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The Gentle Art of Being Human, 1923.

SERMON BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER,
SUBJECT: "THE GENTLE ART OF BEING HUMAN."
AT THE TEMPLE - SUNDAY MORNING,
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WRHS



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
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The gentle art of being human. The more real a thing is, the more difficult it is to define it, because the most real thing is the most spiritual. The more spiritual a thing is the more subtle and impalpable it is, and the more difficult it is to describe it. The great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, said of God, the most spiritual reality, that you cannot apply any positive attributes to God: the best thing you can do is to define Him negatively--what He is not. The only thing you can say of God positively is that He exists, and I suppose when we come to think of it profoundly, that is very true.

And it is so with those essential qualities of human personality; it is very difficult to describe them or to analyze them; because life, the study of life, is not an essential, it is an art; it has to do with those fleeting, changing, dynamic values of human personality, and it is very difficult to lay down hard and fast, definite rules.

While it is difficult to define these qualities, it is well to attempt to, because in so doing we might gain some stimulating intimations and suggestions, some helpful hints of one kind or another, and so when I speak on the gentle art of being human, I know that we will not be able to arrive at any definite, absolute definition, but we may be rewarded with a few helpful suggestions.

The theme was suggested to me by one of the sayings of the Fathers which I read to you this morning. The great

Hillel, who was himself the embodiment of what I would call human--he is the Jewish classic example of the human man,--Hillel, you will recall, was the father of the Golden Rule. Hillel said: "In the place where there are no men, strive thou to be a man."

Now, there are three words in Hebrew for man. One is Admah, which refers to the essential, mortal, natural character of the man; Admah means earth--the earth man. Then there is a word Gebher, which means strength, strong--referring to man as distinguished from women and children, possessing character, physical strength; and then there is a third word, Ish, which means man, not alone as lord and master, the masculine character, but Ish implies certain moral values. Ish is the man, the man of strong character, the man of integrity, the man of uprightness. And so when Hillel says, "In the place where there are no men, strive thou to be a man," he has in mind certain moral values where men are shifting and changing.

"Be thou steadfast. Where men are inferior, endeavor thou to be superior. Hold true to thy standards of manhood." And yet, somehow, I think that when we speak of being human, we have in mind something more than that, even more than what is implied in Hillel's idea of Ish, of man. I suppose the best thing to do is to fall back on the expediency of Maimonides and try to approach this concept of humanity negatively.

What qualities do not go into our concept of being

human? I should think the first quality is that of the extreme. A man who is extreme in his intellectual or in his emotional life is not really human; because the man who is extreme is usually over-zealous, and fanatical, and ardent, and impetuous. The man who has a passionate conviction will, as a rule, count no cost too great to achieve his ideal, to realize his ambition; he will at all times be cruel. Certainly, he will narrow the fullness of his life into the one sphere of his all-consuming hobby or conviction or ideal or vision, and that man most likely will not be human.

Now, it is a good thing for the world that there are extremists. All prophets are extremists; they must be. The prophets are the thunderbolts and the storms that clear the atmosphere of life. By their very extravagant emotionalism they force humanity to give up a bit of its inertia, to move. But prophets are never loved, just because they are not human. Prophets may be admired, and as a rule they are admired after death; a prophet, as a rule, is crucified, and then he is worshipped on the cross. A leader of men, a man of genius, will be stoned to death, and then mankind will erect a shrine over his rocky tomb.

But not all men are prophets; and, really, prophets belong to another order of existence. It was Jehuda Halevi, the great poet and philosopher of the Middle Ages, who said that the prophets belonged to a fifth kingdom, as far removed from the human kingdom as man is removed from the animal

kingdom. The prophet is no longer human in the sense of belonging to the family of men; he is in a new order, on a new plane, and our laws and standards do not apply to him; and so we may leave the prophet out of consideration in our discussion of the art of being human. ✓

Not all extremists are prophets. Many of them are fools. To the order of the extremists belongs the crank, the bigot, the radical, the reactionary, the over-zealous reformer--all those who are impatient with the restrictions of life, who fume and fuss and carry on, all who ride a hobby to death--all these belong to the group of extremists, and all these are not human in our sense of the word. ✓

