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What is Culture?, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "WHAT IS CULTURE?" AT THE TEMPLE,
SUNDAY MORNING - JANUARY 22, 1922,
CLEVELAND, OHIO.



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I am going to speak this morning on the book: "If Winter Comes." I shall use that as the text for a discussion of the subject: "What is Culture?" I shall not discuss Mr. Hutchinson's book as a piece of literature; that is not my province. The book appealed to me as a finely wrought, an artistically wrought piece of fiction, informed by a fine spirit of humanity and sincerity and tenderness; and it was refreshing to come across a book of this character; it was refreshing to come across it today, amidst the vast outpouring of hectic fiction, most of it raw to the point of ugliness; to come across a book that is at once both true and sweet; profound in theme, but in style and phrase and manner, noble and strong and tender.

I want to use this book as a text for a sermon, not because the author had in mind any particular preachment. The book is not a condensed novel; for that matter, no great piece of literature is deliberately and consciously categoric or sermonic. But, after all, in the life and character of the hero of this book, Mark Sabre, is, to my mind, focused the entire problem of human character, the entire problem of standards of conduct.

Mark Sabre evolves for himself a code of conduct by which he lives, because of which he suffers, and through which he triumphs in the end. When we are

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through with the book we ask ourselves: Was his code a true code? Was it the highest code? Was Mark Sabre a truly cultured man?

Briefly, the story "If Winter Comes" is this: the hero of the story, Mark Sabre, is not a saint, or a brave man, or an impractical idealist; he is just a kind, genial, patient sort of a man; he loves the world, loves nature, observes and believes in all social conventions. He is not a rebel, or a radical, or a reformer--those terrible people whom one generation stones and another generation enthrones, but he has a very sensitive soul, has Mark Sabre--a soul that is sensitive to all the nicer spiritual values of life; and he is tolerant and gentle in his judgment of men and of government, because he can see a thing from many sides.

Mark Sabre cannot become a stormy and passionate partisan of anything or of anyone, because he can always see the thing from the other side of the fence. Now, that is his most fatal weakness, and perhaps his greatest strength; and that is what makes him really most unpopular among men; for most people like only those who are one hundred percenters. "You are with me or against me." Mark Sabre is not a one hundred percenter; he can see the point of view of his antagonist; and this peculiar and unusual trait of his makes him progressively a misunderstood and isolated man.

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His wife, Mabel Sabre, is everything that Mark is not. Mabel is, of course, a very capable and efficient and estimable and perfectly proper lady, but she is terribly unimaginative and cold and harsh; she cannot understand her husband (that's the complaint of most husbands); she does not wish to understand him, nor his odd and whimsical manners and mannerisms. And she just thwarts him and checks him and rasps him at every turn of the road.

Now, Mark Sabre, being a man of honor, with a high sense of duty, patiently submits. He submits even after every attempt which he makes towards a better understanding fails. But his life becomes, as a result of this, terribly, terribly lonely; and so he begins to seek companionship among his neighbors. There is a Fargus family in the book which reminds one of Dickens' characters; there is a husband who is terribly "female ridden," whose chief concern in life, according to the author, is to get out of the way of his large and very red wife and his thin and rather yellowish six daughters.

Then there is the Perch family--the old mother and the son, who are linked together by a love that transfigures a holy and a beautiful maternal and filial love. In business Mark Sabre is equally unfortunate. His business associates fail to understand him, and resent his idealism, his tolerance, his unusual attitudes and

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points of view; especially so does Twynning, his associate, whose envy and malice pursue Mark Sabre to the very end.

Then there is Nona, the woman whom Mark once loved but did not marry; Nona, who was as unfortunate in her marriage as Mark was. She had married a nobleman, charming in his manners, exquisite, fine taste, brave, but utterly graceless and heartless and consciousness and immoral. Nona was a high spirited woman, and finds herself furiously lashed by the conduct of her husband; she finds herself lonely even as Mark is lonely. And she loves Mark; she needs him; she wants him; she calls for him. But Mark Sabre, who has a code of conduct, of honor and beauty, insists upon remaining faithful to his cold, uninviting home, rather than to respond to the appeal of a love which he himself deeply feels.

