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147

Box
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Folder
145

Standardized America, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,

SUBJECT: STANDARDIZED AMERICA.

AT THE TEMPLE - SUNDAY MORNING,

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS
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Professor Stuart B. Sherman, writing in the Atlantic Monthly not so very long ago on the subject of "The Point of View in American Criticism," makes this very helpful observation: he says there are three distinct movements noticeable in American literature from early Revolutionary days until our own time, and that these movements follow rather closely the attitude of the American people towards democracy.

The first movement is that of the early republican, aristocratic, federalist group of Washington, Adams and Hamilton--a tradition that was grounded in the classical eighteenth century. These men, you will recall, looked with distrust upon democracy. In framing the constitution they put every possible check and safeguard against direct popular administration of government. They were afraid of the people. They believed in good government for the people but not so much government by the people.

You will recall it was they who insisted upon an electoral college, and that senators should be elected by state legislatures instead of by direct votes of the people, and so forth--an aristocratic tradition. However, the American Revolution was very much unlike the French Revolution which followed it some fifteen years later. The French Revolution was in every sense a popular uprising, a democratic passion--a social, political, economic revolution. The American Revolution was merely a struggle for independence.

Now, this attitude towards democracy reflected

itself in the culture and in the literature of the day and of the succeeding generation. The literature of New England was very much like the literature of Old England. Washington Irving, and later on Webster, Longfellow and Whittier wrote in America; there was very little characteristically, uniquely American in their writing. There was in Walt Whitman.

Now, Whitman represents the second movement in American literature. Whitman represents the period when democracy, real democracy, was triumphant; when the old aristocratic traditions died in American politics. Professor Sherman claims that this tradition received its death blow with the election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency of the United States--this fiery rough-rider from Tennessee. New standards were established; the leaders of the people were no longer chosen from the wealthy and the refined and the cultured classes--from the old families. A Lincoln was called from the log cabin in Illinois, and a Grant was taken from a tannery in Ohio, and a Mark Twain was taken from a pilot house on the Mississippi. Democracy, real democracy was triumphant. Men hitherto unknown became industrial magnates; men hitherto unknown went out West and exploited a continent and became powerful and wealthy, and a new type of American evolved--powerful, self-confident, self-sufficient, strong; somewhat coarse, uncultured, unrefined, but tremendously self-reliant and self-sufficient.

Now, that was the period of writers like Bret Harte

and Mark Twain and Riley, who glorified this type of an American, threw a glamour of romance about his life, and even scoffed at the decadent culture of European peoples.

Now we are now entering, says this writer, definitely a third period in American literature, as we are entering a third period in our attitude towards democracy. There seems to be a general revolt against this sort of idealization and glorification of democracy. America has become introspective and self-analytical; we are beginning to realize that prosperity and the full dinner pail do not always imply the full life, that bigness is not yet greatness, that tall buildings do not take the place of high ideals. We are beginning to discover a certain drabness, a commonplaceness, a dreariness, a barrenness in American life, in spite of all the material wealth and the material comforts which are generously distributed among the one hundred millions of the people.

And so a new group of writers has arisen, new voices are challenging the old illusion--men of the type of Masters, Dreiser, Hergesheimer, Lewis, Lewi'sohn and Hecht--men who question the self-sufficiency and the completeness of American life. Now to this new age, this young group, belongs the author of the book which we are to discuss this morning--Babbitt. Babbitt is not a book for the ages but is decidedly a book for this age. Babbitt endeavors to reveal and lay bare the inner desolation beneath the surface and the sheen of material prosperity in American life. Babbitt is really

not a book of fiction; it really does not tell a story; it has no plot. It is more of an amazingly accurate journalistic record of the life and the doings and the concerns and the interests and the blind gropings of a man called Babbitt; who is, after all, the type of the average successful American business man whose name is legion.

