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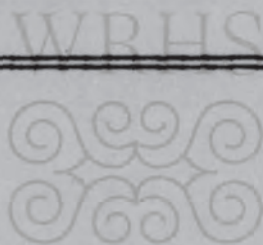
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The Age of the Flapper, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "THE AGE OF THE FLAPPER," AT
THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
DECEMBER 11, 1921, CLEVELAND, O.



I don't know exactly why, but I do like the word "flapper." I don't know what it means; I suppose that is why I am lecturing on it. And I share with a few select ones a secret admiration for the flapper--I mean the institution, of course.

I suppose to express a sentiment so unconventional in a place so conventional as a temple or a church would shock some people; but then it is a good thing to shock some people. People nowadays have to be shocked into thinking or they fall asleep. And then, really, some people are unhappy unless they are shocked every once in a while. That holds especially true of middle-age people--staid, conservative people, who have conveniently forgotten their own youth, and have constituted themselves the shock absorbers of society.

I suppose the conventional thing to do for one in my position, on a subject such as this, would be to scold, to hold up the young men and young women--the so-called flapper--to scorn, and rebuke and chastise them publicly; to contrast their erring ways and sinful ways with the very, very virtuous ways of the older generation, and to point out the menace therein involved and the dire consequences which must ensue.

That, I am quite sure, would please the old people immensely, but really it would do no good. Youth

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is not at all impressed by the pointing of an admonitory finger and by reference to the unutterable goodness of the past generations. In fact, they are so sophisticated nowadays that they actually question this legend about the goodness of the older people. And I suppose they have reason to question it. Look what a frightful mess, what a terrible mess the older generation has made of this world! And then it calls in the young people to do the fighting, and sends them into the trenches to be hacked and mutilated.

It is perhaps much better, my friends, to try to understand the young people, to try with her or with him to work out, to solve his problems. The dictionary defines the flapper as one who flaps. That, of course, at once implies an undignified, an disciplined manner of doing things; and the young generation today is very, very undignified and unconventional and undisciplined.

Times have really changed; the whole discipline has gone; church discipline has gone, school discipline has gone; authority is no longer revered as it was in the bygone days, and the young lady in her 'teens today, and the young man in his 'teens today, is very, very independent, and impatient, and critical, and challenging, and irreverent--very irreverent. She is a child for her age; and this is a rebellious age, this is a restless age, this is a questioning age, this is an unhappy age.

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The dictionary further defines a flapper as "a young game bird, especially a duck, not yet able to fly." But it is eager to fly; and that is the characteristic of this age. Youth today is eager to fly, to soar aloft, to roam, to see the world, to see life; to draw its own conclusions, to find its own experiences, to meet its own God face to face. Of course it cannot fly yet, but it flaps its wings, it tries to fly.

Now, do you think that is to be censured? Do you think that is to be denounced? I think it is admirable. A flaming spirit! That is youth. And would you dampen it by inhibitions, by restraint? I would not. We get old soon enough; in fact, the tragedy nowadays is that we get old when we are young. What the world needs today, men and woman, really is youth--the dreams of youth, the visions of youth; a new start, a new faith, a new confidence, a new outlook. And that spirit, instead of being denounced, should be nurtured, kept alive, idealized and directed into the right channels.

You know it has been truly said that every season of life has its own virtues--every period of life has its own virtues. What is a virtue in a man of sixty may be a vice in a child of six. A child of six that is perfect is morbid; there is something wrong with a child of six that is absolutely good, obeying everything and following out every convention established by its elders at all

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times. And the young man of sixteen, or the young girl of sixteen, that is settled, and calculating, and circumspect, and staid, gives evidence that his life or her life has been stultified. And a young woman--I suppose we could say a young woman at forty--when a woman is a flapper at forty then she becomes an unutterable nuisance.

Every season of life has its own virtues, just as every season of the year has its own temperature and its own beauty. And the age of the teens is the age of youth, the age when young people should be adventuresome and full of enthusiasm and great loyalties--even reckless, seeking, trying to do the impossible. Rachael Crothers arises to the defense of the flapper when she says that "the flapper takes my breath away; she wants to know so much; she wishes to be free." Why, that is youth! Impatience with restraint, impatience with precedents, with traditions; when the blood runs clean and warm and the eyes are as yet unclouded by the sad experiences of life; when the young man and woman has not as yet learned the necessity of compromise and concession and submission.

