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Some of the great tasks of American Israel, 1927.

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"SOME OF THE GREAT TASKS OF AMERICAN ISRAEL."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING

JANUARY 16, 1927, CLEVELAND, O.

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WRHS

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



Some two thousand years ago there lived in Alexandria an eminent Jewish historian by the name of Josephus, with whose work some of you are undoubtedly familiar. Josephus wrote three important works, one called the "Antiquities of the Jews," and the other the "Wars of the Jews," and the third a sort of an apology for the Jewish people against its maligners and critics in his day, called "Contra Apionem"--"Against Apion," who was one of the arch anti-Semites in Josephus' time.

In reading through again this work "Against Apion" a few days ago, this phrase of Josephus leaped into significance, in view of the approaching convention of the American Hebrew Congregations, and of all the liberal religious bodies of Jewry in our land, and I shall read this sentence to you, for I believe that there is no more appropriate phrase that can be uttered on an occasion such as we are preparing for in our community today. Josephus said: "As for ourselves (meaning the Jewish people) we neither inhabit a maritime country, nor do we delight in merchandise, nor in such a mixture with other men as arises from it, (namely, the ) but the cities we dwell in are remote from the sea, and having a fruitful country for our habitation, we take pains in cultivating that only. Our principal care of all is this: to educate our children well, and we think it to be the most necessary business of our



whole life to observe the laws that have been given us, and to keep those rules of piety that have been delivered down to us." I read again that last phrase: "Our principal care of all is this: to educate our children well, and we think it to be the most necessary business of our whole life to observe the laws that have been given us, and to keep those rules of piety that have been delivered down to us."

In this same essay Josephus recounts the report made by a Greek historian of an event which took place in Jewish history. Ptolemy invaded Palestine and laid siege to the great city of Jerusalem. It was a Sabbath day and the Jews were prohibited by law to work on that day or to bear arms on that day, and Ptolemy, knowing this, made his major assault upon the fortifications of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, and the Jews did not resist and so the city fell. This Greek historian, Epaphroditus, called it "the mad custom of the Jews" which suffered their country to submit to a bit of law and a mad custom. But Josephus said to this Greek historian, "This custom seems a ridiculous thing, but it will appear to such as consider it without prejudice a great thing and one deserving of a great many encœmiums. I mean when certain men constantly prefer the observation of their laws and their religion toward God before the preservation of themselves and their country."

It was a Jew who understood the heart of Judaism and the philosophy of Jewish history. Here was a Jew who knew, first, what was the principal business of the Jews



collectively, and the way in which they meant to perpetuate this principal business or concern of their life. It was to observe the laws of piety, faith, the highest ethical ideals among themselves, even at the cost of self, even at the cost of physical self-preservation, even at the cost of that which others denominated as mad, and a people which knew how to perpetuate itself in these ideals by making it the principal care to educate their children well.

If there is one particular note which, to my mind, ought to be struck at these forthcoming conventions, if there is one particular battle-cry which should be sounded in all the convocations of Israel from one end of the land to the other at the present time, it is this: that the principal care of our people must now be to educate our children well. We have organized our philanthropies well; we have built those institutions which care for the physical needs of the orphaned and the aged and the delinquent and the deficient, well; we have built magnificent hospitals, and built them well, for the care of the body and the alleviation of the physical ailments of our people. But we have not, unfortunately, taken care of the education, of the Jewish, of the religious, education of our children well. Nay, we have taken so little care of it that to this day, in spite of all of our prosperity, in spite of all of our physical well-being in the midst of these marvelous buildings and institutions which we have erected, two-thirds of the youth of Israel in America is utterly without any education in the



religion, the history and the literature of their people. There are six hundred thousand young Jewish boys and girls of school age who never enter the Sabbath school or Sunday school or the Hebrew school, who never receive private instruction anywhere.

Now there is, to my way of thinking--and I say this without any desire to exaggerate--no problem so compelling, so immediate, so all-important, facing organized American Israel at the present day as this problem of educating our children well. When I speak of our children I have in mind also our adolescent boys and girls; I have in mind our young men and women who attend our colleges and our universities. Many of them are drifting away from us, from our tradition, from our inspiration,--not because of any wickedness in themselves, but because we have not placed at the important cross-roads of their lives those power-houses of inspiration to reach them, to stimulate them, to guide them, to direct them along the paths which we want them to walk. While every other great religious denomination in America has built, and is building, in every college and university, institutions which foster their faith, their ideals, we have pitifully few of these institutions, pitifully few places, and only in the last three or four years have we seriously been turning our attention to that problem.

