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The Responsibilities of a Modern Business Man, 1924.

"THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A MODERN BUSINESS MAN."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MAY 4, 1924, CLEVELAND, O.



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
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I have spoken often to you in the past of the duties and the responsibilities of business men as I saw them. I have endeavored to emphasize at all times the thought that business must be integrated within the social plan, and that it must be, for the sake of society, submitted to the same standards and to the same social control. I very often, I believe, stressed this thought: that business, in common with every other endeavor of the mind and spirit of man, must be made to serve the ends of life. By that I mean that a definite functional task must be assigned to it in its relation to the well being of society. Just as, for example, art must beautify life, and science must explain life, and literature must interpret life, and medicine must protect life, and religion must ennoble life, so business must have a definite functional purpose in the scheme of things; and that, we take it, is the production and the distribution of the physical commodities needed for the comfort and the sustenance of human life.

I have also from time to time endeavored to stress the thought that the slogan very frequently heard, as a sort of industrial apologetics, that business is business, is anathema, is a black obsession which has devastated society for generations. I have tried to point out that this phrase, so trippingly heard on the lips of many business men even today, if it means anything at all means that business

has a law of its own, a jungle law, which, though every other department of human life exercised it and no longer recognizes it, must forever be recognized within the sphere of business.

I have tried to show that there is but one law in life, that a code of conduct is one and indivisible, and that if society is ever to devolve to the purer air and the higher levels, it must exercise, drive out, this economic devil.

We look with suspicion upon a man who is in politics for the sake of making money; we hold in contempt the artist who would commercialize his art; we would frown upon, as we do, a physician, for example,--who is infinitely more important to society than, say, a real estate broker--we would frown upon him if he, by means of charging exorbitant fees and limiting his clientele, would set out and make it the supreme purpose of his life to amass a fortune. We would lose all faith in a minister, for example, who would spend his days trying to make money, however hopeless that task might be. The same thing is true of educators; the same thing is true of soldiers.

We ask a rather rigorous standard of service from these professions, which are infinitely more important to the well being of society than the business profession is; yet we are not so rigorous when it comes to the business man. We do not ask of the business man so insistently that he produce social values, that he directly contribute to the social health and well being of society. It is enough for a

business man to be called successful if he has amassed wealth without palpably violating the law. He may have been a financial juggler; he may have pyramided profits on intangible and, as far as society is concerned, non-existing assets; he may never have contributed one ounce of real value to the assets of society. And yet he is seldom condemned. Surely, we rarely apply to him that rigorous standard we apply to other professions.

Now, I think it is rather trite and irrelevant to say that a man, every man, is in business to make money. If that is true, then every man should be in politics to make money. And yet the business men of the country are outraged when a politician actually succeeds in making some money. There can be but one law and one standard in life.

I have also endeavored to point out from time to time that business is a profession, that the business man ought to look upon his enterprise with the same reverence and the same dignity as the professional man looks upon his calling. Business today is not what it was a hundred years ago, or a generation ago; because of its involved organization and its vast ramifications it demands today the same training, the same preparation and the same expert knowledge and the same gifts of mind and of character that professions demand.

I have tried to make business men feel that their work is a profession. The word "profession" means something which you profess--a declaration of your faith, a

declaration of your life's purpose. When a man professes a calling, he announces that this is his mission in life, his contribution, his torch, his destiny in life. I have tried to have the businessman feel that his work, however humble it may be, however important it may be, is a vocation, a calling, something to the performance of which a man has been summoned; his life interest; something which must give him the full opportunity for self-culture; something that must fulfill him and realize him.

I very often come across business men who look upon their work as necessary but rather unattractive, oftentimes sordid. They look for the beauty of life, the nobility of life and the exercise of their virtues elsewhere--after business hours. That makes for a very serious and sad duality of character, a strange confusion of personality. You will find the same man in his business cold and hard and harsh and calculating, ruthlessly aggressive, stopping at nothing, driving a hard bargain, and after six o'clock, in the circle of his friends, he is the most affable and sociable and kindly sort of individual, especially charitable.

