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Censors and Other Afflictions, 1922.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,  
ON "CENSORS AND OTHER AFFLICTIONS,"  
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,  
JANUARY 15, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.

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You may ask yourself why I choose to speak of this subject of censorship at this time. Frankly, I believe that it is very important that this subject of censorship be clearly understood by the American people. The conviction has been borne in upon me during the past few years that the elemental liberties which we enjoy in this land are fast being invaded by suppressionists of one kind or another, by highly organized and vociferous minorities who are never happy unless they have made other people unhappy.

It is really a mistake to think that in this land the majority rule. The majority may govern, but it is the minority that really rules. A well organized and well financed and determined minority may, in this form of political organization which we have, force its point of view upon the American people and express its peculiar ideas in laws before the majority has awakened to the fact.

There are in every land, and especially in ours, self-appointed of divinity, self-appointed bureaucrats of the Almighty, who have taken upon themselves to be the guardians of the tastes and morals of everybody; and during the past few years these minorities have been quietly organizing themselves to force religion into our public schools, to restore these glorious blue laws for our Sundays, and to impose their predilections and their

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tastes upon everyone, so that they will be in a position to tell you and me what we ought to read, and what we ought to see, and what we ought to hear. It is a pity.

The all-spacious days of Jefferson, Adams, Paine, Franklin, and people really free, when a man prided himself upon being a free American citizen,--these days have given way to the day of Comstock and Sweet and Burleson and security leagues and similar institutions of stupid suppressionists and puritans. This movement has grown much during the past few years as a result of the war. Every war, of course, is, in itself, the supreme example and the supreme justification, I suppose, of censorship, and those groups that during the war are entrusted with the privilege of censorship hate to surrender that privilege when peace is restored. The habit clings to people long after the need has ceased to exist. Also the fact that as a result of the war the emotions, the repressions, the intensity under which we live, the rigid discipline of war days, have found a reaction and an abandon in post-bellum days.

There is much more of laxity today in our manners, in our speech, in our dress, in our conduct, in our relations. It seems that the palate of every human being today is craving for the sharper and the more piquant sauce--clearly a result of the war. It is an abnormal state of things and a temporary condition.

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But these professional moralists have seized upon these phenomena as a justification for their cry for still greater suppression, and prohibition, and censorship. I do not want you to feel that I am to hold this morning a brief for all these deficiencies and delinquencies of human society; I am not here this morning to justify the kind of dress people wear today; the short skirt and the bobbed hair, or what people consider offensive or defensive cosmetics; and I am not here to justify the off-color play or movie. I do believe that too much has been made of it. The styles today are not unusually immoral; for that matter, they are not unusually attractive or beautiful. And ministers really ought not to make themselves so unhappy about these things. Styles do change, and the more extreme they are the quicker they change; and the more things change the more they remain the same.

What I am here to warn against is this mania that has taken hold of people,--this mania for suppression by law; this usurpation on the part of unqualified individuals of our liberties, and this fatuous belief that we can regulate taste and morals by law. One of the supreme fictions of human thought is that taste and morals can be elevated or degraded by law.

What I am here to speak against is the enthronement of Mrs. Grundy as the arbiter of our taste,

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of our social and intellectual and esthetic life. It is a strange thing, isn't it, how eager men are to act as amateur policemen. There is nothing a man likes to do more than to act as a policeman--of course, an amateur policeman, without any responsibilities. A civilian with a badge is really a most dangerous animal; it is much easier to regulate another man's life than to regulate their own. Many people feel that what may be good for themselves may not be good for anyone else, and when you add this bit of psychology: that some people, themselves morbid, unconsciously wish to keep other people from enjoying the things that they can't enjoy, you have the psychology of the suppressionist in full. And once you give these people free rein, you have an end to all your liberties.

I repeat again that I am not defending the bad play, or the bad movie, or the immoral book. There are some books that have no justification for existence at all; and some plays and some movies. They are written without art, without sincerity, without the spirit of humanity and kindness; they are the products of perverted minds that pander to the depravity of human beings. These books, plays and pictures clearly ought to be suppressed. But then there is a law--a law of the land which takes care of such cases, a law which regards as an offense against the decency of life and of society to exhibit such

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plays and pictures and to circulate such books. You then have a duly constituted authority backed and limited by well defined law. That is not censorship; that is the punishment of an act in violation of a clearly defined law: that every society must have and does have.

