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Have We an American Civilization?, 1922.

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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,  
ON "HAVE WE AN AMERICAN CIVILIZATION?"  
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,  
MARCH 26, 1922 - CLEVELAND, O.

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WRHS

AMERICAN JEWISH  
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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
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To the thoughtful observer it has become apparent in the last few years that the world has been taking stock. The world has been in a rather introspective mood. The calamities of the past few years have sobered it to the point where it is ready critically and objectively to appraise its life, its notions, its institutions. And it is a wholesome thing, this self-appraisal.

Our civilization during the nineteenth century has been one in which all the music of humanity was drowned in the clang and the clatter of machinery. There have been some in the last few years who have returned a very severe and crushing indictment of our present day civilization, much of it extreme, much of it true. They insist that our civilization, the European civilization, is inferior today not alone to the civilization of the ancients, the Greeks and the Romans, but to the civilization of the Medieval Ages; that the motive of our present day civilization is wrong; that its objectives are anti-social; that its economic life is wrong and maladjusted, and that its political life is bad.

Now, I am not concerned at the present moment with the accuracy of these assertions, but I am concerned with the phenomenon that such contentions and such assertions are now being seriously made by serious-minded thinkers. And it is a wholesome thing, I say.

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For the ten days of introspection and penitence must always precede the great day of atonement; and when mankind is contemplating a universal atonement day, it must prepare for it by a soul-searching.

The world is asking: Have we a civilization? What is civilization? And the most promising fact is that in these United States, the most comfortable, the most prosperous, the most conventional, the most orthodox country in the world today, these same questions are being put.

Recently there appeared a book, the work of thirty Americans, called "Civilization in the United States. An Inquiry by Thirty Americans." It is a symposium by men, each one a specialist and an authority in his own sphere of intellectual activity; an inquiry as to the status of civilization in each one of the departments of our national life--in education, in art, in literature, in science, in politics, in law; in fact, in every phase of our national life.

Now, this is not the work of disgruntled radicals; this is the work of thirty Americans who love and believe in America, and who because of their love and faith are frank enough to see things as they are--to dig down to the roots of things and to offer constructive and honest criticisms and suggestions.

Have we a civilization here in America?  
And is it an American civilization? I suppose for those

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who regard civilization as a matter of big cities and tall buildings and well paved streets, swift modes of locomotion, and the radio and gas and electricity and comforts,--I say, for those who look upon these things as the highest expressions of civilization, we undoubtedly have a high type of civilization here in the United States, and the question: Have we a civilization? is at once answered. For we have all these things here abundantly.

I venture to say that there is more of comfort in these United States per unit than there has ever been since man was put upon this planet. And that is a big assertion. There is more of a general distribution of physical well-being among these hundred millions of human beings that live in these states than there is anywhere in the world or that has ever been in the world. That is a remarkable thing, and a very promising thing, although it holds within it also the seed of real danger.

I say, those who look upon these things as civilization have just reason to regard those long-haired fanatics who seem constantly disgruntled and constantly fault-finding, as un-American and foreign and bolshevik, and all that. And in a sense that has been the frame of mind of the average American, has it not? We are very much satisfied with ourselves. We all belong to a

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boosters club; we all point to the fact that this is the third largest city or the fifty largest city in America; that we have the largest steel plant, or the greatest machine-shop or stockyards in the world; that we have the tallest building. It is bulk, mass, size, numbers, that have been before us, of the good things of life, as symbols of civilization.

And when someone sadly points to the absence of cultural centers or cultural influences in some of our larger cities, and in most of our smaller cities--when someone points to the absence of art and artists, music and musicians, of good books and writers of distinction and eminence; when someone points to the fact that most of our cultural activities are relegated to women, as if those things do not at all come within the promise of red-blooded, virile men; when someone sadly points, as has been done in the past, to the mediocrity of our press and our pulpit, to the provincialism of our views and our attitudes, to the general impoverishment of our esthetic and our cultural and our intellectual life, why, that, in the past, and sometimes even today, has been shunned as somewhat peculiar and un-American, because the American is accustomed to think of himself complacently and in a self-satisfied mood. It is almost pathetic how self-satisfied and contented we are.

