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The American School, 1924.

"THE AMERICAN SCHOOL."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

DECEMBER 21, 1924, CLEVELAND.

WRHS

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
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The aim of education, I take it, is one with the aim of human life. Education is the means by which we attain our life's purposes. What is the aim of human life? It is quite difficult to give a comprehensive definition, but, briefly, the aim of human life may be said to be the free and full expressions of human personality, the realization of self through and by and in the midst of social life and social activity.

I said the realization of self. Now, this self of ours is a very complex thing, or, rather, a many-sided thing. When I speak of myself I have in mind the body, the intellect, and that something which we call the soul of a man. The self is the physical and the mental and the emotional. The self is a composite of sense, thought and feeling--imagination. And these things are not arranged in us departmentally. Human personality is not organized departmentally; it is organized organically. All these are interlocked, interlaced, intertwined, acting and reacting upon one another; in fact, one element is a constituent of the other elements. And so the development of this complex, compound human personality is a many-sided development. To have a free and full development of one's personality is to develop oneself physically, mentally, spiritually; else you remain, our personality remains, distorted, poorly balanced, awry. And that is dangerous. For the stream of human energy which

surges through us, when it finds itself dammed in one or more channels, is diverted into the others, where it overtakes the capacity of that other channel to contain it, where it reaches the flood tide, and where it may become destructive, devastating.

So that the well-being of the human personality is dependent upon the harmonious and simultaneous development of all the sides of all the faculties of human personality. The man whose body is superbly developed but whose mind is unorganized, and whose soul is dead, irresponsible to the appeal of the finer things of life, is only a man in a very limited sense of the word. A man whose body and whose intellect are finely developed but whose emotional life is undisciplined and anarchic, is a dangerous man, a danger to himself and a danger to society. A man whose body and soul are finely developed but whose intellect is untrained and undirected, is a helpless man, whose best intention will be constantly thwarted by his ignorance and by his lack of constructive thinking. The ideal man is the man in whom physical prowess and well-being are blended with intellectual alertness and spiritual sensitiveness. Physical power, mental acumen, spiritual sensitiveness, and an inquisitive and eager imagination,--these, to my mind, are the ingredients of the well balanced man.

So that education has its program pretty well defined when once we define what the aim of life is. Education, of course, cannot give all these things to a man.

Many of these things are gifts of nature, gifts of heredity, which no post-natal influence can give. But, on the other hand, education can and does modify and control and rearrange and redirect that which nature grants to a man. Physical culture may strengthen a situation which is physically weak. Mental training may stimulate a mind which, inspite of its native endowments, may otherwise remain sluggish and dull. Education may take these innate human instincts which are neither bad nor good but human, and by proper cultivation and direction guide these instincts into socially beneficent channels, where otherwise they would run amuck and destroy life. Education may give wings to our imagination, which otherwise would lie dormant in us.

And so education is the tool, the technique of human development, the tool of progress, the plow which breaks the new furrows in the fields of human experience. That is education from the point of view of the individual, of the man. Now, from the point of view of society, education is that force which holds society together.

I came across this significant paragraph in reading Wells' "Joan and Peter": "Men have to be unified. They are driven to seek unity. And they are still with the individualized instincts of a savage. See, then, what education always has to be! The process of taking this imperfectly social, jealous, deeply savage creature and socializing him. The development of education and the development of human societies are one and the same thing. Education makes the social

man. So far as schooling goes, it is quite plainly that. You teach your solitary beast to read and write, you teach him to express himself by drawing, you teach him other languages, perhaps, and something of history, and the distribution of mankind. What is it all but making this creature who would naturally possess only the fierce, narrow sociability of a savage family in the cave into a citizen in a greater community? That primarily is what has been done. An uneducated man is a man who can talk to a few score familiar people with a few hundred words. You two can talk to a quarter of mankind. With the help of a little translation you can get to understandings with most of mankind. As a child learns the accepted language and the accepted writing and the laws and rules of life, it learns the community."

In other words, education is the means whereby the individual is initiated into community life and into social organization. Now the school is, of course, but one of the institutions of education. There are others. There is the home, which is also a potent and tremendously important agency in education, in the development of personality, and in the socialization of the individual. There is the church, there is the community; and these institutions are not graded seriously or chronologically. A boy or girl lives in all of these institutions simultaneously, and their influences come to play upon him simultaneously. So that their influences, too, are interrelated and intertwined. They are one.

