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The Age of Reason, 1923.



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"THE AGE OF REASON."

RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

OCTOBER 14, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



I spoke last week of the Age of Confusion.

I expressed it as my opinion that the dominant quality of our life today is one of almost hopeless confusion. I said that politically our life is a cluttered up heap of anomalies; that economically our age is running the entire gamut of change from the tragic to the ridiculous; that spiritually we are at the lowest ebb in the history of mankind since the fall of Rome.

I expressed it as my judgment that the War seemed to have undermined our entire intellectual life, our mental apparatus; it has shaken our faith in the old convictions and the old beliefs; our minds are not clear-thinking minds but propaganda minds, fed with half-truths and rumors and prejudices. And I expressed my doubt as to whether this generation of ours, which has tasted blood, will ever see the world pacified, made normal; whether we, of this age, will ever recover from the losses of the War.

But, I said, if mankind is ever to leave the age of confusion and enter upon the age of reason, that we must begin at once with the primer and the kindergarten, right up through our entire educational system, to reorganize, revamp, redeem our entire educational content and method. If we are to have a new world for the old world, then we must set up new goals and new standards and new aspirations for the children of tomorrow.



Now, this morning I want to speak a little more at length about this age of reason which is to supplant the age of confusion. What is it? How is it to be effected? Is it just a Utopia? A tantalizing but unsatisfying vision? An impossibility? Is it too good for human daily food? In times of distress and unrest and unhappiness the minds of men turn to dreams of Utopia. Man always seeks refuge in dreams. The man who is lost in the desert and is parched with thirst will catch glimpses of a mirage of cooling shades and an abundance of water.

We seek refuge in dreams; and so the mind of the race, in times of extreme trouble and tribulation, will picture for itself dream worlds, Utopias of peace and felicity and perfection. When Alaric, the Goth, was passing through Italy and Rome like the wrath of God; when Rome, the mistress of the world, was crumbling in blood and fire; when that marvelous empire which was to be deemed eternal had become a seething world of sedition and civil strife and massacre and bloodshed and lawlessness, the Christian St. Augustine, to comfort himself and to solace his faithful followers, wrote his Utopia, called "The City of God," in which he pictured a marvelous city, a heavenly city of bliss and peace and justice, in which the righteous who are persecuted and denied here below will find eternal compensation.

In the sixteenth century, when Europe was torn with civil and religious strife, shortly after the fall



of Constantinople, the new Rome--Constantinople, which was the seat of culture and learning for over a thousand years; when Europe was startled and frightened and confused by the fall of this great capital of eastern Christendom to the Mohammedans; when men's minds were beginning to be troubled by religious doubts and perplexities, Sir Thomas Moore wrote his Utopia to comfort and cheer and strengthen the hearts and minds of men.

And so in our own age, this age of confusion in which we live, men have turned to dreams of Utopia. Men like Wells and others are writing pictures of the kingdom come, of the perfect world, to cheer and strengthen our drooping spirits.

The trouble with most of these Utopias is that the more perfect they are the less helpful they are. They are too perfect and too far distant to be able to guide the stumbling, groping child of man. They are like towering mountain peaks, resplendant in the sunlight, but with nowhere a path discernable by which a man may reach that peak. Most of these Utopias are programs without a technique; they are visions without the wherewithal of making that vision come true; they are like the legendary gardens of Eden--perfect, delectable but inaccessible, because at its gate is the angel with the revolving sword of fire who forbids admission.

And yet, while it is true that most of these dreams and councils of perfection are not of very much help to us in our trials and problems, we do need some ideal to



guide us. Without an ideal we are without a compass to steer our course aright. We would be drifting aimlessly upon an endless sea of chance. It is only in the nature of things that mankind should project a wish, an ideal, and then proceed to try to make that wish and that ideal come true. The rabbis so wisely said that before God created the world He created the Torah. The ideal preceded the attempt to corporealize and express that ideal. The Bible said of Moses that he was to build the Mizpah, the tabernacle, after the fashion of the tabernacle in Heaven. The Christian apostle said, "In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was made flesh."

The whole philosophy of Plato and of his disciples to this day is based upon this fundamental conviction--that the idea precedes, and is primary to, the expression of that idea; that the idea is the form. In other words, the essence, the creative impulse, all in itself.

