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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

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We moderns and we ancients, 1926.

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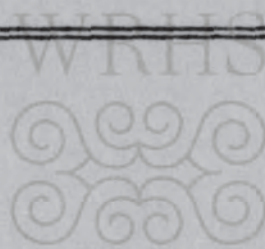
"WE MODERNS AND WE ANCIENTS."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING

OCTOBER 10, 1926, CLEVELAND.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



The Revolt of Youth has been a favorite topic of conversation in recent years. Educators, ministers, jurists, psychologists have all discussed, some at great length, this so-called revolt of youth. Some have spoken with great sentimentality about the subject, and applied to it rather glamorous, fascinating titles; they have spoken of Flaming Youth and similar captivating titles. Others have treated the subject with great resentment, with marked pessimism as to the outcome of this revolt of youth.

Youth has been represented as breaking with the traditions of the elders; the eager young men and women of today are trying to emancipate themselves from the restraints, the control of the older generation; they are seeking larger freedom and wider horizons; they are dissatisfied with the world which their parents have builded; they seek to build a new world, a happier and a nobler world.

Our young men and women, it is said, grew up in the sad years of the war, and in the moral chaos which followed the war they saw the kind of a world their wise and experienced elders fashioned,--a world of blood, tears, hate and madness--universal disaster; and these young men and women, in their unspoiled innocence, loathed this world of their elders and this world of sham and hypocrisy, and in their unimpaired enthusiasm they are now seeking to build upon the ruins of this old world a new and a more



beautiful world. And this is the Revolt of Youth.

Well, this ought to be the revolt of youth. In reality it is not; at least, not in our country. I understand that in some countries, like Germany and North-western Europe, there is such a thing as a youth movement, where splendid young men and women in unalloyed idealism and enthusiasm are actually trying to fashion a new order of society through their own efforts. In our land I am afraid such a youth movement is not visible. What is actually taking place is a sharpened relish of the physical appetites of our young people. Nothing more or less than that. The old pace of pleasure-seeking, which is as old as mankind, has been put to quicker rhythm and accelerated. The same sordid old melody has been tuned up and a new sauce has been added to an old dish.

There has been no revolt. The books which our young people read today, if they read at all, must be a little more suggestive, and the dress must be a little more provocative, and the speech must be a little more inelegant, and the dance must be a little more rapid or tortuous. And all this---these superficial things--together with a certain freer mingling, though not a profounder mutual understanding, of the sexes; all this,, together with late hours of dissipation, when young people show how they can skate on thin ice,--all this, together with a certain amount of irreverence and irresponsibility, is called the revolt of youth.



This is clearly a misnomer. In the first place, if it is a revolt, it is not peculiar to youth. The older generation is just as eager as the younger generation to enjoy this accelerated tempo of self-indulgence. The number of people of 50 today who would like to act and speak and dress like 20 are growing more and more rapidly so in our land. You see, our nation has become exceedingly rich in the last few decades, and it is now pleasure bent. Few people can survive wealth and few nations can survive wealth. The offspring of wealth are ease and indulgence, and these in turn beget laxity and corruption. And that is true of youth and true of middle age in our land today.

In the second place, it is not a revolt. Only in a limited sense of the word can it be said that a man who drinks to excess, for example, is revolting. You cannot dignify the over-indulgence of an inebriate with the term of moral indignation, which is implied in the concept of revolt. We understand revolt as being a moral aspiration which at some moment in its history begins to feel a dynamic urge to knock off the shackles of the false ideas and the antiquated standards of the older generation, so that it can be free to seek a fuller and a richer and a more beautiful life. That is a modern revolt,--Breaking with the past for the sake of a more resplendent future: that is revolt. Mankind has witnessed frequently such revolts; and they are inevitable, nay, more, they are the very steps by which mankind progresses.



Social life must be continually changing and evolving. The moment society stands still, that moment it begins to degenerate and life becomes mean and starved and sordid. The best of customs, unless it adjusts and re-adjusts itself constantly, soon corrupts the world, and therefore the old world must give way to the new. Now this eternal transition, this eternal readjustment, is not without its tragedies, not without its heartaches and hardships. The old hate to give way and the young are frequently too impatient, too unsympathetic; and there are conflicts between the old and the new, and tragedies.