Babbitt lives in a town called Zenith, a mid-Western metropolis of some 350,000 people. But Zenith may just as well be Columbus, Cincinnati, Cleveland or Chicago, and Babbitt may just as well be you or I. The theme of Babbitt is very much a continuation of the theme of Main Street, by the same author--with this deviation: Main Street was built around a frontierstown--Gopher Prairie, you will recall--a small town having all the crudeness of a small frontierstown. Zenith is an older city that has much of the comfort and some of the beauty which Gopher Prairie did not have. The heroine of Main Street is a rebel. Carol Kennicott was one who tried to challenge Gopher Prairie; she tried to impose her ideal of the city beautiful upon this crude, primitive, hastily contrived town called Gopher Prairie, and she was beaten down; the meanness and the coarseness and the dreariness of the town defeated her ultimately.

But Babbitt is not a rebel at all. He believes in Zenith; he worships Zenith; he is of the very substance and essence of Zenith. He reverences the city for its bigness, its hustle, its achievements, its tall structures, its comforts, the number of automobiles it has; he likes the

life, he makes the life of Zenith. And when he does rebel, when, towards the end, he begins to sense a certain desolation, a certain emptiness, a certain frustration in his life, and he tries to cut loose, to break away, to Challenge Zenith and all that it stands for, he finds that it does not pay--he can't do it. And so he hastily retreats to the comfort of conformity and he "stays put."

Now, who is Babbitt? Why, Babbitt is just a standardized product of our successful American business life. I say he is standardized. He is very much like his neighbor, as much like his neighbor as one machine is like another machine producing the same thing. He speaks as his neighbor does and thinks as his neighbor does; the standards are the same, the interests are the same, the likes and dislikes are the same; there is no originality or imagination in him except as he uses a certain originality and imagination in his business in competition with his neighbor.

Babbitt is a standardized product. By birth he is a Republican and by birth he is a Presbyterian, and he takes his politics and his religion from the elders of the Republican party and of the Presbyterian church--he does not know why, but that is the thing to do. By affiliation he is an Elk, and a member of the Chamber of Commerce, and the the Real Estate Board, and the Boosters Club, and the Athletic Club. He is a member of the Athletic Club because he cannot belong to the Union Club. And so he takes his social, his economic, his political views from these groups.

They supply him not alone with his views but with his phraseology, with his speech, with his vocabulary. He is thoroughly standardized.

I would not have you think that Babbitt is an illiterate person. He is not illiterate; but he is not literate. Babbitt is a graduate of his state college where he gained a liberal education--which was neither liberal nor a gain. Babbitt looks back with a certain contentment upon his years at college, not for the wisdom or the knowledge that he derived from his school days, but from the fact that his degree gives him a certain standing in the community and perhaps helps him in his business. But Babbitt does not know why a correspondence course of some three months--an up-to-date, efficient correspondence course, could not give you all the information that the four years of college failed to give him. But, after all, what is an education for? All a man needs is a good business English and the knack of being able to write a good ad and a letter that pulls, and that is all. Latin and Greek and high-brow literature are a waste of time.

Babbitt likes books; he likes to read the books that are very evident and simple, that do not bother you too much; the kind of books that always end happily--where a poor boy becomes rich, you know. And Babbitt likes plays; not those high-brow plays that make you think, but the plays where graceful limbs take the place of thoughtful lines. And Babbitt likes moving pictures--that last resort of the tired

business man--he likes them, but especially those that are built around bathing beaches.

Now the morals of Babbitt are not bad, but they are not good. Babbitt has no attractive virtues and he has no repellent vices. He has no ideals; he just has a sort of a vague, undefined, hankering after what he calls good fellowship, good will, good sportsmanship--the kind of phraseology that one picks up at the Elks lodge meeting. He is averagely honest--no more and no less. He would not steal but he would not be averse to indirectly cheating the public in a real estate deal if he could. There is no hard discipline in his moral makeup; it is just a certain flabbiness. By profession he calls himself a realtor; he sells real estate, or, as the author puts it, he sells houses for more than people can afford to pay.

Babbitt is a booster--that type you meet at all these civic organization meetings. He believes in his city; he believes that the ideal of life is energy and hustle--what he calls "pep"; people that do things,--"he-men" as he calls them. And he likes to address these boosters' gatherings; he shares the weakness of the average American business man for speech-making. There is hardly a country in the world where merchants are so vocal and articulate as they are in the United States. And ultimately his successful speech-making wins him the vice-presidency of the Boosters' association.

