important moral responsibility is to imitate God's goodness, Holy shalt thou be for I, the Lord, Thy God am holy. There is hope for mankind. God has created the world for a purpose. All is not confusion. Man has the responsibility to enroll himself in the service of God. Man has the capacity to be a useful servant of God. These precepts Biblical Judaism, rabbinic Judaism and Reform Judaism share. Where Biblical Judaism differed from rabbinic Judaism was in the focus of the religious life. Biblical Judaism focused on the sanctuary. Rabbinic Judaism focused on the synagogue. Biblical Judaism focused on the leadership of the priests and worship, their vestments, their offerings, their libations, the rules and regulations of the shrine. Rabbinic Judaism focused on the authority of the learned, of the rabbi, of the sage, and of the responsibility of the congregation not merely to throng, to come, to attend, to observe and to watch, but to participate through study, through awareness, through discussion, through debate in the Torah of the people. We call the Bible Torah but, surprisingly, there is very little Torah in Biblical Judaism. There is very little emphasis on the congregation. There is very little emphasis on the ability of every man to worship God without an intermediary and without an intercessor. There is very little emphasis on religious learning, on your responsibility to understand the Scripture, to understand its depth, to turn it and turn it over again for everything is in it. The religious rules of Biblical Judaism were rather simple. They had the rules of the community and the rules of individual life. The rules of rabbinic Judaism are intricate and they bind one's life so that every dimension of it is sacred. Biblical Judaism, then, has different priorities, different urgencies than rabbinic Judaism. To justify what they had created the rabbis set down this little book ^{which} said that Moses was the founder of rabbinic Judaism which said that each of the great generations of the patriarchs, of those who had preceded the rabbis, had the same view of Jewish life which was then being taught. Moses receives the Torah from God. He conveys it to Joshua, Joshua to

the elders, the elders to the prophets and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly. But the men of the Great Assembly were priests, by and large. They were the men who lived during the time when Judea was a theocracy, a priest-governed state. They were men who officiated at the sacrifices prescribed in the Bible. Yet, of all the many things ^{that} the men of the great assembly, these priests, must have said, the editor of the Pirket Avod chooses only three phrases which are rabbinic in their import rather than Biblical: Be deliberate in judgment; raise up many disciples; and build a fence around the Torah.

Simon the Just, the next man who was quoted was the High Priest of Israel. He was the governing theocrat in a theocratic state. He was the High Priest who engaged in diplomatic negotiations with Alexander the Great who managed to preserve Israel during that difficult period. He officiated, year in and year out, at the altar, but what is he made to say? The world rests upon three foundations: upon avodah, that is, the divine sacrificial service in the temple; but equally upon Torah, upon learning, upon the new orientation of the Jew towards the synagogue and towards Scripture; and, of course, upon gemilut hasidim, upon good deeds, upon the decency of our relationship towards each other.

Briefly put, then, this book is a brief, a legal brief, setting forth credentials of rabbinic Judaism, of their acceptability, and if you would understand the dimensions of rabbinic Judaism you would open a window on it. There is no better place than the Pirkei Avot to begin for here we have set down the broad outlines, the clear statements, of the priorities, the thrust, those things that were deemed important by the rabbi. The world rests upon three things: on Torah, upon worship, upon righteousness. Learning is all-important, but one must prove one's learning through deed. Learning is all important. The simple man cannot be a pious man. Judgment requires experience so that you can weigh and you can balance all the alternative options which are open to you. The most important occupation that a man has is to involve himself in study, in awareness of the revealed word of God and of its implications. Make for yourself a teacher, busy yourself in the house of learning, and beware that you use

