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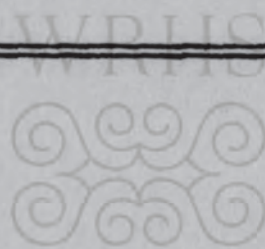
Will prosperity destroy this nation?, 1926.

"WILL PROSPERITY DESTROY THIS NATION?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MARCH 7, 1926, CLEVELAND, O.



In discussing the subject announced for this morning--"Will Prosperity Destroy This Nation?"--I should like to allay your fears at the outset. This nation is not likely to be destroyed next week or next year, and I should not like to indulge in prophecies of doom, of calamity. I am not unaware of the great strength, physical and moral, upon which this great nation is grounded; I am not unaware of its moral reserves, of its innate idealism, of its sound common sense and of its ability to meet critical situations.

I am also not unaware of the fact that the rank and file of our people are hard-working, God-fearing, honest men and women, who love their homes and their families; who like fairness, who revere freedom and justice, who are charitable and kindly, and who are not at all behind any people, as far as the basic virtues of life are concerned. Daily it is brought to our attention that men of wealth are endowing great institutions of learning--universities, museums, scientific laboratories, philanthropic agencies, thereby enriching the intellectual and cultural and social life of our nation. Our nation is strongly buttressed in its institutions,--its numberless schools and colleges, its churches, its laboratories, and the countless number of organizations for humanitarian purposes. All these are sources of strength, which are in turn guaranteed permanence by the durability of our nation.

So that one would have to be of a decidedly melancholy humor to anticipate, in spite of these many evidences of vitality, of vigor, the collapse of this nation.

On the other hand, I believe that one would be criminally foolish to persuade himself into a sense of pleasant complacence and serenity in view of these facts. Our vigilance ought not to be deadened by the opiate of prosperity. There are certain things, certain factors, surface and hidden, which are not altogether reassuring in our national life, and there are historical precedents which ought to cause thoughtful men and women serious concern.

I want to point out this morning a few of these disturbing factors in our national life which, if unchecked or unremedied, will undermine the strength of this nation or of any nation. The first of these is the spread of crime. I spoke of that a few weeks ago. Just a few days ago a symposium was held in this temple under the auspices of our Men's Club, on the subject of crime, its causes and its cure, and men representing all those professions which are concerned with the issue of crime participated in this symposium. Many fine and true things were said, many illuminating ideas were suggested, and, withal, many staggering facts.

All of the men seemed to be dreadfully concerned with the appalling spread of criminality in our land. Crime, it has been said, is increasing in our land at the rate of 10% a year; juvenile delinquency has increased within

the last ten years 200%. There seems to be a dark tide of lawlessness rising to engulf our whole life. Among the many very fine things that were said that night, one thing in particular, one statement, attracted me because of its force and its incisiveness. It was a statement made by our thoughtful city manager. He said: "The inducements to dishonesty are altogether out of proportion to the ability of the people to resist them." The inducements to dishonesty offered by the wealth of this land, by the provision of prosperity, the inducements to dishonesty, to criminality, to lawlessness, are altogether out of proportion to the ability of the people to resist them.

In other words, prosperity, social surplus, which ought, to our way of thinking, insure honesty and stability, is, on the contrary, becoming a destructive and disintegrating factor in our national life. The more wealth we have the greater the temptation to augment it, to acquire it, on the part of individuals, if necessary by illicit means.

He said that the arm of government ought to be as strong as its purse is big. In other words, the ability of government to enforce law ought to be at least as vigorous and as powerful as the progressive accumulation of wealth, which makes law enforcement continually more imperative. But unfortunately that is not so. For government only reflects the moral temper of the governed, and when the standards of the people are lessened, their moral tone, their moral passion, become lower through the debilitat-

ing and weakening influences of prosperity and wealth, and government, too, decays, and bribery and iniquity creep in, paralyzing it, ultimately destroying it.

That has been the story of every great and rich people from the beginning of time. No nation was ever destroyed because of its poverty. Almost every great empire was destroyed because of its tremendous wealth which it could not morally use, and the tremendous problems which prosperity presented to it which it could not intelligently solve.