Now, of course, no country has a perfect

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civilization. In the matter of organizing our social life beautifully and harmoniously, in the task of bringing in real sweetness and light into the lives of men and women,--I say, in these tasks we are still stumbling and blundering, wilful children the world over. There is much yet of fundamental work, of elemental work, that will have to be done before the ideal state of things will come to pass.

But Europe has had this great advantage over America: Europe is old; Europe has had time in which to ripen and mould some cultural values. America is young. It takes time to develop a civilization, and that is an important thing to keep in mind. Rome was not built in a day, and certainly the Latin civilization is not the product of a day or a year or a century. There is a very appealing poem written by one of your local talent--"It takes a heap o' living to make a home." Well, it takes a heap of living to make a civilization. It is the labor of generations and the experiences of centuries, and the common life moulded and determined, of common things and common fortunes, and the ripening influences of climate and environment and geography. It takes all that to put the stamp of originality upon civilization, whether it be Latin or Greek, or French or English; to give it personality, to give it character.

Now, America is young, in spite of the fact

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that those who came here came from older civilizations and centuries of older cultures. We had a type of civilization along the Atlantic coast--the New England civilization--that during the early part of the last century produced a fine type of literature; but it wasn't American, it was English, really; it was transplanted from the old country, from Old England to New England.

But that culture of New England never passed beyond the Alleghenies. The pioneer who left the Atlantic seaboard and crossed the Alleghenies to exploit a continent, to plow his way through the wilderness, carried little of culture with him; and if he did, his environment, his life, the harshness and the crudeness of his existence stifled any culture that he might have brought over with him. The pioneer life has very little room for the refinements of life, because the pioneer life has no room for leisure, and there cannot be culture without leisure. The pioneer is concerned with one task, namely, to exploit, to subdue, to conquer. He wrestles with the physical and the immediate problems of life, and abstract thought and abstract thinking and art and esthetics are looked upon with suspicion, and as something in the nature of idling, of time-wasting; it is an interference with men who must work. And so the great gospel of work was sung from one end of the land to the other.

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Now, the pioneer days are over, but the pioneer spirit and psychology have not passed. The same frame of mind, the same attitude towards life, the same approach to the good of life is still with the American people. There is still the one absorbing passion to exploit, to amass wealth, to conquer, and to gain power; and there is still the same distrust of abstract thinking, of culture.

These things--music and art, the intellectual pursuits, are still left to the women folks the nation over. It somehow does not belong in the masculine's sphere. That, of course, is no reflection upon the women, who fill our concert halls and our <sup>art</sup> galleries, and even our churches. The reflection is upon the type of mind of the average American business man, whose life is so starved and confined and circumscribed and impoverished; and the tragedy of it all is he does not realize it; he is perfectly satisfied and pleased with himself.

Did you ever stop to think how few men take to the teaching profession in America? Education--perhaps the most important thing in human life. How few are the men that go into the profession of teaching. Why? It is underpaid. Why is it underpaid? Because we regard education not one-tenth as important as business. Why is the university professor so shamefully underpaid, and the shop foreman and the advertising expert so fabulously

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rewarded in many instances? Because in the one case his value can be measured in terms current among the tradesmen. There is a monetary, a physical evaluation of his production. In the other case there is something vague, though necessary, but not easily gauged in terms of dollars and cents.

How few American parents train their children for an artistic career, or even for a professional career, or a purely scientific career. How few of the well to do train their children for the ministry. How few of our well to do Jews in this land inspire their children to prepare themselves for a scholastic career, for a scientific career, for an artistic career. As a rule, we send our children to study business and business administration; or the law, which of course is also business--without the risk.

Have we a civilization in the United States? Take your cities--Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York: how are they built? What principle determined their development? Industrialism and real estate speculators! The ideal of the city beautiful has come into American city life but very recently. Most American cities, of necessity, were built around the mill, the shop and the factory and the railroad station. Our cities are raw and new, and much of their native beauty has been sacrificed to industrialism and to commercialism.

