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152

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54

Folder
350

The weaker sex - which?, 1929.

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"THE WEAKER SEX---WHICH?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

NOVEMBER 24, 1929, CLEVELAND.

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It is of course notorious that philosophy frequently is the hand maiden of things as they are--status quo. Whatever the political or economic regime of a given age might be, philosophers will always be on hand to ground that particular regime metaphysically, to justify it to philosophic argument. In a way that is but natural. Action always precedes thought, and experience comes before perfection. Experiences come as a result--I am speaking now of group experiences, of course,--group experiences come as a result of political upheaval or conquest or discovery or scientific invention, and these new experiences give the whole trend of life a new direction. The supreme culture they will turn sharply aside. Men gain new attitudes, new points of view, new mannerisms, new convictions as a result of these social, political or economical changes that have taken place in their lives. Then philosophers appear to prove by logic and reason that the new conditions, the latest points of view, are the truths now and the older points of view are false.

That is particularly true of moral philosophy. Moral philosophy is, by and large, a sort of a label to the moral status of an age. What is being moralized. Just as Mr. Bertrand Russell, for example, today is attempting to moralize, to justify the metaphysical arguments of the moral laxity of our age. It is not his philosophy which causes the

moral laxity; it is the moral laxity which causes his philosophy. Occasionally a moral philosopher will appear who will construct an epochal system without reference to the political or social setting of his time. He will be of no influence upon his age; he will be completely ignored. Perhaps centuries later life will catch up with his theory, and then he will be rediscovered. And then people will say that he was a pathfinder for the human race. He was not that at all. Life found the path. He was just lucky that life found the path which he prognosticated. He was right; he could just as well have been wrong.

I say all this by way of introduction to my subject this morning. There have been many moral philosophers since the beginning of the reflective life of our race, who have over and over again produced very erudite, very plausible, very conflicting theories about the role of woman in society. And they did it, as they thought, they based their conclusions, as they believed, upon objective scientific reason. In reality all of them based their conclusion upon the glossed and varnished prejudices of their times, which prejudices derived from the economic set-up of those times.

Thus, for example, when woman was economically dependent she was looked upon as inferior. Naturally so. We still look upon a person who is economically

helpless as somehow inferior. And because she was dependent economically, and therefore regarded as inferior, philosophers appeared on the scene who proved quite conclusively,--to themselves, at least, to their age, that woman was constitutionally and providentially, irrevocably inferior. Thus, for example, the very wise Greeks, who, after all, gave us philosophy and logic, and who were the first to attempt to build up a coherent system of ethics,--these ancient wise Greeks too looked upon woman as constitutionally inferior. The greatest of them, Aristotle, said, "The male is by nature superior and the female inferior. And the one rules while the other is ruled." Very simple.

In that brilliant Athenian civilization, which in many ways we haven't yet approached today, woman occupied a position nothing short of coddled slavery,--except, of course, the public Athena. The Greeks praised the intellect, but they denied intellect to woman; and in the later neo-Platonic philosophy, the principle of evil in society, in the universe, was always looked upon as phenomenon. Even among religious leaders that same moralizing took place about woman.

Thus the great propagandist of Christianity, Hall, advised men as follows: "Let your women keep silent in the churches, while it is not permitted them to speech; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith

the law." And one of the foremost church fathers thus catechises about woman, St. Christopher. "What is woman?" he asks. And he answers: "But an enemy to friendship, an unavoidable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a wicked work of nature covered up with shining varnish." They are varnished.

And even our own Bible, which has so many noble, complimentary things to say about woman, and provides so many heroic types of woman, occasionally slips into that same attitude towards woman. For example, in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, when woman is scolded and cursed for her yielding to temptation, the Bible says: "With whom you shall walk." "And thy desire shall be unto thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." It is of course significant that the author of this passage looks upon this as a curse, presumably, in the Garden of Eden, where the condition of man's superiority over woman did not prevail.