When the great ancient empire of Babylon fell it was, to quote the prophet Isaiah, who was a contemporary, "the Golden City; the beauty of the Chaldeans' pride; the glory of the world." When Babylon fell it was the great meeting place of the world, the market of the world; all the trade routes from the ends of the earth met in Babylon, and the wealth of nations poured through its market-places. And it was strongly fortified, too; it was not a defenseless city which fell before the sweep of the oncoming foe. Herodotus tells us that the walls of Babylon were 335 feet high and 85 feet wide; that the outer walls alone of the city had a hundred gates of brass, a city which seemed nigh impregnable, absolutely prepared from a military point of view. And yet it fell.

It fell into ruin and decay not so much because of the onslaught of the enemy without, but because of the corrosive, eating away of the enemies within,--of greed, crime, lawlessness, intrigue and sin, and the enervating,

subtile, weakening influences of wealth. When the Persians conquered Babylon they were ^a simple, crude, hardy race of mountaineers, strong physically, mentally alert, morally clean,--a conquering people. But with conquest came wealth; with wealth came luxury and the desire for ease and security; with wealth and luxury came pomp and circumstance, and the intrigues for power and conspiracy and assassination, which resulted ultimately in a complete breakup of this empire which conquered almost four-fifths of the then known world. And just 150 years after the time of Cyrus the Great--and things moved much slower in those days than they do today--150 years after the peak of the conquering might of the Persians, a handful of Greeks, ten thousand of them under Xenophon, were able to march from the Tigris to the Black Sea, to the very heart of the Persian empire, unhindered, unmolested, and seize the whole empire.

Rome fell because of its very greatness and its prosperity. It was not poverty which destroyed Rome but wealth. The hardy Romans who in the early centuries of the Empire were able to conquer people after people because their bodies were strong and their minds were active and their morals were rigorous, these Romans after a while were won over to the east and the comforts of luxury. They decided that it was not necessary and it was not right for a patrician to work; they could import tens of thousands of slaves from the conquered territories to do their work; and they did, and they imported so many of these slaves that the

native born, the Latin laborer, was impoverished; the racial stock began to deteriorate, so much so that the Romans themselves could no longer rebuild their depleted legions in order to have their ranks intact to protect their outlying frontiers. They had to invite barbarians into these legions to such a degree that after a while most of the armies of Rome were composed of non-Latin Romans, and when Rome actually fell Rome was really a Germanized empire. Ease, luxury, love of power, self-indulgence, with all the destructive consequences destroyed Rome.

So that prosperity in itself is no guarantee of permanence. The strongest human frame will collapse when the heart fails, and prosperity has a way of attacking the very heart of a nation.

I spoke of crime. A few days ago Bishop Manning in a Lenten address before the congregation of St. Thomas in New York called attention of his people to the appalling prevalence of the evil of divorce which is breaking up the American home; and among other things he said: "In 1916, the last available figures, there were 57 divorces in the Dominion of Canada, and 112,000 in the United States. I think we ought to hear more from all our pulpits. We all know the delicacy of the subject. We feel deepest sympathy with those whose marriages have brought them suffering and tragedy. We are called upon to speak plainly on this question; for the shocking and scandalous increase of divorce among us is affecting our social system; it is

weakening and destroying every fabric of the home and is a grave menace to our life as a nation. One of the worst features of the situation is the unsocial, irresponsible, morally destructive example given by many who are regarded as holding high social position, who have had every advantage of education and whose influence should count for higher things. Constantly we are now seeing in the newspapers notices of divorces obtained in Paris or elsewhere, by those whose names are well known among us, and who seem to have forgotten their duty to God, to society and to their country.

"In not a few cases the real reason for the divorce is the desire to marry someone else; in many instances the new alliance is not only in mind but is definitely arranged before the divorce is obtained. The moral degradation of such a situation needs no comment. We have now reached the point at which there is in this land one divorce to every seven marriages; it is growing steadily worse, and in many of our states it has gone far beyond this. Statistics show, for example, in Ohio one divorce for every five marriages; in Texas one to 3.9; in Michigan one to 5.8; in Oregon one to 2.6; while in Nevada the statistics show a thousand divorces in 900 marriages!

