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The Cry for Justice, 1924.

"THE CRY FOR JUSTICE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

FEBRUARY 24, 1924, CLEVELAND.



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

I read to you this morning that great chapter from the prophet Isaiah, the most tremendous denunciation of corrupt religion found in the literature of the world. You will recall that the prophet denounces two things. First: the vast iniquity of the people; their wrongdoing, their oppressions, their infamous dealings, their cruelties; and, secondly, the attempt made by these self-same people to find atonement for their sins in sacrifice, in bringing gifts to the house of God.

What Isaiah is most angered by is the identification in the minds of these people of religion with an unrelated, cold and formal ritual. Isaiah, of course, was not the first of the great prophets, nor yet the last, who sounded this mighty note. You will recall that before him that prophet of justice, Amos, had said, "I hate and despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Yea, though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meal offerings, I will not accept them. Neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take them away from me! Take away from me the noise of your song. Let me not hear the melody of your psalterys; but let justice well up as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

And that prophet of love and compassion, Hosea, you will recall said, "For ye desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt

offerings. And after the days of Isaiah you will recall that that great prophet Micah, who perhaps gave the most complete and perfect definition of religion for all times, said, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? It hath been told thee, O man, and what the Lord doth require of thee, only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

And then that mightiest of all prophets-- Jeremiah, the martyred prophet. You will recall that famous temple sermon of his, when he stood before the great temple in Jerusalem, and pointing to them, said: "Trust ye not in lying words, saying The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these." (As long as this temple is there, we are secure; God will not forsake us; we have his sanctuary in our midst.) "Nay, but if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbor; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless and the widow, and shed not innocent blood, then I will cause ye to dwell in this place."

So that it may well be said that the whole keynote of prophecy in Israel was this: that religion

It is well known. Just. It is new. but it expresses them

expresses itself most truly and justifies itself solely in social justice. From the days of Isaiah, I suppose, to our own day, men have tried to worship God not by imitating God but by imitating man. Men are appeased, men are won over, by gifts, and so God can be appeased and won over by homage and tribute and gifts. And so from the most ancient of times to our own, great conquerors who would despoil the territories of their neighbors, massacre and devastate, on returning as victors to their own lands, they would bring part of their spoils, of their plunder, to the house of God, and sometimes they would erect temples of victory in gratitude to the deity who was an accomplice in their enterprise, or in order to appease the wrath of an outraged deity. Phillip II, of Spain, after devastating half of Europe in useless, aimless, brutal warfare, retired and ^{for} built himself in the mountains back of Madrid a cathedral, into which he poured all the available wealth of Spain and the Indies, and all the plunder of Europe; a church which took thirty years in the building, and which the Spaniards regard as the eighth wonder of the world.

I suppose from the days of Isaiah to our own, men who battled on their fellowmen,--all the exploiters of society, and all the oppressors, would cloak their iniquity and salve their consciences by bringing offerings to the church or the cathedral, the synagogue or the temple.

Now, it remains to the everlasting glory of the prophetic genius of Israel, that very early it detected

the absurdity and the social menace of such an attitude of mind, and that it set about courageously, uncompromisingly, to destroy it. This message of the prophets which I read this morning is a much more revolutionary message than that which, say, evolution was fifty years ago. It meant a complete overhauling of religious doctrines; it meant a definite break with the past; it meant a new departure for civilization.

The identification of religion with ethics was, to my mind, the most significant forward step taken by the human race in the last three thousand years. If religion is to mean anything in human life, then it must become, so said the prophets, a force for righteousness. If God is to help man in his upward climb to the higher reaches and the purer air, then God must be worshipped in His way and not in man's way; then God must be worshipped in spirit and not in things; sacrifices are well, but not the sacrifices of things, which man neither makes nor destroys, but the sacrifices of the heart; the sacrifice of self--self-immolation upon the altars of the high duty, the sacrifice of self in the pursuit of truth and duty, the sacrifice of the sorrows and the pains which come to us, and the martyrdom when we consecrate ourselves to some noble ideal, some noble social, humanitarian effort.

These are the sacrifices acceptable unto the Lord; prayer as well. And man should pray, but not the prayers of hands stained with blood lifted up to heaven.

not the prayers to have more but to be more; not the prayers for the augmentation of our physical possessions, but the prayer for the expansion of our spiritual domain, so as to embrace more of the children of God in our sympathy and in our interest. Temples are fine, and cathedrals and churches, but only as long as they remain the vital expressions of a virgous faith, only as long as their symbolism stirs the soul of man to higher impulses and to nobler effort, else they become white sepulchers for the dead souls of mankind, else they become not gateways to heaven but ² ^{walls} towers and ² fortresses blocking the progress of man on his onward and forward march.