This attitude towards woman prevailed throughout Europe until very, very recently. The Christian Church regarded woman more or less as a temptress, a sex, a contamination. And when you read the literature of the Middle Ages, in the drama of the Middle Ages, you will find over and over again this note struck,--that woman is to blame for everything. Economically dependent, therefore inferior, therefore the scape goat, therefore

the source of all evil.

Thus you will find, you may recall, that famous passage from the play of Thomas Otway, of the seventeenth century, who also characterizes woman.

"What might else have not been done by woman? Who was it betrayed the capital? A woman! Who lost Mark Antony to the world? A woman! Who was the cause of a long ten years war, and laid at last O Troy in ashes? A woman!" . . .

You will find playwrights of our own day,-- Swinburne, Eugene O'Neill,--who subconsciously attribute nearly all of human woe to woman. In "The Strange Interlude" a woman goes through nine acts like a vast devastation, a fury, destroying nearly every man she comes in contact with.

The age of chivalry in Europe did not in the least improve the condition of woman. It really did not exalt her position. The knight fought for his lady fair, but his lady fair was a very weak sister, an impossible person--too good for human daily food; an unreality. Ludwig has some very thick things to say about women in his book on the last of the kaisers, who, strutting about in his arrogance, was fond of saying that woman was only good for three things, as you will recall---children, kitchen and cooking.

Now the interesting thing is that it was not always so; and here again is one of the curious facts of history. Many of us are prone to think of human progress as a sort of continuous affair. Mankind advances along a solid front from the jungles to the present day. Nothing can be further from the truth. Progress rather works in cycles, and sometimes retraces its steps. Were progress continuous we would be justified in assuming that in the year 1900 A.D. mankind in every regard was better off than mankind in 900 A.D. or 3000 B.C. But it is not at all the case.

This is particularly evidenced in the attitude of the race to woman. In many ancient civilizations, in many primitive civilizations, woman occupied a far more honorable and important position than, say, in England fifty years ago. Among some of the tribes in Asia and Africa and America woman was the absolute equal of man. In fact, she was looked upon in many tribes as the principal parent, and ancestry was traced not by forefathers but by foremothers. In the political life of the tribe, of the clan, she was the equal of man, sometimes the superior of man. She was governess, priestess, ruler, warrior, counselor. If you were to study the mythology of the Norse, the Greeks, the Semites, the Hindoos, you will find that the female goddesses rendered oftentimes their share for the same power and sovereignty

as the male gods.

That is a reflex, a recondition of human society where woman was the equal or the superior of man, because the theology of the people also reflects its political, social and economic life. Woman in those days was economically independent, and therefore she could demand her rights, and there were no philosophers on hand to prove conclusively that woman was constitutionally and providentially inferior.

The attitude of woman in many of the older civilizations is very much like that of the 31st chapter of the Book of Proverbs which I read to you,--the most magnificent tribute paid to woman in the literature of the world; and if you will remember, woman in this chapter 31 is portrayed first as valorous. She is not the woman of the seraglio, of the harem; not the woman of the Hindu purdah. She is the busy, active, valorous, industrious woman working in a great world. She is not the timid, helpless, Victorian type of woman; she is not the impossible woman of the age of chivalry, and she is not the flapper of our own day. She is a co-partner and co-worker with man in the business of life. "She worketh willingly with her hands, she eateth not the bread of idleness." She helps her husband when possible. "She considereth a field, and buyeth it." She is strong. "She girdeth her loins with strength and maketh strong her

arms." She is wise. "She openeth her mouth with wisdom." She is dignified. "Strength and dignity are her clothing."

But woman lost her economic independence, and with it lost her strength and dignity; and Europe proceeded, over a period of two thousand years, to degrade woman; and her condition was degraded up to very recently, and the change came about not as a result of the feminist movement, but also as a result of the economic revolution. The machine emancipated woman; the machine equalized woman's status with that of man. The machine could use the two hands of a woman just as much and just as readily as the two hands of a man. During the war thirty million men left industry to go to war, and thirty million women stepped in and carried on, and there was no break, no loss.