"Plainly," says Bishop Manning", this threatens the very existence of the family as an institution; it is destroying the meaning of marriage and is making it only a temporary arrangement to be determined at the whim of either party to it. How can a home exist if it is understood

that it may be dissolved at any time on the most trivial grounds? And often because those who enter into this sacred relation have become bored or because one of them wishes to form an alliance with a new partner. Homes cannot be built and cannot endure on such a foundation as that, and a nation cannot endure unless it preserves the sacredness and stability of the home."

And these are incontrovertible truths. One need not go into a lengthy discussion of the causes of divorce. One should, however, face these two facts: that divorce goes hand in hand with national decline--always; and, secondly, that divorce goes hand in hand with the increase in prosperity. The richer a nation, the richer a people, the more homes are disrupted in that people. Wealth seems to attack the very citadel of a people's life,--the home. It seems to cheapen the sanctity of family life; it seems to lessen, somehow, reverence between parents and children, and between one parent and another; it seems to place, as it does place, so many more temptations to infidelity in the way of the people. And prosperity, therefore, is a dangerous force if uncontrolled, as far as the preservation of the integrity of the home, which is the bulwark of the people's life.

Let me point to one or two other disturbing factors in our life today, and they are very real and they cannot be lightly pushed aside. I am thinking at this moment of how wealth and the acceleration of modern life have broken down, physically and mentally, so many thousands of

people in our land. The number of so-called nervous wrecks in our land is increasing with appalling rapidity every year. It seems that the strain of great possessions and the strain of life today is at such a high tempo--we live today more in one day than our forefathers lived in a year--and experiences and sensations beat in upon us so constantly and attack our nervous system so persistently, that thousands are giving way under the burden. And there are many more thousands, especially among the women of our land, whom idleness is breaking, idleness which is there because they have been able to have servants do their work and have not learned how to use their preempted time intelligently and helpfully. And so idleness, which our Rabbis already held responsible for immorality and for melancholy--"Idleness brings to immorality and idleness leads to melancholy"--that idleness is causing so many of the nervous maladies which afflict tens of thousands; not a few but tens of thousands of our people, and their number is daily increasing.

I am thinking of yet another thing. Prosperity has a tendency to dull the sensibility of the people to moral values; it has a tendency to deaden a people's alertness when fundamental principles are involved. Today it seems as if nobody cared what was transpiring in our national, in our political life. Nobody cares. Daily the basic principles of our national life are violated in one instance or in another. At no time was our federal government so flagrantly and so persistently exploited by powerful financial

interests as it is today; and nobody cares. Malefactors, corruptionists, go unpunished in our midst; and nobody cares. Men of repute, honorable men, are denied admission into our country because of the evil machinations of some foreign embassies; and nobody in this freedom-loving country seems to care. We are so much engaged by our material concerns that we do not care. Even the liberals of a decade ago seem to have vanished; they, too, seem to have lost their souls in the obesity of prosperity. Altruistic defense of principles, selfless championing of basic ideals, are very little in evidence in our life today, and I attribute it directly to the prevalence of prosperity in our midst. No nation can long survive in indifference to fundamental ideals.

Now wealth itself, friends, is neither good nor evil. Some religions have looked upon wealth as in itself an evil. The ascetics and the monastics of Christianity, as well as of other religions, have pointed to wealth as the source of all evil and have urged men voluntarily to welcome poverty so as to escape the allurements of possessions and things. "It is as difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle as for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." Or vice versa. That may be true. Very often it is just as difficult for a poor man to enter the kingdom of heaven; for poverty has its temptations and poverty brings with it its attendant vices--envy, greed, sycophancy, loss of independence. Even poverty is not an unmixed blessing.

