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How to be Happy in an Imperfect World, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"HOW TO BE HAPPY IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD,"
SUNDAY MORNING, MARCH 6, 1921, AT THE
TEMPLE, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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How to be happy in an imperfect world! I venture to say that most unhappiness in the world is caused by mal-adjustment--our inability to fit in our environment or the scheme of things. When the fine joints of our social existence do not dove-tail, do not fit in properly, there results friction, and irritation, and unhappiness.

Now, there is no perfectly happy man or woman. There cannot be complete happiness anywhere. For two reasons: In the first place, because the scheme of things is not perfect, and, in the second place, because man himself is not perfect. Our process of evolution, of adjustment, is not yet ended, and there is much that is mal-adjusted in life that inevitably makes for sorrow. There is not a man or woman that has not his or her moments of sorrow; there is not a soul that has not tasted at some time the cup of bitterness.

Now, some men are more fortunate than others. There are some people who, by temperament, and disposition, and environment, are out of gear completely and at all times. You know them, and I know them. You see them tossed and buffeted about almost constantly, until finally

they are just ground relentlessly into utter desolation. There are other people that fit in much better. They experience these tears and wrenches much less frequently than others. But we all have our moments of unhappiness and sorrow. This world is not a fool's Paradise. I know that there are some mystic sects that hold up before the eyes of people the tantalizing vision of complete happiness, if they would but shake off from themselves those regrettable errors of the mortal mind, with which, somehow, they are mysteriously afflicted.

Now, in spite of all that may be said to the contrary, the world is not a continuous merry-go-round, and men and women do not move all the time on the undulating waves of gaiety and delight, with luscious lollypops of joy for the asking all about you. Life is a much more serious thing. It is as serious as the seas and the mountains--glorious in sun and calm, but forbidding and dark in storm and in night. The same sun that energizes life may bring drouth and death, and the same winds that carry the pollen of the new life may become the destructive tornadoes that leave wreckage in their wake. And the same fine ideals may lead to glory, but may also lead to the gallows.

There is a shallow optimism abroad in our land--the kind of optimism that you find in your magazines and in newspaper columns; optimism of the well fed man, who dispenses wise counsel to young, enterprising men, after

a satisfying dinner, amidst the aroma of a fine cigar--the optimism of the successful, self-made man. That philosophy has a language all its own,---Every cloud has its silver lining, and every stumbling block may become a stepping stone; and it speaks a good deal of go, and pep, and ginger, and all sorts of things.

Every cloud has not its silver lining, and every stumbling block is not a stepping stone. There is much that is tragically serious in life. There are devastating wars that slay their millions, and epidemics that ravage their myriads; there is injustice, and oppression, and poverty, and cruelty abroad in the world. And this shallow sort of optimism that can see nothing but the silver lining becomes oftentimes very offensive. It is like the fool jingling his merry bells, when the blind King Lear is out in the night and in the storm.

But just as there is a shallow optimism there is a shallow pessimism. You find it in Russian literature. I suppose you can find it in the literature of all peoples. It is the sort of freedom of mind, or attitude of mind, that believes that the silver lining exists only to make the cloud more visible; and that every stepping stone is a stumbling block, and that people eat only on the chance of getting indigestion. There is a shallow pessimism that is a magnified pseudo-philosophy of one's own failures, of one's own indolence, of one's own satiety. It is the ghost of Banquet at the Feast of Life, and, like all ghosts,

it exists only in the inflamed imagination of people.

There is much unavoidable sorrow in life; but there is much of real happiness that one can get out of life, if one knows how to look for it--or, rather, if one knows how to live so as to experience happiness. For happiness is not a thing, not a reality all of its own; it is only a resultant harmony. It is not the vibration itself, but the sound caused by the vibration. It is not the act, but only the reaction and attendant circumstances of life's efforts and activities.