Now, then, if our definition is a satisfactory one, namely, that the aim of education is one with human life, and that the aim of human life is the free and full development of human personality, then the program and the curriculum and the method of instruction, and the technique of instruction and the quality of instructor, becomes quite clear and apparent: the school, the public school, and the high school and the college and the university must look to the efficient performance of those things which will help to develop man physically, mentally, spiritually.

Now, the American school in the last decade or two has been quick to realize this task, the public school to a larger extent than the high school, the high school to a larger extent than the college or the university; the private school to a larger extent than the public school, the public school to a larger extent than the country school. The private school, because of its greater financial independence and endowment, because of its smaller enrolment of children, and because of the closer cooperation between teacher and parent, is able to a larger degree to experiment with the newer theories of education looking to the development of human personality, than the public school. So that the private school, to that extent, is a benefactor of the public school for the things with which it experiments, and the theories which it will establish will ultimately percolate down into the common public school system.

As a rule, the private school is not a

desirable institution in a democracy. As a general rule, the private school is undesirable. For it inevitably and quite unconsciously makes for social isolation and social exclusiveness; for the average parent is not in position to send his child to the private school. The public school has been and is a very decided democratizing influence in a community, but until the public school is able and willing to do that intensive work, that experimental work which the private school can and is doing,--until that time the private school is performing a legitimate and worthwhile task in the community.

The private school, again, is able to do something which the public school is as yet unable to do, namely, to pay attention to the individual, and that is what education must ultimately do if it is to be true to its purposes. In the public school children are treated enmasse, in great number. With the exception of children who are clearly subnormal or supernormal, the average are taken in groups, and they are passed from class to class to teachers who have specialized in certain subjects common to them, and certain information given to all alike and to all in the same amount. The education is standardized. The individual aptitudes and gifts and talents and perplexities and problems of each child are but slightly and indifferently figured; unless there be found here and there a teacher who has the genius and the vision to realize that she or he is moulding character and personality and not merely imparting a certain

amount of information and knowledge.

Our school system, taken by and large, from the public school to the university, is vitiated from time to time by certain things, the first of which, to my mind, is the desire to make of our educational system a purely practical, utilitarian affair. Education, as soon as it passes from the public school stage, at once is diverted into professional channels. The youth is at once taught to specialize so as to prepare himself for his chosen vocation or profession in life. His education is stripped down to the bare essentials needed for his profession. With the result that our education, to a large degree, is training men to be professionals, to be experts, to be specialists, to be capable each in the performance of his particular job, an efficient machine,--doctor and lawyer, engineer and minister, teacher and business man.

So that the full and free development of human personality, which is the aim of life, and therefore the aim of education, is, unfortunately, quite frequently overlooked. As a result, the man's horizon becomes tragically narrow; the man's interest becomes tragically confined; the man himself becomes grooved and niched and jobified. That is unwholesome. You hear from time to time so-called practical men, who are the most impractical men in the world, attack liberal education as a clear dissipation of time and energy; those men who would like to turn all of our colleges and universities into a school which would train efficient and

capable machines. Classical education is sneered at as being so much dry rot come down to us from Medieval days, and literature and fine art and philosophy and esthetics are regarded by these practical men as sort of namby-pamby subjects that no real--what do they call them?--he-men would take

Now that is the voice of Main Street, made heavy with the rich food of prosperity, dictating to our educators. No education, friends, is worth the name if it is not a liberal education. No education is worth a "tinker's dam" if it does not liberate a man, if it does not free his mind to think constructively and creatively and free his soul to roam, if it does not inculcate in him a finer and nobler enthusiasm for all of the fine things which have been said and written and created from the beginning of time, if it does not make him seek out the humanities of life, if it does not give him the humanitarian, the social point of view in life.

We need specialists, of course. We need men who are specially trained to do a certain thing especially well, but over and above that, and of infinitely greater importance to us and society, is to have men whose mind and soul have been trained to love truth and to love beauty and to love goodness in life; men who have social sympathies; men who love humanity and all that the struggling and suffering mind of humanity has produced in the way of cultural and spiritual and moral values.

And so American education would do well not to hearken to the voice of the practical men of our day and our generation, but to follow its light and to carry through its program established by human experience and by human needs, namely, the free and full development of human personality and the socialization of the individual.

There is another tendency which today seems to vitiate our educational system, namely, the conception that the educator is there to impart knowledge, to give information to the pupil; that the whole business of the school or the high school or the college is to feed the mind, to cram it with a certain amount of knowledge--facts, events, dates or formulas. In the first place, that amount of knowledge and information which the school does and should impart to the student must be true and accurate, uncolored, undistorted; and most of the knowledge which our schools impart under the subjects of history and politics and economics is colored and distorted and deliberately falsified by well meaning though foolish pedagogues.