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And the greater the pity; because it is in the city where half of our population lives. When there is beauty round about you, unconsciously you absorb that in your soul, and your soul ultimately will express itself in beautiful creations; but when there is ugliness and squalor and distaste all about you, ultimately these things will express themselves in such creations.

You take your coal town and your mill town, and even the settlements of workingmen in your big cities, those settlements that surround the factories like the old peasant homes which surrounded the castle of the feudal lord, and I say unto you men and women that for ugliness and coarseness and brutality and gracelessness these coal towns and mill towns and settlements and slums are unparalleled in the world. They are built by the god Mammon for greed; they are built by the spirit of exploitation and not by a spirit of culture and civilization.

You have all read "Main Street"; some of you have read the other book--"Upstream." It was only in the last few years that Americans have awakened to the realization of how much intolerance and bigotry and crudeness there is to be found in the small American city. Bernard Shaw called us "a nation of villagers," because even those who live in the big cities come from the small cities, and it is in these small towns, deprived of the

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softening influences of culture that most of those restrictive, prohibitory movements in these United States originate. It is the small town psychology and frame of mind that is dominating the thought of these United States. And it is not always a wholesome influence.

In politics the civilization of these United States finds a rather sad, sad consideration. The author of the chapter on Politics is Mr. Menekin. Now, Mr. Menekin is a sharp-tongued literary scold; Mr. Menekin has more of brilliancy than illumination, and Mr. Menekin would sacrifice any time an honest platitude for a dishonest epigram. But much that he says concerning our political life is true.

Speaking of the average American congressman, Mr. Menekin says this: "If he has genuine ability, it is a sort of accident. If he is thoroughly honest, it is next door to a miracle. Of the four hundred and thirty odd representatives who carry on so diligently at Washington making laws and determining policies for the largest free nation ever seen in the world, there are not two dozen whose values upon any subject under the sun can in any way carry any weight whatsoever outside their own baliwicks, and there are not a dozen who arise to anything approaching unmistakable force and originality. They are, in the overwhelming main, shallow fellows, ignorant of the grave matters they deal with, and too stupid to learn."

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"Examine the congressman at leisure and you will find that he is incompetent and an imbecile; and not only incompetent and an imbecile, but also incurably dishonest. The first principles of civilized law making are quite beyond him. He ends as he began--a local politician, interested only in jobs. His knowledge is that of a third rate country lawyer--which he often is, in fact. His intelligence is that of a country newspaper editor or evangelical divine. His standards of honor are those of a country banker--which he also often is. To demand sense of such a man, or wide and accurate information, or a delicate feeling for the public and private proprieties, is to strain his parts beyond endurance."

It is rather extreme, isn't it? But how often have we entertained similar thoughts. In the last few weeks we have had evidence of these things. The debate in the Senate on the four-power treaty, and the debate in the House of Representatives on the bonus measure were, to my mind, as uninformed, as purile, as futile, as dishonest, as partisan as they possibly could be anywhere in the world. And why? Because the brains of these United States have not yet gone into the political life of this land; because the average business man still looks upon politics as he looks upon art--as something to be relegated to someone else, to some

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professional, to dabbling; it doesn't concern him vitally. Just so he is left alone to carry on his work without hindrance and without undue interference, he is satisfied to permit the whole political life of this, the greatest free nation in the world, to be left to ward-heelers and bosses and professional politicians, who are dominated by a spirit of selfishness and personal aggrandizement!

Now, I say that no great country can ever exist and no great civilization can permanently endure that is based upon such shifting sands of political corruption. And what is true of politics, which touches the lives of everyone, is true of journalism. Forty millions of people read daily their newspapers. Yet if you read the indictment of Sinclair in his "Brass Check" you would have been appalled and startled at this systematic corruption and prostitution of news in these United States-- corruption by corrupt wealth and corrupt politics; a systematic organization to misinform, to mislead.