Now, one of the most common causes for unhappiness is our inability to face reality and to face it patiently. We conceive in the hot-house of our own personality an ideal--intellectual or emotional--without reference to life, to conditions as they are, to the coarse, crude facts of life; and then we take this ideal and we project it into the world, and it does not fit. We fail to realize that none of us can begin building from the bottom, that much has already been built; that we are born into a new world, newly created; that we are no longer at the beginning of things; that much has been built, rightly or wrongly; that much has been planned, and that other peoples of other generations have pottered and fussed about the same things that we are fussing about.

But life is not simple, not a vast simplicity; it is, unfortunately, involved; it is, sometimes, a tangled skein, a Gordian knot. We fail to realize, in our

impetuosity, in our far flung imagination, that there are along side of us other people in the world who are working along the same problems, who have views and convictions that may differ from ours; that we must take cognizance of their presence and their existence; that we must work with them; we must yield and receive, give and take; and that, when all is said and done, our contribution to life will, unless we are of the rare and blessed ones of the world, be small though significant.

Take the case of Carol Kennicott, this bright and beautiful girl, who starts out with wonderful ideals, but all tinged with romance of the impossible and the impatient. And what happens? Carol has no experience in unhappiness, and before very long she learns reverence for reality, though she never loses her allegiance to her own ideals; and she learns the virtue of patience. That does not mean that she sinks back to a state of bovine contentment, of smugness; that she never again experiences unhappiness, but that the unhappiness, when it has come, is not of the same stunning and crushing nature which she experiences in the earlier tempestuous stages of her life.

This book "Main Street," while its chief object is a criticism of the rather sordid existence in a small prairie town of our West, is instantly also a fine study in the psychology of happiness--how to gain it, how to lose it. This girl Carol is the heroine of the book; she is a high-minded college girl, who very soon marries a

rather unimaginative, steady but unromantic physician--as some physicians are. He takes her from a large city, where she lived and studied, to his own small town--Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. Now, Carol is a sensitive soul, and her mind is filled with all the romance which she gleaned from her books and her reading. She likes, as most of us like, beautiful things; old houses with legend clinging around the eaves story-laden, and the perfume of forgotten things clinging round the old winding lanes of the old cities of Europe. She likes all these things; she likes interesting people, who carry about them the breath of foreign lands and strange adventures; men who have traveled down the unfrequented by-ways of the world.

She likes music--that music that is touched with romance; music that one associates with the strum of the guitar as the gondolas of life enter the of an age old city like Cairo or Stamboul. She likes the music and the grace of majestic art, to dance in the great dance halls of fine cities of the world; she likes to vision in her mind those brilliant scenesⁱⁿ--the sea of life--the rhythmic strains of the orchestra, the swirl of the dress, the glide of well-shod feet, the flushed face, the glistening eyes, and all the sweet expectancies and promise of youth. All of which, of course, one does not find in Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.

Carol, a really high-Minded girl, with fine

ideals, would like to see all about her in Gopher Prairie quaint, vine-clad homes; neat, trim, fine lawns; nice approaches; homes of beautiful design, architecturally attractive--with perhaps just a relish and touch of Greenwich Village to some of them.

But she finds in place of that--Main Street; raw, ugly, cheap looking. It is well to read the paragraph describing Main Street, to remind you traveling men of the things you have seen in the past.

"She had sought to be definite in analyzing the surface ugliness of the Gopher Prairies. She asserted that it is a matter of universal similarity; of flimsiness of construction, so that the towns resemble frontier camps; of neglect of natural advantages, so that the hills are covered with brush, the lakes shut off by railroads, and the creeks lined with dumping-grounds; of depressing sobriety of color; rectangularity of buildings; and excessive breadth and straightness of the gashed streets, so that there is no escape from gales and from sight of the grim sweep of land, nor any windings to coax the loiterer along, while the breadth which would be majestic in an avenue of palaces makes the low shabby shops creeping down the typical Main Street the more mean by comparison.

