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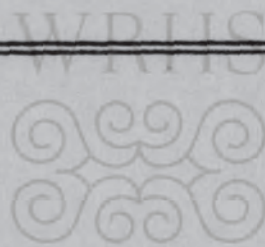
Are We Going the Way of Babylon?, 1925.

"ARE WE GOING THE WAY OF BABYLON?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

APRIL 5, 1925, CLEVELAND, O.



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From my discussion last week of the theme, "The Privilege of Living Today," you may have inferred that this brilliant future which I prophesied for the races of mankind will come of itself automatically and assuredly; that nothing can prevent the coming of this far-off divine event; that all that we need to do is to drift leisurely along and watch the grand processional of human progress.

So undoubtedly reasoned the great civilizations of the past in the midst of their glorious cities, with their far-flung legions and armies and their wealth; they, too, undoubtedly assumed that their future was assured, and that their progress would be unchecked and continuous, and that all that they had to do was leisurely to drift along with the high tide of prosperity which was destined to carry them indefinitely into the future; and I suppose if a prophet arose among them to warn them of a possible collapse, that such a prophet would have been met with--as they undoubtedly were met with--scorn and mockery and contempt.

And yet of all these mighty civilizations of the past, we have today but monuments of death, and occasionally a curious archaeologist, fumbling among the debris, comes upon a relic, a broken bit of what was once a mighty empire, or a city teeming with myriads, a city of palaces and citadels and temples and strongholds. I am afraid that races and nations, like individuals, deliberately fail to realize that

progress is not a continuous affair, and that it is not automatic. Progress is the result of great mental and spiritual and physical effort. When that effort ceases progress automatically ceases and retrogression sets in at a terrific pace. There is nothing automatic but the progress of disintegration. For an organism to keep alive it must feed; it must have an active principle of living actuating it; when once it becomes moribund, when the life principle, the principle of stir, of enterprise, of initiative, leaves it, decomposition sets in, and it is swift and terrible. And so it is with a social organism. For a social organism to be alive it must be cared for and guarded; it must be given spiritual and mental nutriments; when these things cease, why, then automatically decomposition sets in.

In other words, the price of progress is eternal vigilance, eternal effort, ceaseless aspiring. In the last fifty or seventy-five years many people glibly assumed that this doctrine we call evolution has somehow underwritten human progress; that evolution means that mankind will rise continuously rung upon rung; that someone has guaranteed the progressive advancement of mankind. And yet evolution is nothing of the sort. As far as evolution is concerned, man may just as well degrade as advance. Evolution is just the adaptation of the species to their environments. Certain species living today are inferior in many respects to those species from which they are derived. And it is so with races. Certain races and peoples living today are culturally

and intellectually inferior to their ancestors of three thousand years ago. You take the modern Greek. The modern Greek is a pigmy in comparison with the giant intellectual forces of ancient Greece. You take Spain today. Spain today is much behind Spain of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in spite of the fact that in point of time it is three centuries ahead. And I suppose Italy today is not to be compared culturally and intellectually with the Italy of the Renaissance.

So that there is no such a thing as automatic progress, as continuous progress in races, peoples and individuals. Why is it so? Why do nations after they reach the peak somehow begin to decline? Why cannot they be progressing steadily and constantly on into an indefinite future? Why, simply because sooner or later certain social maladies begin to develop which the race in the pride of its prosperity and achievement does not take heed of, does not pay attention to, and in the course of time these maladies undermine the strength of the race; in the course of time these maladies enervate and weaken the people; in the course of time the spiritual and mental reservoirs are empty; in the course of time other races more vigorous and more powerful outstrip this race or overpower it. That has been the story of all the yesterdays of mankind. That was the story of Babylon--the way of Babylon.