Now, that condition is brought about by the fact that that individual looks upon his business activity not as upon the profession, the vocation, the calling, the opportunity of his life; that is merely an avenue or a means or a method for making money to be used in this other sphere and department of life.

I have tried to make business men feel that

their business ought to make them happy. Happiness is the seal which a good God places upon our work, when He is satisfied with our work. Now, I donot mean that a business man never has his worries and his heartaches and his disappointments and his failures. Every profession has that. And the real failures in life, the real tragic failures, are not always the money failures. But business, in common with any other profession which you may choose for yourself, must by far, by large, and in the sum total of it, as a life interest, make you happy, give you the sense of satisfaction, give you the sense of gratification of having done well something you want to do, something you feel you ought to do.

Now, if your business does not give you that sense, that happiness, you do not belong there; that is not your profession; and you will never get that sense of gratification and satisfaction if you look upon your business activity as a mere money making and money grubbing, aggrandizing tool, and not as a high-up activity. I have said that I have frequently made these statements, because I hold them to be true, and I regard the task of each one to bring these facts to the minds and to the hearts of the people.

This morning I want to make practical application of these principles as they touch us Jews, and I shall speak very frankly, because I believe that frankness in such matters is highly desirable. A rabbi must not always tell his people how good they are. They know that all too

well. And it is not the function of a rabbi always to act as the tribune of his people, to defend them to the outside world. Very often it is the duty of a rabbi to tell Jacob his transgressions and Israel his sins; and no people is perfect and no individual is blameless in the sight of God or of men. To us Jews this problem of the ethics of business is a particularly cogent and pressing and vital one, because when all is said and done we are a business people. There are very few of us who are farmers; there are many more who are laborers, but they, too, as they climb on the rungs of the economic ladder--and every Jew wishes to rise and to climb on the economic ladder--sooner or later enter into the commercial field.

We are progressively becoming a business people. Of course it was not always so, and it is quite stupid for a man, like Professor S , to maintain that the Jewish people is possessed of racial and mental endowments and religious sentiments to fit them to be capitalists and to be merchants. That is part of the Prussian pseudo-scientific balderdash, which is the groundwork and the basis of all anti-Semitic speculation today. Before our people entered Palestine and for hundreds of years, they were nomads in the wilderness--tribes wandering from one oasis to another, tending their flocks and their sheep. There was no trade and no business there; and after they entered Palestine, for a period of about twelve hundred years, they were farmers. At the time of the destruction of the Temple, the great historian

Josephus remarks with amazement and wonderment, that while all the surrounding peoples were such clever trades people, the people of Israel was a humble, lowly, agricultural people; they lived on the soil; their holidays were nature festivals; the blessings with which the Bible blesses Israel are the blessings of field and garden and rain and sky and earth. It was only after they were driven out of their land and uprooted from their soil and scattered to the four winds of the world, into lands where they were not allowed to hold land or to engage in manual labor, that the Jew was perforce, because he wanted to live the life of light that was strong within him, driven into trade and barter and sale, money-making--business.

But whatever the history may be, we are at present engaged in realities, in present day realities, and the fact is that today the Jews of America are largely and increasingly a business people. As a business people we are easily singled out and distinguished, not alone because we are a racial minority, but because our very business enterprises bring us constantly to the notice of the public. Our vocations make us seek the main thoroughfares in every city and the advertising columns of every newspaper. The farmer is not noticed; the industrial plant is on the outskirts of the city; but the institutions, the shops and the stores of the Jewish business man are on the highways and the main streets and thoroughfares of every city in America, constantly noticed, and it is no wonder, therefore, that we

loom so large in the eyes of the world far beyond our proportion. And, furthermore, because we are the distributors of commodities, because we sell the food and the raiment and the lodging for people, most people sooner or later come to us; they have no contact with the actual producer, who does not exist for them, but we do; and if there is anything wrong with the economic order, if the cost of living is too high, it is not the unseen producer who is blamed, but the very visible, palpable distributor--you! For all the evils and shortcomings of our economic organization, you have to bear the brunt of economic mal-adjustment, because of your very calling.

