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Who Shall Come to America?, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
ON "WHO SHALL COME TO AMERICA?"
AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,
APRIL 9th, 1922, CLEVELAND, O.

The question of immigration has always been a difficult one; more especially has it become perplexing in recent years. As a result of the universal nervousness engendered by the last war, this problem of migrations of peoples has become very confused; especially in these United States there has been broad-casted much of misinformation, wrong information--information based on hasty conclusions, and we have now reached the comic opera stage in our immigration problem.

Washington has again added to the gaiety of the nations by giving evidence to the fact that among these hundred million people inhabiting this land, and these thousands of heavily endowed universities and colleges, no one could be found sufficiently qualified to study the problem of immigration abroad but a retired actress. In olden days when the affairs of state were difficult people would consult an oracle; nowadays we are consulting those who in past years have been experts in giving beauty hints.

Now, the wisdom which this lady, whose unfailling charms, in spite of the merciless advance of years, seem to have captivated official Washington and the immigration authorities, gathered in her Cook's tramp of Europe, is summed up in the following profound observation:

In the first place, the people who have been

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coming to these shores in the last few years are the riff-raff of Europe; the good people stayed home.

Secondly: the immigration of recent years has been from that class of people (that is how prudish wives sometimes speak of people in the chorus--"that class of people") which arrests rather than aids the development of any nation.

Thirdly: If we do not put up the bars and make them higher and stronger than before, there no longer will be an America for Americans. And then a five years holiday on immigration should be declared. And then again, the immigrants that do come to this land should be compelled to wait at least twenty years before they are permitted to become naturalized.

Now, this episode is only one among the host in recent years that has set out to inform the American people concerning the menace which looms in this wave of immigration that is coming to the United States. One of those popular organs, those weeklies that are read with such avidity by the public, the Saturday Evening Post, where all stories end so beautifully and so sweetly, with no disagreeable thoughts there to disturb you,--the Saturday Evening Post, heretofore so genteel and restrained and with such good manners, has actually lost its manners in its bitter, impassioned, almost furious, advocacy of restriction of immigration.

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And so there will be many more, especially the blue-bloods of New England.

The immigrants, I say, of recent years have been inferior; they are the off-scouring, the scum of Europe; they are just glutting our country; they are restless, disturbing, disgruntled bolsheviks; they lower the intelligence of the electorate; they lower the standard of American living; they do not understand our free institutions, and never could understand them; they are responsible for all the crime in this land, and so on, and so forth. Every crime in the calendar has been attributed by one or another to the immigrants of recent years.

Of course, one did not say these things during the war. During the war the immigrant was needed, and so he was petted and pampered and made a fuss over. You recall that poster that used to decorate our walls, with a long list of names, each one representative of the nomenclatures of each country. There was a Greek name, a Bulgarian name, a Slavish name, a Teutonic name, and a Jewish name. And over it all, in big type, was this phrase: "Americans all!" Do you recall that?

The immigrant was all right during the war. He was needed in the camps; he was needed in the trenches; he was needed in the munition factories; he was needed to fight for democracy. And so there was nothing but praise

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and adulation--some of it very foolish and very much exaggerated. You do not hear that sort of thing any more. Which brings to mind a similar parallel. You recall during the war, when there was a scarcity of labor, and shortly thereafter, when there was a scare of bolshevism, those beautiful posters with capital and labor shaking hands. Do you recall that? And full pages in our newspapers, paid by various Chambers of Commerce, praising the laborer and promising all sorts of good things. Well, you do not see that any more, either.

Now, what has happened? A change in the psychology of people? The philanthropy of the employer has diminished? Oh, no. It is just a question of economics. In those days labor was scarce; nowadays there is a great deal of unemployment, and labor does not have to be praised, and the feelings and the thoughts of the workingman do not have to be consulted any more. And so they are not.

Back of all these things, in spite of their beautiful coating of fine metaphysics and phrases, is a cold, simple, prosaic, economic fact, and unless one faces the fact one will continue to live in a world of figments and fictions and unrealities. People turn against the immigrant today because we have hard times! If these advocates of restriction would be honest and frank in their contentions, if they would say, "There are millions

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of unemployed in these United States, and we cannot afford to be indifferent to our own people, to our own working-class, and to have millions of immigrants pouring into our land; it will benefit neither the native nor the immigrant."

