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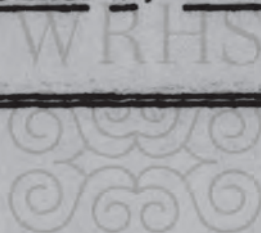
The Age of Confusion, 1923.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER

"THE AGE OF CONFUSION."

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

OCTOBER 7, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.



You will agree with me, I am sure, when I say that it is not an exaggeration to say that this age in which we live is an age of confusion. One need not be of a particularly morose disposition; one need not be addicted to pessimism and depression of spirit, to maintain that the dominant quality of our life today is confusion, almost hopeless confusion.

In the past few years things have moved so swiftly and so unexpectedly, occurrences have transpired which were so difficult to calculate and to foresee, that we are left rather confused and dazed as to the meaning of it all. Wars and near-wars, invasion and resistances, inflations, bread riots, crises, and the collapse of ministries, triumphant democracy and dictatorship, the white terror, the red terror, the black terror,--all these things crowd in upon us with such lightning speed and such rapid succession that we are left rather bewildered and dazed.

And not alone have these events of the past few years disorganized our thinking--we who up to 1914 pursued the even tenor of our lives, we who up to 1914 thought of Europe as a pleasant place to read about or to travel in, and of the United States as a pleasant home in which to live and in which to make money,--I say, not alone have these events driven us to readjust ourselves forcibly and unwillingly, but it seems as though our entire

intellectual world has been messed up; it seems as if an earthquake struck and undermined the entire structure of our world of ideas--our beliefs and opinions, the formulas and the dogmas which we held inviolable and indisputable, and which we regarded as eternal. The war seems to have acted, as far as our mental life is concerned, like the proverbial bull in the china shop, and all our delicate, prized and pat ideas, which up to very recently were so highly regarded and so brightly displayed, many of them seem to be lying now, shattered and broken, in a cluttering heap in our minds.

One need only take stock of Europe today, one need only glimpse the political and economic situation abroad, to realize what a frightful, hopeless confusion it all is. There is Germany, an enfeebled and impecunious country, on the verge of financial collapse, in the throes of counter-revolutions, monarchical and communistic, and now, as a last desperate resort, facing the possibility of a dictatorship. The Ruhr war, with the incidental disorganization of industry, and the loss of the mark have bled Germany white. The mark is not even worth while quoting. It is worth less today than the ludicrous ruble of Russia. You can purchase on the marts of exchange two million marks for one penny. The German government is spending annually fifteen hundred billion marks more than its income. So much for Germany.

Italy is in the grip of a black-shirted

dictatorship, a dictatorship in the hands of that adventurer Mussolini, which drove Italy in the last few weeks to the verge of an aggressive war with Greece, and which may in the next few weeks drive it into war with Jugoslavia. Greece, humiliated, crushed, beaten, is today nursing a hate, vindictive, waiting for the opportunity, which is bound to come, to revenge her insult upon her traditional enemy, the Turk.

In Spain a revolution and a dictatorship, all within the last few weeks. Spain has embarked upon a stupid, criminal policy in Morocco. Spain is now engaged in a disastrous war with the tribesmen of Morocco. And so a coup d'etat was carried out by the military in Spain. A new government has been instituted and a dictatorship has been established.

In Bulgaria a revolution and a dictatorship, all in the last few weeks. The agrarian government of Stamboulisky--the peasant government--has been overthrown, and the military has placed itself in power, and now the resentful peasants are in counter-revolution.

In Hungary a dictatorship of the most hopeless and oppressive kind, and a country on the verge of bankruptcy. Russia, out off from the nations of the world, isolated as if it were a plague spot, struggling through almost insurmountable difficulties to save itself--to save itself from a hopeless Utopia, to save itself from a menacing collapse--Russia in the grip of a red dictatorship.

England, facing the winter with two millions unemployed; England, with a vast empire on her hands, too big to hold and too rich to lose; unrest, riots, discontent in Egypt, in India, everywhere, except it be in those colonies peopled with her own sons.

And so the whole of Europe, not a sound spot in it, is a seething volcano, an unnerved world, in which anything can happen; the most unexpected may occur hourly.

