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

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Ought we to educate everybody?, 1928.



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"OUGHT WE TO EDUCATE EVERYBODY?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

JANUARY 15, 1928, CLEVELAND, O.

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Nowhere in the world is so much money spent on education as in America. Our expenditures from public and private funds for education are amazingly lavish. As a people we do not stint on our schools. We build the best types of schools and we equip them the best and in the most modern way. No people can pride itself on as many schools and high schools and colleges and universities and technical schools as the people of the United States.

We have a universal compulsory system of education for children up to an age which is higher than the age limit of almost any other country, and we have systems of secondary education, higher education, that are made available for almost anyone who wishes to avail himself of the opportunities of higher education. Our colleges and universities are richly endowed. Our very rich men vie with one another in the building of colleges or in the building of units within universities, in donating buildings to universities, in establishing departments and chairs in universities, or in making generous gifts to universities.

The endowment fund of Harvard University, for example, is well over seventy-five millions of dollars; that of Yale, forty-five millions; of Columbia University, fifty millions; of Chicago University, thirty-five millions of dollars. Our universities seemingly are not suffering from lack of funds; and the craving of the American people



for education is fairly amazing. Our day schools and night schools, our day colleges and night colleges, are crowded. Why over three millions are enrolled in various correspondence courses. The enrollment in some of our universities, if not in all, during the past ten or fifteen years has increased three-fold, four-fold and five-fold. Within the last fifteen years, for example, the student enrollment of Columbia University rose from 3500 to 12,500; that of Berkeley, California, rose from 3800 to 19,000; that of the New York University from 3600 to 20,000; that of the City College of New York from 4400 to 18,000; that of Minnesota University from 5,000 to 13,000; that of Pennsylvania University from 4,000 to 11,000. And every year an increasing number, a veritable tide of applicants presents itself at the doors of our academies, and untold numbers of scholarships and stipends are made available for the poor who wish to avail themselves of the higher education.

Clearly, then, the American people cannot be charged with indifference to education; and yet we have been called a nation of semi-literates. Both here and abroad the products of our schools have been severely criticized. American educators have been perhaps the most severe in their appraisal of the products of our schools and high schools and universities, many of them maintaining that our public school gives the child a mental mess instead of an education, and that our colleges and universities give to our young people at best a surface veneering, a stereotyped amalgam of



inadequate knowledge but no education.

It is maintained by many that the graduate of the American public school system is far inferior, as regards training and equipment, to the graduate of the English or the Continental public school; that the graduate of the American high school cannot be compared, as far as thoroughness and mastery of given subjects and ability to think, to the graduate of the English or Continental European high school. Most surely the graduate of the American college or university lags far behind the European college in the mastery of the subject, in the broadness of the outlook, in the perfection of his thinking apparatus.

Now this criticism need not be refuted because it is generally accepted. The American people is not an educated people in spite of the lavish expenditure of moneys on education; for a truly high type of education inevitably manifests itself in high standards of taste, of criticism, of culture, of literary production, and the American people, except in the realm of technology, has produced no such high standards. On the basis of culture we are looked upon as a nation of mediocrity.

Now what is wrong? Clearly great sums of money spent on education and adequate physical facilities and large numbers of pupils and structures do not yet make for education. What is wrong? Surely the American mind is not inferior to the mind of the European. We are not a dull and backward people. In certain enterprises of the



human mind, in scientific effort and technical ingenuity, in invention, we have made remarkable progress, and we have far outdistanced many of the most civilized peoples of the world. What is wrong with our education? Clearly it is not our minds which are at fault but our method. We have not yet passed from the quantitative stage of education to the qualitative; we have not yet passed from the mass concept of education to the value concept; from the extensive to the intensive, the concentrated and the select.