learning as a spade with which to dig. They had no use for those who wore the crown of learning haughtily. The learned man was, in a sense, the ideal of religious personality. He could see the virtue in every man. Judge not another man until thou hast been put into his own place. Disparage not any man nor any object for to every man there is a time, to every object there is a place. Religious authority was to be vested not in the priest group but in the learned, among the learned and the scholar class. These were to be deliberate in judgment. They were to manage their authority with humility. Nor were they allowed to flee as scholar classes have a penchant to do in their ivory towers. Separate not thyself from the community. From the place there are no men you strive to be a man. The emphasis is on study, on learning, on Torah, on the relationships between men, the relationships of justice, of freedom, of respect, and of kindness. The emphasis is, of course, derived from an implicit unbreakable faith in God. May God's will be identical with your will, and do not serve God out of any hope that you will be recompensed for it. Don't serve God because you fear to go to hell or you seek to go to heaven. Be not like the servant who serves his master for the sake of receiving a reward; be rather like the servant who serves his master without thought of reward and let the reverence of God ever be upon you.

Here is the faith. Here is the outreach. Here is the vision of rabbinic Judaism. Here, too, tucked here and there in the text are many of the more interesting insights and scraps of wisdom which they pass on to us. How many of us waste our energies and our lives seeking goals which haven't been obtained and do not satisfy us, failing to ask from the beginning what is implicit in these goals, and how wise, occasionally, to remind ourselves of Benzoma's quizzical searching out of the meaning of our goals. Who is a wise man? The academic? No, Benzoma answered, the wise man is the man who can learn from everyone. And who is the strong man? The athlete? No, the strong man is the man who can master his passions. And who is the rich man? A Rockefeller? No, the rich man is the man who can be satisfied whatever be his lot. And who is the man who is truly honored? The man who is banqueted and plagued? No, the man who can easily and freely honor other human beings. And every teacher rejoices

in that very apt description of the four kinds of scholars, the putative scholars that come before us: the scholar who is a sponge, he ingests the lecture, the jokes, the aside, the page references. He can divest himself of all this information in an examination but once he has put it down on paper his mind is a blank, the sponge is empty.

And then there's the funnel, in one ear and out the other.

And then there is the sieve, the child, a youngster who absorbs all the trivial details, page references, the author of secondary works, dates, names, places, but somehow the broad overall perspective of the field utterly escapes him, the fine flour sifts through.

And finally, there is the rare scholar who is like a sifter, who somehow manages to hold on to the grist, that which is important, to leave go of the detail, the trivia, that which can always be looked up and of which we can remind yourself.

The Sayings of the Fathers is a compact book of proverbial wisdom. As I've tried to indicate to you it is far more than an ordinary book of quotations. It is the justification of that Judaism which was the Judaism of our grandfathers for almost seventeen hundred years. We can find insight and enlightenment in it, but we cannot find a description of that Judaism which is fit for our day. We need a new "Sayings of the Fathers". If I can achieve anything this morning it would be hopefully that one of you, an editor by nature, would sit down and out of the substance that has been taught these last two hundred years create a new Sayings of the Fathers.

The Torah to us cannot only be the disciplines of Torah, Talmud, midrash, medieval codes. It must include all the insights of a dozen humane academic disciplines. And Avodah cannot only be the worship as it was practiced in the synagogues of the medieval world, but it must express the entire outreach and the aesthetic spirit of the twentieth century, all the turbulence and the revolutionary qualities of our age, the doing of righteousness, and it must not only be ^{the} beautiful, humane regulation within the Jewish community and within our home, but a much broader citizenship because

we are now allowed what our fathers were never allowed to be, citizens of a larger world, burdened with a far grander greater responsibility. We need a new Sayings of the Fathers, a new Pierket Avot, so as we read in these weeks ahead the ancient sayings begin to make your notes, jot down your thoughts, perhaps you, too, can create a ritual for the synagogue of the twenty-first century.



should not - for one after apply to expected plan on enough.
 as for which it is entirely inappropriate. Familiar use concerns to
be done - after it is argued but helpful. Take the position
"where there's a will - there's a way". It helps to concern
moderated inquiry & to an understanding substance operation -
 but as a prejudice of the past & the recompensed - it is not of place
fact, recompensed, but later after the time passed copy of concern
man, rule on recompensed concern, which it is not that anyone needs
want to work concern fact which is not fundamental of the concern,
responsibility, even in concern with standards national society concern
is not enough well it concern one concern which can significantly in
psychology, in fact recompensed