Judaism regarded neither wealth nor poverty as a virtue or a vice in itself. In fact, Judaism looked upon wealth very often as a just reward of righteousness. Job was congratulated for having recovered his fortune. Judaism never criticized the rich man just because he was rich, but the prophets of Israel throughout the ages mercilessly denounced the rich man who abused his wealth and exploited the poor, the needy, the orphaned, the widow; who lived at ease in Zion upon couches of ivory, heedless of the safety of the people. The prophets lashed with scorpion's whips the fat and idle rich and their wives,--the kine of Bashan, as the prophet called them,--the bejeweled and the bedecked and the bestrung kine of Bashan, who, through their life of luxury, disrupt the social life of the people.

Wealth may be a blessing for a nation. It is a blessing if justly distributed and wisely administered; for wealth brings with it a certain amount of leisure, and leisure is indispensable for culture. You cannot have a high degree of culture in a people or a high type of civilization if that people has not leisure for the pursuit of intellectual or artistic interests. A people whose life is stunted by poverty, a people which must devote every ounce of its energy to wrest a living from the soil, that people will never create a high type of art or literature, or for that matter any real intellectual assets for mankind.

Leisure is necessary, but that leisure must be creatively used. Leisure alone can make for intemperance and

immorality and self-indulgence, for the pampering of the body. Leisure may give the devil free play, but leisure creatively used, time and energy preempted from physical labor, employed for the augmentation of intellectual assets, for the improvement of soul and mind and spirit,--that leisure, made possible by wealth, becomes a blessing.

So that our nation, like every other nation which is enjoying or about to enjoy prosperity, ought to go through a national education, a national course of training in the usage of leisure, of wealth. I should like to see in every college and university of America, where the sons of our rich people spend four years in training for football and the pasttimes of fraternity life,--I should like to see there courses of instruction in the social responsibility of wealth and in the technique of the administration of wealth and in the use of leisure for self-development and self-recreation; for the child of a rich parent needs ten times the amount of moral training than the child of the parent who is not rich; for the rich son will encounter ten times the temptation of the other.

Prosperity, wealth, makes possible all the things which we live to see,--our fine institutions, our beautiful public buildings, our resplendent cities, our museums, our churches and our temples. Prosperity makes possible those comforts of life which add so much to the amenities of existence; and prosperity if coupled with the ability to master it instead of being mastered by it--I think

it was Bacon who said, "Wealth is a good servant but a poor master"--prosperity with the ability to control it, prosperity coupled with the knowledge of how to guard ourselves against its invidious influences, coupled with increased vigilance, in other words; prosperity which goes hand in hand with an increased emphasis upon hard work, cleanliness of living, clean thinking, discipline of self; prosperity which goes hand in hand with the eschewing of all luxury which enervates,--that prosperity may well be a blessing to a nation. And that is, friends, the challenge of the hour for the American people.

Some nations have had to surmount the handicap of poverty. Our nation, I am afraid, will have to surmount the handicap of great wealth. No nation since the beginning of time was as rich and as powerful as this nation, and no nation since the beginning of time will be compelled to face so many pitfalls, so many moral pitfalls as this nation.

May it not be charged against us what the prophet of old charged against his people: "I increase their silver and their gold; their coffer I fill with richness, but they use that silver and gold for the worship of Baal--for the worship of the gods which bring death and destruction on the world." May it rather be said of us that we, favored by God with plenty and prosperity, use our wealth to honor God. "We have honored God with our substance." In the midst of all the temptations which wealth brings we have remained clean, strong, God-fearing, hard-working, truth-seeking,

liberty-loving; we have not yielded to the insidious invasions of the influences of wealth.

That is the great program which the American people must adopt in the generations to come. It must find for itself collectively and for the people individually a program of life whereby they will save themselves and save the nation from destruction, while at the same time retaining and using to its highest advantages the gifts to profusion which Providence pours in our lap.

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That may well be the slogan of all of our collective efforts in the years to come--to learn how to honor God, honor all the things which speak of God, and all the things which stand for God,--how to honor God with our substance. When we do that there is no fear at all that prosperity will destroy this nation. Failing to do that, the future is dark and forboding.