To be human, I believe, means to be temperate. The Greeks called it the highest virtue, the sum of all other virtues. Temperance, balance, poise, equilibrium; not to be hasty, nor yet to be slothful and laggard; not to be forward, nor yet to be shy; not to be proud, nor yet to be excessively humble; not to be hard, nor yet to be soft; to be practical, and yet not to be materialistic; to have ideals, and yet not to be a visionary. ✓

That is serenity. Isn't? That is humanity. But you must distinguish this serenity, this proper poise, the spiritual poise, from compromise. To be truly human is not to be a trimmer, a timer-server; to be truly human does not mean to compromise on principles and on convictions. The man who shifts and stalls and trims, the man who would ✓

rather straddle the fence than courageously face an issue, the man who would please everybody by agreeing with everybody, that man has no character, for character means the organization of one's life on the basis of certain fundamental convictions and ideals and purposes. Character means the harmonious organization of your life, the unification of your being. But if you are constantly trying to trim and to readjust yourself, to meet the views of this man or that man--to please, you have no unity and you have no harmony; your life is unorganized; it is chaotic. You therefore have no character and you are not at all human. You may be a good mixer, but you are not human. *but you are all mixed up*

That is not the art of being human; that is the art of being safe. The really human man is the man who has strong convictions and earnest purposes, and tries to live by them and for them, but he is the man, likewise, who brings to these convictions and to these purposes a wide tolerance, a spirit of understanding and sympathy. He is not furious, nor passionate, nor fretful, nor impatient; he understands, and he is therefore extremely patient.

I should like to read to you the definition of humaneness given by Woodrow Wilson--not that I believe that Woodrow Wilson exemplifies within himself the ideal of humaneness, but he has a very fine definition, nevertheless. "This is our conception of the truly human man," says Mr. Wilson, "--a man in whom there is a just balance of faculties, a catholic sympathy; no drawler, no fanatic, no Pharisee; not

too credulous in hope, not too desperate in purpose; warm but not too hasty; ardent and full of definite power, but not running about to be pleased and deceived by every new thing."

I think one of the real manifestations of humanity is the desire not to hurt. Cruelty is the heritage of the jungle, and as long as there resides within a man the desire to hurt, whether by act or word or gesture, to add pain, that man has not yet reached the heights of real humanity. The truly human man knows how hard it is to live; the truly human man knows how much the children of God must struggle in order to gain a little bit of happiness in the world; the truly human man knows of the sorrows that abide in the habitations of men, and so he is desperately careful not to add by word or act even an iota of pain; not to add unnecessarily any new burdens to the already heavily burdened shoulders of mankind.

The truly human man knows how few achieve the things they wish to achieve; how many of our hopes are frustrated. I sometimes think of that definition of Samuel Butler. Samuel Butler said there are two rules in life: one a general rule and one a particular rule. The general rule is that every man will, in the end, get what he wants if he tries long enough. That is the general rule. The particular rule is that every individual is more or less an exception to the general rule.

Now, the man who has really suffered himself--and

I think to be truly human one must have suffered, one must have passed through what the Psalmist calls "the iron furnace," to be truly human. Some are gifted with a vivid imagination, and they can be spared personal sufferings and yet be able to know and understand the trials and the tribulations of their fellowmen to such a degree that they will avoid inflicting pain, that they will avoid harsh judgments and sharp denunciations, and anything that hurts and bruises and destroys.

The truly human man knows what the poet said:

✓ "What does it take to make a rose, mother of mine?

What does it take to make a rose?

Why, the God that died to make it knows.

It takes the world's eternal wars;

It takes the moon and all the stars;

It takes the might of heaven and hell,

And the everlasting love as well,

To make a rose, little child of mine."

Now, the human man knows the value of all things. He knows the agony and the struggle and the suffering that have gone into the making of a thing, and so he reveres and respects the faiths and the loyalties of men, and so he is sensitized to other people.