If they would put this problem on this simple economic fact, very few of us would find objection to it, because economic necessity may, at certain times, force a restriction of immigration. As an economic emergency, as a temporary relief, as a breathing spell, one can understand restriction of immigration. But when this sort of thing is put on a pseudo-scientific, a pseudo-philosophic, a pseudo-racial and cultural ground, when people try to invoke some metaphysical speculation to justify restriction of immigration, and they bring in all sorts of false, erroneous, fictitious race and cultural argument, then, I believe, it is time to protest, it is time to prick some bubbles, lest these things, by a repetition and by gaining currency, will gain a semblance of truth.

You know, propaganda is based upon this one fact: you repeat a thing often enough and long enough and people will come to believe it without critically analyzing it or investigating it. That is the secret of all propaganda. When a man hears that everybody is doing the same thing, then it must be true, and ideas are

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entertained that are fundamentally and essentially false, because they are universally entertained. Just as certain words still cling to our vocabulary. In spite of the fact that their inner meanings have perished long ago, we still speak of sunrise and sunset, when we know there is no such thing as sunrise and sunset.

Now, there are just a few of these metaphysical arguments now being widely spread through press and pulpit in this land against immigration which must be answered, lest they gain currency and ultimate acceptance on the part of the American people. I believe there is a real danger and menace in these things, and it is to prick a few of these bubbles that I chose to speak this morning on who shall come to America.

I am not going to hold a brief for immigration; I am not going to hold a brief for the immigrant of recent years. That has been done adequately and completely by men of training, of erudition and of consciousness, and any man who is sincerely concerned with the problem may find the information accurate if he but look for it.

It has been established beyond any doubt that the immigrant of the last thirty years, far from hurting this land, has benefitted it tremendously. He has not lowered the intelligence of our electorate; he has not lowered the standard of American living; he has not refused

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to become assimilated, and if any proof were needed of his loyalty and his patriotism, this last war supremely and superbly advanced that proof. It is strange how quickly we forget. It is strange how distantly removed the events of the past war already seem. It is strange how that fine exaltation of the war, that heroic mood which took hold of all the American people, irrespective of native or foreigner, regardless of race and religion, a heroic and transcendently beautiful mood, when all these diverse elements threw themselves into the one great impulse, and by their loyalty became transfigured into a fine, homogeneous brotherhood,--I say, it is strange how that spirit so quickly and so tragically has left us.

You recall during the days of the war how daily we read the casualty list, and you still remember the significance of the names of those boys who were singled out for honor and distinction. They did not all speak of Anglo-Saxon; they did not all speak of Scotland and England and Wales and Ireland. How many of those names of the boys who died that we might live more freely and more abundantly, spoke of the distant steppes of Russia, of the ancient and storied cities of Hellas, of the hills and plains of Italy and Sicily. Why, those names spoke of a hundred peoples and a hundred races, all blended and fused by one common impulse, by one common motive.

I say, if proof were needed of the loyalty

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and patriotism of the recent immigrant, this last war supremely supplied that proof. But I am not going to hold a brief for him. I just want to destroy certain intellectual fictions that are now being advocated or propagated in this land. The first of these fictions, the first of these bubbles, is the one which says the immigration of recent years has been from that class of people which arrests rather than aids the development of any nation, implying that the new immigration coming from Eastern Europe, from Poland, from Italy, from Russia, is inferior in stock, in character, in intellectual equipment, to the immigrant who came here in the early days of the last century.

Now, one can understand that prejudice. That same prejudice existed against the Irish when they began coming here in the 30's, following the potatoe famine in Ireland. That same prejudice existed against the Germans when they began coming here in the early 40's of the last century. You recall in those days the Know-Nothing Party and the "Order of United Americans" movements were aimed directly against Irish and German immigration. And the same argument was used: they are inferior stock, the riff-raff, the off-scouring of Europe; they are a menace to us and to our civilization and to our culture. When these people settled here, and the Irish took hold of our government, and the Germans took hold of

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our farms, they became prosperous and successful and thoroughly Americans. And so they in turn are extending a most horrid lack of welcome to the newer immigrants that are now coming; they in turn are now beginning to say of these immigrants of Eastern Europe that they are the off-scouring of Europe, the scum of Europe, they will destroy our civilization and our culture, they are a menace to us. And so you have these movements organized today--the three per cent law and the Ku Klux Klan.

