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The Three R's of Progress: Revolution, Reaction, and Reform,
1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE THREE R's OF PROGRESS--REVOLUTION,
REACTION AND REFORM," AT THE TEMPLE,
SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 8, 1921, AT
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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A hundred years ago this May 5th Napoleon died an exile at St. Helena, and the last chapter in the history of the most romantic figure in the last century was written. We are not concerned this morning with the life ambitions and achievements of this man Napoleon, except in so far as his career illustrates the almost universal law of revolution.

The French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille in 1889 and ended with Napoleon. The revolution which began with the National Assembly, with the cry: "Liberty, equality, fraternity!"; the revolution which began with that wonderful evening of August 4th, when, amidst a veritable delirium of joy, French noblemen voluntarily surrendered their feudal rights, and bishops relinquished their church privileges, and priests their theism, and judges their distinctive honors and titles, when, in one night, a complete social revolution transpired,--that revolution soon passed into the stage of the Robespierres and the Jacobins, of Danton and Cordelier clubs; that revolution soon passed into the stage of the September massacres--the

the Reign of Terror; and that revolution soon terminated in the Fructidor of Napoleon in 1799, which made him a consul, and later on, in 1804, made him emperor.

The Goddess of Reason enthroned in the church of Notre Dame inevitably led to the guillotine and the Red Cap, and all the show and paraphernalia of revolution inevitably led to the Roman pomp, to the veritable pomp of Nero, in which Napoleon soon clothed himself.

That is, somehow, the history of most revolutions. The question arises in the minds of thinking men and women: are revolutions necessary in human progress? What is progress? Some forty odd years ago one of the greatest minds in the world wrote a book that must rank among the greatest books in all literature. The man was Henry George and his book was "Progress and Poverty." Henry George devotes a good deal of space in his book--his epoch-making text book of a newer economics, to the subject of progress. What is the law of human progress? What is human progress? And he makes some very pertinent, some very trenchant, some very important comments concerning human progress.

You and I very often assume that human progress is continuous, steady, inevitable; that civilization is like one long road; it is just a question of how long it will take humanity to travel this road until it reaches the goal; that from the day of Creation man moves uninterruptedly, inevitably, to the far off divine end to which the whole creation moves, and that everything

contributes to this unbroken progression of the human race, even where disaster and calamity contribute to his forward march, to his triumphant procession.

That is a very hopeful way to look at things. Unfortunately, it is not true. If it were true--that human progress is steady, unbroken, continuous--there would be no dead civilizations; we would today not be reading the tragedy of human frailty and impotence in ruined temples and in the records of dead cities. There is no civilization today, with the possible exception of the Hebraic civilization, that is a thousand years old.

Progress is not so much like a long, unending road, but very much like the life of a human being--it begins weakly, it develops into full maturity and into all the vigor of manhood, and then somehow it passes into age and senile debility and stagnation and death. That has been the history of every civilization from that of China, India, Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Rome, the civilization of Islam, and that will probably be the history of our modern civilization.

In spite of the fact that we dislike to entertain the thought, it goes without saying that the men of today are no better, no stronger physically, mentally or morally, than the men of two thousand years ago, or three thousand years ago, or four thousand years ago--certainly, not physically. If you compare the men of today with the wonderful Greek statues of twenty-five hundred years ago,

with the carved figures on Babylonian and Egyptian monuments, and I doubt whether, physically, the man of today can vie with the man of yesterday. And mentally equally so. Our civilization of the Twentieth Century has not produced thinkers, poets and philosophers comparable to those of Greece or of ancient Israel. Plato, Aristotle, Solon, Sophocles, Isaiah, Moses, Virgil, Homer,--these are names to be conjured with, and were men who were mentally as alert and as vigorous as the men of today. Even scientifically they were as active. I think it was Henry George who very cleverly remarked that it takes just as much of mental acumen to invent a wheelbarrow as it takes to invent a railroad.

I have never forgotten the impressions that crept in upon me as I stood some two years ago near the pyramids outside of Cairo. There were the pyramids; it took a hundred thousand men fifty years to build them--to build a tomb for a king. And I thought of ancient Egypt, that held the world tributary; ancient Egypt, toward which all the commerce of the world moved, from the distant Indus, and from the canals of Mesopotamia, and from the plains of Assyria, and the islands of the Aegaeum,--all moved to the cities of the Nile. I thought of Egypt, with all its temples and all its palaces and all its greatness, of its wonderful libraries--four thousand years ago! And I saw it before me today--dust, tombs, ruins, a civilization that was dead. And I knew that human progress is not

a constantly ascending affair at all. In the walls of Jerusalem, in the various strata and layers of rocks in those towering walls of Zion, I was able to read the records of five empires that lived and died.