So far the code of Mark Sabre has held. Misunderstanding, irritation, loneliness have not broken down his fine code of moral conduct; but he is to be submitted to much more trying and terrible things to test the strength of his code. The war breaks out, and young Perch, his neighbor, enlists, and he calls upon Mark Sabre to find some young woman to be the companion of his old mother. Mark Sabre bethinks himself of the little, beautiful Effie Bright. Mark Sabre is very much interested in Effie; he loves this young person, because she, too, has within her soul that gentleness, that

tenderness, which, to Mark, seems to be the highest good and the greatest virtue in life. But Twynning, Mark's associate, seems to see in this affection, this innocent affection of Mark for Effie, sinister motive.

Young Perch is killed in the war; his mother dies as a result of it, and Effie is taken into the home of the Sabres to act as the companion of Mrs. Sabre, for, in the meantime, Mark had joined the army, having previously been thrice refused. Mabel Sabre, of course, proceeds to bully and browbeat this poor girl, as she does everyone except her minister. When Mark comes home on leave he and his wife have words frequently about the treatment of Effie. And then Mrs. Sabre, in revenge, in resentment, unceremoniously discharges Effie. Effie leaves. Mark is perfectly helpless to do anything and submits. Mark returns to France, remains there about a year, and then he is sent back wounded. But in the meantime poor little Effie Bright had loved too well but not too wisely someone, and had joined the great numbers of unmarried war mothers in England. And rumor, ugly and foul rumor, begins to connect the name of Effie Bright with Mark Sabre.

And then one day, not long after Mark's return wounded from France, Mrs. Sabre receives a letter, a pathetic letter from little Effie Bright; she begs of Mrs. Sabre to take her back into her home; she knows she

has sinned; she has been punished; she has a little baby; no one wants her or her little baby; her own father, this massive, stern, religious zealot, refuses to take her back unless she gives up her child; which Effie would not do. Mark Sabre has a code of conduct, and his code says to him that whenever a human being in misery and distress turns to you, however unpleasant the duty may be, however much you would like to shirk it or pass it by to someone else, you have been singled out for a service and you must respond; and he argues with Mrs. Sabre and tells her, furthermore, that after all Effie has a claim upon them; she had been with them, had eaten with them, had served them, and now that she is in want they ought to do something for her.

Mrs. Sabre cannot see it at all, and refuses, but Mark sticks by his code and insists, and in the midst of this conflict and struggle poor little Effie herself comes to the house with her child. She had been turned from her father's door; she was hungry, tired and alone; and Mark at once takes her into his home. But Mrs. Sabre threatens to leave the house if Effie remains, and poor Mark Sabre says that it would cut him to the quick if his wife would leave his house, but his duty is clear. Effie must stay. And Mabel leaves the house, and in leaving flings back this insinuation--that perhaps Mark's insistence upon Effie's remaining is due to the fact that

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Effie has a claim not upon them but upon him.

And now Mark Sabre is a social outcast. His moral code was beginning to bring the structure of his life down upon him. A strange woman, and a child whose paternity was unknown, were living in his house, and his own wife had left. His business associates begin to threaten and insist. Unless Mark dismissed this woman they would be compelled to ask for his resignation. Mark tries to find a home for the mother and the child, but no one will take the mother with the child. And then things begin to move dramatically, tragically for Mark. The wife sues for divorce, naming Effie Bright; and poor little Effie Bright, seeing into what a terrible mess she had brought this man, Mark Sabre, whom she worshipped for his goodness and his gentleness,--frightened at the thing she had done, commits suicide; but the circumstances surrounding her suicide somehow seem to enmesh even more Mark Sabre into this terrible tangle; and at the coroner's inquest everything seems to point to Mark Sabre as the responsible man for this terrible suffering and final suicide of this little girl. And Twynning, whose malice and envy had pursued Mark, was the most damning, the most vindictive witness at this inquest, and the verdict of the jury takes the shape of a terrible censure of Mark Sabre.

