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The Wicked Age: Are the Morals of our Young People Low?,
1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE WICKED AGE--ARE THE MORALS OF OUR
YOUNG PEOPLE LOW," AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY
MORNING, APRIL 17, 1921, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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Recently the head of the school system of our city startled our mothers and fathers by announcing publicly that the morals of our school children and our high school children are not all that they should be; that there was a growing laxity in the moral relations of the young people in our schools, and that apocopated dresses, and joy rides, and protective coloration were contributory causes to the growing moral delinquency of our young folks. And so fond mothers were appropriately shocked, and they said how altogether true that was of their neighbors' children. And there the matter rests.

Now, this statement of the head of our school system is deserving of real serious thought. I want to put myself right at the very start: I am not a Puritan, and I do not belong to those sweet-tempered deputies of the Almighty who think that this age is utterly, utterly damned, that our young folks are fast going the way of damnation. I do not believe that this age is unusually or extraordinarily wicked, or more so than any other age. Every generation is, to a measure, interestingly wicked.

I do not believe that the morals of our young

people today are any lower than the morals of the young people of yesterday, who are now the parents of the young people of today; in fact, whenever I hear elderly folks speaking of the ineffable goodness of the days gone by, I see truth languishing to death. Just because the girl in 1921 prefers to dance the fox-trot--or is there a later dance? (They say that there are even more shocking dances, but I haven't attended any Jewish affairs lately)--I say, just because she prefers to dance this particular dance instead of the waltz, that is not at all an indication of her complete abandon.

When the waltz was first introduced a hundred years ago the moral indignation of the people in England was at fever point. Perfectly shocking! And today even ministers ^{do not} hesitate to dance a waltz.

And just because in the year 1921 a girl likes to add a few decorative touches to the indifferent work of Nature, that is really not startling. Even savages do that, and birds and animals; and an institution or a practice that is sanctioned by animals ought not be condemned by human beings. And as for the styles of 1921, I suppose any one who has studied the styles in the last one hundred years will note that the styles of today are but a shy and modest cousin to some of the thorough-going styles of yesterday.

We are prone to make a bit too much of these trifles, for they are trifles. But the criticism of the

head of our educational system is directed to these practices as they apply to children of the school age. Now we know that a civilization such as ours cannot have that quality of absolute simplicity that a more simple civilization may have, and that great wealth broadly shared, such as is the case in this land, does not make for a rigorous discipline of conduct and strict mode of life, but, nevertheless, there are conditions which do exist that justify the condemnation and the criticism of this man because they apply to children. Things that maybe harmless in growing boys and girls or men and women may be thoroughly harmful in school children, because when there is an exaggerated interest on the part of school children--boys and girls who are just entering their teens--in dress, and in the pastimes of their elders, and in the art of attractiveness, that exaggerated interest is stimulating interest in them that should for the time be latent, and is interfering with the free expression and exercise of those interests which at that time should be most active.

It is giving the young boy or girl a wrong standard of values. It is giving the rich, heavy food of dinner in the early morning hours. And that is harmful. It makes for an unwholesome precocity--they age too soon. I am never tempted so much to scold--not the children, of course, but their parents--as when I see young boys and girls, especially girls, scarcely entering their early youth, with the morning dew upon their lashes; when I see

them airily arrayed in costly dresses and fur coats and jewelry, running to and coming from moving picture entertainments, which are veritable poison to their young minds; with their innocent faces pathetically and hopelessly daubed. And I see them very often, all too often.

I am never tempted to scold as when I behold these things, not because of the acts or practices themselves, but because the souls of these children are being stunted; the free and normal development of them into fine womanhood is being interfered with. Because these children are being surfeited too early in life. By the time they are twenty they will be fed-up--blase, with slovenly minds and with no stimulating interests in life; they will be enervated hot house plants; they will have drunk the cup of life too eagerly, too greedily, too soon.

That fine devotion to the beautiful and simple things of life is not given to them. To find complete contentment in the common things, the every day things, the simple and the beautiful things of life; to find complete contentment in friends and in books, in field and in sports and in the great outdoors of God, to find joy in the home and not away from home,--they are robbed of all these things. And it is a great mistake.

What we ask for, and what the educators ask for, is not repression. The old Puritans used to believe, as Bunyan expressed it, that a child is an accursed thing; a

child has evil inclinations that must be broken; the child must be restrained by the iron hand of discipline, because it is by nature evil. Now, that is not true. The instincts of children are neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral. They are unmoral; they may be moralized, they may be driven into wholesome channels of social beneficence, or they may be vulgarized into social detriment.