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daily we encounter evidence of the people's ~~love~~ strength. It has
become a commonplace thing to read of real men endeavoring
with their ^{fabulous} wealth universities, museums, scientific institutions,
thereby enriching the intell. & cultural life of the nation.



to properly make a nation cautious and dull to the very
perception to distinguish bet. right and wrong. There
was no nation more inclined to political abuse in
high and low places as it is to-day. Almost daily
vaunted dem. principles are violated. Our Federal
Government has
never been so flagrantly and obviously exploited
by Wall Street as it is to-day. Malefactors and
corruptors go unpunished. - And wobbly cases.
Men are denied admission to our shores than the
mechanics & foreign emigrants - & no body
care - The great desire to preserve for their
own rate Administrative desires to put principles
is not very much in evidence. Even the liberals
of a decade ago seem to have lost their faith
in the virtues & prosperity.

5) luxury, wantonness
wealth, too, coupled with the acceleration of
modern life, is making for an appalling
wreck in mental health - depression among men &
women - The strain & swift movement, of
astounding varieties & numbers of experiences to
which men 50 years ago be. & their limitations
were altogether unaccustomed, is proving too
much for the nervous system of many
people. Also the care, the curriculum, the rich
allures reaching for having mis used done by
restraints & finding no stimulating usage for the
time & energy thus released, it is wearing
down the human, then. The Rabbis never said
אלוהים לא יבנה לנו בית אלא אנחנו

- Such are some of the serious consequences & perils
in our country

and in the republics involved in its stewardship
I should like to see courses introduced in our
large great Colleges & Universities where the sons &
daughters of our rich now go for a 4 years
European study
European training in football and feathered
life past times - courses in the social reformation ^{in large numbers in wealth}
of wealth and the demerit of its stewardship
to rich youth ought to receive a 10 fold
new European training in self discipline
in the essential values of human personality
and in social responsibility & a poor youth
for his temptations as well be 10 fold -

10/ Prosperity makes possible all those virtues which
we prize - fine schools, museums, libraries,
beautiful cities, public buildings, fine roads
& parties & these comforts & life which add
so much to the amenities of existence.
When coupled with money prosperity gives an in-
crease, the instincts & making it in stead of
being mastered by it, an abstract TK gives
a parent its possible deliberation & anti-social
influence, a strong instinct in hard
work, upright moral character &
life, renewal for basic moral principles,
and an intelligent use & loyalty for growth
& self development - then prosperity is
a blowing indeed -

7. Wealth in itself is neither good nor evil. Some rel.
I have preached the virtue of poverty, among the monks
& monastics (Christ. rel.) to them, poverty is preached
as a means of freeing one self from the allurements
of possessions & things. The saints voluntarily surrendering
their pos. & entered the holy poverty. (But Plato has
the attendant evil. To every highness and by con-
sequence, it is in itself, as much man. To reach it is even at dis-
tance. Over rel. never made a virtue of poverty
of wealth. It regarded the possession of wealth
as desirable, if properly administered. Job was
complained in getting his fortune back, & not
the loss of wealth came in for the excruciating
commutation of all the prophets, & more. It is
the rich who exploit, rob & oppress, the rich
who idle life away in carousals & worry at
ease in Zion, the rich who are steeped in
refinement & refinement who are the targets
of their burning wrath. And they lay the
blame on the state of the land, these golden
rich & their usury, the fat king of Babylon, be-
drunk, bejewelled and be shawled, whose brain
the cups of iniquities being corrupt the social
life, the people.

8. The wealth may be a blessing, if justly distributed
and wisely administered. No nation is so wealthy
without legislation & discipline, no culture is possible
without legislation. But legislation must be used
for creative purposes not for bodily pampering,
for cultivation of mind & spirit, for
intellect & artistic pursuit, for the enrichment
of the cultural assets of society. This
makes necessary education in the use of wealth

11/ Some nations have had
~~In the past men to~~ to mountain the hand-
cap of poverty, and will have to mountain
the handcaps of wealth. No nation since the beg. of
time has been as rich as ~~the~~ our nation, & none
will face as many of the pitfalls of mechanism, as
our nation. Let us see to it that Chang & Hsien
be not aimed at us - Mo-tyal of mind you
.Wrl. - false gods whose worship is death.

- Turn the hand with our substance.

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