It is, of course, true that man can improve, which is the one thing that distinguishes him from the animal. The animal cannot improve. The bird builds its nest today exactly as it built its nest five thousand or ten thousand years ago, and will continue to build its nest a hundred thousand years from today exactly in the same way. But man begins with a cave and a hut and improves unto the palace and the mansion and the wonderful cathedral. Man begins his music, even as he begins his architecture, even as he begins his literature, even as he begins his science, with rudiments, with crude things--with the beating of a drum or a tom-tom, or the wild shriek of a reed, and he perfects it and he develops it into a perfect symphony.

Man can improve, but he does not of necessity and inevitably improve. There are two great factors in human progress that make for this improvement, and the absence of these factors make for stagnation, for retrogression and for death. The first of these two essentials for human development--and it is well to remember it in a study of human progress--is peace. Peaceful cooperation; peaceful association. Man by himself must utilize all his mental powers to provide

himself with the elemental needs of food, clothing and shelter; he will remain forever by himself in the lowest stage of civilization and will never emerge from it. He begins to emerge from that lowest stage when he joins forces with other men, when he joins into association, into cooperation, so that there is a surplus of mental energy left to be divided to the extent of human knowledge, to the gaining of a greater control over nature, to experimentation, to enterprise, to initiative.

When men join into associations there comes about a division of labor, and this division of labor and function enables human beings to devote some of their surplus mental energy to other things. If a man were compelled to make his own shoes and his own clothing and his own bread, he would never have a moment's time for anything else--for travel, for research, for study, for observation. It is only when his function is limited to one thing that he is able, because of the leisure that it affords him, to devote himself to the things which make for progress and civilization.

The tribes of this country before the advent of the white man, or the tribes of any land who are constantly warring with one another, never developed a civilization. And why? Because all their energy and all their mental powers are consumed in the task of the struggle for survival. It is only when the tribes merge, when they associate into peaceful cooperation, that they are able to

devote themselves to the sacred arts of peace and civilization.

Two things, therefore, make for progress. First: peaceful cooperation, and, secondly, as a result of that peaceful cooperation, justice, freedom, morality.

And there are two things which destroy civilization. One is war, conflict, struggle; and the other is injustice, inequality, absense of a moral restraint, of a moral discipline. And that is why all progress carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Every civilization carries within itself its own germs of annihilation. As soon as an association is formed, as soon as a great state like the Roman empire or the Babylonian empire succeeds in establishing peace over a vast stretch of the world's territory, as soon as it succeeds in establishing government, the arts begin to flourish; commerce, industry and travel are free and develop freely; institutions are founded; civilization begins to thrive and flourish.

But here is what follows as a result of it: this intense subdivision of function, of labor makes for classes. There soon comes about a military class, determined to preserve its own powers and its own privileges; and a religious group, or class, or caste, which is determined to preserve it-^{self,} augment its powers at all costs--a ruling class. Society becomes split up, broken into fragments of castes and classes, each one

struggling to preserve itself, its rights, its privileges; the wealthy become wealthier, the poorer classes become poorer and more exploited, and inequality, injustice, begins to corrode, to eat away, to undermine this fine civilization which cooperation and association established.

And that has been the tragic history of every ancient civilization. At the very height of its glory, ^{the} of its power, luxury, wealth, passions and ambitions of the privileged classes corrupted the very core of its being, and it died at the center long before it was attacked at the periphery.

The true test, my friends, of whether a thing makes for progress is to ask yourself two questions: Does it make for peaceful association among men? And does it make for equality and justice? Religion! Has religion a social value? Is religion of any value at all to human society? How are you going to test the merit and worthwhileness of religion? Simply by asking yourself these questions: Has religion enabled men to get together in fraternity of spirit, in mutual trustfulness, in co-operation? Has it revealed to the struggling peoples of the earth their fundamental kinship and unity? Has it taught them their common needs? If that is so then religion has been a tremendously beneficial factor in human society.

Has religion taught men hatred and suspicion of one another? Has it turned group against group, and

people against people? Has it taught men hypocrisy? Has it established castes and classes that feed and live off the lower and the exploited classes? Then religion has been a baneful influence in human life. The sad thing about it all is that religion has been both.