Some of the finest dramas of the last quarter of a century were written around this very thing,--the struggle between the old generation and the new. One thinks of Ibsen's "The Master Builders"; of Bennett's "Milestones"; Sir John Francis' "Change" and similar great dramas which vividly depict the tragic struggle between those who have cherished the old and been wedded to it with all the affection of their souls, and those who seek to plunge into the future and experiment with new ideas, new events and new institutions. And a man would be utterly unschooled in the whole history of human advancement if he were unsympathetic with this urge of youth to experiment with new things,--with this "revolt of youth." Why, it is the very life and glory, the flame of life; it is the zest and romance of life,--this "revolt of youth."

And I dare say the world today is in



desperate need of such a revolution. The old order of things went down in defeat and in shame in the last war. A civilization that leads mankind to the shambles is rotten to the core; its ideas are treacherous; its standards are deceptive; its faith is idolatrous; its heroes are clay images; and mankind today needs a veritable housecleaning of all the trappings and paraphernalia of this decrepit civilization.

We are in need of a bloodless revolution, and we need youth, the energy of youth, the indefeasible hope of youth to effect such a revolution. That would be the revolt of youth. But we haven't it. That is not the way our young people are revolting today. You visit your colleges and your universities; you look about you and see how many of the young men and women who, I suppose, represent if not the best, then surely the most privileged young people of our country. How many of them are concerned with this problem of fashioning a finer world in which they may live? Very few, if any. Of course they are restless, but that restlessness goes to waste in mere excitement and fuss and fury, signifying nothing. I suppose that these young men and women regard themselves as extremely modern and as emancipated people. I suppose they look with a certain amount of pity and indulgence on the older people who are not so emancipated and so modern. But in reality they are not modern at all. They are as ancient as the most ancient of the men whom they believe to have outstripped and out-



distanced. Because their ideas are the same--essential ideas I mean; their ideas concerning the essential facts of life. They are the same.

In order to be a modern one must not only live in 1927: one must think in terms of 1927, in terms of the newer problems and the newer truths and the newer discoveries and the newer alignments of the day. To be a modern one must belong to a new school of thought, not to a new school of dancing. That is the confusion in the mind of the young men and women. To be a modern one must be identified with the modern movements in art, in literature, in politics, in religion. One must be more responsible and not less responsible; one must have higher devotions and not lower devotions; one must be more disciplined and not less disciplined in order to be a modern. To be a modern, as I see it, is to be able to think ~~thoughtfully~~, critically. To be a modern, as I see it, is to free oneself of the cultural superstition and the intellectual taboos and the political regimentation and the mock emotionalism of the older generation, and to strike out along the broader highways of finer, cleaner, nobler and saner living and thinking. That is to be a modern.

The late lamented Charles W. Eliot, the dean of American college presidents, was a modern, although he was more than three-score years and ten, and although in manner and in his codes of conduct he was a gentleman of the old school of two generations ago. But he was a modern of the



moderns. John Dewey is a modern just as Brandeis is a modern; Havelock Ellis is a modern; Bernard Shaw is a modern, and all their disciples. Those who think with them and follow them are moderns. Modernism is a quality of thought, an attitude. Modernism is a quality of courage. Dress and capers and stunts and a cheap and easy cleverness,-- these things have nothing to do with being modern.

Now, to attain to a degree of modernity, to be a free man, these stale bravados in which our young men and women indulge themselves can be of little help. There is only one kind of freedom: that is the freedom of the mind and the spirit. All other types of freedom are anarchy. Self-indulgence, for example, and riotous living are not freedom; they are the veriest kind of slavery. We become enslaved by our passion, by our whims and by our lusts until these passions and these lusts exhaust and consume us; they destroy us; they never make us free. A life of ease and indulgence is not a free life; it is bovine servitude; it is the sorriest substitute for a life of daring and enterprise and glorious adventure in the sphere of thought, in the sphere of spirit or in the sphere of human service. That is not freedom. To challenge the conventions about us in dress and in speech and in form of conduct,--that is not freedom; that is like the pettishness of a naughty child. Freedom is a profound inner adjustment to the basic facts of life. Freedom comes with the discovery of the fundamental truths, the reality and the nobility of



of life, and of our subjection to these basic truths and ideals of life. That is freedom. To become free is to become the slave of God, the slave of truth. Only then is a man really free.