"The universal similarity--that is the physical expression of the philosophy of dull safety. Nine-tenths of the American towns are so alike that it is the completest

boredom to wander from one to another. Always, west of Pittsburg, and often, east of it, there is the same lumber yard, the same railroad station, the same Ford garage, the same creamery, the same box-like houses and two-story shops. The new, more conscious houses are alike in their very attempts at diversity: the same bungalows, the same square houses of stucco or tapestry brick. The shops show the same standardized, nationally advertised wares; the newspapers of sections three thousand miles apart have the same "syndicated features"; the boy in Arkansas displays just such a flamboyant ready-made suit as is found on just such a boy in Delaware, both of them iterate the same slang phrases from the same sporting-pages, and if one of them is in college and the other is a barber, no one may surmise which is which."

Now, Carol, before she comes to Gopher Prairie, imagines that she will find in this town the simple, honest country folks that one reads about in the books and one sees in moving pictures--kindly, imaginative souls, ready to learn, ready to improve. In place of that she finds smugness, conceit, hardness, cruelty, slander, back-biting, vice, tyrannies, and all the coarseness accumulated in one little town. She expected to find lambs to fondle and caress, and she finds wolves that snap and bite when they do not like anything; she finds bigotry in religion, and snobbishness in social relations, and deceit and dishonesty in business relations.

And she is a disillusioned girl--all broken up. She thought of marrying a husband who would like poetry, preferably modern poetry--maybe a bit of Swinburne or Rossetti; a husband who would like Chinese prints in the home, who likes romance. And she finds a rather hard-working, unimaginative, unromantic husband, interested much more in his automobile than he is in Browning; interested much more in real estate speculation than he is in Japanese prints; and occasionally even chewing tobacco.

Poor Carol, from early life, craved for a diet of delicacies--chicken a la king; and finds that she is getting pork a la Gopher Prairie. And so she is depressed, caught in the meshes of life's imperfection, dreaming of El Dorado, and utterly, hopelessly unhappy. She would like to reform the town; she would like to make it a town beautiful. So she sets about with all the impatience to reform it. She finds the conversation in the town of Gopher Prairie, as a rule revolves around two subjects--the weather, automobiles, and, occasionally, crops.

And Carol decides to inject tone into this conversation to liven things up. She gives a party to shock the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie into esthetics, and the party has a touch of Bohemian about it. And all poor Carol gets for her pains is back glances and caustic comments and sharp remarks behind her back concerning this person who was coming to Gopher Prairie "to tell us old timers what is good for us."

She tries to lift the taste of Gopher Prairie in literature. She comes to the circle which is the final arbiter of eloquence in Gopher Prairie--the Jolly Seventeen--and listens in to their program. This group has actually come to the point where it is ready to set aside twenty minutes a month to discuss Shakespeare and Milton, and ten minutes more for Tennyson. Now, Carol would like to have them discuss Celtic revival, Yeats, and other exotic, European authors. But all she gets for her efforts is sly, hidden laughter and cynicism.

She would like to build a little theater in Gopher Prairie--something like the little theaters we have in our larger cities; the spirit of the theaters that like to do the queer things, the outlandish things, because they are artistic. And she organizes a dramatic group, and hopes that they will put out a play, a moderate play--one of the less involved plays. But the circle finally decides to put on "The Girl from Kankakee." And then again poor Carol finds her soul lacerated, finds herself broken, misunderstood, rejected, and unhappy.

She tries to find comfort in travel, but she must always come back to Gopher Prairie, with its coarseness, its conceit, its arrogance, its harshness. She tries once or twice to dabble in love affairs, but her fine soul keeps her from going very far into these rather dangerous experiments. And, finally, utterly confused, despairing of anything that she may ever hope to achieve in Gopher

Prairie, she decides to leave home, and she leaves home for Washington, D. C., and spends about two years in Washington doing war work. There she meets the interesting people that she has been hungering for, and she sees beauty all about her; and she is, in a way, satisfied, and yet, in a way, not satisfied. She does go back to Gopher Prairie in the end, and the story rounds out with a phrase that comes from her own mouth: "I'll go on, always. And I am happy."