Immigrants have a knack or a habit of first trying to break into the circle, and once they have gotten into the circle they want to make the circle even more exclusive than before. I say, one can understand that prejudice. But it is only a prejudice. The immigrant of today is not inferior, certainly not physically, because he would not be admitted if he were. He is not inferior mentally, for in the last thirty or forty or fifty years many of them have already established themselves and have become successful, and their children are now fast advancing to the van of leadership and control in these United States. And they assimilate as rapidly as any other people; in fact, statistics have proved that of the newer immigration, that is, the immigrants of the last thirty years, a greater number applied for citizenship in less time than of those immigrants who come from Western Europe. They are not inferior; they are just not wanted.

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And the second bubble is that somehow these immigrants come to these shores merely to exploit America, to gain wealth. They do not care much for our institutions or for our country; all they want is to make money here. Presumably the immigrants of the early 80's or 60's or 40's came here inspired by noble sentiments of altruism. There is but one law, friends, that determines all migrations of individuals and peoples, and that is necessity. People leave home and migrate to foreign lands and shores because they have to, because they are driven by the hard, ruthless hand of economic necessity. That is what brought the early Spaniard and the early Frenchman and the early Dutchman and the early Englishman to these shores. Hunger and famine drove the Irishman to these shores; persecution and lack of opportunity and economic poverty drove the early German to these shores; and the same thing drove the Slav and the Latin and the Jew to these shores.

All migrations of peoples are determined by the economic law. When there is an over-population, when there is drouth or famine, when there is danger of a foreign enemy, when there is persecution, when there is lack of opportunity for self-development, the people tear themselves up by their very roots and transplant themselves elsewhere. That is what is responsible for this vast migrations of people from time immemorial that swept over

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Europe, coming from Central Asia and the Arabic Peninsula and from the Baltic lands--those three reservoirs of peoples that swept over Europe. Why, they were driven to migration because of necessity, and for all time this law will hold true.

The same law is now driving tens of thousands of American farmers into Canada because there is greater economic opportunity for them there; and the same law is driving the European to Africa and South America and Australia. And it is the elemental right of the human being--it is the God-given elemental right of the human being to move to those places where there are to him chances of greater economic opportunity. The motive which prompts the newer immigration is exactly the same as the motive which prompted the older immigration.

And, thirdly, there is this bubble that somehow these people come from inferior races; the early immigration came from the Northwestern European races, superb races, created races; the newer immigration comes from mongrel races, from inferior stock. That is a fiction. That gained currency during the war and before the war, and that is a fiction in itself that was responsible for the catastrophe of this war. One of the supreme lies of the nineteenth century has been this lie of race superiority, that one race, by its very nature, by its qualities of mind and soul and character and physique,

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is better, finer and nobler than another race. That was the notion that was popularized in Germany so as to prompt the people to feel that they were divinely summoned to impose their superior culture and civilization upon all peoples. And the tragedy of it all is that peoples are ready to die for just such fictions of race superiority!

Do you know why the Northwestern races today are more advanced than the Latin races? It is simply a question of coal, that's all. Coal! It has nothing to do with qualities of mind or soul or character, with blood, with blond hair or black hair, with blue eyes or brown eyes; it simply has to do with physical resources, with physical needs. Coal! And the Northwestern European nations--England, Germany, France--have an abundance of coal, while Italy and the Mediterranean lands lack coal; and when the coal is exhausted in the Northwestern lands, their civilization will begin to decline.

No race remains permanently superior. You cannot mention a race that for six hundred years consecutively occupied the stage of eminence in the world of civilization. Races, like individuals, grow up. They are children first, and then they have their periods of vast creativeness, and then they grow old and weak and perish; just like the human being, they exhaust themselves, they consume their energies. Why, the very Germans who today are priding themselves as "the blonde beasts of

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Europe" (as Nietzsche called them) were originally an Asiatic people. And the very English have in them the fused elements of the Mediterranean races. There is no pure race and there is no superior race in the world.

