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What is Culture?, 1924.

"WHAT IS CULTURE?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

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Culture is still regarded by many with suspicion. Many people still look upon it as upon a frill, as upon an indulgence--a rather effeminate thing. I know a few universities, for example, in this country, where cultural subjects--courses in fine arts, in letters, in music, even in ethics, are made compulsory. The formal sciences are almost universally compulsory in our colleges and in our universities.

Our educational system is, of course, dominated today by the idea of practical utility and efficiency in education; a man should be trained and prepared directly and immediately for his chosen vocation. It is sufficient, according to our present ideas of education, to give a man accurate information in his chosen field, and to train him to think accurately and logically. All else is decorative, all else is a gloss and a polish, which may be obtained in any way any where.

Outside of our halls of academies culture is even held in a lower estimate: culture is the possession of the idler, the dilettante; culture rather unfits a man for real work in the world. The average man confuses culture with mannerism and speech and dress, with a certain aloofness and snobbishness, with a certain fastidiousness, utterly unbecoming to the masculine of the species; and so culture has been relegated, in our land, at least, to

women, on the ground that they have nothing more important to do, and so they can waste time on this rather pleasant thing which we call culture.

But the real hard-headed, sound, practical business men, the Babbitts of our land, who run this country, look rather askance on the entire subject of culture, and yet from the days of Aristotle to Matthew Arnold, the finest minds of mankind have regarded culture as the supreme good and the supreme goal of life. The intellectual life, the inner life of man, the life of enlightenment and of contemplation, the life of the imagination, was regarded by the most mature minds of the human race in every generation as the real life of man, in relation to which all else was transitory and, as it were, a preparation.

The sage of the Book of Proverbs regarded hachmah (wisdom), which, of course, is more than knowledge or information, as the foundation of the universe--the tool with which God created the world. Plato and Aristotle looked upon reason, disinterested reason, as the focal point of their entire philosophic system. Maimonides extolled the active intellect; the scholiasts of the Middle Ages dwelt in a world of conceptual ideas, as the real world of their child. Matthew Arnold called culture "sweetness and light." So that surely these people were speaking of something very real and very cogent and very important in human life.

Just what is culture? Let us first try to define what it is not, so that by narrowing the field we may approximate what it is. Culture has nothing in the world to do with fastidiousness, with affectation, with mannerism, in speech, in dress, in style, in the furniture of your home, or of your mind. To speak with a broad accent, or to give a peculiar intonation to your speech, is not yet culture. It may be picturesque, it may be very distinctive and effective, but as far as real culture is concerned, it is spurious. Oscar Wilde, with all his affectation and mannerism, with his decorative breeches, and flowers, and his epigrams, was, after all, only a vulgar showman.

No, culture is not mannerism, and culture has nothing to do with that weak-kneed dilettantism, that pathetic, hopeless flitting from bower to bower in the garden of human thought, that picking up of stray crumbs in this field of human thought or in that field of human thought. A Japanese print in your home and a visit to the Little Theatre does not yet make you a cultured man.

Culture is a very vigorous thing; it is very earnest and very honest; it is grounded in fundamentals; it is grounded in human verities and in human sincerities. And then culture is not education; culture is not learning. It is more. Formal education, insofar as it trains the intellect and sensitizes the mental faculties of a man,

thereby helping him towards a well rounded life.--I say, formal education is an essential of real culture, but it does not exhaust the full content of real culture. There is many a well-trained, highly educated, technically efficient human being who is a cultural moron. Education prepares a man for the work of life--for his life's work. Culture prepares a man for life. Education enables a man to earn a living; culture enables a man to earn life. Education you gain largely from books, from instruction, from study; culture is derived not only from books, not only from study, but from observation, from contemplation, from contacts, from self-culture and self-expansion; through endless quest for the good and the true and the beautiful--the quest of the Holy Grail of humanity.

The education which we receive today in our universities, that surely cannot be called culture. To drive ten thousand students into the narrow confines of one campus and force them into a machine, a sort of a reducing machine, and then turn them out stereotyped doctors and ministers and engineers and dentists, goose-stepped and dragooned, one like the other, or ten thousand like the other ten thousand,--that is not culture; that is efficiency; that is maximum production. But that is also minimum personality. If Upton Sinclair's indictment of our educational system is one-tenth true, then our universities and our colleges are the veritable graveyards of real culture.