Carol has learned the virtue of patience in trying to reform people or a community. Carol has learned to take cognizance and pay reverence to reality, to things as they are. Gopher Prairie, a frontier town, called into existence by the needs of a farming community, having a history of perhaps two generations, cannot have the charm, and the grace, and the quaintness, and the loveliness of communities centuries old--that have history about them. One must recognize facts. One must handle the material that life presents to him, and the tools that life gives him. This complete break, this absolute disparity between one's ideal and reality is perhaps the most common cause of human unhappiness.

Impatience is responsible for two things: either the desire to run away from life, just as the esthetic of old did, to escape life, realizing that in your own life you cannot try to make life perfect; you fear it; you desire to escape, and so you retreat into yourself, into

complete isolation; you become a spiritual or mental hermit. Or impatience leads to revolution, to reliance upon force, to a desire to crush and break and tear things up by their roots, and then start again to rebuild from the bottom. That is the supreme impatience of the supreme idealist. That is not most helpful. We must work with men; we must work in and through society; we must work in and by and through the things that life has put before us; and only in so doing can we gain a bit of happiness in life.

And, furthermore, we must never so over-concentrate upon our ideal, so focus completely all our hopes, all our ambitions and all our energies upon the one ideal so as to overlook the many things, the thousand things that are all about us that may contribute in some way or other to our happiness. Whatever our ideal may be, if it is at all noble and exalted, we shall never be able to realize it in our own life time. The world will not be perfect in a day, in a generation, or in a century.

The human race has many millions who live upon the earth, and imperfections grow even as things are progressively perfected. So that if one is to pin his happiness on the achievement, on the complete realization of one's ideal, one is doomed to utter desolation. But if one works patiently and hopefully and industriously upon the realization of that ideal nearest to him, while at the same time he finds pleasure in the things in which he can find pleasure--in Nature, in friends, in books, in the infinite

relationships that we can establish with our fellowmen. If we do not ignore the little plot of grass which may yield to us abundant happiness; if we do not go through life as if we were running a race, bent upon the goal and nothing else, blind to the wonderful beauty about us, but pausing at some time to hold friendly converse with our fellow travelers, giving and taking and learning, moving gently and graciously through life,--I say, if one could think of these things one could gain a great deal of happiness, even in an imperfect world. Deference to reality, patience, and, lastly, gentleness in our service.

Do you know what was wrong with Carol? She missed in her own life and in her own adventures the very thing which she was looking for in Gopher Prairie. She was looking for graciousness and charm, sweetness and gentleness; but she went about it furiously, cynically often, super or hyper-critically. She met the hardness, the crudeness of life in Gopher Prairie with a parallel hardness and crudeness in her own soul. She did not meet life in a spirit of gentleness, of kindness, of indulgence.

Let me tell you another story, to illustrate what I mean, and I shall be through. It is the story of Christian Von S....., the hero of another book--a greater book than "Main Street"--called "The World's Illusion." Christian is an elegant aristocrat--spoiled, arrogant, the whole world made for him, taking everything that came to him for granted, with no corresponding obligations on his

part; the son of a German steel king, a man who has lived all his life beautifully, esthetically, avoiding unpleasant things and unpleasant sights, never bothering with the serious and compelling realities of life. If a beggar touched his garment he would give that garment away to his valet. It contaminated him. If he was compelled to walk or ride through the poorest section of the city he would pass through hastily, with compressed lips and nostrils, so as not to be compelled to inhale the atmosphere of that poorer section. He liked to live among well-clad, and well-fed, and well-cared for people--a perfect sun child; a child of the sun, of prosperity and of wealth.

And then fate begins to rain blow upon blow--disaster, upon this aristocrat; then fate begins to break through the crust and reach down and tear at the vitals of the soul. First, a friend of his is killed in the automobile that he himself was driving, and for the first time he beholds death. Then another friend of his, with whom he had dallied in illicit love, kills herself; and again Christian sees death with all its ugliness. And then Christian meets a man--Ivan Becker, a revolutionist, an exile from Russia, one who had spent years in prison and years in exile, and whose speech is faltering because of the many years of loneliness which he was compelled to experience; his hand is mutilated because some jailor riveted the iron around his hand too closely. And Christian begins to plumb the depths of human misery; he

begins to see the slime and the ugliness of life; and then Christian, in trying to render succor to a girl who had been mistreated by ruffians, is brought into a home of poverty, and he sees poverty for the first time as it really is. Then a discharged workingman shoots at his father; he is apprehended and sentenced, and somehow Christian is taken to the home of this workingman and sees the hovel, the dirty, ill-smelling hovel in which the wife and the five children, starved and half-naked, of this workingman live.