God was, said the prophets; God created the physical world, but He also created the moral world. Both are His, and one can only be righteous with God as he is just with humanity. One can only be at one with his fellowmen who is at one with God. Now, the prophets in the olden days knew that religion can and should make for justice, and their descendents today know that religion can and should make for social justice. The tragedy of it is that it has not; the tragedy of it is that from the beginning of times the church, that is organized religion, has allied itself with the intrenched, the privileged classes; the tragedy of it is that those who supported its institutions also controlled its program and imprisoned its soul; and when the church became a little brother to the rich, and became a little brother to the devil, ah, if the

spirit of the church could be but unleashed, if this revolutionary passion of the church for justice and social righteousness,--cease to do evil, learn to do good; relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless,--if this craving with a perfect harmony in the world could just be given a chance to sweep through the world as a cleansing and a healing fire.

the church would then become a leader instead of a follower; the powerful who are wicked would dread the church instead of building churches; the denied and the oppressed, the dreamers, would seek out the church and look upon it as the great comforter, the great champion and defender.

And so the cry of the human soul for justice first expressed itself in this struggle which we call prophecy, this struggle to separate institutionalism from spirituality; this struggle to elevate religion to the position of the most important force for social betterment. And that was the contribution of Israel to the thought of the world; and for that reason I selected as the first text for my address this morning this Chapter I of Isaiah. I selected as my second text a poem not widely known, but one which is significant--"The Sons of Martha," by Kipling.

"The Sons of Martha" is a bitter lament on the inequalities of life, on the vast social chasm which separates those who are condemned to unrequited labor and those who live off their labor. You will recall the legend of the New Testament. Martha and Mary were sisters, and

Jesus came as a guest to the house of these two sisters. Martha was busily engaged working, and so she had no time to pay any attention to this visitor, and ignored him. Mary stopped her work and went and sat down at the feet of the master and listened to his teaching. Martha was rather put out that Mary stopped her work and was wasting her time, and so she rebuked the master for having induced her sister to stop her work, and Jesus is quoted as having said to Martha: "Mary chose well; she chose the better part, and the better part will be hers forever."

Around this legend Kipling built his remarkable poem, a verse or two of which I will read to you so that you may follow the discussion of it.

The Sons of Mary seldom bother, for they have
inherited that good part;

But the Sons of Martha favor their Mother of the
careful soul and the troubled heart.

And because she lost her temper once, and because
she was rude to the Lord her Guest,

Her Sons must wait upon Mary's Sons, world without
end, reprieve or rest.

It is their care in all the ages to take the buffet
and cushion the shock.

It is their care that the gear engages; it is their
care that the switches lock.

It is their care that the wheels run truly; it is their

care to embark and entrain,
Tally, transport and deliver duly the Sons of Mary
by land and main.

They say to mountains, "Be ye removed." They
say to the lesser floods, "Run dry."

Under their rods are the rocks reprov'd--they are
not afraid of that which is high.

Then do the hilltops shake to the summit--then
is the bed of the deep laid bare,

That the Sons of Mary may overcome it, pleasantly
sleeping and unaware.

They do not preach that their God will rouse them
a little before the nuts work loose.

They do not teach that His Pity allows them to
leave their work when they damn-well choose.

As in the thronged and lighted ways, so in the
dark and the desert they stand,

Wary and watchful all their days that their brethern's
days may be long in the land.

Raise ye the stone or cleave the wood to make a
path more fair or flat;

Lo, it is black already with blood some Son of
Martha spilled for that!

Not as a ladder from earth to Heaven, not as a witness
to any creed,

But simple service simply given to his own kind in
their common need.

And the Sons of Mary smile and are blessed--they
know the angels are on their side.

They know in them is the Grace confessed, and for
them are the Mercies multiplied.

They sit at the Feet--they hear the Word--they
see how truly the Promise runs;

They have cast their burden upon the Lord, and--
the Lord He lays it on Martha's Sons!

Now, the bitterness of the complaint of this poem is not that men work hard--men will always have to work hard, and the hard work of the world will always have to be done by someone; the complaint of this poem is on two counts, and both on the basis of injustice. First of all, the injustice of some men working and others not working. There are few men--and this it is worthy to remember--who, unless they are imbittered, begrudge a rich man his wealth, if that wealth was properly earned and is properly administered. It sometimes appears--and it is one of the strange anomalies of life--that the masses often make an idol of an extremely wealthy man. Now, if the masses instinctively begrudged the man his wealth, they would hate the rich man and never make an idol of him; but the very contrary is often the fact--the masses do not begrudge a man wealth earned and properly used. What they do begrudge is

wealth possessed but not earned; what they do hate is the loafer who inherited wealth; what they do hate, with all the hate that men are capable of, are those who trip down the primrose path, having all the comforts and luxuries and opportunities of life, without having sweated for them; while they who are grimy with sweat in the dank, dark pits of mines, or before blazing furnaces--who sweat for these things, cannot have them.

That is the first complaint. And the second one is a complaint about the lack of opportunity. They are so overburdened with work, these sons of Martha, that they haven't a chance to sit at the feet of the Master and hear the Word. They haven't a chance for education, for culture, for the appreciation of the fine and beautiful things of life, they are so crushed with the burden of their job; and their remuneration is so limited that their children are likewise deprived of the opportunity to sit at the feet and hear the Word; while the sons of Mary have every opportunity to enjoy the good things of life. And on these two counts the lament of this poem is based.