The instincts of children for play, for amusement, for entertainment ought not to be repressed but guided sanely and intelligently. The instinct for play is just as true, and just as insistent, and just as natural as the instinct for food or for self-defense. The child must play just as ~~you see~~ the lamb that gambols on the hillside; there is a surplus of vital energy that must find expression. And it is the holy task of those in whose hands the well-being of the child is entrusted to see that a legitimate and socially useful avenue for the expression of these energies is found.

We complain that our children like cheap dancing, but they will continue to like it unless we teach them beautiful dancing, in our schools and in their homes. They must not be kept from dancing, but they must be taught the difference between refined and beautiful dancing and vulgar dancing, so that as they grow up they will instinctively avoid that which is unesthetic.

I have heard mothers complain that the children care for no other music but ragtime music. There is a

a good deal of ragtime music that is ^{very} attractive. But the way to make a child love good music is to teach the child good music in the home and in the school; to establish orchestras in synagogues, and churches, and temples, to stimulate that fine esthetic love for harmony and fine music in the souls of children; to provide our young boys and girls with places where they can meet, so that they will not have to seek the by-ways that lead to the crooked ways of life.

In other words, not repression, not stupid suppression, not incarcerating the outreaching life of the boy or the girl, hedging them in, (endeavoring to protect them from life), but guiding them sanely and intelligently through the mazes and the perplexities of early youth. That is the sane thing, that is the practical thing. But then, don't you see, how the problem shifts from the child to the parent. Is the father or mother capable of such a guidance? Have they disciplined themselves for that sacred task? Can they win the confidence of the children, who are supremely critical and observable? Have they anything to give to their children? Have they made the home sufficiently attractive, and the hearth sufficiently inviting so that the child will seek that as naturally as the flower seeks the sunshine? Is the father the hero of the boy? Can he impart to him a host of precious memories which the child will treasure? Is the mother the priestess of the home, teaching the child to kindle

the light of idealism, of fine manhood and womanhood upon the alters of home life? Or are the parents afraid of their children, afraid of the critical appraisal of the children, having nothing to give them, slavishly devoted to those very things which the children are now endeavoring to indulge in?--money, and amusements, and dress--and nothing else.

I hear a great deal of talk about putting school children in uniforms to avoid excess in dress, or to reinstitute a curfew, which is perfectly ridiculous and absurd. All that is necessary is a sensible, intelligent mother, and a father who has common sense. All that is required is a recognition on the part of the father and mother of their trusteeship and their consecration in the parenthood which they have assumed; a realization that where there is a flower there are weeds, and that the garden of life must be tended and weeded, for there is danger everywhere, and only a practical, intelligent approach to the problem on the part of the father and mother is necessary and nothing else.

What applies to school children applies equally well to young men and women. What is regrettable, my friends, is not that our young people of eighteen and twenty and twenty-two like to dance late--or clingingly; what is regrettable is not that they like to dress gaily--more or less; what is regrettable is not that they love cards or theaters too much. These are mere trifles. Some

more
people like their food, spiced than others. What is
regrettable is that these interests exist almost to the
complete exclusion of all other interests. What is
really regrettable is that these interests completely
absorb the energy and the talent and the time of these
people. And with all goes a tragic complacency and
feeling that they are right, which is even more damnable
than the exclusive practice of these things. *Begin*

While I am not prone to general indictments, I
feel that I am not overestimating in saying that there is
an unwholesome materialization, an unwholesome vulgariza-
tion of our young people throughout this country. I have
seen young men and women come out of the colleges with fine
qualities, fine intellectual equipment--alert, eager, full
of wonderful promise, and I have seen these men and women
before very long sink into ruts--into the same grooves and
ruts in which their fathers and mothers have sunk; and I
have seen them lose pitifully that fine promise of a rich
and full life, of a variagated life, of a life of many
interests and many devotions, and have a great consecration
in that groove, in that routine mode of living. I have
seen all their leisure hours--for what we do in our leisure
hours is what makes us--devoted singly and solely to these
things of which I have spoken--not harmful in themselves
but harmful in their tyrannical absorption of all of ~~our~~ *their* *End*
leisure time.

And after some time I have found these college men

and women perfectly dull. Their conversation made one feel that they had just come out of night school. I think it was Bernard Shaw who said that the bourgeoisie (the middle class) has lost completely the graceful art of conversation; only workingmen and aristocrats know how to indulge in conversation. You listen to the conversation of these people and all you hear are interminable platitudes and banalities, and talk about automobiles, and tires, and cards, and the weather, and, lately, thanks to a good friend in Detroit, anti-Semitism.

Now, I am not averse to pleasure, to enjoyment of life. Our point of view is not Puritan but Jewish. The Puritan, laboring under the Calvinistic theology and incantation, saw life utterly corrupt and evil; and men laboring under an original sin saw that the body and the desires of the body were of and by themselves evil. And the whole task of life and the duty of man was to suppress these desires of the body, to live a life of rigid discipline, of great sobriety, of gloom and solemnity; and art was looked upon with disfavor, and the stage and the drama were denounced, and romance and poetry were banished from the lives of men.