Now, because of that, I maintain, and because of the fact that the Jew is traditionally singled out as the scapegoat for all shortcomings and disasters, that we must be scrupulous as regards the elementary principles of business conduct and business standards. We must lean backward; we must be a hundred per cent plus. Not only because traditionally we have stood for rectitude and integrity in business relations. It was the Jew who first gave a code of business conduct to mankind. "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in weight, in measure. Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have." "Justice shalt thou pursue!" I say, not only because of our traditional position as pathfinders and leaders in the work of economic righteousness ought we to be supra-scrupulous in our regard for the ethics of the business profession, but also

because of self-defense, to keep us from economic annihilation.

In New York City I read where it is now quite difficult, almost impossible, for a Jewish man or woman to obtain employment. Now, there is but one step from that to an economic boycott, where it will be quite impossible for a Jew to sell his merchandise. When that comes, not alone our economic but our social and political life collapses. That has happened in other countries.

We must lean backward. Every Jew who is engaged in a business enterprise, whatever it be, has the safety, the economic well being, to say the least, of every other Jew in his keeping. Every Jew who in the least is unscrupulous or rapacious, every Jew who in the least violates the basic ethical principles, the customs of the land, even if he does not criminally violate a law, brings discredit, nay, more, danger upon his people.

Let me illustrate what I mean. During the last two years there have occurred in our city two disastrous financial failures, in the same line of business endeavor; disasters which have brought suffering and sorrow to hundreds, to perhaps thousands of citizens of this community. The one was the enterprise largely of non-Jews; the other was the enterprise largely of Jews. Now, I am not here to pass judgment. I am neither judge nor prosecutor, nor am I intimately acquainted with the facts involved in both of these situations to justify me in passing judgment or comment; but this to me is clear, as a rabbi: that while in the one case

the one largely non-Jewish, the delinquencies and the failures, if there existed any, will ultimately be placed squarely upon the individuals responsible for them; in the other case, the one largely Jewish, the delinquencies and the failures, if there existed any, will be placed not merely upon the individuals responsible for them, but upon you, upon me, and upon the whole Jewish community. It will be just by so much harder, more unpleasant, for a Jew to live because of these things. And I wonder whether the men responsible for the management and the administration of those allied institutions and their vast ramifications ever gave thought to this angle of the problem.

From a community point of view, it is not at all important that we have rich Jews in Cleveland; from a community point of view it is not at all important that the Jews of Cleveland receive any more dividends; from a community point of view it is not at all important that the Jews of Cleveland build up vast industrial establishments; from a community point of view it is of supreme and primary and vital importance that every Jewish business establishment in the city of Cleveland be scrupulously, punctiliously honest and honorable, beyond the shadow of a doubt, beyond all shadow of suspicion.

Now, we have thousands of such fine institutions in our community; we have thousands of Jewish business men in Cleveland who have built up through years of fine service institutions which are a credit, not alone to the

Jewish community but to our city. Had I the time to enumerate some, I should gladly do it. Not so very long ago I had the rare privilege to pass through and closely to observe the organization and the workings of one great, largely Jewish, institution in our community. I refer to the institution of Joseph & Feiss. I speak of that institution because it is the one that comes to my mind now, and the one which stands out, not merely because of its integrity, in which thousands of our other Jewish institutions in Cleveland share, but because of its social vision, because of the pioneer work which it has done in the field of amicable and just relations between employer and employee. Now, I maintain that the work of hundreds of such institutions can be eclipsed in one day and forgotten by one unfortunate case.