In one area of thought we can learn in making of fact. Each person has a free mind which
is a reality it is not well fact that we referred judgment to
a free unlimited guide

There is reality.
 It will be well

Then explain is not de guilty concern very no need in the
fact - a Relevant plan to become a participant for the reality
superficial standards concern - superficial concern it is unlimited
the concern of unlimited concern of concern



Further studies in English studies - it gives the impression of
unstable method very indistinctly - it is a modern view, which
ought not be caught easily -

It is dangerous to assume the methodical method - that
is dangerous to assume that all selections of Jewish literature
are essentially disinterested, when Mr. G. will not admit a certain
a go much more into he did not propose to pass over
most valuable parts into the hands of the public - but to include
all the possible of the very best of the past, the study of the past was
the study of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
a go on the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
methodical method was the study of the past was the study of the past was
had to be the study of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
after very many years of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
point I should make is that the P.A. was an important aspect of
methodical method was the study of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was

First let me describe the P.A. by way, it was a very G.H.
long and it was originally a part of the 3rd volume law code 7
manuscript of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
in law code 7 manuscript of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
exception of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
the short history of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
placed in the middle of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was
quite an important part of the past was the study of the past was the study of the past was

* Unpublished documents are added to the collection - why is it -
it will offer little help. it is simply descriptive, 211 is believe
means just, The plan at 1121 has several meanings -

- a simple plan - just
- a description " - the plan - the country?
- most foreign properties - list is
- synonymous in an outline must
- the outline must be published

* Previous meanings - the central idea - the
1121 parts of a paragraph or subject - a
word used with an outline must
in line of meaning - being

WRHS



1121 is also can simply mean -
to mean foreign properties of the country must - though can
in the map of a subject, can mean just support that more can be
of the map of a subject established the meaning of study the
of the map of a subject - just on the subject between Person & Place -
mean on the subject between Person & Place, it
is clear that they are the same thing as the subject
collection of a map & place -

Then the map is added to the P.A. list - it is the subject -
added to the subject list - it is the subject list -
of subject list from more to the subject list -

The Key to understanding the P.A. has to do with the structure which is not
typical and developed from an understanding of nothing
& nothing from more to the relation of the material.



yet he was so proud to justify like new

The world now was 2 generations (first) The second,
; the Jewish people, & the Jewish people of Jewish
history was -

When the P.A. were edited in the 3rd century - a religious person
had already seen the sign - the democratic approach to Jewish
culture was not - its ambiguity of the Jewish of all the
spiritual & intellectual unity of the Jewish (and Christian) - the
approach to Jewish & Christian - but the age, and the religious
of the Jewish ambiguity which is linked to the age

Wells was disappointed & disappointed in the religious
to religiosity to disappoint
potential - religious



can be religious religious
as religious

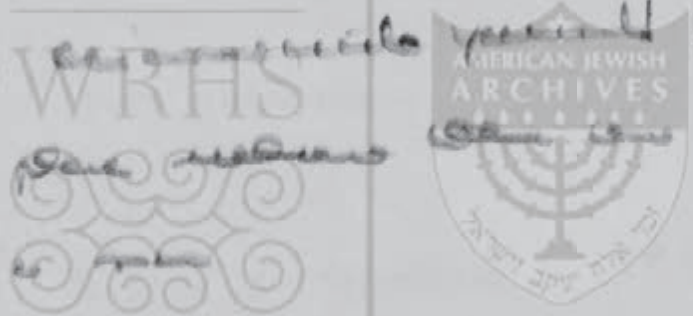
1912
1912

of your unshared excellent multitude judgments, as P.A. offers no
 a number: life highest goal is a life of unity and study - Peace
 from one learning, but "no argument man can not be truly peace"
 The moral decision of life requires a high degree of judgment & experience.
 There is reason for learning - yet no reason is absolutely

Do not despise any man & do not despise any subject.
 For there is not a man who has not his place & not an
 subject that has not his place.