I would bespeak that of my young friends whose problems are not unknown to me, whose lives are not strange but of no concern to me; I would bespeak for all of them a great measure of such freedom and such modernity. I would like them all to be modern men and women in the true and not the spurious sense of modernity; I would like them to go through life as eager truth-seeking, truth-serving men and women, who will then be blessed with perennial youth, with the gift of God's choicest gift of eternal renewal. I know that I am speaking to many young men and women that I have the privilege of teaching, and many of whom I have confirmed. I am waiting now anxiously to see what role they mean to play in life, and what place they will carve out for themselves in the social life, in the cultural life, in the religious life of our community, because they are our hope and they are our immortality.

I would wish them to be moderns in the profoundest sense of the word. They are children of a race that is among the most ancient and yet among the most modern of mankind. Our people (Israel) was old when the pyramids were young, and yet our people comes down to this age and this day as vigorous spiritually, as aggressive mentally, as enterprising as the youngest and the most vigorous of modern



peoples. And why? Because very early in our existence we discovered the magic charm of eternal renewal; and God blessed us with a rare gift. "May thy youth be renewed like an eagle's." Constant self-renewal. We treasured our past. And by the way, every great modern treasures the past. To be a modern is not to throw over the past, the heritage of the past, the glories of the past, the achievements of the past. No man and no people starts life de novo. A tree cannot grow unless it has its roots sunk deep down in the soil. You cannot build a future without having a rich past. We treasured our past wisely, but we never permitted our past to dominate us and to master us. We used it for the sake of the future. We never permitted ourselves to leave off our heritage, but we reinvested it in a rich cultural and intellectual industry with great and rare profit. That is why our people three thousand years ago gave a Moses to the world; that is why our people could two thousand years ago and more give prophets to the world, and sages,--an Isaiah, and a Jeremiah, and an Amos, and a Hillel; and a thousand years later a Maimonides; and six hundred years later a Spinoza. That is why our people today, old and yet young, ancient and yet modern, could give the world a Bergson and an Einstein and a Freud and a George Brandeis and an Israel Zangwill,--vigorous mentality, vivid souls.

Now, you belong to such a race; you are the children of this ancient and modern people. We should like to have our youth continue this rich tradition; we should



like to have you identify your lives, link your destinies with the great dreams of mankind, the great undying past of the world. Some of you may be gifted with the qualities of leadership. Take your place, then, in the van of the civic movements of our community, and ultimately, as your powers wax and your experiences increase, take your place in the forefront of our national movements. Link yourself with a star. And even if you are not gifted with the qualities of leadership, you may be gifted, if so you will, with the qualities of the consecrated discipleship.

I sometimes think that the world needs more today disciples than leaders. We have leaders; we have God-inspired dreamers of magnificent dreams that project programs and ideals for mankind; we have our prophets today and our seers. But we ignore them, and sometimes we crucify them. What we need today are consecrated disciples, men and women who will attach themselves to a leader or to the vision of a leader, and worship it and serve it and follow it through life. That you may do always. And when you do that, young men and women, friends of mine, you will never need the stimulant of the novel, for you will have the satisfaction of the new; every year and every day will bring you precious argosies of new truth, of new discoveries, of new revelations. You will be moving with the high tides of the world on the crest of the waves; you will never have a dull moment in your life; for there is no dullness in nature and there is no dullness in the real, intense, consecrated



social life of the world.

"And God will place in your heart and on your lips a new song," - daily a new song. Your heart will sing and your lips will sing and your voice will then join the choir invisible whose music is the gladness of the world.

That is the blessing that I would invoke upon you all, friends,--the blessing of modernity and the blessing of freedom, which, in other words, is the blessing of truth-seeking, God-loving, man-serving qualities.

May you be so blessed.