And so here is this man, completely broken and crushed, victimized by circumstances, publicly branded as



a criminal, as a traducer, as a murderer--martyred for his code. And Mark Sabre endured; he has not given way; he does not denounce or challenge or attack social conventions; they are right, he said; they are just; they are necessary, sometimes, in their operation, in their practice; they are terribly hard; but if one is called upon in this blind and impartial operation of social custom to suffer, then it is his duty to suffer.

His code stands, then; but he is yet to go through a more terrible trial. On his way home from the inquest he is like a blinded, crushed, broken, hounded animal; he comes to his house and finds a letter written by little Effie before she died. In this letter she thanks Mark for all he has done for her, and names for the first time the father of her child, who was Twynning's own son, Harold. And she asks, poor thing, of Mark to be as gentle and kind to Harold as he had been to her.

And here is the test. Mark Sabre has Twynning in his power now. Here is the man that abused him; here is the man that has maligned and slandered him; here is the man that has torn down the structure of his life--this slimy coward of a man. Mark Sabre has him now. Here is the letter of the girl, implicating his own precious son, Harold. He will go to him; he will gloat over him; and then he will kill him. And he seems to wallow in the ecstasy of hate that comes over him; the

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opportunity to revenge, to vindicate himself and put himself right before the world, and at the same time to revel in the suffering and in the agony of Twynning.

And he runs blinded and maddened to Twynning; he rushes into his office, and there he finds Twynning huddled over his desk, a broken, sobbing figure. Twynning had just received a telegram that his only son had been killed. Harold had been killed. And Mark Sabre is now submitted to the most terrible test in his life. Will the spirit of gentleness and tenderness which guided him throughout his days permit him to beat a man who has already been beaten so terribly by life? Will he leave unmolested this poor man who had sinned against him, but whose one sustaining hope in the days to come will be the proud memory of the fine son that he had? Or will he tell him that his son had traduced a poor, innocent girl; that his son was a coward? Will he rob this poor man of his last, last hope in life?

It was a terrible test to go through--even worse than at the inquest of the coroner's jury, when he was racked and torn by the insinuations and innuendoes of peoples. But the code of conduct of Mark Sabre asserts itself at last; and he takes Effie's letter and throws it into the fire; he puts his arm around Twynning's shoulder and says, "There, there, man; a fine boy you had. He died a soldier's death; you ought to be proud of him."

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Then Mark Sabre gives way; his entire nervous system is wrenched, and he collapses; and for months he hovers between life and death, but he is finally restored, more so by the love of Nona, who had now come into his life, his own wife having divorced him. He is restored to life, to the affection and love of Nona. "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" That is the story.

Now, was Mark Sabre a cultured man? What is culture? Surely, it is more than learning and wisdom and knowledge; surely, it is more than being acquainted with books and plays and music and pictures. Culture is surely something more than fine manners and tact and grace; it is surely more than social proprieties.

What is culture? I believe that Mark Sabre embodies within his life the two essentials of real culture. For culture, to my mind, leaving out a free and open and inquisitive mind, the kind that is eager to see and learn, is nothing else but honor and gentleness. That's all. And by honor I mean not a sense of pride in one's position, or one's lineage, or one's achievements, or one's name; I mean by honor a sense of the dignity and the sacredness of one's own life, and consequently of the life of every other human being.

The rabbis beautifully illustrated this thought when they said: "The Bible says this is the generation of man purposely, so that every human being may be justified

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in saying, 'O Lord, for my sake was the world created!'" A sense of one's own worth; that one is of the image of God. Now, what does that mean? Why, a realization of this fact implies, first of all, that it becomes the duty of man to perfect his life as much as he possibly can; to complete it, to make it as beautiful and as significant and as purposeful as he possibly can.

I think it was Carlisle who said that the great law of culture is that each man become all that he was created capable of being. That's the challenge! That's the duty that one experiences when one realizes this sense of honor, of dignity, of nobility of one's life; and then it also implies that the standard of judgment is not outside or external but within. That is the important thing. The standard of one's conduct, then, is not what the other man will say about me, but what do I think of myself.

The great Greek wise man, Aristotle, said that each man should act as if he were a law unto himself. It does not mean that each man act as he wills, as he whims, but let each man act as if he were disciplined and controlled and determined by a supreme law which he himself reverences. The man of honor will not stoop to do the thing that is dishonest, that is shady, that soils; not because he is afraid of the opinions and the judgments of other people, or of the rigors and the

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exactitude of the law, but because his own soul, his own standard, his own opinion of himself, of his position, will not permit him to. That is what we mean by a sense of honor.