As a people we accepted the dogma of popular education as enthusiastically as we accepted the dogma of popular government. Everybody ought to vote; everybody ought to be educated. These are dogmas which we accepted with all the fervor and devotion which dogmas frequently command. But a hundred and fifty years of experimentation in popular government have convinced the American people that popular government does not always and inevitably make for good government, and a hundred years or more of popular education is beginning to convince the American people that popular education does not of necessity and always make for good education or excellency in education.

We have become convinced, as far as our political life is concerned, that if popular government is to function at all, it must make possible the creation of a small class of highly trained and scientifically equipped political administrators and executives who will be entrusted with the actual business of government, subject of course



ultimately to popular control, and only as we evolve such a class of men trained for government and charged with the responsibility of expertness in government can popular government succeed.

Similarly with popular education. If we are to become an educated people, a people possessing a high standard of culture and a high civilization other than our mechanistic civilization, then our system must make possible a class of intellectual thoroughbreds, if you will,--a minority men and women who will really be educated. We must look for true education not to the many but to the few, and it is sheer waste of substance and of energy to try to give to everyone what only the few are prepared and willing to receive.

I am not arguing against popular education or mass education. Popular schooling is indispensable for democracy, indispensable for civilization. No democracy can be built upon foundations of popular illiteracy and ignorance. Absolutism, tyrannous government, can be grounded in popular ignorance; in fact, it is the only type of foundation upon which monarchical government can really rest. But the strength of a democracy is the strength of an enlightened people. Democracy depends upon the judgments and the opinions, and ultimately of the masses, of the people, but only as that opinion is informed and enlightened by knowledge can democracy ever hope to advance.

Again, every human being is entitled to an



education. Every human being is entitled to that liberation, to that emancipation which education gives a person. Every human being is entitled to have access to the sources of human knowledge in books, and every human being is entitled to have his intellectual apparatus trained and prepared so that he will not be handicapped and disabled in life. A man today who cannot read and write and reason logically, at least partially so, who has not been given at least a modicum of scientific and practical knowledge, will find himself exactly where his ancestor ten thousand years ago was,--disabled, handicapped, thwarted, frustrated in the modern world.

But if all people need education not all people need the same kind of education. Nor do they all want the same kind of education; nor are they all prepared to receive the same kind of education. There are many people in the world who would be far happier if in their childhood they had been thoroughly grounded in the few elements of an education, and in right living and in the duties of citizenship, and then vocationally trained so as to earn a competent living and to fit into the economic scheme. While in a democracy there are no differences of caste, there are decidedly differences of capacity, and no system of government can alter a fact of nature; that all minds are the same, that all minds possess the same capacities, the same powers of grasp and apprehension, the same gifts, and to subject all young people to one type of



education is to lower the standards for all, and to reduce the more able to the level of the less able. In trying to give one type of education for all of our children, we have been compelled to force so many subjects into our public school curriculum as a result of which we have been compelled to speed up the work of our children to a point where the real object of education is defeated, namely, that of enabling young people to think.

A few days ago I read a statement by one of the educators of our own city, not only a pedagog but a psychologist, who pointedly comments upon this situation in our schools. He says: "Pretty generally there has not been much change in the mode of dealing with the learner in our schools except to urge or force him to exert more and more effort, to work faster. In consequence, he and the teacher have been burning up more nervous fuel and turning out more pieces of work. The quality remains about the same. The average pupil now undoubtedly can make more errors in a minute than the pupil years ago. Of course he also can make a few more correct responses in that interval. If habits of learning are of any consequence, what is the net result? The principal and the supervisor, jealous of their reputation, have been urging still more speed. They and the teachers have become more and more nervous on account of the children's slowness, and the defenseless children have to bear the brunt of their stupidity.

"There are also many interruptions of the



teachers. New things are added to and almost nothing dropped. Often the teacher feels that she is hopelessly overwhelmed. And who would come to the child's defense? By the stop-watch the child is supposed to think. But how impossible! He therefore rarely thinks in the average school room, for it is about the last place for him to learn to think. Thinking presupposes time and calm and comfort. "Teach less," says Professor ? whom I am quoting, "teach less, teach better. It is better to master a few things than to mess over many. Children, like adults, learn best when they are least annoyed and most comfortable. Help the teacher to find more time for calm and poise and for individual instruction."