And so if mankind is ever to advance it must have certain beckoning, attracting ideals to guide it. I believe the ideal of our age today, the beckoning dream-world of our generation, is what we choose to call the Age of Reason. The great modern philosopher called his magnum opus the Age of Reason. Santiana wrote his great work of many volumes and called it the Age of Reason. His main contention is that the highest good in life is the state of reason. Reason is the summary, and the total, and the climax of human aspiration; that every activity of the human



mind--religion, science, art, society, politics--must contribute its share to the reasonableness of human life.

That vision, of course, was not revealed with Santiana. Other men in ages gone by had the same dream of the Age of Reason. The great Greek thinker who lived in the third century--Plotinus, who was bitterly engaged in fighting the superstitions of his day--sorcery and magic and idolatry and false notions--in one of his works utters this heroic thought, heroic even in our own day. He says: "He who yields to the charm of political power, or aught else than truth and true beauty, or even he who searches for beauty in inferior things, he who is deceived by appearances or who follows irrational inclinations, is as truly bewitched as if he were the victim of magic."

In other words, the aim of life is to free mankind from this bewitchment of the irrational, the unreasonable. The aim of life, the ideal of society, is to rise from the purely animal instinctive to the rational and the intellectual; to rise from the purely habitual to the critical and the thoughtful; to rise from mob action and mob movements and mob passions to the thoughtful, reflective life of the autonomous individual.

Human progress, then, is the dynamic task of substituting fact for fiction, truth for mere opinion, knowledge for rumor, a disciplined life for an emotional, anarchic, unorganized life. That is the task of civilization.



Now, we, in the days before the War, actually believed that we had entered this Age of Reason. We actually thought that because of the advances which science has made, because of the multitudinous inventions that we were actually living in the Golden Age. And it took the War, and the peace which followed it, to shatter our illusion; it took a war to reveal to us our close proximity to the jungle life and the beast life. Had we really entered the Age of Reason in the days before the War, had our life been grounded in truth, the war would never have come upon us; or if it had come upon us, it would never have unloosened those primitive, primordial jungle passions of hate and prejudice and lust and bloodthirstiness which it did.

War, of course, is a jungle institution, and it brings men back to the twilight life of the jungle. But if we had been as far removed from the jungle as we thought we were, war would never have overtaken us. The fact of the matter is that we over-estimated the civilization of our mind; and not only that, we overestimated the role which reason was actually playing in our individual lives. You and I think we are rational creatures; you and I think that our actions are determined by reason, by logic, by reflection, by judgment. Doctor Eliot, writing on the Biological Foundation of the Human Character, makes this startling statement: "The more we study character the more convinced we are that men's activities are much less purposive and intelligent than they appear to be on the surface, and far



more the mere product of blind emotion or instinct escaping along its normal channels, though outwardly refined and decorated by the veneer of reason and intellect."

In other words, beneath this placid surface of our lives, upon which the sun plays an attractive surface of reason and culture and intellect, there are deep, dark depths where our emotional life is to be discovered--depths where all the survivals of the racial experiences from times immemorial are deposited.

Our past, my friends, is always with us. Nothing is ever destroyed in our own lives or in the life of the race. Everything is recorded and remains. Our past may not, at a given moment, be in the realm of our conscious life, but deep down in the treasure house of the subconscious they are lodged. All the things we saw and all the things we wished for, every act, thought, movement, hope and wish of our life is there--indestructible.

And it is so with the human race. Its past lives in the present. The savage, the cannibal, the jungle-man, the ape-man is still in the man of today--dormant, hidden in some dark corner, suppressed, but just as in the case of the individual, under some hypnotic spell his past will surge in upon him suddenly, vividly, so in the case of the human race, under a strong impulse, under some great tension, that hidden, ugly, unattractive past of the race will surge in upon us, blind us, play with us; and it is the task of mankind to keep that past down and to struggle into



the future--the Age of Reason.