I make bold to say that we would have far less war in the world today if our historical text books were not lying documents, in every land where the virtues of a nation are extolled and the vices of a nation are passed over in silence; where each nation is represented as the noblest and the finest, beyond sin or the possibility of sin, and where the warrior and the fighter and the soldier and the battle are the four sides around which the educational life of

the child is moulded and fashioned, and not the scientist, and not the teacher, and not the men who quietly and unostentatiously in the study, in the laboratory and in the school room and in the pulpit are giving of themselves to make life sweeter and better, and men finer and nobler. I say, that even the information and knowledge which we impart, whether they touch politics or government or economics or history, are not those conducive to thinking.--critical, unbiased thinking on the part of the pupil.

But be that as it may, the chief function of education is not to impart knowledge, which knowledge is sooner or later forgotten, and sooner more than later. For the real function of education is to teach a man how to think. If he does nothing else but that, education has justified itself in the fullest measure. To teach a man how to use his mind, how constructively and consistently and deliberately to think, to solve the problem; how to be able to discern, to shift and sift evidence; to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, to think logically, to think without bias and without prejudice; to think.--the most difficult and the most necessary thing in life. That, I take it, is the real function and purpose of the school. Not to impart beliefs, not to transmit dogmas, not to inculcate notions which are at this day considered orthodox and conventional and proper, but to stimulate, to set at work this marvelous machinery of the human mind, so that when the young man goes out into life he takes with him not a certain amount of dead facts and dead

weight--a milestone of information, but he takes into life an active, marvelously working machinery to solve every problem and to meet every situation which will confront him with a fair chance of success.

That the American system of education very often forgets. Presidents and professors in our universities who think too much are unceremoniously discharged, with the result that our student bodies in most of our colleges present the sorry spectacle of a standardized, uniform, monotonous affair, without color, without life, without individuality, without cultural uniqueness, quite ordinary, and quite unattractive.

Lastly, there is this tendency, too, which sometimes threatens our American educational system, especially the public school system, namely, the attempt to Protestantize our public schools, to introduce formal dogma, religion, into our common school educational system. I said that it is the purpose of education to develop a man physically, mentally and spiritually. Spiritually. I did not say that it is the function of the public school to develop a man theologically. That is the business of the church and the temple and the synagogue and the home. The public school well performs its spiritual task when it trains the youth into clean, fine habits--physical cleanliness, mental cleanliness, spiritual cleanliness; when it opens its mind to think honestly, when it teaches reverence for the great institutions of human life, for the home, for the church, for one's community, for one's

country, and for the whole of mankind. That is the limit and the extent of the spiritual education which the public school ought to undertake. Beyond that it is dangerous. Beyond that the public school becomes the theologic battlefield. For no one can teach formal religion without introducing a subjective personal bias.

The public school ought to be a place where children meet as children and not as members of this church or that church, or this denomination or that denomination. There is a danger against which we must guard ourselves in this generation, and above all generations, this is the most intolerant and the most bigoted and the most benighted generation which America has experienced in a hundred years.

To sum up: the American school may justly be regarded as the pride and the glory of American life. The greatest tribute that can be paid to the American people is that to this day we are spending more money on the education of their children than any other thing and any other institution in American life today. The American school is alert to the problem of a more efficient, culturally efficient type of education, and it will undoubtedly progressively solve this problem.

I think a word of tribute ought to be paid, when one speaks of the American school, to those quiet, patient, consecrated souls who, in the class rooms, in the schools of our great land, quietly and unostentatiously perform

in real love and real devotion this, the greatest task of civilization. I mean the teacher; the teacher, who is seldom heralded and seldom proclaimed and seldom publicly honored; the public school teacher and the high school teacher and the college teacher--those men and women to whom we owe so much of our mental and moral development.

When one looks back upon one's school days one does not think of the amount of knowledge which he received there, much of which he may have forgotten. One does not think of his arithmetic, of his history, of his geography. One thinks, as I think, of a few luminous personalities who, by divine grace, came athwart our lives and helped us, stimulated us, set us to thinking. These men and women are, to my mind, the real rays of mankind ministering at the altar of humanity. Some day when we are a little more enlightened than we are today, and a little more thoughtful than we are today, we will pay more heed and more attention to these uncomplaining souls who do the work, the real work, of civilization. Underpaid always, socially unrecognized, as they should be, nearly always. But by and large, they are more important to this country and to the world than the men who exploit the millions and amass the fortunes, and appropriate the material goods of life.

The teacher--civilization's guide-post and path-finder.