And in a more refined way a study was made not long ago by two reputable newspaper men--Mr. Lipman and Mr. Mertz, of the New York Times. A summary was made of all the news concerning Russia that appeared in the New York Times for three years, and the finding was appalling. It was a systematic, consecutive, unbroken misrepresentation of the policies, the program, the strength, the activities of the Russian government, when

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accurate and correct information was absolutely vital to the determination of sound policies.

Now, I have no quarrel with an editor who gives free expression to his opinions in his editorials. That is his concern; that is a subjective matter, and that one can discount. But when news is polluted by subjectivism, by self-interest, by corrupt capital, forty millions of people are daily misled, and I say that no civilization is possible where the greatest avenue for popular education is so artificially, as if by conspiracy, shut off from the people.

And what is true of politics and of journalism, and of our intellectual and cultural life, and of our city life and town life, these men and some others find to be true of almost every other department of our national life. The pioneer spirit is still there-- a spirit which is at once crude and unpolished, with wrong emphases and distortion of values; a spirit which is intolerant and harsh, which lacks the softness and the mellowness and the kindness of an aged and seasoned civilization.

And in spite of it these men are not pessimists. Nor am I a pessimist. We have not a perfect civilization in America, and the very realization of the fact paves the way for a greater perfection. And we have not really an American civilization. These Anglo-Saxons

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who live along the Atlantic coast are very much chagrined over the fact that their cultural domination over the American is fast passing, that the average American no longer regards himself as an off-shoot of Anglo-Saxon civilization, that new voices are heard in the land.

Well, the time is ended when a minority, one racial element which went into the making of this great republic, dominates by political and social superiority the intellectual or cultural life of America. The American civilization, like the American himself, is still in the process of becoming; the fusing and the blending of the ages and the mellowing influences of time and the common experiences of the future years will mellow and evolve the American and the American civilization. And every immigrant group that has poured its life and its soul and its energies and the sweep of its spirit into this vast experiment will help to create and to fashion this American civilization and this American culture.

And those who fear the immigrant as undermining American civilization are children, for they lack the vision and the understanding of what actually is taking place upon these shores. American civilization is not a bit of European civilization transplanted here; it is not a bit of English culture carried over here by ancient men and women: it is something new; it is a normal enterprise, and a gloriously new adventure of the human

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spirit that is taking place on these shores, and the sons and the daughters of every land and of every clime are coming here to give of their spirit, of their soul, of their brain and their brawn, to make this new thing real.

I do not know what the American civilization will be five hundred years from today, or how the American will look or act five hundred years from today. He will certainly be different from the Anglo-Saxon; he will certainly be different from the American of today. He will be something new--I hope something more, something greater and something finer.

America, to my mind, will be like a beautiful rainbow, not one color but many colors, blending and fusing into one perfect harmony; or like one grand mosaic, made up of many blocks and many sizes and many colors, but all grouped in one fine pattern--the pattern of American democracy: one people, one culture, one ideal, one spirit evolved out of the many that have come here.

We have the crudeness of the pioneer yet, but, thank God, we also have the strength of him and the simplicity of him. We are not an effete civilization, we are not a decadent civilization, we are not old and dry and worn out; we are physically strong and mentally alert, and spiritually we have with us Latin influence for greatness and for promise. And these facts of youth and faith and capacity which we have, are, to my

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mind, a challenge to every American not to be complacent and self-satisfied and a member of a boosters' club only, but critically to examine and honestly and sincerely to evaluate conditions as they are, and then constructively and in faith and high adventure sit down to make good that which is evil, to make straight that which is crooked, to make of America the land of blessedness--to make of this country the home of the true and of the beautiful.

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1. Civilization in the U.S. - An Inquiry by 30 Americans. 89  
1. Symposium - inquiry into status of every dept. not dis-  
printed radicals.