What do I mean by an Age of Reason? What am I thinking of when I speak of an Age of Reason? Am I thinking of some fairyland? Am I thinking of a world utterly different from this world of Cleveland, New York, London and Rome, in which we live? I am not. The world of tomorrow will be a little different from the world of today. As far as human material, as far as physical appearances, are concerned, there will be nothing in the world to come whose seeds are not already to be found in the world here and now. There will be but one difference, and that difference is tremendous, and it is this: In the world today we have the program of the Age of Reason, but we cannot carry it out. Thou hast been told, O man, what is to go in our program. We need no new revelation to tell us what is good or what is desirable or what is just, but we are so enmeshed in the absurdities, in the survivals, in the entanglements of the past; we are compelled to follow so many secondary considerations, that we cannot realize even a pitiful part of that program without untold labor and sacrifice and bloodshed.

Because our hands are tied we cannot today make progress without revolution; we cannot move without suffering; every one of our activities is burdened with a load which seems to crush us. Instead of giving the activities of the human mind autonomy, free scope, freedom to carry on its work, unhampered and unhindered, we burden



it with compromise and the need of concession and the need of paying tribute to this or that, to this prejudice, to this privilege, to this consideration, so that its progress is halting, painful.

You take education. Instead of establishing universities and selecting the best minds of our land and of our world and saying unto them, "Men, go forth! follow the light whithersoever it leads! Find truth and give it to unto us!" we find that universities must, in the very quest for truth, trim the sails to certain very definite winds. Universities, as a rule, are heavily endowed, and that means that they are heavily controlled. It means that universities must not teach any doctrine that, to some privileged classes, seems to be subversive and destructive. It means that if the president of a university dares to introduce liberal ideas, in other words, ideas which liberalize and emancipate, he must surrender his post, because, forsooth, he offends some people who did not wish to be or to have others emancipated.

I understand that there is a university soliciting for funds in our vicinity, and the university holds forth as an inducement to rich givers that if they will contribute liberally to this cause, the university will pledge itself to fight socialism or other destructive economic theories. In other words, educational academic freedom is being, from the very start, burdened with a propaganda, with a preconceived notion of what is true.



That is what I mean when I say that human activities today are not free.

Take religion. Instead of saying to religion, "Go forth! exalt life; teach truth, divine, healing truth!" we say unto religion, "The past has laid down certain dogmas and certain creeds beyond which you cannot go. You must confine your creative, eager, prophetic spirit within the hard crust of these creeds, which others in the ages gone by have found to be true." Instead of saying to religion, "Go forth and exalt life," we say to it, "You must defend those who build your institutions. You must not say anything that will shock or startle or render uncomfortable those who pay for your up-keep."

And so it is even with science. You cannot teach evolution because the church members on the board of the university do not wish to be told of their ancient kinship with the ape. Art must pander to wealth or to popular approval. The finest emotions of the human soul--patriotism, love of country--are saddled and burdened with chauvinism, with armies and armaments.

And so with the human soul; in our age today, this age of confusion, <sup>not</sup> it has a chance to give evidence of the marvelous capacities which are in it, of the things which it can do, if the shackles only were removed, if it were given freedom to live.

Now, in this age of reason of which we dream



autonomy will be restored to the human mind and the human soul. The intricacies and the entanglements and the weeds of the past will be cleared away. Mankind will say to art, "Go forth and beautify life"; to science, "Go forth and discover life"; to education, "Go forth and inform life"; to religion, "Go forth and exalt life"; to economics, "Go forth and feed life."

Economics, instead of being a constructive, deliberate science to exploit the endless wealth of this God's world, which has abundance for every child of God; instead of applying the best of human minds to the problem of production and distribution, so that there will be a sufficiency for every child of God, economics today is burdened and crushed with rivalries and prejudices, with theories of ownership and control, which blast and dam human life; so that you have your slums and your poverty and your misery--altogether unnecessary.

In the age of reason we will give man a chance to be himself, true to the vision that is his. Mr. Wells, in writing his book, "Men Like Gods," makes his hero say, at the conclusion of the story, after this panorama of the world to come unfolds itself before his eyes, "Given only the will! Ah, given only the will!" That is why the Age of Reason will have to be an age of faith. To know is not yet to do. To know the right is not yet to do the right; or else our educated people will be the most moral and the most socially-minded of mankind.