Babbitt has a lovely house, a standardized house--up-to-date in every sense; standardized rooms, standardized

pictures on the walls, standardized bath rooms, standardized plumbing; everything modern and complete--a house but not a home. It lacks the warmth and the rumbled intimacies of the real home; it is machine-like in its perfection, in its orderliness and in its efficiency. Babbitt has a car--every Babbitt has a car--and his car supplies him with most of his transportation. He also has a wife and three children.

Now, that is Babbitt--successful, competent, efficient, comfortable, well thought of, a leader among his clan; and yet there are moments when Babbitt feels terribly tired and dissatisfied, and he does not know why. There are moments when he tries to look beyond the rim and the circumstance of his busy days and there finds nothing. He begins to realize in those rare moments of reflection which come to him how terribly mechanical his life is in his mechanical business--always trying to sell badly built houses to gullible people, doing the same thing day after day and month after month and year after year, in drudgery, where even the passion for making money sometimes loses its hold upon people.

His speech is mechanical, his thoughts are mechanical, his reactions to life are mechanical, his very religion is mechanical; his church is full of oak and velvet, a beautiful, aristocratic church, and yet a church that is out of contact with real life, and a religion which does not reach down and touch the mainsprings of his life--which does not move him or stir him or mould him or help him; a mechanical life--mechanical entertainments, mechanical amusements,

mechanical dinner parties, mechanical conversations, over and over again--routine, endless, interminable, crushing.

And Babbitt sometimes also realizes how little companionship he has had in life. His wife is a good wife and he has been an average good husband, and yet he feels what little real communion of soul there has been between him and his wife, and what little help he has been to his children, how little in common the members of the family have.

He is successful and yet he wonders what success is. In the early days of his life he had certain ambitions. He wanted to study law, to enter politics; he had ambitions of becoming some day a governor of the state. He felt the prompting to that profession. He married early in life and was drafted soon into this real estate business; he was successful in it, but it was not his first ambition, his first love, his first ideal that had been realized. And he soon finds that most of his friends are in the same category as he is. There is his friend Paul Riesling, who wanted to be an artist, a violinist--who wanted to study music and who is now selling roofs for cow sheds; and at one of the conventions of the Boosters he meets a man who is selling kitchenware who wanted to be a chemist; and one day he meets Chum Frink, a man who in the early days of his life wanted to be a poet, who longed for it, but soon sold himself as an associate to some of these column writers in the newspapers and he turned out this quick lunch poetry that you read every evening in your newspapers; and he finds that most of the men about him

who seem to be successful and prosperous and well to do have all gained success, but few have gained happiness because they have not realized the main ambition of their life; they followed the line of least resistance and chose success and lost happiness.

And in his reveries--which are rare--and in his dreams and day dreams, Babbitt catches visions of what he calls his "fairy child"--a fairy child beautiful, a bit of poetry against the drab background of his life; and the fairy child is, after all, but the thing he might have done, the man he might have been, the things he might have seen--the romance of his life which was crushed and starved by this passion of acquisitiveness; the beauty of his life and the poetry of his life that were driven out by this feverish craving for material success.

Now Babbitt tries to escape when it is too late; he tries to escape from this world which enslaves him. But he finds he cannot do it. He goes to the Maine woods, once with his friend and again alone, to get in contact with clean, wholesome, refreshing nature, away from the bondage and the conventionalities and the mechanism of his life in Zenith; and he thinks that nature will give him that which he lacks. But he soon finds that nature can give only to him who has prepared himself to receive the gifts of nature; he finds that nature speaks the language which, unless one trains his ears through a lifetime to understand, remains forever unknown. Nature means nothing to him any more, for the steel and the

concrete and the artificiality, with which his whole life had been surrounded and his whole thinking world had been surrounded, have rendered him unable to receive a revelation from God's great outdoors.