The cultured man is the man who, realizing this, becomes an artist in everything he says and does. Why? Because having this high opinion of himself, in the highest sense of the word--and when I speak of a high opinion of himself, I mean as a child of God--he will not permit anything to leave his hands that is not as perfect as he can make it. Our wise rabbis said: "Hazakah! it is an accepted truth that a cultured man does not permit anything to leave his hands unless it be perfect."

Galileo once made a beautiful figure, and his friends came to visit him at his studio, and they said: "Marvelous! what a perfect thing that figure is! And Galileo said: "Oh, no, friends, this thing is not yet perfect. Come here." And he took them to the rear of the statue, that part which is pushed to the wall and which nobody perhaps will ever see, and he said: "Behold a little surface there; it is still rough, it is still unpolished; this thing will not be perfect until I have polished it."

That is the artist speaking, not merely the artisan. That is a sense of honor. The man of honor looks upon everything he does as tremendously significant.

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He tries to do it perfectly. I have said more than once, I believe, that there is nothing insignificant in life. For that matter, there is nothing significant, unless we make it so. A man walked down the highway and saw three men breaking stone, and he asked of one: "What are you doing?" And the man said: "I am making three dollars a day." And he asked of the second one: "What are you doing?" And he said: "I am breaking stone." And he asked of the third one: "What are you doing?" And he replied: "I, sir, am building a cathedral." They were all doing the same work; but the one was the artist; the one was conscious of the dignity and the worthwhileness of his own life and of his own efforts, however prosaic and small and insignificant that action may be. He was a man of honor; for the man of honor makes everything honorable.

That, to my mind, is one of the great criteria of culture. No man is cultured unless he have within him this sublime conviction in the nobility, the grandeur, the worthwhileness of his own life, of his own impulses, of his own emotions, of his own mind, and tries to perfect them, tries to express them in a most beautiful way, and at the same time has reverence for the opinions and the sensibilities and the lives of other people.

My second essential of culture is gentleness--gentleness of mind, gentleness of soul. The Greeks called



it moderation. That was their highest virtue--moderation. To be just without being harsh; to be critical without being captious; to be refined without being fastidious; to be good without being weak. Moderation! Gentleness! Gentleness in our judgment of other people, of their weaknesses, and their follies, and their sins; gentleness which makes us realize how much of pathos and how much of sorrow there is in this world of ours, and its unutterable sadness, and how much men and women must struggle and suffer to realize the choicest wishes of their hearts; to bear with them, to understand them when they fail, to sympathize when they err--Gentleness!

It is only this spirit of gentleness, my friends, that keeps virtue from becoming offensive; for virtue may become at times terribly offensive and harsh. Mabel was a virtuous woman, but she lacked, she overlooked something: gentleness, tenderness, sympathy, without which life is cold and hard and, oftentimes, cruel. Someone once said that in reading history we ought to keep two things--irony and pity; irony to enable us to smile without permitting our hearts to break at the follies, at the stupidities of human beings; and pity to enable us at times to shed a tear, which consecrates life.

Gentleness--that restrained Mark Sabre, when he could have crushed that man, and perhaps justly have crushed that man who ruined his life, who drove him as an

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outcast from human society; but gentleness laid a restraining hand upon him.

Culture, then, is justice tempered with kindness. And I think that that is the ideal of life-- isn't it, my friends? To go through life proud because we are children of God, with a fine sense of our own worth and dignity, trying to do everything in the finest possible way and manner, and yet with a realization that, after all, we are but a drop in the great ocean of existence; that after all we are so small and insignificant when we regard ourselves from the viewpoint of eternity; and that it ever behooves us not to be harsh and furious and intolerant, but kindly and understanding and gentle, in order to make this life of ours livable.

Isn't it, after all, the ideal of culture of all civilization to enable each one of us to go through life as a wise friend? Isn't that summing it up? To go through life as a wise friend, and to pass through our allotted span of days as a sweet benediction.

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