What is it that we want to give to these young people in our universities and in our colleges? There are some who say that the way to hold our young people is to



give them sort of a secular Jewish culture. The advocates of that type of culture assume that Jewish culture is more than the Jewish religion, and that it is likely to appeal to the youth in our colleges and in our universities just because it is secular and not religious. Many of these advocates are frankly hostile to religion, and because they lack strong religious convictions which would help them to master their environment and to adjust themselves to life, and because they also lack what others seem to have,--strong nationalistic convictions which would help those others to adjust themselves to their environment, they find their Jewish birth very much of a burden. They do not know what to do with it; they are not wanted outside of the fold, and so they attempt to build up a new philosophy of Jewish life, a new concept of a Jewish culture, which has little to do with the Jewish religion, and in order to bolster up this thesis of theirs, they present the whole philosophy of American life, they propound that fantastic philosophy of cultural pluralism in America which means that every race coming to America,--the Italian, the French, the German, the Polish, the Irish, ought to be made to perpetuate its own distinctive culture, to preserve it, to develop it, and that all of these people presenting their unique cultures to America will help to create that composite culture which will be the real American culture. In other words, they aim to achieve what someone has rightly called the Balkanization of America,--to Balkanize America, to make it a crazy-quilt of



culture.

Now the fact of the matter is that none of these groups wishes to preserve that culture which it brought from the Old World; except where a racial group lives in an isolated section, in a congested section, these groups are quite ready and willing to slough off that which they brought with them, and to merge and submerge themselves into a common American culture. The German immigrant to America is not anxious to preserve, nor will he create, a German-American culture. The Italian immigrant is not anxious to preserve Italian culture in America, nor is he likely to produce, nor has he produced, an Italian-American culture. The whole concept is fantastic and is evoked only by these Jewish racialists or secularists to give a high-sounding basis for an unsound position.

If there is not enough of virility or uniqueness or distinction in our religion, in our ethics, to attract our young college men and women to us, there certainly is not enough of uniqueness and distinction in so-called Jewish art and Jewish music or Jewish scholarship to attract them, to enflame their imagination, to enkindle their enthusiasm. What is Jewish culture? How much of it is really secular? Amazingly little. When one takes a survey of the whole panorama of Jewish culture from the beginning until the last century, one is amazed to find how thoroughly and completely the whole cultural achievements of our people in the last three thousand years are saturated, completely



saturated with religious thought. Our Bible, our Talmud, our Midrashim, our piyyuṭim, our hymnology of the Middle Ages, our legal code, our mystic literature, all of them, revolve around a few central, indispensable ideals which are the unique contributions of Israel to the thought of mankind,-- an infinite variety in style and technique of a few basic themes and dogmas: God's law of the Torah, God's people, Israel, God's purpose, the kingdom of God in the world.

What is Jewish philosophy but theology? What are Jewish legal codes but the effort to regulation, to help men to live the Godly life? In all the poetry which our people has produced through thirty generations, you will not find five per cent of it that is secular in subject or in treatment. Nearly all of it are embellishments to the prayer book. Their very names, the names they go by, are such that they are integral parts or to be parts of the ritual.

What is Jewish culture? Why, it is just this: the religious envisagement of the whole of life; the rapt and devout contemplation of the mysteries of life; the attitude and the spirit of holiness and reverence in our approach to all human relationships, and that passionate craving and yearning for "the establishment of God's kingdom on earth." That is Jewish culture; that is the unique stamp and imprint of the Jewish personality. Of what other material can a Jewish culture be fashioned for tomorrow? And it is my firm belief that there is enough of romance and beauty and



nobility in these religious cultural achievements and contributions of our race to enkindle the minds of our young Jews and Jewesses, to inspire them, if we but knew how to reach them, if we but apply ourselves to the job of reaching them,--through classes, through schools, through lecturers, through a hundred and one ways by which one mind transmits its potency to another mind.

There is developing in our modern colleges and universities a very commendable and a very hopeful new Jewish agency which goes by the name of the Hillel Foundation. This Hillel Foundation is fostered by that great fraternal body, the B'nai Brith. It aims to establish at each campus a house where Jewish students may meet,--not for physical exercise, not merely for recreation, but for gaining Jewish religious culture, for receiving instruction in the faith, in the ideals and in the literature of their people. These foundation agencies ought to be fostered, for they may become our strongest help in meeting this real problem which is facing us,--how to hold our young people; how to make them not indifferent and unhappy members of a people who live on the fringe, apologetic, but inspired and enthused and creating sons and daughters of a great heritage.