But censorship is another thing entirely. Censorship is the right arrogated to themselves by a few individuals to pass judgment upon a play or a picture even before it is exhibited; the right assumed by these men to dictate as to what must be suppressed, what must be deleted, what must be distorted, in order to meet their tastes and their likes and their dislikes. That I regard as tyranny; that I regard as dangerous; that is subjecting art and thought and progress to the whim of a few,--and, as often happens in our democratic form of organization, the unqualified few; those who are least competent to pass judgment upon things that have to do with art and literature and morality.

Away back in the middle of the eighteenth century, a British prime minister, Robert Walpole, who was afraid of the criticisms that were being launched at him by dramatists, passed that infamous act of 1737, which was a rigid bit of censorship. Lord Chesterfield at the time made this very significant statement: "If poets and players are to be restrained let them be restrained as other subjects are, by the

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known laws of the country. If they offend, let them be tried as every Englishman ought to be tried--by his own country. Do not let us submit them to the arbitrary will and pleasure of any one man." And for that matter, of any one group; because, my friends, it is so very, very difficult for anyone definitely to say what is moral and what is immoral. The personal element and local prejudices enter so much in such decisions.

Twenty years ago <sup>Shaw's</sup> Gibson's Ghosts was immoral, and Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession was immoral, and Brieux's Damaged Goods was immoral. I suppose if you trace down the career of all classics you will find at one time or another each one of them was considered immoral and dangerous to the public well being. You simply cannot set up a hard and fast rule for the gauging of the moral content of a great book. I suppose the vice hunters and puritan hounds find a good deal objectionable in Shakespeare, in Chaucer, in Shelley, in Balzac, in Sophocles--in all the Greek classics, and, I suppose, even in the Bible. How can you relegate these vital decisions, touching upon the very soul of art, to one or to a few men? What may be one man's meat, said Shaw, may be another man's poison. What may be one age's longing may be another age's loathing.

This institution of censorship lends itself so readily to abuse that even the menace which may be

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involved in its complete absence is infinitesimally small as compared to the actual menace involved in its presence; a board of censorship may so readily impose its political and economic views upon books and dramas and moving pictures. I understand that not so very long ago the Pennsylvania board deleted from the pictures of the news of the day scenes portraying the actual conditions in the mining districts during the strike. I suppose that they thought that was detrimental to public welfare. But don't you see where that leads you to?

During the French Revolution we are told they would not permit any plays to be put on the boards that had any dukes or duchesses or countesses in. The spirit of equality which was established precluded the right of any dramatist to portray such characters in his plays. The story is told of a German censor--and of all censors the German is one of the most thorough--who returned a play and refused permission to have that play presented, because the count, the hero of the play, married a gardener's daughter; and the censor remarked that while unfortunately such things did take place in actual life, that is no reason why that should be presented on the stage.

During the reign of King George III, the revival of King Lear was prohibited because King George at the time was mad. The personal likes and dislikes, the local

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events and conditions, enter inevitably into any opinion rendered by censors, and that is why censorship is so great a menace. Every autocracy based on authority and not consent, whether it be the authority of a church which establishes a ban on prohibited books, or whether it be the autocracy of a Russian soviet government,-- every autocratic form of human organization seeks refuge in censorship; and once censorship is sanctioned by law, it works like a steel band that is constantly narrowing itself, and confining and incarcerating the mind and the soul of human beings.

What is censorship? Professor in Harper's Monthly, says that censorship is the outcome of human laziness and inertia. When anything goes wrong lazy men begin to clamor for laws. The things that they would not do themselves through an effort of will they want done for them by acts of government. You cannot legislate the devil out of existence. That is a truth established by centuries of human experience; and yet we always fall back upon that stupid expedient of repression, prohibition, censorship, instead of education, because education is a slower and more laborious task; education throws the responsibility upon you as an individual and not upon the government; education requires of you to regulate your own taste and your own standards, and to determine what is best for your soul and your mind. That

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requires study and thought and self-control and self-discipline; that is an effort of will and of mind. You would rather have the magistrate or the policeman say what play we should see and what play we ought not to see; that is much easier.

I have great faith in the average man and the average woman; I have great faith in the wholesomeness of the average human mind. I do not think as these stupid puritans think: that the natural proclivity of the human being is to the coarse and the vulgar. I think that the average man and woman is decent, and likes the decent and the fine and the sweet and the wholesome things, and it is a mistaken notion that has gone abroad in the land that the plays that pander to the lowest are the most successful plays, and the pictures that are the gaudiest and the reddest and the loudest are the kind that attract most. They do not.