I want to underscore that thought, because it is fundamental to our conception of America. There are no superior and there are no inferior races! A race is superior temporarily because of greater physical, geographic, climatic conditions. When Europe was plunged into the Dark Ages, those terrible Orientals, the Mohammedans, the Arabs, were producing an art and a culture and a civilization and a science and a metaphysics in their universities in Bagdad, in Cairo, in Cordova, in Sicily, in Babylonia, in Spain, when Europe was passing through the darkest, gloomiest, unhappiest period of its history.

And when Europe was savage, China, those terrible mongrels, China, that decadent race, was producing a marvelous art and a civilization and a science and a religion. Europe today is worshipping an Asiatic deity, and the whole sacred literature of Europe is the product of an Asiatic people. Asia exhausted itself. It is now in a period of exhaustion, but it is fast gaining strength again, and no one knows to whom the future belongs. It may be to this semi-Oriental people called the Russians, and it may be yet again to India, and it may be yet again

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to China.

This race fiction must perish, because it is the one thing that stirs all the primitive, archaic passions of people; it is the thing for which people blindly destroy one another.

And lastly, there is this fourth bubble: that America somehow is a race. Somehow we have become distinct a race, and, naturally, if we are a race, then these Italians and Bulgarians and Rumanians and Poles and Jews are aliens, are foreigners, and will perhaps forever remain foreign, because races, according to this philosophy, do not blend well.

Now, no nation is a race; not even the oldest nations of Europe are racially homogeneous or racially pure. The only pure races or nations that you will find in the world are perhaps the Esquimaux and the pygmies and the Fijians--those people who have lived in a pocket away from the movements and currents of migratory peoples. England is six races, and France is ten races, and Russia is twenty races, and America is a hundred races!

What is a nation? What makes a nation? Not race; not blood. A nation evolves when peoples, living together in one locality through the ages, evolve a common speech, and common traditions, and common loyalties, and common institutions. That is a nation--a political unity, a spiritual unity, rather than a physical.

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formal, racial unity. And if at any time this definition was true of any people, it is certainly true of the American people. In the wildest stretch of our imaginations we cannot speak of America as an effete, as a racial unity, because the facts belie it. But we can speak with absolute justice, of ourselves as a nation blended, fused, homogeneous, because we have or are evolving a common culture and a common tradition and a common speech and a common loyalty to common principles and institutions. And that is what makes a nation.

The uniqueness of America--and this is the thought that I would leave with you this morning--must be found in spiritual essences, in spiritual realities. And her uniqueness consists in this: First, that in this land, more than many other land, we have freedom of opportunity, freedom to live one's own life, freedom to develop one's own capacities, unhampered by traditions and by customs and by conventions, by ranks, by law; freedom for growth, freedom for the emancipation of human being personality. That we have in this land to a degree greater than in any other land, and that constitutes one of the unique features, one of the unique phases of American life.

Secondly, another characteristic feature of America which makes it in a sense unique in the world, is that her millions of peoples from all parts of the earth have joined in a voluntary, cooperative experiment on the

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basis not of race, or of religion, or of rank, or of position or of ancestry, but simply on the basis of a common loyalty to common ideals. That is unique in the world.

And the uniqueness of America consists in this, that here in this virgin land we are not saddled with castes, with privileged classes, with legalized nobility; we have started afresh with a clean slate. The uniqueness of America consists in that we do not harbor or never did harbor that cankerous, corrosive, destructive, imperialistic ambition which has proved the bane and the blight of European peoples. We have no imperialistic ambitions, and we do not compel the individual to regiment and drill himself, to subserve, to subject himself and his life to the ambitions of an imperialistic state. That is fundamental. In America it is the individual that is regnant, that is sovereign, that is the important one. In Europe they are vassals of the state, for the individual is the servant of the state, that the ambitions of the state may be furthered; the individual must throw himself beneath the yoke and serve those ambitions of the state.

The uniqueness of America consists in the emphasis laid on human personality, on the human, single individual. He is the goal, he is the means, he is the objective of that great experiment. That is fundamental.