Remember something to one's prejudice & prejudice is unavoidably encouraged
 ... Do not judge another until you have been put into his
position - & do not be sure of yourself until the day that you do
 That is a world of learned men - there is not a man who is not learning

Learn wisdom - Do not despise any man or subject until you have been put into his position
 & do not be sure of yourself until the day that you do it
 to be so wise



For all the illness of the P.A. & unavoidably comes from a defect in the character
 as best & wisdom is not in the head but in the heart - My friend
 will - you will - as best & wisdom is not in the head but in the heart

Like several other men who have been put into his position because of his reputation
reputation is not in the head but in the heart and it is not in the head but in the heart
equality is not in the head but in the heart and it is not in the head but in the heart

100
 100

The P.A. defect qualifies as a fulcrum of analysis, really
~~nothing~~ can be judged, // by the fact that the world
depends on three things, Time, Space, & Consciousness -
respect for ideas, the attitude
respect for land & respect for unity
relationships & ideas are the only abstract things there -

There is much pretended observation at the P.A. & in all
also by the Europe's many of which unpleasant people
What is it ? (The school) Yes - the whole idea from
old man

What is it ? (the abstract) Yes - the whole idea from

What is it ? (the abstract) Yes - the whole idea from
 WRHS AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES
 What is it ? (the abstract) Yes - the whole idea from
could be lost

What is it ? (the abstract) Yes - the whole idea from
was fully handled ? (the abstract) Yes - the whole idea from
conference was on other man

and as a leader 2 times see time & again the 4 types of attitude
more can unhappy size be with as reported at
6 years or more is the abstract everything - the abstract
regards everything - the abstract nothing
4 years or more is the abstract everything - the abstract
4 years or more is the abstract everything - the abstract
4 years or more is the abstract everything - the abstract

difficult & complex but not impossible &

simple

the right - who know the mind of the United, if
remember, keep the conscience

For all, 1944 - quicker - as P.A. under a mandate which
2 full clearly concerns 1/4 P 1174 2 - at the place
where there was an open - place where it was an

There is not a single word that is being transferred to the P.A. -

but the judgment is clear & yet not clear - The mind of the
United is not as simple as it seems to be at first glance and then
by rejection has it been regulated by the rejection of the United and then
and not only is regulated and then judgment is clear and then
then is the very expression of the United and then judgment is clear and then
regulation, then is the United and then judgment is clear and then

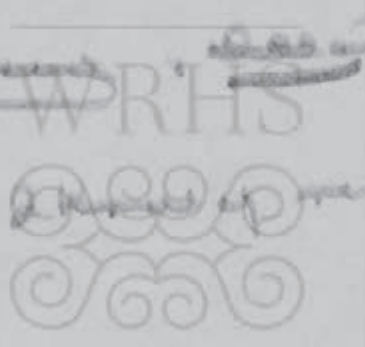
Let not the United play the part of the United and then judgment is clear and then
United is not as simple as it seems to be at first glance and then
United is not as simple as it seems to be at first glance and then
United is not as simple as it seems to be at first glance and then

and

We can not avoid to be the United and then judgment is clear and then

Do not make of the United and then judgment is clear and then
to make yourself as simple as it seems to be at first glance and then

The P.A. is a good statement of a way of justice which includes an
people ready to confrontation - and it reminded us strongly to look on
it as a statement of our way of justice - just as the unlike will now
provide us the 1st, 2nd stages - as new legis - The number of
in all confronting rel. laws as not more - the unlike of the
rel. relations has disappeared. Toward new out of Tubman - He, him had
6 days clear & business the system unlike new out of
old way of the unlike had a new - upon not the new out of
law & democracy but a new & unlike unlike the
unlike you was not released - I know the unlike unlike unlike
new P.A. - a new unlike unlike & unlike unlike unlike unlike
unlike - justice & unlike unlike unlike unlike unlike unlike unlike
unlike, unlike unlike - unlike unlike unlike unlike unlike unlike unlike
you to unlike unlike -



unlike had to move - for
unlike to unlike unlike unlike