Why, that is a wonderful age, the age of big things! By twenty we have formed nearly all the ideals of our lives, nearly all the friendships worth while. Why, you wouldn't take that wonderful fire of youth and extinguish it because youth does not act or think exactly as people do when they are forty or fifty! Why should

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they? I wouldn't have young people imitate the old people for the world. If there were not so many young people here I would say because most of the old people are not worth while imitating. I would have youth guided, helped; I would have the older people who know life and understand life, who are tolerant, a bit, patient a bit, remembering their own follies and their own mistakes, try to show youth how its abundant, exuberant energy can be happily extended in fine things. I say happily extended. People who talk about stern duty and moralize to young people with a somber countenance and with serious mien will never get anywhere. You have got to show young people that virtue is just as attractive and just as pleasant, and more so, than vice.

I once said that the reason so few people are good is because they are afraid to be lonely. And it is true. We have cast a pall of solemnity over goodness, virtue and the clean life. Why, there is no more freedom and no more joy and no more real happiness to be gotten anywhere but in the good life and the clean life. People rail against certain types of dancing in vogue at certain times. Well, you take a child and teach it dancing--artistic dancing, beautiful dancing, and there are few things more beautiful in the world than that. Train that child into artistic dancing, and when that child grows to be a young woman she just will not dance

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the dances that you criticize. Her soul will not permit it; she has a standard; it is vulgar, she just couldn't do it. You train the children into the beauty of design, into the artistry of dress, give it an artistic point of view, and when they get older they will not wear those things that you criticize so much--some people criticize so much; their life just will not permit them to. You have given them a standard; you have shown them the beauty of dress, and the beauty of dancing, and the beauty of doing the fine things, and they will not stoop to do anything else; you will not have to moralize to them; you will not have to tell them this is bad; it is vulgar; they will not do it.

If you make your home comfortable and pleasant, and bring into it beautiful things, interesting people, interesting subjects, why, your child will imbibe that beauty and charm of the home, that loveliness of it, and when he or she grow up to be a young man or a young woman they will not be tugging away at the leash, seeking to get away from the pleasant hours of the home, because they will know real joy is found in the home. But if you make your home a place in which to eat and sleep only, why, your boy and girl will just naturally seek for pleasure away from home.

If you live your life simply but with dignity, frankly, never trying to appear anything that you are not,

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never trying to appear to your children wiser than you are, never trying to appear to other people richer than you are--living simply, honestly, sincerely, the boys and girls that grow up in such an atmosphere will just naturally imbibe that spirit of simplicity and dignity and frankness and openness.

Children are not obstreperous in the sense that they are at all bad; they are molded and modeled, as a rule--the normal child is. And we are speaking of the normal child. Now, in all this, of course, there is a challenge to parents. I suppose most parents do realize it--do they not?--that it is really the boy and the girl from thirteen on that needs them more than the child needs them, because it is those years that are the years of storm and stress, the years in which the boy and the girl become conscious of life, and of all its passions, and of all its emotions; it is the formative years, when real character is fashioned. In those years the young boy and girl go out into life, into society. Up to that age the child is a very selfish thing, concerned with itself. From thirteen on is the age of the gang, and the age of the club, and the age of the crowd; the age when the boy seeks companions, the age when he forms his ideals, the age of the ^{hero} higher worship, and great admiration, and great exultation, and great depression; of tremendously beautiful loyalties and devotions. And it is in those

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years that the boy needs his father and the girl needs her mother, that the father and the mother have something to give to the children--which is not always the case. And wise parents, instead of railing and denouncing and lamenting the frivolities of modern youth; its excesses, its love of pleasure, its irresponsibility, will do well to try to understand them, to try to understand the fire that is in youth, and the love of life that is there, and the fine impulses that are there, and give them an opportunity for expression along fine lines.

Now, of course, I do not wish to imply that the entire responsibility is with the parents at all: the young must share their responsibilities as well. Just because there is no more a church discipline and a home discipline and a school discipline, there must emerge in the lives of young people today an inner compulsion, an inner restraint, an inner discipline.

The freedom which you young people enjoy today, which is infinitely more than young people enjoyed a generation ago, must be a challenge to bring out all the strength and all the nobility that is in you. I would have the young people today guard themselves against certain things that blight life. I would not denounce your love of pleasure and entertainment. A certain amount of pleasure is perfectly legitimate and in full consonance to the age of youth. One gets over that as

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one gets older if one has sense.