Commerce! Is international commerce a help to human progress, or a hindrance? The test is a very simple one. Has international commerce made for a greater sense of interdependence among nations? Has it helped men to realize that the foreigner is just as human as he of his own land? Has it made for a diminution of the chances and the possibilities for war? Has it drawn men closer together? In that case international commerce has been helpful, salutary, most highly desirable.

On the other hand, has international commerce and trade made for bitter rivalry, for competition, for protective tariffs? Has it made for imperialism? Has it made for large navies and armies? Has it made for wars? Then international commerce is inevitably making for the collapse of our civilization.

And so it is with education. We educate men and women. What for? Has education always been helpful to human progress? The true test is whether or not our type of education has taught men sympathy, intelligent understanding of other peoples' problems and other peoples' lives. Has education made for greater human kinship and brotherhood? Has education thrown a ring of

the living fire of love around all the dispersed and scattered remnants of the human race? Has education taught the American that the Russian, and the Frenchman, and the German, and the Englishman belong unto his race, are determined by his acts, and determine his life? Has education taught men the fundamental and basic unity of human love, the sense of responsibility for those in the farthestmost ends of the world? Then education has been a help.

But if it taught men a narrow, centripetal kind of nationalism, and an incrustrated type of patriotism, if it has made men chauvenistic, if it has made men selfish, if it has made men snobbish, then education is destructive of human progress. There are really two kinds of education, my friends: there is the education that sharpens men's wits, the education that enables a man to compete more successfully in life--to become what is commonly known as a successful man; the education that places additional tools into his hands with which to fight in the great struggle for existence. That is one kind of education.

But there is another kind, a deeper, a truer kind, a more social form of education; the kind that educates the soul; the kind that refines the human sentiments and human passions; the kind that teaches men to hold fast unto all the animalic passions within their souls; the kind that teaches responsibility, and duty, and

sympathy, and love, and understanding, and tolerance.

That is the only kind of education that makes for human progress.

In other words, progress depends upon two things, friends--the unity of the human race and the liberty of human beings; and it is from that point that we can ask ourselves: Is revolution worth while? Is reaction worth while? Is reform worth while? What are the best means of advancing or preserving civilization? I believe it was Leckie who said that under the present popular form of governments revolutions are most always a crime, and a crime of the first magnitude.

I am not dogmatic on the subject of revolution. One cannot be dogmatic on any such theme. Revolutions are sometimes necessary in human progress. When anti-social barriers have to be destroyed, when the stream of human life has been dammed and the waters are kept from flowing normally in their normal channels, then it becomes an imperative and sacred task of human beings to smash these barriers, to break the dam and to permit the waters of the human spirit to move freely and unhampered. The primary thing is life's progress, and anything that stands in the way as an immovable obstacle, that cannot be moved, must be destroyed.

But when there are other means of effecting the same ends, when in popular government and a democratic government there are opportunities for expressing the

✓ popular will legitimately, peacefully, and, nevertheless, effectually, then revolution and revolutionary measures become harmful, destructive of their own ends, inimical to the highest interests of society. Revolution in and by itself is nothing, and a man just because he happens to be a revolutionary is not, therefore, a hero, a prophet, a leader of men. Most revolutions have been brought about by charlatans; most revolutions have been caused by men of inordinate ambitions who wanted to serve selfish ends. A revolution must be justified by its purposes and by the conditions surrounding it, and when the purposes are unholy and the conditions surrounding it do not warrant it, a revolution is wrong--it is an enemy of civilization.

I wish that men would realize that--that revolutions let loose all those passions and all those animalic, beastly instincts which are still in every human being, which government and civilization somehow hold in restraint. Revolution lets them loose upon the world and they play havoc with the world. We have had evidences of it in Russia; we had evidences of it in the revolution of 1889. A revolution turns into mobocracy, into the rule of an impassioned, infuriated mob, and in place of deliberation there is haste, and in place of construction there is destruction, and in place of love and the holy balm of reconciliation there is hate, and enmity, and suspicion, and fury; and these things have never built a civilization and have never made for progress.

No revolution can succeed where the people, the masses, are not educated up to it. That is why the French Revolution failed. They prattled of liberty, equality, fraternity, but they had never learned through experience the vast responsibilities involved in self-government. They had never learned self-restraint; they had never learned to submit the will of the individual to the will of the people, of the majority. The people had not been disciplined up to the concepts of the revolution, and so the revolution failed. And that is why the revolution in Russia is doomed to failure--because the peasant of Russia is still the same illiterate, superstitious, selfish individual that he was before the revolution. It will take Russia generations of self-government, of trials, of failures, to learn the very rudiments of democracy, not to speak of the rudiments of communism.