Reason, knowledge, logic, are, after all, only principles by which to guide our conduct. The will to do, the driving impulse to make the thing real--that must come not from the mind but from the soul; that must come not from the syllogism but from the enthusiasm and the passion and the faith of the human soul. I can picture for you a marvelous dream-world, and you will say, "Yea, yea, it is beautiful, indeed." But unless you have in your souls a holy desire to make that thing come true, unless there is in you a restless urge to give all else, and if need be yourself, to make that Utopia come true, it will remain just a word-picture and nothing more.

Yes, this age of confusion is faith! faith! faith in God, faith in men, faith in man's destiny, faith in man's ascendancy, faith in the world and the value of human sacrifice, faith in progress, faith in the far off divine thing to which the whole creation moves, faith that we have it in us, if so we will, to make a garden spot out of the wilderness and to strike water out of the rock! Faith that we can rise from our lowest animal, beastly past, rise slowly, painfully, rung upon rung, to the highest level and the purer air!

That is the need of our age. Faith in our destiny, to be co-workers of God; to create new worlds and to destroy old worlds. That faith will hasten the day of the Age of Reason.

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## THE AGE OF REASON

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In times of great ~~distress~~<sup>distress</sup> and confusion, it is natural for the minds of men to turn to dreams of Utopia. The mind normally seeks refuge in dreams. When the Roman Empire was crumbling before the onslaught of the barbarian hosts, St. Augustine wrote his "City of God" - the vision of a Heavenly City of beatitude and felicity for the faithful and the suffering children of man. In the 16th Century, when Europe was torn with civil and religious dissension, Sir Thomas Moore wrote his Utopia, and today, in the midst of <sup>the</sup> confusion of our world, men like Wells are picturing dream-worlds, to ~~make~~ cheer and comfort mankind. But Utopias, the more perfect they are, the less ~~beautiful~~<sup>helpful</sup> they are. They intrigue the imagination; they do not satisfy the mind. They are not sure guides for a groping humanity, which needs to be shown, not Kingdom Come, but the next step. They are mountain peaks with hardly a path discernible by which they may be reached.

But Humanity must have some guiding ideal in order to advance. We need the compass of a beckoning ~~light~~ hope to steer our course aright. The ideal of the world today is the Age of Reason. The aim of society today is to free itself from the bewitchment of the irrational, the primitive and the anarchic; to rise from the purely instinctive to the rational; from the purely habitual to the reflective and critical; from the herd to the individual. The goal of life is to establish a condition of society in which fact will take the place of fiction, knowledge of superstition, judgment of prejudice.

Our age over-estimated itself because of our scientific advancement and discoveries. We believed ourselves already in the Age of Reason. The War shattered this illusion. It staggered us with a revelation of our close proximity to the jungle life. <sup>P</sup> The Age of Reason which is to come will not differ radically from our World today. It will have nothing whose seed is not already existing. We have <sup>the</sup> a program, but we are too enmeshed in the lagacies of the past; too much entangled in survivals and in secondary considerations to realize even part of this program without <sup>f</sup> rightful sacrifice. The Age of Reason will liberate men's activities.



No human institution is free today to function properly. Education must humor class and privilege. Our universities are heavily endowed and heavily controlled. University presidents and professors are compelled to resign if they dare follow the light of reason whither-so-ever it <sup>may</sup> lead them. Appeals for funds must be made on the basis of a promise to do propaganda work for certain economic theories.

Religion must confine its creative spirit to the <sup>shell of</sup> Medieval creeds and dogmas. It must also defend those who support it. Economics cannot apply itself constructively to the problem of the production and distribution of the vast resources of the earth, <sup>if there is</sup> which have abundance for everyone, but is entangled with ancient conceptions of possession, competition and exploitation. Patriotism is hampered with Chauvinism; Nationalism is stifled with the Junker spirit. All of life is burdened and retarded and we cannot progress without revolution and suffering and bloodshed.

The Age of Reason will remove these burdens. It will restore autonomy to human institutions. It will say to Science - "Proceed ~~be~~ unhampered to explain life"; to Art - "Beautify life"; to Literature - "~~Inform~~ <sup>Instruct-Interpret</sup> life"; to Education - "Inform life"; to Economics - "<sup>Supply</sup> ~~Beautify~~ the where-with-all of life"; and to Religion - "Exalt life". Unto each it will give freedom and opportunity.