But I would have the young people today guard themselves against a besetting sin--what I regard as a real danger, and that is cheapness of soul; soul devotion to trivialities. Most young people mistake the shadow of things for their substance; the froth and the foam for the real drink. Our young people ought to try to remember that pleasures are the caviar of life and not the food of life; that there are qualities abiding, qualities enduring, qualities that make for happiness and power that must be developed in those five, six or seven years of youth, for we never develop them after that.

I say that the flapper nowadays devotes himself or herself to too much of trivialities. One seldom finds really a serious discussion of serious things in a circle of young people today; it is almost taboo. It is only the very light and frothy things that are legitimately a subject of conversation among young people today. It is dress, and social functions, and theater, and sometimes the latest book just off the press; a book that is ten years old is passe. The classic is out of fashion nowadays; a book must come hot off the griddle to be a great book.

There are no great interests in the lives of most of our young people today, and that is saddening, because youth is the age of great idealism. Youth is the age

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when we project wonderful vision, when we identify ourselves solely and devotedly to projects almost impossible, but tantalizing and energizing; when we seek the big things, the high things, the exalted things of life, whether practical or no. Our young people today haven't those high interests, and because of that their lives are scattered and fragmentary and broken, and their pleasures are hectic and feverish and sporadic. There is no unifying motive, there is no great ideal that creates a harmony in their lives, that gives a purpose and a goal and a meaning to their activity. And that is sad.

Youth today takes its pleasure to ravenously; it drinks the cup of life with too much gusto, and empties it too early in life, and that, too, is a mistake, because you become disillusioned too early in life. The real wisdom of living is not to drink the cup of life too greedily and too quickly, but to leave much of life's experiences, of life's exhilarations, of life's stimulents for the later days that are to come, or the lag end of your life will be cold and empty and monotonous. Young people today become disillusioned too early, and sometimes their parents, unfortunately, help them in that sort of thing.

Children are today made to imitate their elders in dress and in action. They dance late and dress expensively, and parents think that is fine; but they are



doing a grave injustice to their children. They are depriving them of all these pleasures when they will enjoy them much more, and much more intelligently, later on in life. That is one of the besetting sins of young people today: they are too trivial, they are too ordinary, with all the wonderful gifts and capacities and energies that they have that are precious. They dissipate them; they waste them; they do not develop charming personalities; they are just individuals that exist.

There is another thing that I would have my young friends guard themselves against, and that is the invidious effect of luxury, or the desire for luxuries in life. That, too, is a besetting sin of modern society, old and young. I would like the young, if possible, to get out of this frightful and terrible disillusion: that in luxury and comforts and things, the things that one can put on his back or on the walls of his home, is life's real worth and meaning to be found. You have observed and I have observed the many tragedies that have come into the lives of families because parents and children would like to imitate the luxurious way of living of other people; this morbid craving to be like others in externals, in dress, in carriage, in homes, has blighted many happy families. Luxury is a terrible thing if not properly used. It is terrible for those who have it not and want it; it is terrible for those who have it

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and don't know how to use it, because we pay a terrible price for luxury, and we pay a price for every comfort that we have.

There is a beautiful story told of the great caliph Omar, one of the earliest of the caliphs who helped to extend the empire of Arabia from Spain to India--a powerful man and a great man. During his caliphate most of the great conquests of the Mohammedans took place. The City of Jerusalem was conquered, and the general, the conqueror, sent an embassy to Omar, who was down in Mecca, urging him to come to the City of Jerusalem and himself take over the keys of the conquered city; and this great Omar, whose life was almost the life of an ascetic, the life of a man who does things, rode the six hundred miles from Mecca to Jerusalem with one attendant, on a camel, with one bag of barley and a skin of water.

He came to the City of Jerusalem, and out of the gates of that city came the general and his attendants, dressed in wonderful silk robes, with their horses richly caparisoned, and with a great deal of style. Omar beheld them, and he was outraged. Getting off his camel he began to pick up all the mud and all the stones he could gather and began to pelt his generals and their attendants with it. "What are you doing! What is this outrage!" he cried. "Are you now to destroy the things which I have built by your luxuries, by your effeminate cravings

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for the sweet and the comfortable and the luxurious?"