And the question arises in one's mind: will the great races of today go the way of Babylon? Will America,

mistress of the world, in a sense, today, some day, too, go the way of Babylon? Will it, too, reach the peak and then begin to descend into the shadows, go into oblivion? Ah, you will say that can never be; and it will be your loyalty and your patriotism speaking; but nature and the laws of nature know neither loyalty nor patriotism nor prejudice; the laws are universally applicable to all peoples alike--then as now, there as here. Nature plays no favorites and makes no concessions to personal likes or dislikes.

I speak of this subject, "Are we going the way of Babylon?" not because I believe that we are actually on the road to Babylon now, not because I believe that we are in imminent danger of national collapse. Far from it. Our national life is quite sound; our political institutions are quite secure; the American people as a whole is still a hard-working, God-fearing people. There is in our land great prosperity and economic wealth, and the people are fairly well participating in and sharing this great wealth. We are not in imminent danger of a threatening enemy; we are not in danger of having our foreign markets cut off, so that we would be forced into starvation, because our plains are broad enough and our mountains are rich enough to sustain us for many generations and centuries to come. So it is not because I foresee immediate doom that I speak of the subject "Are we Going the Way of Babylon?"; but I believe that it would be the supremest folly if we did not from time to time call the attention of the American people to those self-same social

maladies, which begin, almost insignificantly, like a cancer, and then proceed silently, swiftly, like the "pestilence that walketh in darkness," to corrode and undermine and weaken the strongest of social structures. And there are symptoms of these maladies abroad in our land today. It has been said, and truly said, that the bulwark of society is the home. That is a platitude, one of those luminous platitudes, like the law of gravitation--simple, easily understood, easily overlooked. The home is the cell unit, the life unit of the state. The state builds itself upon the home; the state is as strong or as weak as the individual home; when the home begins to break up the state will ultimately break up. When the sense of loyalty and responsibility and the sharing of the common burdens of life in the home is flaunted and disregarded in the home, then that same sense of loyalty and responsibility and the sharing of the common burdens will ultimately be flaunted and disregarded in the common home--in the state.

This is a platitude, simple and clear, but quite easily overlooked. The United States outstrips the world in the number of homes that are broken up annually. The United States outstrips the world in the number of divorces annually granted. The ratio is, I believe, one divorce to every eight marriages. The spread of the divorce evil is not limited to any one section of American society; to the rich, for example. It has invaded the rank and file, and close onto eighty percent, I understand of these divorces

are not contested, which means that a great deal of fraud and collusion is back of this institution--fraud and collusion which make of legalized divorce legalized immorality.

Now, of course it may be assumed that our lax marriage and divorce laws, the ease with which they are granted, may be responsible for this condition; it may be assumed that the forty-eight different sections of marriage and divorce laws which we have in the United States, and the three hundred and sixty odd causes for divorce which are found on the respective statute books of the forty-eight states,--it may be that these facts are in some measure responsible for the ease with which divorces are obtained, but surely they are not responsible for the cause of divorce. The causes must be traced back to the individual man and woman; the causes must be found in the altered standards of morality, in the weakening of the social sense, in the break-down of moral principle largely.

← The spread of the divorce evil in the United States is an index not of the growing emancipation of womanhood, not of the greater freedom of men, but an index of a lack of moral discipline, a break-down of essential moral standards, which augurs ill for the prosperity of our American civilization. Along with the spread of this divorce evil is the outrageous, staggering spread of crime in our midst. We are the most criminal nation in the world; we are a nation more addicted to man-killing and to crimes of violence than any nation in the world. In 1923 there were

two hundred cases of murder in England. In that same year there were ten thousand cases of murder in the United States. In 1921 there were ninety-five cases of robbery reported in England and in Wales. In 1922, in the city of Chicago alone, there were 2417 cases reported. The United States has had to contract for three thousand armed cars to carry its mail because crime and violence are so rampant in the land.