He finds that Zenith is in his brain, and that is the tragedy of his life; he cannot get away from himself. It is like the tragedy of old age: it is not the wrinkles in our foreheads but the wrinkles in our minds. And he tries to find not relaxation but excitement--in love affairs, hoping that some affair would save him from the drear monotony of his life; and it is also cheap and vulgar, for Babbitt has not even the courage to sin bravely. He has not the grand passion to be a great sinner; he is not the grand lover; he is just a poor Presbyterian who is trying hard to be wicked.

And then he tries to experiment with yet another form of emancipation: he was going to be liberal. There was a man in town--Seneca Doane, a radical lawyer--who seemed to have so much of independence about him and so much of the relish and the joy of doing the thing that one actually wants to do, and he was going to imitate Seneca Doane, he was going to be free in his views. There is a strike in the city of Zenith, and Babbitt tentatively, in the midst of a conversation, throws out a suggestion that perhaps the strikers are entitled to the right of free assemblage; and at another time he mumbles some inarticulate words about free speech; and at yet another time he refuses to join an organization of good citizens which is clearly called into existence to

suppress the workingclasses in the city of Zenith.

But Babbitt soon learns that it does not pay to break with one's clan. They look upon his words and his attitudes as treachery to the clan, as lack of loyalty, and they begin readily enough to show their disapproval, and Babbitt becomes timid and frightened. Babbitt has no overpowering convictions; Babbitt has no strong ideals; Babbitt has not the stuff to make him a martyr; and so Babbitt very readily and quickly retreats to the fortress of conformity and stays put.

What is the story of Babbitt? There is no story. What is the climax? There is no climax; there is no denouement in this book. Babbitt just goes on after these pathetic attempts to free himself from himself; he goes on living his comfortable, standardized life in his comfortable, standardized home, amidst his comfortable, standardized family, in the circle of his standardized clubs and friends for the rest of his life--comfortable in a cage.

There is just but one last flare-up of his spirit, when, towards the close of the book, he says to his son: "My boy, I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life! I don't know as I've accomplished anything except just get along. I figure out I've made about a quarter of an inch out of a possible hundred rods. Well, maybe you'll carry things on further. I don't know. But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it. (His boy eloped with a

girl.) Well, those folks in there (meaning his mother and the parents of the girl) will try to bully you, and tame you down. Tell 'em to go to the devil! I'll back you. Take your factory job, if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours!"

I think that fairly well sums up the ideal of the man who was frustrated in these very things. With the story of Babbitt goes a rapid fire, almost devastating, commentary on many of the fads and the foibles of the American middle-class. Had I time I would read much that is decidedly worth while in the book. Perhaps one or two short paragraphs may help you to complete the picture which Lewis tries to draw. He speaks about our passion for activity and industry and bustle and "pep."

"As Babbitt approached the office he walked faster and faster, muttering, "Guess better hustle." All about him the city was hustling, for hustling's sake. Men in motors were hustling to pass one another in the hustling traffic. Men were hustling to catch trolleys, with another trolley a minute behind, and to leap from the trolleys, to gallop across the sidewalk, to hurl themselves into buildings, into hustling express elevators. Men in dairy lunches were hustling to gulp down the food which cooks had hustled to fry. Men in barber shops were snapping, "Jus' shave me once over. Gotta hustle." Men were feverishly getting rid of visitors in offices adorned with the signs, "This Is My

Busy Day" and "The Lord Created the World in Six Days--You Can Tell all You Got to Say in Six Minutes." Men who made five thousand year before last, and ten thousand last year, were urging on nerve-yelping bodies and parched brains so that they might make twenty thousand this year; and the men who had broken down immediately after making their twenty thousand dollars were hustling to catch trains, to hustle through the vacations which the hustling doctors had ordered."

One is reminded of the story that Mr. Schwab told of the dog he had. The flying express train would pass through the city every day and this dog would furiously bark and chase after it, and chase after it and bark, and Mr. Schwab always wondered what the dog would do with the train after he got it.

And the hustle for what? And the rushing after what? Babbitt never asked himself that question except when it was too late.

And perhaps this word, too, about society in Floral Heights--which is very much like our Cleveland Heights:

In Floral Heights and the other prosperous sections of Zenith, especially in the "young married set," there were many women who had nothing to do. Though they had few servants, yet with gas stoves, electric ranges and dishwashers and vacuum cleaners, and tiled kitchen walls, their houses were so convenient that they had little housework, and much of their food came from bakeries and delicatessens.