And that is only the political side of it. The spiritual side of it is even more depressing. The moral tone of Europe today is exactly what it was in the fifth and sixth centuries following the collapse of the Roman Empire. It is at the lowest ebb. The peoples of Europe live in a world of suspicion; the peoples of Europe are filled with defeat and frustration and disillusionment; the peoples of Europe have been thrown back upon themselves; they have become-ego-centered; they have become self-seeking. The victor is arrogant and jealous of that which he has acquired in war; the defeated is hateful and resentful and vindictive. The Church as a guiding influence, as an agent of light and learning and inspiration has completely collapsed in Europe. It is tragically and woefully bankrupt. Nowhere, unless it be in Russia, is there a sign of a renaissance of the spiritual life of a people. Nothing but ill-will and distrust and hate and self-seeking, and the trickery and thievery of diplomats. Armament, wars, plots

and conspiracies.

This is the ledger account of Europe five years after the termination of the war which was to usher in the millennium.

At home, in the United States, things are far from being as hopeless as they are in Europe. Our government is sound, our institutions are unshaken, our people enjoy prosperity. But our country is far from being spiritually sound. We have no longer that marvelous spiritual exaltation which was ours during the war. We have not even that free, broad, generous spirit of good will and brotherliness, that spacious sympathy which was our pride in the days before the war.

Our contact with Europe, my friends, has done us no good. We have become infected with that disease characteristic of European life, that disease which has blighted the civilization and the peoples of Europe for fifteen centuries. At no time in the history of these United States has racial and religious antipathies and hostilities been so rampant as they are today. This spirit of religious conflict, of racial conflict, has invaded our political life in many sections of our country today. Men are chosen for office not on the basis of party affiliation, or on the basis of qualification and fitness, but on the basis of religious affiliation and race extraction. The tragedy of Oklahoma--and to me it is a tragedy--is significant not in and for itself only, but for what it

indicates as to the mental state, the degradation of the democratic ideal in American life today.

An invisible empire frustrated the law, the courts of law, the police of a great state; they dictated to all what the law should be and how the law should operate. Men and women and children were flogged and beaten and exiled by these self-appointed law givers of a democratic empire, and as a result of it actual civil war has ensued, and a military dictatorship, not unlike the dictatorship of Spain or Bulgaria or Germany, has been found necessary in one of the free states of these United States.

All about us in the discussion of national problems, in the discussion of economic problems, we are beginning to hear those phrases and those formulas and those fictitious, pseudo-scientific doctrines and theories which the junkers and the chauvinists and the reactionaries of the Old World have been using for decades, befuddling the minds of the masses with them.

In the discussion of an immigration problem-- a purely economic question affecting the welfare of this land--we are beginning to hear theories and doctrines concerning Nordic superiority and the non-assimilability of certain races--pseudo-scientific fictions, figments of the imagination, which are now being injected and seriously considered in the public discussion of vital national problems.

The majority is becoming as tyrannical as all

uncontrolled majorities always become. The Protestant majority in the United States, disdainful of the constitutional rights of other minorities, are now introducing the teaching of religion in our public schools. The experiment which was sprung so unexpectedly on an unsuspecting public in the public schools of East Cleveland this week is not an isolated fact nor an insignificant fact. It will not end there. It is one piece of a great, well-organized, highly financed movement in these United States to introduce the teaching of religion into our public schools, which means the introducing of a particular religion into our public schools, which means ultimately the identification of the secular and the religious in the public educational institutions of America.

Anti-Semitism, which is always the child of reaction, is rampant today, as you well know; and it is also a sad commentary on the decline of American standards when one who was the father and the financier of this highly organized, anti-Jewish propaganda, this befuddled illiterate, can be seriously spoken of by tens of thousands and by whole sections of our population as a candidate for the office graced and honored by a Lincoln and a Roosevelt. A terrible age of confusion! Just confused thinking on the part of all of us!

I read the other day where an organization, notorious for its spirit of lawlessness, an organization conceived in hate and dedicated to the proposition that

all men are not created equal, in a neighboring town in Ohio presented to a new high school the American flag and the Bible. These were to be the symbols of that organization; the American flag, which was fashioned by those who declared it to be self-evident that all men are created equal; the American flag, fashioned by the hands and the blood and the sacrifices of those who wrote into the fundamental law of the land that Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of a religion or prohibit the free exercise thereof, and that no religious tests shall be required as a qualification for the holding of any office or public trust in these United States.

