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The Business of Killing Time, 1924.

"THE BUSINESS OF KILLING TIME."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MARCH 9, 1924, CLEVELAND, O.



AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
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In discussing this morning the business of killing time, I shall not spend much time in inveighing against idleness. Of all our national sins the sin of idleness is not one; we are rather, if anything, a strenuous people. A luxury class, in the Continental sense of the word, we haven't in this country; certainly not in the male contingent of this country. Of course we have idle people. We have the idle poor--the men who want jobs and cannot get them; and the ~~men~~ who can get jobs and do not want them. The former, of course, are not idle but unemployed; and the latter are really not idle but just shiftless and unstable. We have, of course, the idle rich--those who seem to have been burdened with the task of spending everything and earning nothing. But they are an exception; they are neither the norm nor the ideal in American life. An American still has the pioneer tradition of work, and looks with suspicion upon the loafer. We have, of course, those people who kill time even when they are ostensibly engaged in work. There are workmen who soldier on the job, who give a minimum of service for a maximum of pay. These men are, of course, foolhardy, for in the long run they themselves pay for their own delinquency. Increased pay and decreased production inevitably make for higher prices or inflations or hard times and for unemployment. But these people also are the exception and not the rule. With the exception of a few

privileged trades, our industrial life is so highly geared and labor is so intensely subdivided and coordinated, and so efficiently supervised and administered, that there is scant room for a man to loaf on his job for any long period of time.

There are, of course, business men who loaf on the job; men who intersperse a year of vacationing in warm climates when it is cold, and in cold climates when it is warm with a few weeks of work. There are men, usually the easy-going sons of hard-working fathers, who have made of business an avocation and of golf a vocation. But they, too, are the exception, and they do not last long.

There are, of course, idle women--women who seem to have nothing to do in the world; women who have been relieved of household responsibilities by efficient help, and have not as yet discovered the art of the spiritual home-building; women who have no stimulating interests outside of the home, and perhaps too many exciting interests. These unfortunates keep our nerve specialists quite busy; but they are not typical or representative of American womanhood. They, too, are the exception, and they are the victims of leisure improperly invested. They are engaged in the business of killing time, and time kills them ultimately.

Now, this morning I wish to speak not of these idle people--who are really not a problem in our life; Nature weeds them out sooner or later--I want to speak of you and me, of all of us, of the multitudes who are busy and industrious, always employed and never idle, but who

nevertheless, in the truest sense of the word, kill time. I want to speak of those who lose life in the very intensity of living; I want to speak of the men and the women who are so pre-occupied as to be wasters of life. Industrialism, my friends, in the last one hundred years--in the last fifty years, has speeded up our life terrificly. Steam and electricity have made possible phenomenal economic expansion; they have made possible the swift exploitation of continents; they have made possible unheard of accumulations of wealth.

The machine has multiplied the power of man a million fold; we travel today faster and further; we communicate more rapidly and more often; we crowd more of life, of the busy life, rather of activity, into less time than at any period in the world's history. Our vast, astounding cities are athrob with noise and movement and motion and life, and we move about--busy, pre-occupied, absorbed, feeding the flames of enterprise with our abundant energy.

We manufacture things, and manufacture more things; we carve out first the necessities of our life, and then the comforts of our life, and then we carve out the luxuries, and then, why then we must go on; we cannot stop; we have but the one interest, and we cannot lose hold of that interest or we go to pieces. I have known active business men who have, for one reason or another, retired, and soon after their retirement they seem to have wilted and crumbled and gone to pieces. And the reason is quite simple: they

had but one sustaining prop in life, the one concern, the one interest, and when that was gone their life just collapsed--like a tree whose roots are cut off falls to the ground and withers.

We had hoped to make a slave of the machine, but the machine has made a slave of us; the machine has mastered us; we serve it; and when in the helpless years of our old age we take stock, and look back upon our turbulent life, a life of feverish activity, and ask ourselves: Who have we served? - if we are honest with ourselves and sufficiently clear-sighted we will discover that we have served not ourselves at all, or our dear ones, as much as we have served this ruthless, extorting, thirsty, hungry thing which craves our sap and our vitality and the energy of our mind and soul and body--the machine!