2. One evidence of a universal ~~Evangelism~~ <sup>new turned upon us</sup> -  
made necessary by War. ① Age of Confusion

3. We question human Progress! - Before war we  
accepted it as axiom. ① candle - ~~evolution~~ <sup>university</sup> - ~~evolution~~ - democracy. Then came ① Our  
type of war - ~~dist.~~ ② History ③ Spirit & ~~spirit~~ ④ ~~Economics~~  
⑤ Justice ⑥ Books ⑦ Evolution ⑧ ~~Shaw~~ ⑧ ~~Confusion~~  
⑨ Talenti

4. And so we question Amer. Civilization -

1. If Civil. is big cities, tall buildings, airplanes,  
radio, - Comfort - 'we have it!'

2. Abundance & ~~resemblance~~ for attitude of Main  
St. Habitat of ~~stay~~ Club. - The best  
possible world.

3. If Civil. is something else; spiritual  
a question not of quantity but quality not  
of number but excellence, If it is measured  
in terms of production or wealth but  
not in terms of human personalities. then the question  
is not so easily answered - Have we?  
We have - as Seed - bud -

2. Our Civil. is 7-course new - in spite -

1. "It takes a heap of living to make a house"

2. Rome was not built in a day

3. Common fortunes, ripening influences, climatic forces

for the most  
of ~~university~~  
of ~~university~~  
for us



1. Begin with - "alpacadabra ; Wilew. Wilywaw" - etc.

2. What's wrong -

3. What's funny or funny of South.

4. Just a challenge Strength - knowledge

WRHS





1. We had an old Civil. War - New England - but it wasn't American.

~~2. But making allowances is not endorsing a condemnation - Youth is not an apology but a challenge -~~

3. And most of our failings are the failings of Youth.

1. Youth lacks culture. The pioneer who crossed the Alleghenies, <sup>no time for artist, no room for refinement, no leisure - no concern to exploit.</sup> <sup>Culture left to women</sup> <sup>1. Teachers</sup> <sup>2. Parents</sup> <sup>3. Children</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>sublime,</sup>

2. But true culture begins when men grow tired of exploiting - every is turned inward toward self-realization in reading, music & art.

3. In Exploitation - great need of standardization. Produce in quantity & cheaply. - Sacrifice uniqueness for uniformity -

① Dissenters anathema. No country possible the war-patriot - pol. puritan - or opponent or America - not we. it is cruel. But <sup>Hearts - from his life</sup> <sup>substance. "a nation's village"</sup> <sup>disturbances</sup>

4. But real culture is thelad by standardization. The Reg. time, but is individuality - you cannot turn out 1000 pictures - symph. or sonatas out Ford Cars. ① Our newspapers, ② Our most. newspapers - ③ Our most. works -

5. ④ Our most. reformers - ⑤ Our most. preachers.

4. Making allowances for Youth is not endorsing it. Youth is challenge



1. Role of Jew in Am. Civilization.

1. If my conception is true - Individually -  
then he must remain true to his traditions

2. His faith in Conscience. Parables -  
Seal - Herbert Bell.

3. In loyalty to <sup>rel. & moral</sup> Jewish <sup>as rare</sup> - ideal  
of unity - social justice & brotherhood & One  
God. & Hellman's life - ...

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1. The fact that we are going, is hopeful. Not  
a decadent corrupt, effete Civil - old  
trodden out. (1) Physically strong (2) Mentally  
able (3) blessed with endless resources  
and almost all compulsions. Not  
imprison.

1. Not melting Pot - but Mosaic - or

Rainbow - not be Racial. As pure

2. Creation need not be Racial. As pure  
S. Am. Civil. will be different. Not Anglo-Saxon

1. Centuries of living together, common living -  
common loyalties - common spirit will  
show us that unique spirit for the creation  
of a distinct civilization. But that's  
all -

6. That we are a democr. will help us in  
evolving a great Civil - for when all is  
said & done democ. is only human. pol. org.  
which permits men to be free, to seek freedom  
in law -

(1) Granted all our failures 1. inefficiency.  
2. Inequality 3. weakness 4. Imperialism.

(2) Uman. Beliefs in Man. Mystic Really  
autocratic - Jordan! desires not conformity  
but individuality.

(3) One Freedom - the heights which man  
may reach

(4) To slow - dance - spiral -