And then culture is not egoism, selfishness. Culture, of course, means self-development, but not at the expense of others or for the purposes of self. Self-development does not exclude self-sacrifice. On the contrary, there can be no real self-development without a concomitant social development. A man cannot live up to the highest within him without at the same time living up to the highest in other men. In humanity real culture is not selfishness. Culture means contemplation, but not to the exclusion of work. Culture means the seeking of truth, but it also means the doing of good.

I should like to emphasize the thought. Tolstoy attacked culture on the ground that it is aristocratic, on the ground that it is the privileged possession of the few favored ones at the expense of the masses; the cultured man must of necessity rise on the backs of the lowly, the unlettered and the uncultured, and gain for himself the life of complete self-development at the expense of those who cannot. And that is a one-sided, oftentimes accepted, but nevertheless untrue, conception of culture.

No man who trains himself to respond spontaneously and immediately to the appeal of beauty--to the beauty of line, of form, of color; no man who trains his eyes to see clearly and to see more, who trains his ear to hear distinctly and hear more of the melody and the music in the world; no man who trains his mind critically to sift the true from the false, the real from the unreal,--I say,

no man who so trains his faculties of mind and soul and heart can remain deaf, dead to the appeal of the beauty in the lives of the humble and the lowly and the common. To fail to find poetry in humbleness, to fail to read the epic of struggle, no man whose heart has been opened to the beauty of God's world can fail to keep his heart open to the sympathy and the appeal of God's children.

The real cultured man is the man whose life is grounded in morality. Of course the cultured man seeks at times seclusion; the cultured man at times wants to be alone, away from his fellowmen; and he should be alone. We have too little in our lives today of solitude, of mental and spiritual privacy. We are always in crowds and with crowds, jostled and pushed about, physically and mentally, by contact with multitudes and the thoughts of multitudes. We do not experience as often as we should the healing balm of solitude, of retirement into the sanctuary of our own souls and of our own lives. In fact, most of us are afraid to be left alone, as though a man can be left alone ever who has his soul to study and his God to worship and his books to read and the world of God to contemplate.

I say it is well for a man very often to retire from the world of men and seek refreshment of soul, restitution of individuality, reorganization of our scattered energies and thoughts, in isolation and in solitude. But those hours and days of contemplation must be and are to the real cultured man only periods of

gestation, periods of preparation for his work in the great world, for his mission in life. I think it was Goethe who said talent is perfected in solitude, but character in the stream of life; that if you have ability, if you have talent, you can perfect that talent and that ability through hard work, through concentration, through contemplation in and by yourself; but if you want your character to develop itself, you must have the test, the trials and the tribulations, the tug and the pull of experience out into the great world. Character must be tested in the burning heat of human experience before it can become pure, without alloy. All learning, all study, all culture which does not go with work, with service, perishes at the end, said the rabbis.

Culture without an ideal of service ultimately degenerates into un-Godly, decadent asceticism, and becomes destructive and a menace to society.

Now, these are some of the things that culture is not. Now, what are some of the things that culture is? I will not attempt a scientific definition; it is impossible to give a scientific definition of any spiritual fact, because the very terms are mutually exclusive. Simply stated, culture means harmonious self-development. Culture means the development of our mind, of our soul, of our heart, harmoniously, one with the other. Culture means self-expression of man along every legitimate avenue, of mind, soul, heart and hand. Culture is the program of

man's expansion along not one but every highway of human endeavor.

Professor Shaw defined culture as humanity's effort to enjoy its inner and independent life; which is another way of stating that culture is harmonious self-development. Let me make myself clear. When you eat you eat out of compulsion, because you are hungry. Eating is not an effort to enjoy our inner independent life; it is forced upon us by our physical constitution and by the driving wants of our physical life. When we seek shelter and raiment and things and possessions and wealth, we do that likewise out of an exterior compulsion, out of the needs physical, and out of the needs social. We do not seek these things in order to satisfy our inner independent, autonomous life; we share these things in common with the animal; in a sense they are beyond the control of our spirit. But when you and I seek for beauty, impalpable as it is, imperishable; when you and I seek for disinterested truth, which cannot immediately be converted into gain and profit to satisfy an immediate need of our body; when you and I seek for an altruistic cause and dedicate ourselves to some ideal which is linked ^{not} with something immediate but with something which is eternal; when you and I reach out for balance and harmony, for symmetry and orderliness; when we strive for dignity and nobility, in speech, in conduct, in manner and in thought, in our relations with our fellowmen,-- why, we do these things not because we are driven to them

by the itch and the drive of our bodies, but because we want to enjoy our inner and our independent life; we want to vindicate our position as free born, high born men; we want to vindicate our freedom--freedom from the chains and the shackles of the material, the natural, the physical, the animalic. We want the ego, that which is really ourselves, that sum total of our mind and our soul and our heart, which distinguishes us from the beast of the field,--we want that enthroned in human life.