And we got so little out of life--only things, perhaps many things, but things which never satisfied us because we were always hungry to get more; our life was a mounting fever of discontent; the machine drove us on, and we thought that the machine was making us and our dear ones happy. We give everything; we give all our time to this vast commercialism of our life; and I am speaking now not only of business men, I am speaking of professional men as well; we give all our time to this competitive enterprise; we even invent time-saving devices. We want to save time. For whom? For ourselves? Oh, no. For the machine! So that we can devote more time to it. And when we relax,

when we give our tired mind and nerves a chance to relax, we do it for what reason? Not that we might cultivate ourselves, or lead fuller lives, but just that we may be more fit in the morning for the machine.

Of course we are busy. The river of our life is very tempestuous, because the channel is very narrow, and the banks hem us closely in. Our lives are tempestuous because they are not broad and full. We haven't time for anything else. Few of us have time for our families, for our friends, for self-cultivation, for the duties of citizenship. Few of us have time for God.

Now, it is not really that we haven't time. We have time for the things we regard as important; we have time to add one business enterprise on top of another; we have time, after we have won a comfortable income, to go out and work and slave and sweat for a larger income, and a still larger income. We always have time for that because we regard that as primary and essential, but we haven't much time for these things because we regard them as secondary, unessential. We rob these of the time which is theirs, and we give that time to this enterprise.

We kill the time which belongs to these major concerns of life. We are so concentrated on our job, whether it be the lawyer, or the physician, or the minister, or the merchant, or the manufacturer,--we are so concentrated on our particular job, and we are so bent upon making a success of it, a large success, a still larger success, that we lose

sight completely of the fact that the real job of a man is to develop himself not in terms of money but in terms of personality; that the real job of a man is to educate himself through moral and mental and spiritual discipline, and to raise himself to a higher level of thinking and feeling. That is the real job of a man.

The main concern of our three-score and ten years--and for most of us fewer years, all too few, pathetically few years,--the main concern of those few years given to us is not to pile up winnings at our end of the table. Life is not a game. In a game you have a chance. At the end of the game you can be a winner, but in the game of life, at the end you are always the loser. Death claims not so much the winnings as the winner himself.

The main concern of life is not to surround yourself with things; it is to perfect yourself to the highest point of your capacities; it is to try to think as clearly as you possibly can, to train yourself to feel as keenly and as nobly as you possibly can. The chief concern of your days and mine is to bring in as much of the beauty and of charm, the sweetness of life, into our lives; to reach out and touch the lives of other men and the minds of other men, living and dead--through their work, their writings, their deeds, their service.

The ultimate values of life are spiritual and not physical. Self-fulfillment, self-expression, self-exaltation, through thought, through meditation, through

service, through spiritual enterprises, through loves and loyalties and devotions--that is the chief concern of a man in the few years allotted to him. And we have lost sight of the fact, most of us, completely. Our mental and spiritual curiosities, which we call culture; the yearning of the mind and soul to see more and know more, to encompass more of God's beautiful world--these things we business men or professional men have relegated largely to the women folks.

I very frequently hear one of our typical Babbitts, these hard-working go-getters, say, "Oh, well, I keep my religion in my wife's name." But this poor Babbitt keeps more than his religion in his wife's name; he keeps his culture, he keeps his reading, he keeps his appreciation of art, he keeps his love of music, he keeps, in fact, his entire soul, except his conceit, in his wife's name.

If it were not for the women of America, who have in the last fifty years made remarkable progress in legal and political economy, in educational self-development,--if it were not for these women who have made this progress while the men stood still, our operas and our serious drama and our concerts and our symphonies, our entire school system, would be shut down.