In a society such as ours, so delicately organized, so intricate, so involved, a revolutionary movement can result in nothing but harm. It is a delicate clockwork that the ruthless hand of revolution crashes into, and it will take generations, centuries, to rebuild it. Revolutions today, my friends, are unnecessary in human progress. A revolution is a blind plunge into the future, and progress today must be achieved by slow, patient planning, deliberate study; by education, by cooperation, by organization. It is a slower process; it is the only

process.

Just as revolution is a blind plunge into the future, so is reaction a blind plunge into the past; and the reactionary is the very same enemy of human progress as the blind, impassionate revolutionary. The reactionary would have the hand of the past encircle like a python the future and stifle it; the reactionary would sacrifice the future to the past, the unknown to that which is known and discredited; the reactionary would confine and incarcerate all the freedom of the human soul; all the opportunities for initiative, for experimentation, that is within society; the reactionary would put a halt, a check, to human improvement and human progress. And the reactionary is really the father of the revolutionary. The reactionary makes for revolution, because he is the one that builds the dam that holds back the on-rushing stream of human life. He might regard himself as a safe and sane conservative; he might pride himself upon worshipping things as they are, and the god of things as they are, but in reality he digs the grave for the civilization which he wishes to perpetuate.

Reaction and revolution are both undesirable in human life. The one helpful means of human progress is a constant reformation, a constant growth, a normal development--an adjustment to the needs of the new day and the new conditions; a constant reinterpretation, a revaluation of human values. That is the mighty need of our day.

The three R's of progress are superseded by a fourth R of human progress--Religion. There can be no human progress without that principle of justice, of equality, of freedom, which we call religion. Everything that is unjust in our economic life, in our political life, in our social life, makes for the destruction of our civilization, by whatever name you call it. Everything that makes for greater justice, and greater fairness, and greater freedom in human life makes for the perpetuation and for the progress of our civilization.

What men need today more than anything else, my friends,--more than new scientific discoveries, more than the conquest of the air or the conquest of space, more than the ships to sail through the deep and underneath the surface of the waters, more than machines to soar through the heights,--what we need today, what every civilization of the past needed, and for the lack of which it perished, is that all-controlling principle, that dynamic influence in our life--morality, uncompromising, unyielding; a sturdy, wholesome, compelling morality.

Our entire civilization, my friends, with all its wonderful cities, and all its beautiful structures; with its Paris, and London, and Berlin, and New York; with its wonderful machinery, with its constantly increasing scientific discoveries, may pass away in a century, and leave behind it but ruins to tell a sad and tragic story of our own frailty and our own impotence.

There is but one thing that can save our civilization from the fate that overtook the equally glorious civilizations of yesterday, and that is morality, religion--God! Put not your trust in matter; put not your trust in machinery; put not your trust in the things which have conquered for you time and space. They are as nothing when the organism begins to rot away internally, when wars, and conflicts, and revolutions begin to eat away at the foundation.

Put your trust in the abiding things of life; put your trust in a religion that makes for human association, that makes for comradeship, that makes for peace. Put your faith absolutely in a religion which elevates science, and art, and literature, and education to so many shrines dedicated to God. Your art and literature of today are beginning to show the same signs of corruption that the art and literature of Rome showed in the period of its decadence. Your theater today is just as rotten morally as the theaters of Rome were fifty years before Rome crumbled before the invasions of the barbarian.

The same poison that ate at the heart of great Hellenes, and Assyria, and Egypt, is beginning to eat at the heart of our own civilization; and let not the splendor and the luxury of our present day civilization blind us to these facts. The color of the flower and its gaudiness are not a true index of its strength and its ability to survive the tempest and the storm.

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Put your faith in a religion that will purge and purify the hearts of men, that will teach them that there are things in life much more worth while than the accumulation of wealth, and luxury and comforts that enervate, that weaken, that destroy the stamina, the back-bone, the endurance of the human race.

Put your faith in a religion and in a moral code that makes for justice, that makes for freedom, that gives every child of God an opportunity to live his life freely and happily; that does not fall into a caste and a class, and confine him and make him the victim of every exploiter and of every enemy of society.

Put not your faith in the mighty men or in the mighty things. Put your faith in those eternal verities of peace and justice, of union and liberty, which are alone the foundations and the bases of every abiding civilization.

✓ That, to my mind, is the most important art of human progress.

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