Now it may be that our lax officials and the lax administration of the law are somewhat responsible; it may be that the endless delays and the endless appeals deprive the law of its full measure of deterrent influence in crime, but the law is certainly not responsible for crime. This vicious spread of all forms of crime is an indication of a moral weakening; it is the cheapening of life; it is the loss of a sense of reverence for the sanctity of human life and for the sanctity of the immemorial commandment upon which civilization grounds itself: "Thou shalt not murder." The spread of crime is an unfailing indication of national decay.

Equally menacing, friends, is the lack of administration of the law. In no nation can that old proverb be applied with as much justice as in our nation: "Steal a million and you are free; steal a dime and you go to jail." Our penitentiaries are full of criminals, but nearly all of them are poor. The rich somehow manage to escape the penalties of the law. A wizard of finance who will engage in reckless speculation, squandering the earnings and the savings of hundreds of widows and orphans, will go

free, because in all probability he was in position to procure the finest and the most gifted of legal talent. The poor, ordinary thief, breaking into a grocery store, will receive twenty years in the penitentiary. The rich criminal is seldom punished in the United States. Those ghouls of recent years who fed on the misery and the suffering of the American people during the war--the profiteers--not one of them is today in jail; I don't know of one of them that ever found his way into jail. Even Mr. Fall is still at liberty; and Mr. Fall will probably live to a hoary old age before he is convicted or sentenced.

Now these charges are not made by men who are professional critics of the government--by radicals, by the disgruntled people. The poor and the rich do not have an equal chance before the law. That is the testimony of the greatest legal authorities in the United States. A study was made not long ago by the Carnegie Foundation, and Mr. R. H. Smith, writing on "Justice and the Poor," concludes his survey with the following statement: "The administration of American justice is not impartial. The rich and the poor do not stand on equality before the law. The widespread suspicion that our law fails to secure justice has only too much basis in fact. If this suspicion is allowed to grow unchecked it will end by poisoning the faith of the people in their own government and in law itself, the very bulwark of justice." And Chief Justice Taft, the head of our Supreme Court, declared: "Of all the questions which are before the American

people, I regard no one as more important than the importance of the administration of justice. We must make it so that the poor man will have as nearly as possible an equal opportunity in litigating as the rich man, and under present conditions, ashamed as we may be of it, this is not the fact."

Now a tendency such as this, of having one measure of justice for the rich and another for the poor, inevitably makes for anarchy and revolution, for it destroys a man's respect for the law, for the courts, for the judge, for the government, and when that sense of reverence is destroyed, men begin to resort to force and to violence.

I have frequently spoken of the lowering of the moral standards on the part of adults and on the part of the youth of our land, and I will not dwell at length on the subject now. But yesterday I read an abstract of the report submitted to the board of education of New York City by a committee appointed to study the moral conditions of the boys and girls in the high schools of the city of New York, and the report reads as follows: "A cosmopolitan high school is a cross-section of the great city itself, including every element of society, every race, color, and every creed. As a result, the school disciplinarian has to deal with almost every conceivable kind of crime. He must frequently call on the police for help; to maintain law and order he needs the training of a detective (this is in high schools); he often wishes he had a finger print expert, a psychologist or a psychiatrist; but the shock comes when we learn their code of

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morals (speaking of these young people). These same delightful young people believe that it is all right if they can get away with it. They lack respect for parents and for authority; to copy home-work is entirely honorable if they are not caught; forging a signature is a simple way of saving a lot of trouble; cutting is to be commended if they can get by; thieving is a matter of almost daily occurrence; cheating is no disgrace if the offender is not detected. And so down the line."

Now with all the indulgence that one may have for the age of youth, with all the allowances one may make for the natural ebullience of youth, these facts are quite shocking, quite disconcerting and quite menacing. There has set in a lowering of standards clear down the line from parents to children. I think one of our greatest social maladies is wealth. We are today the richest nation in the world; in the last thirty years we have increased our national wealth five-fold; in 1890 our wealth was something like 65 billions of dollars; today it is something like 320 billions of dollars. Our wealth is two and a half times as great as the wealth of the British Empire, and this wealth today in many instances is no longer wealth which is being used by people who produce it. There has set in a vast inherited wealth, a wealth which instead of giving to the man the discipline which comes with producing wealth, brings to the man enervation and a weakening which comes purely from the job of spending wealth.