And I chose a third poem, better known to you--Edward Markham's "The Man with the Hoe." For two reasons: first, because it expresses the same thought as this Kipling's poem, and, secondly, because it goes one step further. I will read to you a verse or two to refresh your memory about this remarkable social protest. As you know, the poem is based on Millet's great painting--The Man with

the Hoe." You have undoubtedly seen the painting itself, or reproductions--this lone figure in the open field, a large bulk of a man, a peasant,--crude, coarse, fettered, with the weight of centuries upon his shoulders. Markham looked at this picture, and in his mind flashed the verse from Genesis: "And God made man in His image, and in the image of God was he created." And he wrote this poem.

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.
Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave
To have dominion over sea and land;
To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;
To feel the passion of Eternity?

Is this the Dream He dreamed who shaped the suns
And marked their ways upon the ancient deep?
Down all the stretch of Hell to its last gulf
There is no shape more terrible than this--
More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed--

More filled with signs and portents for the soul--
More fraught with menace to the universe.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
Is this the handiwork you give to God,
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quenched?
How will you ever straighten up this shape;
Touch it again with immortality;
Give back the upward looking and the light;
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;
Make right the immemorial infamies,
Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the Future reckon with this Man?
How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings--
With those who shaped him to the thing he is--
When this dumb Terror shall reply to God,
After the silence of the centuries?

I do not know whether Markham caught the spirit
of Millet's great painting. This peasant that Millet
depicted is not so much the result of the cruelties of man
as the natural result of peasant life. He is as much a
nature product as a man product. He is very much like Isak,
. you will recall, of Hamsun's "Growth of the Soil." His

solidity, his sullenness, his dull simplicity, are not things which cruel kings and tyrants imposed upon him, but something which the monotony of his life--the soil, his environment, moulded in him. But the idea back of the poem is nevertheless true. Kings and potentates and rulers have all too often, all too tragically kept their subjects in a state of ignorance, suppression, deprivation, so that they became brutes, coarsened--brutalized instead of heaven-aspiring men made in the image of God; that the czars of Russia and the rulers of other kingdoms have adown the ages imprisoned life, stultified it, crippled it and rendered it ugly; and it is true that unscrupulous industrialists, yesterday and today, have and are brutalizing life by their ruthless exploitation of men; it is true that in this courageous land of ours, blessed with plenty and prosperity, there are this day, in the year 1924, a million and a half children who are being maimed and crippled on the wheel of industry in mines and mills and factories to serve the greed of men.

Now, how will the future reckon with these men? How will answer these brute men in that hour when world unrest or rebellion shake the world? How will these kings who shape these men be when this dumb terror replies to God? We have evidence of what the consequences are when that hundred-million-headed brute called the Slav, held down through the ages, finally replied to God after the silence of the centuries. His dumb terror became a red terror; he

swept down the land like a devastating, maddened fury, killing and destroying. The passions of the ages were finally let loose! God holds men to a strict accountability. There isn't a tear of the oppressed that some day will not be paid with the blood of the oppressor. You cannot escape; there is no escape from the absolute balancing of account, sooner or later, in this world.

The human cry for justice, to my mind, men and women, the human instinct for justice, is one of the most Godly things about man. It is as real an instinct as the instinct of man for harmony and balance. It is a cry of the human soul, and it cannot be forever silenced.

What is justice? Justice is much more than legal justice, determined by authority. Justice is more than the prevailing social usage or convention; justice is more than the determination of my rights and your rights. Justice is the most essential ideal of society making for a progressive development of human life, making for social peace and prosperity. Justice is more than rights: it is righteousness. Justice oftentimes demands of us to sacrifice our rights for the sake of a higher righteousness. Justice is sometimes love, and compassion, and forgiveness. Justice is always the application of our best intelligence and our highest motives upon any or to any given problem. Justice is always objective as regards to truth, and subjective as regards to our ^{body and love,} highest instincts and impulses.

Justice must make, first, for a condition of

society in which every man will be provided with the elementary needs of life; and, secondly, a condition of society in which every man's aptitudes and gifts and talents that is in him will have a chance to express itself. Justice demands a social condition in which reward will be commensurate with service. Justice demands that no man shall partake of the social goods who does not contribute to the social assets. Justice demands not an equal distribution of wealth--that is injustice; that is an artificial, formal arrangement which has no relation to service, or merit, or competence, or ability,---Nature did not--and wisely--create all men equal as to ability and prowess and talent and gifts,--but justice demands equality or a liberalization of opportunity, so that each man will have a chance to express the best that is in him, and to realize himself to the fullest of his native capacity.

Justice is nothing else and can never be brought about in any other way than by means of that simple, profound, revolutionary doctrine first initiated by a prophet of Israel: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Love thyself by loving thy neighbor. Fulfill yourself through your neighbor; enrich your life by enriching the lives of the people with whom you must live; establish contacts so that your life will grow richer and fuller; do justice to others that life may be just to you.

"Love thy neighbor as thyself."