The three great bodies who are meeting in our city this week will do all that they can do, for they will devote much of their time and their deliberations to this problem: how to educate our children well.

There is one other thought that comes to my



mind, and I shall be through, and that, too, is suggested by this phrase of Josephus,--the men who make it the supreme business--"we think it to be the most necessary business of our whole life to observe the laws, to keep the rules of piety." These conventions are bringing to our city hundreds of representative Jews and Jewesses of America; they will speak for hundreds of prosperous American congregations, sisterhoods and brotherhoods; they will be a mass demonstration of strength, of increasing strength, of liberal Judaism in America; they will be perhaps the most effective rebuttal against the charge which has been made now for more than a generation by all the prophets of doom of our people, who base their prophecies on their own skepticism and on their own lack of faith: that Judaism in America is doomed; that liberal Judaism has no future. They will be the most effective and telling rejoinders for all these unfounded charges and all these prophecies of doom.

All this is gratifying and inspiriting, but we ought never to forget that our ultimate strength, that strength which asserts itself in the moments of our crisis and need, is not numbers, nor beautiful institutions, nor beautiful temples, nor a multiplicity of activities - "Not in strength and not in numbers but in the spirit." In other words, that our ultimate strength lies in that sense of real Jewish obligation which can be and unfortunately is the possession of only a few at any time. Our power, our hope, are not in the multitudes, however anxious we are to have



them, but in the few who take Judaism quite seriously, as the most necessary business of their life. We are going to lose the masses whenever the crisis comes, as we always have lost the masses. Those whose adherence to Judaism and to the synagogue are a matter of habit or inheritance or lukewarm allegiance, those, in those tense moments which try a people in the hour of persecution, those disappear; they leave us; they scuttle for safety. Only the few who make Judaism the most necessary business of their life remain, and it is they who become the seed of the new resurrection; those Jews who, when they speak of faith, mean something very concrete and real to them in their lives; and when they speak of God they speak of a very vivid experience in their life, and when they say that Judaism stands for social justice, they will move heaven and earth to establish social justice in the world; and when they say that the mission of Israel is peace, those few who take the business of Judaism seriously will face a whole world arrayed in hostility, will submit to the mockery, to the contempt of the world, will submit to be called traitor for the sake of that mission of Judaism-- which is peace.

And so in the midst of the physical manifestations of our prosperity, in the face of our increasing numbers, let us be humble. For we do not yet know how many there really are in that vast host who are making their faith the supreme concern of their life. Let us be prayerfully humble and prayerfully hopeful that here and there, in every



habitation where the sons of our people dwell, there are found, and in moments of need there will be found, "the chosen few, the sparks which escape from the conflagration, the aristocrats of the spirit" - the chosen spirits who will remain steadfast, who will never bend even if it means that they must break; the chosen few who are the essence, the soul contribution of Israel to the world; who will speak the courageous word when that word must be spoken; who will do the courageous deed when that act is needed; who will exemplify in their life, in their thought, in their speech, this hope of the ancient sage of our people--that they take their faith as the most important concern of their life.

Josephus said we were never a maritime people; we were never a great commercial people; our interest was never great in merchandising; we were a simple agricultural people; but our greatest care, our greatest love, was to educate our children well, and our greatest concern in life was to obey the moral laws, the laws of piety which were handed down to us from time immemorial. Well, we are the great merchandising people today; we are engaged in commerce and industry; we are leaders in finance. Can we say, two thousand years after Josephus, that in spite of the change in our outer fortunes, we are still taking care of, that we shall educate, our children well? And our chief interest in life is still our religion? I wonder. I wonder.

I wonder whether American Israel is not losing its soul in the obesity of prosperity, of wealth, and



in the multitudinous concerns of the busy life about us. I wonder whether American Israel has not fallen victim to that pervading attitude that the chief concern of a people's life is not the obedience of moral laws, not the education of its children into the high standards of living and thinking, but wealth and things, aggrandizement, accumulation, size, multitude, possession of things.

We stood out unique in those days. Josephus says we were different. He tells the Greeks, who were the great maritime peoples, and the Phoenicians, who were the great commercial peoples, that Israel was different; its main concern was not the ships that ply the seas, or the exports and the imports, but its chief concern was, quietly and modestly, to educate, to instruct, to live a life of purity and nobility, plain living and high thinking.

That is another need, friends, that I think this great body of Jews assembling in our city this week may strike. It may not reach the masses; it will reach the few, and the few will save us.

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