Now there are others who would like a broader education for themselves before they enter into the industrial and commercial life. They would like to go a little beyond this minimum of which I have spoken. Well, for these people there should be a system of secondary education, say, a two or three year course, which will aim not at preparing them for college or university--which most of our high schools fatuously do today; only ten or twelve per cent of the graduates of our high school enter a college, and yet the curriculum of the high school is so organized as to prepare every graduate for college. The curriculum of such a school ought to be an end in itself; ought to possess its own goal and its own objective, and should give the pupil that type of education which they will need and



use in life. There, too, less stress should be laid upon the number of subjects, upon the mechanical cramming of knowledge and more insistence upon the ability to think clearly.

Now there are others, again, who would like the luxury of a college education--not because they are passionately seekers after higher education but because they wish, or their well-to-do parents wish for them, the refinement and the polish and the social life of the college. They are attracted by college sports, by college fraternities, by college associates, by all the extra curriculum activities of American colleges and universities; and perhaps also they are attracted by the thought of gaining a little more knowledge. That is true of most of the men and women who are attending our colleges today. They are not to be criticized; they know exactly what they want, and there is no reason why they should not get it. They have no high ambitions of scholarship, and they make no pretenses about it.

Now we are rich enough to supply these with the type of education which they have acquired, a type of education which Professor ? properly defines. He says: "Such instruction as is given should merely be designed to equip the student with a general knowledge of the world in which he is living, the whole purpose being to provide at least a veneer of culture in the popular sense of the term. The graduate should be able to leave college with a good



line. The method and procedure followed in the recent so-called outlines of history, science, knowlegde, literature and art would seem to be excellently designed for the purpose of such institution. No attempt should be made to secure intensive education in any special field, but equal care should be taken to guard against abysmal ignorance with respect to any subject. Along with this general initiation into the culture of the human past and present, a leading aim of instruction in these institutions should be the cultivation of intellectual urbanity and amiable open-mindedness. The instruction should, for the most part, be given \* \*\* with the view of meeting very large groups in order to reduce the burden of teaching to a minimum and to exploit to a maximum high abilities and provide entertainment and enlightenment."

But for the small group that seriously aspires for higher education real opportunities for higher education should be afforded. Education should be brought down to the business of actually educating people. Colleges should be organized to take care of this small group which are to be the carriers of American culture, the creative thinkers in American life, the pioneers, the thoroughbreds, which shall be, first of all, physically small, so that the individual student will not be lost, overwhelmed, as he is in these vast factories of education of ten, fifteen, twenty thousand students crowded into one campus. These colleges shall afford the individual an opportunity to exploit all



that is in him, to develop himself; and a prime object should be the full development of the individual. The student shall have an opportunity to come in contact daily, if possible, with a few luminous personalities in the faculty, for a man learns infinitely more from contact with a man than from contact with a book.

Again the primary object in these smaller colleges of real higher education shall be not credits or degrees or a superficial veneering, but creative thinking, of insighted and cultivated intelligence, the free and purposeful and organized inquiry, and the love of truth; and the striving in these academies of real higher education shall be the discovery of criteria of judgment and evaluation, the giving unto men and women standards of judgment by which they shall be able to evaluate the world without and their own world within. Then the small college will give us what the large university cannot--the small group which will be the leavening force in our civilization.

The masses never produce a culture. The masses should be equipped to live comfortably; the masses should be equipped so that if they wish to continue their education they will be enabled to. But our salvation lies in the development of a class--not based upon birth or upon wealth but upon ability, capacity and eagerness to learn, a class chosen from all which shall take to heart seriously this thing which we call education and culture.