They had but two, one, or no children; and despite the myth that the Great War had made work respectable, their husbands objected to their 'wasting time and getting a lot of crank ideas' in unpaid social work, and still more to their causing a rumor, by earning money, that they were not adequately supported. They worked perhaps two hours a day, and the rest of the time they ate chocolates, went to the motion-pictures, went window-shopping, went in gossiping twos and threes to card parties, read magazines, thought timorously of the lovers who never appeared, and accumulated a splendid restlessness which they got rid of by nagging their husbands. The husbands nagged back."

That is a severe indictment, is it not? I believe that Mr. Lewis exaggerated. I believe that with an eye of the journalist he has looked for things that would help him in his indictment. I believe that Mr. Lewis has not looked deep enough; I believe there is much of beauty which he has overlooked, even in the life of the average successful American business man. There is real love there in many instances, and real friendship, and oftentimes real sorrow and real tragedy. There are humble, simple, beautiful virtues that brighten their lives and lend a great deal of charm and color to their lives, which Lewis failed to perceive altogether.

And yet I believe there is much in his charge that is true. I believe the situation is not hopeless at all. The very fact that a book like Main Street could have two

million residents of America's Main Street read it is itself a sign that there seems to be a groping for something better and finer, that there seems to be a discontent which augurs well that America is no longer smugly complacent to the perfection and completeness, and the almightiness and all-goodness of its life to an all-permanent democracy; that we are beginning to realize, all of us--the Babbitts of this land are beginning to realize that a full life and a beautiful life is much more to be desired than a prosperous and a successful life.

The American people was called upon during the last generation to do two things, and it devoted itself exclusively and energetically to those two things. First, to build up a government, and then to exploit this great continent. We had to build from the bottom up; we had to build our institutions, organize our political, our social, our economic, our industrial life. We had to build cities that were not built, and plow fields that were not plowed, and build roads that had never been built. We did not come to a civilization that was a thousand years old, that had traditions and had legacies and heritages of beauty. All that we have we had to create by the sweat of our body and our mind, and we did not have, we could not have, energy to spare for the finer things--the things that give the aroma and the grandeur and the sweetness and the light of human life.

But we have come now to a point where we are economically competent, where we are successful and

prosperous, and we shall now begin to forge ahead along the ways of the sacred paths of peace. We shall now devote the the gifts of the American people--and this people is as gifted as any other people--to art and to literature and to music, and to make a life more beautiful, more meaningful, more liberal, than it has been heretofore.

These men are rendering a real service to the cause of the American people by making us realize this fundamental truth (and this is my last word this morning) : that happiness and contentment cannot be, and never has been, found in things--in comfort, in luxury. Happiness is found only in doing the thing that one wants to do and that one feels he ought to do, and in doing it well. Happiness consists, first of all in doing, in being alive in every pore of our being, athrill with purpose--never routine, never standardized, never mechanical; because that means decay, that means the habit no longer calls upon us to exert our thought, our imagination--but always alert, always inquisitive, always seeking new heavens, new earths, new horizons for the adventures of our spirit; ceaselessly aspiring to do and then to do the things we want to do. Not the things which our families dictate to us, or our environment, or our city, or our club, or our caste, or our clan; not to do the thing which expediency prompts us to do, but the thing we want to do, the thing for which our soul yearns.

First, to do that even at the sacrifice of material success--to do the things we want to do

and to do the things we feel we ought to do, when there is a moral purpose back of it, a sanctified ideal around it; and then in doing it well, whatever our task--merchant or profession or day laborer--whatever the task assigned to us by destiny and by Providence--to do that well; seeking as the artist seeks, always to improve upon it, always to excel ourselves. To do it well. That is what gives happiness to life, and that is when life is never frustrated; that is when we will no longer seek for stupid excitements to tingle our tired, bored, worn-out, frazzled nerves.

We shall find beauty in the simplest, the humblest, the most commonplace things about us, around us everywhere.

The meaning of life is within us!



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