There has been a tremendous increase in luxuries and in the consumption of luxuries in America. Now luxuries are not good for any individual or for any race. Luxuries inevitably enfeeble character; luxuries pamper and make weak; luxuries make for a laxity ultimately in moral principles; luxuries ultimately make for envy on the part of those who haven't luxury; luxuries make ultimately for unrest and disturbance. The way of Babylon is the primrose path; it is a plain which masquerades in silks and satins; it is the way of death.

I think a nation would serve itself exceedingly well, and protect its soul, its life and its people, if it would tax out of existence all unearned wealth; for nothing so destroys character and unsettles standards of life and conduct than unearned wealth. And so these are some of the facts which we must, in deference to ourselves, take cognizance of. They are indications which are far from promising for our future. An increase in the number of homes which are being broken up annually in our land; an increase in crime; an increase in the unfairness and the injustice of the administration of law; an increase in immoral practices on the part of even the youth of our land, and an increase in poorly used, wrongfully applied unearned wealth,--these are things which, if not quickly checked, controlled or mended, may result in terrible harm and hurt to the life and the soul of America.

I said that eternal vigilance is the price of

progress. Eternal vigilance is the price of national health. We must, with every ounce of energy in us, endeavor to keep American life from degenerating; we must keep it by constant mental and spiritual exercise from becoming enfeebled and weakened; we must train our young people into a vigorous, arduous, disciplined mode of living; we must set up standards in our homes--standards of duty, standards of good manners, standards of social responsibility, standards of high thinking and plain living--simplicity.

This cannot be brought about by legislation, and this cannot be brought about by the establishment of new institutions and new societies; and we are so often tempted to thrust all of our irritating problems to the attention of government, as though government by a legal fiat can improve and make straight that which is crooked, and make whole that which is wanting. These spiritual problems are individual problems, and individual men and women in their respective homes and their spheres of influence must themselves meet those problems courageously and solve them. A bit of the old pioneer spirit of hard work ought to be conserved in every American home; a bit of that hardy spirit of the faith of the founders and the builders of empire, of the people who broke through the jungle land to extend the frontiers of a great nation; application to duty, respect for authority, devotion to the elemental decencies of human life,-- a bit of that ought to be fostered and cultivated in our homes.

It is infinitely more important for the America of tomorrow that your children should, in your respective homes, be inspired with the ideals of loyalty, devotion, rectitude, hard work, honest thinking, than that they should be clothed in silks and in purples and in furs and in jewelry,--infinitely more important. Plain living, high thinking, the simple life, the purposeful life,--this is the life which will make America great. All else will make us less and less. Our very blessings may become our curse. Our wealth, our prosperity, our sense of security,--these very things which are the gifts of the Almighty God to us may, unless we use them worthily, become our maledictions and our destroying angels.

With the use of wealth must come a vigorous, compelling sense of self-control and self-mastery. When that disappears all disappears. Our homes must remain the sacred dwelling place of life's highest virtues, and men and women must remember that life brings with it burdens which must be shared, even as it brings with it blessings which can be shared. But the enterprise of home-building is not free from difficulties and perplexities and soul-taxing irritations, which strong men and strong women who do not pamper themselves but who serve one another, surmount and overcome.

Our courts of law must remain the sanctuaries of justice--impartial. "Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor pay heed to the person of the rich." "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue!" Our youth must be

inspired with a sense of duty--not so much a sense of privilege, their rights and their prerogatives, their desserts, their rewards; their duties, their responsibilities--the things which they must do in order that they may enjoy the blessings of social life.

All of us must look to the establishment of a norm of living which will not be restricted. Simple living, honest living--that will keep us from going the way of Babylon.

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