These diversified systems of education of



which I speak will accomplish two things. In the first place, they will emancipate us from that blight of standardization to which the American system of education has been subjected; this collectivism, this forcing of all people into one common mold; this giving of a stereotyped, a conventional type of education for all; a system which has given us intellectual Babbitts with no intellectual aristocrats. These diversified systems will give us diversified people and minds, types, color, in our American life; and then it will give us a fairly satisfactory group which will be able to prepare new minds for the culture of America.

I have spoken of schools, the type of instruction in schools, but schools at best give one only the beginning of education. Life would be very depressing and sad if our education halted at fourteen or sixteen or twenty-one; and yet in most of us that is where our education halts. Even for our college graduates and our professional men that is where education stops. Between our business concerns, our social duties, our pleasures, we have little time for consistent and systematic education after we leave school. We all do read,--of course we do, but we read chaotically and sporadically, without plan, without purpose; and most of us read for relaxation instead of for stimulation. Most of us read just fifteen or twenty minutes before we go to sleep.

I know many a brilliant young college man who is actually going to sleep intellectually, whose life



process, whose mental process, has been stopped through the absence of any organized effort to continue an education brilliantly begun in the halls of the school and the college. Now these young people are becoming mentally stodgy, slovenly, monotonous, repetitious. They are losing new worlds which may be theirs; they are losing the zest and the stimulation which education constantly brings; new revelations, new curtains constantly lifting before our mind's eye, revealing new wonders and amazements to us.

Our women are making a braver effort to continue their education, but I wish they would not attend so many lectures. Tabloid knowledge is no substitute for real education. An hour spent at home in a worthwhile book in earnest study is worth a whole year's lecture program.

A few days ago I came across, in the halls of our public library, the following placard which contained the following inquiry and the following answers: "What is the aim of education? The scholar says knowledge; the preacher says character; the artist says beauty; the philosopher says truth; the patriot says citizenship; the old man says wisdom; the young man says achievement; the manufacturer says efficiency; the sociologist says adjustment."

What is the aim of education? I do not know what capacity I ought to speak in in answering the question. I do not know that the question can be answered satisfactorily. I suppose the nearest approach to a comprehensive answer which will include most all of the



answers given in this questionnaire would be that the aim of education is the free and full development of human personality. The free and full development of human personality. Full development implies knowledge, wisdom, adjustment, efficiency, love of truth, love of beauty,-- the full and free development of personality--which also means the development of each man according to his ability; that each man be given the opportunity to go as far as his capacities will take him, as far as his ambitions will take him. But if there be in our land a handful of men and women, earnest, gifted, they must not be subjected to a routinized, a dragooned, a stereotyped system of education which the masses make necessary, and have their human personality thwarted and rendered distorted and awry. These few choice children of a people must be given the fullest opportunities to develop their rich personality really and fully.

I believe, friends, that America will some day produce a culture which will excel the culture of any people in the world; and I believe it for two reasons: first, because we are rich; and wealth is a requisite of culture. A poverty stricken people, whose efforts must be devoted to the one task of wresting a subsistence from an unyielding soil, does not produce a high type of culture. A people whose primary wants are already satisfied can then turn its attention to other things and other interests in life. This people, being wealthy and prosperous, will make possible a



culture. And secondly, because in this people we have the brains and the brawn of the whole world. The very fact that we are a composite people which has within it the colorfulness and the variety of nearly every existing culture, that very fact will make in the future for an amazing culture.

We are a young people; our colleges are not absorbed; we are not an uneducated people; we are not going to seed. We are an enterprising people, alert, eager; and our very pathetic eagerness to attain education for everybody is evidence of our upward climb on the scales of education. What is needed is a definition of value, a firm resolve on the part of the educators of this land not to submerge the few in the many, and not to victimize excellency by mediocrity, but to give unto each what each requires, what each wants; to safeguard for our future a small group of intellectual pathfinders of creative thinkers who will be the prophets of the new day.

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