And Christian sees life in all its brute reality, with none of the glitter and the show of the life from which he came. And so experience follows experience, and fate leads this esthete from one degradation to another, down, down the scale of existence, and shows him ^{the} misery, and suffering, and brutality, and vulgarity, and cruelty that exist in life. Soon these experiences begin to stand between Christian and his pleasures, between this fine aristocrat and the things which he enjoyed in earlier life. He has been wrenched and torn from the fine social fittings of his life, and he becomes utterly unhappy. He seeks happiness. He sets out to find happiness in life.

And how does he find it? The solution which the author gives for the problem may not be the solution that you and I would give, but the thought that I am trying to bring out through this story is this: Christian decides to leave his home, his family, his wealth, to leave the circle

of his friends, to turn his back upon his past life completely, and go down to the very dregs of social existence, and there, among criminals, and outlaws, and prostitutes--the sinners of society, to live, and by personal contact with them, by gentleness and humbleness, and a spirit of service without criticism, to heal the souls of others while at the same time healing his own soul.

And so the book continues to tell of his experiences, into which we haven't the time to enter. How he takes the mutilated souls of life, and by the healing fingers of forgiveness, gentleness, and sympathetic understanding, makes them whole again, and brings life, and light, and comfort; how he takes a man who had committed an unspeakable crime against one whom he, Christian, loved as he had never loved a soul before; how he takes this hardened criminal, and by the same process of kindness and humility and gentleness thaws the ice of his soul, and throws open the doors of his mind so that the light of God enters.

And Christian moves to foreign quarters in the east end of London, to neglected parts in all lands of the world, giving light and comfort through personal service, always to one human being--always to one, but through his acts and through his service making disciples who carry on his work.

It is a masterly study of character. The book is undoubtedly a reaction to war. The book and the

character of Christian are undoubtedly modeled after the character of the masses of Christianity. But that much truth is in it--that whatever we do we can do it so much more effectively, and we can contribute so much more of real happiness to ourselves and to those who receive the good we try to give, if what we do we do in a spirit not of formality, not of harshness, not of Puritanic self-righteousness, but in a spirit of gentleness, of kindness, of love.

I tell you, men and women, if there is anything that this age of steel and concrete needs, if there is anything that the harshness needs, not alone of Gopher Prairie, but of our large cities, in our gay capitals and our glittering society, if there is anything that this whole human race of ours needs, so torn, so gashed, so broken by the experiences of the last few terrible years, it is this quality, somehow driven from our civilization, of serving in gentleness.

Some day a prophet will arise who will teach men how to live gently. You know there are virtues that are even more offensive than vices. And I know many a person who has done more harm than good. They hurt and mutilate the souls that they try to serve; they are bitter and cynical. Life is, after all, a matter of personalities, of souls, and what the man who has fallen, degraded, delinquent, weak, needs, more than he needs food and raiment and shelter, is someone to bring him the healing balm of

kindliness, of gentleness.

How to be happy in an imperfect world? First, to my mind, is to study reality, to face facts, to realize that imperfections are here and here to stay for a good, long while to come; and then to go at these imperfections and work on them, mine underneath them, corrode them patiently, slowly, deliberately, knowing that your small act has universal implication.

And then, still working at your ideal, not to forget the multitudinous things about you--friends, home, books, and Nature,--within the grasp and the reach of everyone. And, finally, whatever your service is, serve in gentleness, serve in kindness, serve in humility. No one can be happy who is not humble; no one can know God who is not gentle in spirit.

There is the source of happiness in the kindly, gentle, patient spirit of man.

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