I say for this organization, which has and is violating in spirit and in letter these sacred documents, to present an American flag to a school is a piece of cynicism of which Machiavellian might well have been proud--a kiss of Judas which betrayed his Master. And for them to present a Bible--which said "Love thine neighbor and love thine enemy," and "Are we not all brothers? Why, then, should we deal treacherously with one another?"--for them to hold the Bible up as the symbol of their organization is not only a mockery--and this is the point I am endeavoring to make--it is symptomatic of that terrible confusion of thought in the minds of men today.

Our age, unfortunately, has a propaganda mind. We have for eight years been fed and glutted not with information, not with truth, not with fact, but with

half-truths, with rumors, with prejudices, with passion-ridden information, so that dooay, cluttered up with this hopeless paraphernalia, we are unable to think logically, consistently, consecutively.

The events of the world have shaken our thoughts, our fundamental beliefs. We are no longer so sure about the things we were so utterly sure of years ago; we are no longer sure about democracy, and sure about capitalism, about economic organization. Our faith in democracy is shaken, our faith in religion is shaken, our faith in the very progress of the human race is shaken, and yet, standing as we are, confused and bewildered, we have not the wherewithal, the facts, the accurate knowledge, the true information, the truth wherewith to^{re-}construct our shattered intellectual lives and to rebuild our crumbled world.

Perhaps we never will be able to. Perhaps you and I who live in this generation will never be privileged to see a world pacified, normal, restored to the sacred arts of peace. We belong to the "generation of the wilderness." Our generation may have to perish in the wilderness and the new generation enter the promised land. God said, "No hand which touched blood shall build my sanctuary." Perhaps we who touched blood and tasted blood are not privileged and will not be privileged to rebuild the temple of humanity.

But surely, if civilization is to be restored, then we of this generation must not transmit to those of the

next generation this hopeless, cluttered up, confused mass of mal-information, wrong information, of half-truths, of rumors, of lies, of fictions, all these cobwebs of darkness and the night. Surely, we of this generation must see to it that we do not make them of the next generation heirs to that tragic legacy of ours of hate and distrust and suspicion. Surely, we must begin to think of the generation of tomorrow and of their education.

I have always believed, and my conviction grows stronger from day to day, that the salvation of mankind will be found in the public school primer. The hope of the world lies in the school room; not in the councils of diplomats, but in the class rooms, the kindergarten of mankind. We have got to reorganize our entire system of education, for it has failed miserably to bring unto mankind those things which it is intended to bring--peace and justice and truth and brotherliness.

We must begin to teach in our schools and high schools and colleges not the life of confusion but the life of reason and the life of reasonableness. We must begin to teach children to have those virtues which our rabbis said was characteristic of the high priest E . . . "Love in peace and pursue in peace." We must begin to teach our youth to eschew the dangers of wealth. It is wealth, the accumulation of wealth, the lust for wealth, the striving to obtain wealth, which precipitated this universal cataclysm. We must begin to teach our youth the ancient

ideal of plain living and high thinking, of seeking ideals and the life of culture and the life of reason and intellectual pursuits, rather than things and comforts and luxuries and pleasures.

In our economics we must begin to teach the children of tomorrow not the private success based on ruthless competition, but the public service based on cooperation. We must begin to teach our children not to be smart and aggressive so as to push their way into financial success and hold that up as the goal and the ideal and the summum bonum of life, but we must begin to fashion their little souls from infancy on, to find the greatest good of life in serving their fellowmen, in mutual helpfulness and cooperation, in living and letting live.

In teaching history we must, for the sake of mankind, here and everywhere, begin to lay less emphasis upon our own peculiar excellence, but rather upon our common dependence. We must begin to teach the youth of tomorrow the common language of mankind, the common speech of the human soul, because our fundamental needs are one. The needs of the man in Moscow are the needs of the man in New Cleveland, and the needs of the man in New England are the needs of the man in London.

If we can take the blind, susceptible souls of the generation of tomorrow and mold them according to the pattern not of the world that is dying, but according to the pattern of the world that is to be, civilization may

yet have its Golden Age in the future. This is my hope for mankind in this age of confusion. I know of no other. This is simply an ancient gospel, as true as it is old, as simple as it is profound.

The age of reason may yet follow this age of confusion if we, bewildered as we are, would look now to the future and plan for the new day.

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