Let me give you another example. There are rabbis in this city who are devoting themselves faithfully, earnestly, to the task of serving their people and serving the Cleveland community--earnest men, consecrated men. A few days ago I read an item in the newspapers that a certain so-called rabbi, a newcomer to this country, and to this city, under suspicion, had his home raided by prohibition agents; he was arrested and arraigned in court. I do not know how you feel about it, but I feel that the work of this fly-by-night, so-called rabbi, accomplished in one day, will undo the work of all the rabbis in Cleveland in a year. That situation is serious because there crime touches our religion.

We seem to be afflicted in this city, and in

every large city, with a new crop of Jewish dignitaries which go by the name of reverends. Every chazan, every shochet, every shamus, every mazother, gets himself a little schule, or builds up a little minion around himself, obtains the title of reverend over night, obtains a permit or a license to sell so-called sacramental wine, and launches upon a new business, altogether new in Jewish life.

You can see the temptations in the way, and you can see there will be some who are so low and degraded that they will drag the fair name of Israel, the honored name of a rabbi, into the mire for the sake of profit. The Central Conference of American Rabbis has protested to the government, urging it to withdraw the clause which permits Jews to have wine for sacramental purposes, stating it is not at all necessary for a Jew to use fermented wine for sacramental purposes. The conservative rabbis of America did the very same thing, but with no effect.

Orthodox Jewry, I suppose, through some dialectic subtlety, stupidly insists, short-sightedly insists upon the perpetuation of this law and this practice, which ultimately will bring a desecration of the name of God and Israel upon our people. Orthodox Jewry has lacked either the courage or the wisdom to protest this thing.

And so there is your situation. We find altogether too many Jewish names on the lists of bootleggers in our community. That, too, is unsavory; but it is a word that must be spoken, because the situation is not improving

here or elsewhere. Of course most of those people are immigrants, newcomers, unacquainted with our laws, who do not realize the gravity of the situation. But that, too, is apologetics. The fact is that altogether too many of the household of Israel are found among those who have violated the law of the land. Now, that entire brood, and all the cheap Jewish lawyers who defend them, and all the cheap Jewish politicians who pull wires for them, must be driven from our community. There must be house cleaning, or the future of our community, the position of our community, will be progressively more and more undermined.

My last word. Long ago in the fourteenth century, to be more exact, in the year 1391, there was a sudden and terrible persecution of the Jews in Spain. Hundreds were killed, thousands were driven out; Jewish property was confiscated, and the Jewish spirit was crushed. The Jews began to blame Christian intolerance for what happened--and I suppose Christian intolerance, religious bigotry, was in a large measure responsible for what happened. But one Jew, a leader of the day--Isaac Halema --had the courage and the foresight and the wisdom to stand up before his people and tell them; and this is what he told them:

"God was good to you. God prospered you. God gave you favor in the eyes of the people in whose midst you dwelt; you were raised to positions of prominence in government; you became wealthy and prosperous. And what did you do? You built for yourselves marvelous mansions

and purchased vast estates; you bought for yourselves jewelry of the most precious and the finest; you dressed in the richest apparel; you lorded it; you forsook your God, you forsook your Torah; you became rapacious, you became greedy, you engaged in ruthless competition, one with another, stepping one upon another, crushing one another, stopping at nothing, until you lost favor in the eyes of the people in whose midst you dwelt, and because of that did this affliction come upon you."

Now, I pray to God that at no time in the future of American Israel will there be any justification for such a statement. This is our home; this will be the home of our children; we must live here, and we must have the confidence and the good will and the favor of the people about us. If anti-Semitism is ever to arise, as it undoubtedly will, let us at least feel, justly feel, that it is not due to any of our shortcomings or failures or transgressions or economic sins, but purely to bigotry and intolerance.

There is a warning in the words of Isaac Halema that we Jews, here and elsewhere, may well take to heart.

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