And at another time this great caliph heard that one of his officers had built for himself a castle, a palace, and he ordered him at once to raze it to the ground, because he knew that for his work to go on, and for his great mission to succeed, he would need robust, vigorous, hardened men to carry on the work, and not men weakened by wealth and pampered by luxuries.

We pay a terrible price for the soft and the comfortable things we enjoy; it saps our strength, our power of endurance, our hardihood, and sooner or later we begin to yield, to compromise, because we hate to lose the things that are so soft to the touch and so pleasant to the eye. Luxury is a menace truly to be guarded against by young men and young women who wish to make something really fine out of their lives.

I wish I could have young people realize, and realize deeply, so that the realization becomes a motivating force in their lives, that real happiness and real contentment, and "the peace that passeth all understanding," are to be found not in things, not in wealth, not in show, not in display, not in things that can be seen, or touched, or felt at all, but in the inner harmony of one's being that comes from doing the thing that one wishes to do, from doing the thing that one knows should be done, and from doing it well.

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There are two great sins in life, my young friends: one is the sin of cruelty, and the other is the sin of vulgarity. There are a great number of young people who are terribly cruel--cruel to their parents in that they fail deliberately to try to understand them; and it is just as much a bounded duty of young men and young women, to try to understand their parents, their problems, their difficulties, the things that they are wrestling with, the agonies of their minds and souls, as it is for parents to try to understand their children.

Children are oftentimes unconsciously cruel in that they take but refuse to give, in that they will not share responsibility, in that they will not meet their parents half way in the building of the home, in their creating the proper spirit of love and devotion and mutuality and cooperation in the home; in a readiness to sacrifice even as the parents are ready to sacrifice. Youth is sometimes very, very selfish and thoughtless and cruel; and that is the greatest sin of the world--is cruelty; cruelty of action and cruelty of speech, cruelty of judgment and cruelty of word.

That is what brings all the misery in the world. We are cruel sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously; we are harsh in our judgment. "Oh, parents, they are old, they know so little; they are not up to date." The parents have gone through the deep waters

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and have learned a few things. Parents have seen life, and life perhaps has sobered them a bit. Parents have tremendous responsibilities and cannot be as adventuresome and as reckless as younger people may, and youth should understand--should sympathetically understand.

That is the great sin of life--cruelty; cruelty to our friends, to strangers; an absence of spirit, of democracy. We sometimes call it snobbishness. Whatever the word be, it is cruelty, is it not? It is our refusal to recognize the worth of all men, the intrinsic goodness that may be found in each one. It is our failure to realize the essential equality, the basic sameness of all men and women. Youth is not as snobbish as old age, but youth should guard itself against the cruelty of petty discrimination and snobbery, for it just blights life, it just devastates all that is fine in the world.

And the second great sin is vulgarity--vulgarity in dress, vulgarity in display, vulgarity in dancing, vulgarity in forwardness and aggressiveness. That is a sin to guard oneself against. The cultured man and woman is never anxious to impress--never; either by his or her dress or actions. The cultured person just lives and moves, and his very life is simple, dignified, humble and refined, which is in itself the finest advertisement.

Anything that does not belong in its place is

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not beautiful; anything that is not quiet and unostentatious is not beautiful; it is vulgar.

The sum and substance of all that I have said this morning is just this: this age is not an age corrupt or degenerate; this age is not going to ruination; it is no better and no worse than the generations that have gone before; it has certain virtues accentuated ✓ and certain vices accentuated. The average young man and woman today is good, is wholesome, and has fine capacities for a really fine life.

It is the first duty of parents of children to intelligently and sympathetically guide, to direct, to help in the solving of these very difficult and perplexing and troubling problems of a boy or girl in their teens; and then it is the duty of the young man and the young woman to call out the resources that are within them, to endeavor, in a spirit of fairness and in high resolve and fine adventure, to live a life that is free of cruelty and vulgarity, a life that is guarded against the invidious influences of trivialities and frivolities and luxuries, that level and weaken and destroy.

My advice to you, young friends of mine, is to live your lives intelligently, courageously; do not get old too quick. If you have a fine ideal, a fine vision, in the name of God, live by it! Try to realize it; do not begin to gauge it too soon by the yardstick of



practicability in success and money. Take the pleasures of life as they come to you, but take them in a spirit of wise selection. Take those that stimulate and strengthen and ennoble, and not those that degrade and pull down and soil--living your life harmoniously, beautifully. And then the kingdom of God is yours.

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