That is not the Jewish view of life. Our God is not alone the God of beauty and of righteousness, but the God of joy, of life, of intellectual light, of happiness. Our God delights in the laughter of children and in the happy moments of human beings. I wish and pray that

every one of God's children could take as much of color,
and light, and music, and joy out of God's world as ~~he~~
possibly can. *Begin*

But the sad thing about it is that these men and
women find noise and not music in life; they find the chaff
and not the grain. It is the very fine things, that lead
to complete happiness and contentment of soul, that they
miss, and it is because of that that I speak. I miss
these young men and women; I miss them at concerts, I miss
them at lectures, I miss them at forums, I miss them in
libraries, I miss them in settlements, I miss them in
literary circles--I miss them almost everywhere where there
is an opportunity to receive spiritual and intellectual
stimulus. They neither learn nor teach. Their morals
are not low, but they are not high. They are just ordinary
and flat. And that is very sad.

Even those that are morally pure--and there are
not too many of them--their purity is but of the limited
and narrow kind; merely abstinence from illicit indulgence,
a mere negative kind of virtue. But there is a higher
kind of moral purity which is far more thoroughgoing, and
far more important, and far more inclusive; it is that
purity which means singleness of mind and purpose; it is
that purity which means a moral unity, the integrity of
will and character, and ^a life dominated by one great, holy
purpose, with all the energies of one's life devoted to a
sacred task and a sacred calling; a life integrated, a life

not broken and scattered into a thousand and one small pursuits, but a life directed and focused to one great goal--service, usefulness, splendid manhood and womanhood,-- a life devoted to God and the service of men. That kind of moral purity one seldom finds today.

And the world needs these young men and women; it needs them today more than it did at any time in the past, with its infinite problems and its torturing problems; with its wounds scarcely healed; with its economic struggles, its political struggles, its intellectual struggles; a thousand and one questions demanding an answer, and a thousand and one problems demanding the constructive intelligence of men of vision, of young men and women of hope and idealism. If the old world must go and a new world must come to take its place, we need the hosts and the legions of the new militants and the new champions who will bring to a sorely tried and a torn and bleeding world the healing balm of faith and hope and salvation.

And I tell you men and women that it is heart-breaking to see the precious talents and the wonderful promise going to waste because of this pervading, almost saturating, spirit of cheap materialization that has taken hold of our younger generation. I do not mean that our young people should become prudes; I do not mean that they should be innocent fools; I do not mean that their lives should be hedged around. No man should be shielded from God, and every man and woman has and must exercise the

inalienable right to find his or her own God in the wilderness.

What we ask for is that our young people should live their lives freely, cleanly; they should enjoy their work, their play; they should feel every pulsating moment and movement of life to its fullest; their emotions should be spacious but sweetly disciplined; their relations toward one another should be free and generous in the knowledge of the higher truth of duty and manhood.

What we ask for is not a narrow standard of decorum but a high standard of conduct; what we need is not modesty but consecration. What our young people need--and everything else will emanate from that naturally--is the lift of a great aspiration; what they need is to have their lives thrilled by a fine devotion; what they need to bring into their lives is not a spirit of prudishness and Puritanism, a shyness and a bashfulness and a stupidity utterly out of tune in our generation and in our time, but what they need is a sense of real freedom which comes from doing the morally beautiful tasks in life; what they need to learn is--and they will learn as they move through life--the value of every passing moment.

I believe it is the Psalmist who says, "Teach us to number our days that we may gain the heart of wisdom." Teach us to number our days--to count every moment as if it were a precious pearl on the string of life, to make every moment meaningful and purposeful and helpful to

ourselves; to our moral growth, to our spiritual development, to our ultimate happiness and to the happiness of our fellow beings.

What we need to realize is that the wasted hour is so much lime salt deposited in our muscles, which gives to us age, which makes us spiritually tired, which robs our ambitions of the elasticity of life that we ought to have throughout our days. What you young men and women need who have been favored with gifts or talents or education is not to turn your backs upon these things--the amusements, the entertainments; there is a moral value in them; there is a moral value in dancing, and in play, and in beautiful dress; dancing and playing and fine dress are always associated with religion and with religious processions and with religious practices; there is a moral value in everything we do provided that everything is directed to the one central goal--that of a harmonious, integrated life.

In other words, what our young people today need is to bring into their lives the sense of duty, the sense of obligation, the sense of service. They must realize that real happiness is not found in the feverish pursuit of one pleasure after another, but in the living of a well-organized, sweetly disciplined, graciously reasoning and harmonious life.

That, to my mind, is the gospel of the new day.