The truly human man knows how to use wealth and how to use poverty; the human man never complains bitterly when he is poor, and never exults excessively when he is rich; for he knows that life, even when he is poor, offers

him many rare and perhaps more precious remunerations. He knows that there is much more to life than things and comforts and luxuries. And the human man, when he is rich, does not exult excessively, because he knows that wealth has its hindrances as well as its advantages; he knows and feels the burdens of possessions. In wealth or in poverty the human man brings to play upon the problems which life offers him, a good sense, and a humor, and a pity, and an irony, and general sanity, which save him from extremes.

And so I think that the human man in his religion is neither a furious dogmatist nor a vain, mooning mystic. In his politics he is neither orthodox nor radical; in his tastes he is neither fastidious nor coarse; and in his mode of living he is neither an esthetic nor a sensualist. He is moderate, and that is perhaps the most difficult quality to gain in life. Moderation. Because when we are young our blood runs hot and furious through our veins, and we cannot be moderate; we try to taste of every experience in life, and so we swing furiously like a pendulum from one extreme to the other, and youth very seldom needs spiritual advice and balance. Youth is the age of storm and stress, and of peaks and depths, of elevations, of emotional enthusiasm and black degradations, of misery and despair.

And in middle age I suppose we are too much involved in the practical concerns of our lives, the many interests that crowd in upon us, the need of earning a living or of keeping our position in society, so that we

cannot always be mindful of the great good of moderation and balance; and of course in old age there sets in a certain hardness, not only in our arteries but in our spiritual arteries--senility and satiety, and it is very difficult then to know poise and moderation. But blessed is the man who is able to know a little of it in all stages of his pilgrimage through life. Moderation.

And I suppose the second characteristic of the human man, of the really human man, is simplicity. There is no affectation about the human man; there is no artificiality about him; there is no posing; there is poise without pose. When I say simple, I do not have in mind naivete or ignorance; I have in mind profoundness, but profoundness with clarity.

In the case of the truly human man the channels of his life are deep, very deep, and they are charted with certainty; there are no roiled, muddy eddies there; there are no dangerous, shifting sands there; there is a logical sequence, a rational sequence in his existence. There is a logical correspondence between his desires and their expressions in life, between his thoughts and his actions; there is a harmony of being there which makes for a vast wholesome soundness and sanity in life.

And because simplicity is a quality of the human man, the human man loves simple things. He is big enough to know the value of little things. The human man has a superb curiosity about everything in life, and he is

delighted with the revelations that come to him from almost everything about him. The human man does not need excitements to stimulate him; he does not require the grotesque, the exceptional, the vast, the overpowering, to impress him. He therefore finds complete soul-satisfaction in the everyday, commonplace, ordinary things and relationships of life. Being great in simplicity himself, he realizes the greatness which resides in every simple thing in life. He knows that there are no ordinary things in existence, but that everything has a voice that speaks of vast, unfathomed mysteries, if only we had the ear to hearken unto them.

And so the human man is delighted with the sound of rain, and the voice of the wind, and the laughter of little children; the human man will find joy in the confidences of friendship; the human man will find supreme delight in the contacts with the great minds that live immortal in books. The really human man will see all about him God and the revelations of God.

The gentle art of being human, then, my friends, is to cultivate--for they need cultivation--these two qualities: Moderation--to taste everything, but not too hasty. Moderation. To have ideals, but not to pursue them too impetuously, knowing that life is long and that progress is measured in terms of cycles and eternities rather than in terms of days and years. Moderation. To be kindly and sympathetic, even in the firmness and in the strength of our resolutions. And then to be simple; to simplify our

existence; not to permit the roar and the bustle and the rush of life about us to break us up spiritually, to scatter our being; not to become too involved and too confused, but to be true to the basic human traits that are in us; always to keep our feet on the bed rock of humanity, those few simple, eternal principles of life and conduct; not to try to pose, to seem, to impress, but to be real, genuine, wholesome. Simplicity.

And to love the simple things of life, to look around the corner of your home; perhaps God is there. To seek the great adventure of life not in some hectic pursuit, not in some wild outreaching, but in the humble daily tasks which surround you and me.

Moderation and simplicity! These, to my mind, constitute the gentle art of being human.

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