What I would substitute for censorship is a concerted effort of school and home and church to refine and elevate the tastes and the standards of men and women by education--by education! the only remedy for all social diseases! We have much to go on the highway that leads to real appreciation of art and literature; we are a young people, and we have heretofore devoted our energies almost exclusively to the exploitation, to the great wealth, of this continent of ours; we have had little

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time to devote ourselves to the finer things, to the sweetness and the light of life; to music and poetry and drama and fine pictures. But the time is coming when the American people will turn from an exclusive devotion to material things to a keen interest in the artistic and the spiritual things of life.

I can see the change today in American life; and I would accelerate that tendency by education all along the line. Do not ask of your moving picture theater to give you pictures that your child can see and understand; that is pulling down this great agency of civilization, for I am convinced that the moving picture is and will progressively become one of the greatest educational agencies of society. Do not ask of that agency to be dragged down to the level of the intellect and the artistic grasp of the child of ten. It is unfair. It is equally unfair to drag your children to moving pictures intended for adults and not for children. You might as well feed a baby of one year beefsteak as take your children of six or ten or twelve and have them see pictures which have to do with the intimate relations of domestic and social and economic life.

I hope the time will soon come when theaters will build exclusively for children, when the drama and the moving picture for children will be produced in this city and in every city in the land, and when children will

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not be permitted to attend plays and motion pictures intended for adults.

What you ought to demand of your moving picture producers--and from the type of picture which they are producing today one has got to think that either half of them are imbeciles themselves, or imagine the American public to be altogether imbeciles--what you ought to demand of those producers is honesty, sincerity of subject, truth, reality. Many of these pictures stupidly tantalize, needlessly tantalize, either by their titles, which are direct appeal to sex, or by some of their scenes. Why, they have not even the courage of their vices. Most of these scenes are camouflaged behind some maudlin sentimentality and the conventional virtues of American life.

What we ought to ask of the moving picture, what we ought to ask of the playwright and the play producer is honesty and sincerity in presenting the problems of life as they are; an earnest attempt, <sup>made</sup> to tell a story honestly; the drama as a play of ideas, as a circle of personalities; the motion picture as the agency for telling an interesting story interestingly. Why, the moving picture today is exactly where the dime novel was twenty years ago. It is in its infancy; it is passing through its first period. It is being fast outstripped by European producers. The German moving

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producer is becoming conscious of the uniqueness of the motion picture, of its unique field, and is beginning to present real works of art. Perhaps the American producer will wake up to a realization of the fact; perhaps he will not wait until the people throughout the land begin to clamor for censors, but he himself will call in men of literary traditions, of culture, and they themselves determine what is art and what is cheap copy and degradation of art.

That is our task for the future; and organizations like the drama league, and agencies like the school and the church and the home ought to throw themselves into this task. First, of supporting those plays that are fine and true and wholesome. You can kill a bad play by withholding patronage, and that is the deadliest instrument. Educate your boys and girls to want the clean and the fine and the truth and you will not need any censors. Do not educate them and no censor will keep them from getting to these plays that the lower traits require. Prohibition in America will never be a success until a new generation is educated in not wanting what this generation seems desperately to want.

To summarize: I do not believe in censorship because my reading of the progress of civilization from earliest time to the present has convinced me that censorship is dangerous; that censorship is worthless

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and never achieves the thing which it sets out to achieve, and that censorship is a makeshift, an expedient, a foolish expedient of lazy people.

And, secondly, there is a concerted movement throughout our land along many lines to restrict, to circumscribe the elemental rights of human beings, to impose the will and the opinions and the predilections of individuals and groups upon the masses of the people. I regard that as exceedingly dangerous, because once the thing is started and given momentum, God knows where it ends.

And, thirdly, I believe as I have always believed: that the salvation of mankind is to come about not through laws imposed from above, but through an effort of will that comes from within. Salvation of mankind will come about through a change of heart, through a determination on the part of men and women to seek the truth and to pursue it, to exert themselves. Inertia-- that is the deadliest sin of society, and it is deadliest in a democracy; we shift responsibility upon others. Real democracy is a challenge to the individual to develop that which is best and strongest and finest in him, and then bring that as an offering to social life. Democracy is a call to the individual to perfect himself through his own will and his own efforts, and not to become perfected by regulations and proscriptions and inhibitions

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and prohibitions.

Every act of censorship is a return to autocracy; every act of prohibition is a return to the time when laws were handed down from superiors to inferiors incapable of determining their own lives and their own destinies. And so when people clamor for censorship, your reply should be: Education.

You will join clubs and societies that have for their aim the popularizing and the supporting of the fine play and the fine movie and the good book; you will encourage reading circles and drama circles and study groups for your boys and your girls and for yourselves; and your taste will be refined and purified gradually so that nothing but the truth and the real will appeal to you.

That is morality; and that is, to my mind, America. All else is worthless and a sorry makeshift.

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