And the uniqueness of America consists in

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this: that somehow, perhaps because of the richness of our land, the abundance of our land, we have evolved a sense of social justice here that is perhaps a little higher than ⁱⁿ any other land--a sense of the square deal, of fair play; there is more of social service in these United States than in any other country in the world. There are more devoted and consecrated men and women who have given up their lives to help the delinquent, the fallen, the weak to rise, and in turn to raise others, than in any other land in the world. And that is not accidental, that is not speradic; that is an emanation of the very soul and the spirit of America. For we do have an ingrown, almost elemental, sense of square deal, of fair play, of social justice and righteousness in this land greater than in any other land.

And when you ask me for a definition of America, it is this definition that I would give: I will not speak of Anglo-Saxon; I will not speak of America being a race. The Anglo-Saxon element is but one element that has gone into this great composite of American life. And by the way, it is an element that is fast dying out, because it is an aristocratic element, and all aristocrisies destroy themselves. It has been truly said that the ruling class ultimately rules itself out; and nothing fails (succeeds) like success.

Any aristocratic element in any land signs

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its own death warrant. It is the element that is touched to the soul, that digs the mines, that forges the steel, that does the hard work, that draws strength and sustenance and virility from the soil, and multiplies and increases that ultimately dominates.

When you ask me for a definition of America, I will not speak of heredity or race, but I will speak of these principles, this spiritual uniqueness which we ought to preserve, which we should preserve, because it is the great hope of civilization.

And when you ask me who shall come to America, why, I would say everyone! Everyone who is physically fit, mentally fit, everyone who brings in his heart and soul a love for the promise and the destiny of American life; anybody who is content to be patient enough to become acclimatized and familiarized with American life before he sets about reforming it; anyone who brings no grudge and no hate in his soul; anyone who wants to rehabilitate himself, to gain a new chance in life, should be welcome when economic conditions justify such a welcome.

The America of tomorrow, whether we like it or no, will be made up of just these one hundred races that have poured their life blood and their energy into this great experiment. They are the seed from which will grow, we hope, the lovely garden in rich and beautiful efflorescence of the American democracy. There may be

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weeds therein, and it therefore requires careful pruning.

Americanization must not be a quick lunch process; just because people speak English, even without an accent, it does not follow that they are American. To become American one must become saturated, completely imbued, with the spirit of the uniqueness of American life. One must take into his soul the idealism of American life, the vision, the sweep, the horizon, the scope of it, to become truly American.

And Americanization must be a slow, deliberate, careful process--the slower the better, the slower the more thorough. And it must be informed by the one spirit of sympathy. Anyone who entertains in his mind that America is a race is automatically disqualified to teach Americanization. Anyone who conceives that America is already made, a mold already fixed, into which every foreigner must be forced, so that he will emerge exactly like the other men, to look alike, to act alike, to speak alike, does not understand at all what America is.

Only one who conceives of America as an experiment not in racial unity but in spiritual unity, as a cooperative, voluntary effort on the part of peoples who have come from all parts of the earth, to evolve through common effort and common labor and free opportunity to a higher type of civilization and a higher type of manhood and womanhood, can help in this tremendous problem.

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The immigrant is an asset or a liability, as we attitudinize ourselves to him, as we approach him; and as we learn to understand him and help him, and give him sympathy, and give him education, and give him opportunity, why, he will just take to American life as the flower takes to the sun. But give him race snobbishness, give him chauvenism, make him feel that he is unwanted, unwelcome, the off-scouring, the scum of the world, and he will remain disgruntled, dissatisfied, festering, discontented in American life.

We have gained much in the war, but we have lost, oh, ever so much. We have become so hardened; we have lost our fine idealism, our fine all-embracing humanitarianism; we have become Europeans; we have taken over all the chauvenism, all the narrowness, all the racial prejudices of Europe. That is tragic.

I wish we would bring back into American life that warm, kindly, tolerant, broad spirit of humanitarianism which founded this land, and informed our Declaration and our Constitution, and erected in the harbor of our greatest metropolis a statue dedicated to oppressed and suffering mankind the world over!

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