And that is culture. Even education, when it is nothing more than an wage earning device, a means of earning a large salary, a means of holding a more prominent position in society, is not an effort to enjoy independent life. But when you strive to open your eyes and see more of the beauty in God's world, when you try to open your mind and see more of the truth which is in God's world, and when you go out into the world trying to do more of the good which can be done in the world, without the expectation of reward, without seeking to have and to hold things, but simply because you want to expand the dominions of your mind and soul, because you want to rise, why, then you are following the behests of real culture.

Our rabbis--and with that I shall close--in their own naive but profound way, expressed the same truth when they said there are six things which serve a man; three are things controlled, and three are not things controlled. The

eye must see the pleasant and the unpleasant alike. Man has no control over the eye. The ear must hear the harmonious and the discordant alike. Man has no control over the things which he is compelled to hear. The nose must smell fragrance and foulness alike. He has no control over that. But there are three things over which man has control. His mouth; he can speak the word of kindness, of love, of wisdom, if he wishes; or he can utter the word of falsehood and lying and slander if he wants to. The hand; he can stretch out his hand in helpfulness and in kindness; or he can stretch out his hand to rob and to kill and to destroy. And his foot; he may command his feet to take him to the halls of learning, to a gathering of the good men and the wise men; or he can command his feet to take him to the dens of iniquity, of sin.

And they conclude: "Blessed is the man who has so trained himself and so disciplined himself and so habituated himself in the doing of the good that the three things which were originally in his control are no longer in his control." That the mouth and the hand and the foot, which previously could be made to do the evil and the wrong, can no longer be prompted or compelled to do the evil and the wrong. He has developed such perfect control over himself that no temptation is great enough to make him utter the lying word or do the cruel act or go in the way of sinfulness.

Now that, in its profoundest sense, is the real meaning of culture. The cultured man is the man who has so trained and disciplined himself; and I emphasize these two words. That is why I began by saying that culture has nothing to do with mannerism and fastidiousness and affectation and dress and dilettantism. Culture is a difficult thing; it is a matter of years of training, of self-control, of self-discipline. Culture is that which trains the man so that he almost instinctively does the right thing and says the right word and goes in the right way, that the temptations become less and less as his habits become stronger and stronger.

Now the rabbis might also have said that the six things rather than the three are in the control of man. It is not true that the eye and the ear and the nose are altogether beyond the control of man. Some men see and are yet blind, and some men hear and are yet deaf. Why, take two men and lead them out into the great open, take them into a field or a garden or a forest, and one of them, having eyes, will see all the splendor and the glory of revelation there, speaking to him at every wind of the road--their line and form and color and composition. He will see; he has trained his eyes to see. And another will just go through the field or the forest or the garden or the city or the world, blind, seeing nothing but things, which mean nothing to him.

The same man has trained his ear so that he can

catch music, melody, where the other hears only jarring noises and dissonance and harshness. He has trained his ear so that he can hear more than the other man, whose physical ear is just as acute, but he has not trained his ear culturally. The same man will smell fragrance, but others can only smell foulness. Some men will see beauty and find something to love and cherish and admire, where others can only see ungainliness, uncouthness and ugliness.

Blessed is the man, therefore, who has, through years of effort, so trained his eye and ear and nose and mouth and hand and foot--all his faculties, not one of them but all of them harmoniously,--who has so organized them and so sensitized them that they are no longer under the control of his animal self; that they have declared their own autonomy; that they have become channels through which the beauty and the truth and the goodness of God's world pours into the life of the man.

That is culture. Self-expression through the development of all our faculties along every legitimate avenue. And that brings with it, my friends, that peace and that contentment which passeth all understanding. That is life. All else is only a means, a preparation, oftentimes only a sad delusion.

The cultured man is the man who will find that modicum of contentment which a human being can find in this world, who will be alert, who will be alive, who will be tingling all the time with new sensations and new

discoveries. His world will teem with revelations, and he will be ceaselessly aspiring, ceaselessly climbing, every emotion ever rising to the higher levels and the purer air. That is culture.

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