The busy business man is content to limit his readings to the Saturday Evening Post, and his love for the drama to the musical comedy, and his appreciation of art to the Sunday comics. Why? It is not that the American

business man is intellectually inferior to the European business man, that he has not the qualities of mind and soul--it is not that at all; it is because we regard these things as secondary, unimportant, and because we regard these things as secondary and unimportant, we are content to accept second-rate things, inferior quality. No merchant would think of accepting merchandise that is shoddy and inferior; he will scrutinize it, he will test it, he will convince himself that he is getting the maximum of quality; but as far as our books are concerned, the reading we do, as far as our plays and our music are concerned, we are content to receive and accept, nay, welcome, the shoddy and the cheap and the sensational and the blatant, because they are just things to relax us when we are tired, and amuse us for the few hours between one great spurt of business enterprise and another great spurt of business enterprise.

When a business man buys a machine he will put his full mind on the job to see that he gets the highest efficiency, durability, dependability, excellent make, but when he buys his news and his information about life and about international affairs--things which touch his life and his soul, which make him the man he is--when he buys those things he is content to be hoodwinked; he is content to buy the sensational, the fraudulent propaganda, the cheap things, and he absorbs these without question, without criticism. He is concerned with the quality of his business judgment, but he is not at all concerned with the quality of his moral

judgments and and his intellectual judgments and his cultural judgments.

We organize for business, we organize marvelously for our working hours, but how many of us organize for our leisure hours? How many of us organize intelligently for cultural enterprise? We go at our reading in a dabbling sort of way; we go after our cultural activities, if we have any, sporadically, without coordination, without plan or purpose or end in view. We haven't organized for anything else in life except for the job of making money; and the main fault is that we haven't yet learned to distinguish between that which is essential and that which is unessential, between proximate things of human life and ultimate things of human life.

We have many idols and we worship them. We prostrate ourselves before many idols because we haven't yet learned to worship one God; we haven't yet learned that the end and the aim and the goal of human life is one: Self-perfection - through self-education and through social service; and therefore, busy as we are, we kill time.

Those few years given to us, which we ought to count as one counts the pearls upon a string, each one precious, we waste so many of them not in idleness but in over-absorption in one task and in one enterprise, which starves, stultifies, narrows our personality, our life. We kill time when, having achieved a comfortable income and a margin of safety for ourselves and our dear ones, we continue

in the same feverish effort to add house to house and field to field, to the neglect, to the utter neglect of other primary enterprises of life. We kill time whenever we have no time for contemplation and reflection, for our families, for our friends, for our duties as citizens of a commonwealth; we kill time whenever we go groping all over creation, traveling to far distant lands to find happiness and to escape the travail, the weariness of our days, the monotony of our lives; we kill time because we can never escape ourselves, because we can never find beauty out of ourselves if we haven't created it within ourselves. And a sense of beauty must be created; we must learn, we must train ourselves to love the beautiful before the beautiful and the good and the true pour their love and their goodness and their truth into us.

We kill time when we are too busy for anything but our business. The words of the Psalmist which I read this morning should be inscribed above the door of our offices, of our studies, of our shops and factories: "Teach us to number our days."

When we are old, when we come into the quiet twilight years, when the tide of life begins to ebb and the fever of the swift pace leaves us, we shall be blessed, indeed, if we can look back upon twenty, thirty, forty years of real living--not forty years of business life only, nor forty years of professional life only, but of real living; of forty years filled with the many beautiful intimacies of

family life; years filled with the divine privilege of friendships; years filled with the many sublime thoughts and ideals of the great minds of the world, living for those of the distant past; years filled with beauty, years filled with devotion to the fine things of life, years filled with service and helpfulness and kindness--just well rounded out years, complete years, years in which every department of our life, every aptitude of our mind and soul had a chance to express itself, to slake its thirst, to satisfy its hunger - years in which we tried in our own humble way to rise just a little higher, and to raise others just a little higher.

Blessed is the man, I say, who can look back upon a stretch of life beautiful in sunshine; more blessed, indeed, than he who, at the lag end of his days, can point to a mass of accumulated things which his cold hands are hugging to his bosom - hands which death will soon lift, so that others may squander the accumulations of his lifetime.

"Teach us to number our days."

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