The machine discovered for woman that she is fit for almost every economic job that man is fit for. In all but some 35 out of 570 odd occupations in the United States, according to the census of 1920, American women are represented, that work,--wage earners.

Now as woman discovered her economic competence, she also discovered a measure of economic independence, and with economic independence her status began to improve. She began to gain in strength and dignity, gain in economic power; she began to demand laws which would protect her rights. Such laws were soon

enacted. Eight and a half million women working in the United States are an economic factor of first importance, and they raise the whole status of woman considerably higher.

The industrial revolution which made possible the emancipation of woman economically made possible her emancipation politically. Our whole democracy is a result, by and large, of the industrial revolution, and woman entering the economic life soon began to demand political rights, because you cannot disassociate economics from government; they are too closely interrelated. Woman needed the vote to protect herself in the economic field of competition; and so before long we had woman suffrage, and today we have women not only as voters but as legislators, as mayors, as governors, as congressmen, as judges. We have national and international organizations of women to protect their rights.

And the next step was educational emancipation. Our economic system today demands a degree of education; our democratic dogma, which derived from our economic philosophy, demands popular education. Not so very many years ago only boys were educated; the girl had to be satisfied with what she could pick up in the home. Well today there are actually more girls in our secondary schools than boys. Within the last twenty years there has been an increase of a thousand percent in the number

of women registered in our colleges and universities. Ninety-six percent as many women received their bachelors' degrees, their A.B., as men; and there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of women attending graduate schools,--three out of eight are women. And woman has walked in, has practically taken possession of our entire elementary educational system. Eighty-eight percent of all school teachers are women, and some sixty-two percent of high school teachers are women.

Of course that is conducive to criticism on the part of men, and such criticism has been forthcoming. You may recall recently Professor Rogers, of the Massachusetts School of Technology, lodged a diatribe on the preponderance of women in the educational system of America, claiming that that is hurtful to the national character, to the national mentality. Of course I am in no position to judge that. I don't know that anyone is.

What is true is that any preponderance of any one sex in any department, cultural department of national life, is undesirable. And woman entered not only the economic, political and educational field, but nigh every field of human endeavor,--the profession, literature, art, science, social service; and the last generation or two witnessed actually a marvelous women's renaissance such as mankind has not seen in thousands of years, so much so that many men have become frightened.

You will find two classes of people,--one class which definitely resents this advance of woman, and one class which woefully, lachrymosely laments it. Those who resent it belong to the class which beholds on the horizon a feminist terror. They claim that woman is about to dominate life, that America is being feminized. Not that woman is crowding man out of industry, but that her opinion, her tastes, her attitude are becoming dominant in American life. And you hear such voices in England today. The writer, the theatre, the newspapers, educators, ministers, artists are beginning to cater to woman. Man has shut himself in quite effectively in his little world of pleasure. He has left woman free to develop herself culturally, to set social standards, to supervise education, and sooner or later to take control of politics.

She has the time, she seemingly has the ability, she certainly has the desire. Particularly are these people afraid of that aggressive cerebral type of woman, that matriarchal busybody, that has appeared in the land, that has gone on a rampage throughout this country, determined to reform everything or die in the attempt. And these people are actually afraid that sooner or later woman will come to look down upon man, just as man up to very recently was supposed to have looked down upon woman.

The second group of people are not enemies of womankind, but they lament what they think is the loss of a certain womanliness, a certain loveliness in woman, as a result of her entrance into the busy arena of life. She is in danger of becoming more or less shop worn. Now of course these people seem to be under the spell of what we may call a cultural lag; they still have in their minds this idyllic picture of the woman as the sheltered wife and mother,--exclusively that; and that of course today is very unreal; it is a futile idealization of woman today. Life has decreed otherwise, and we have got to revise our philosophy, that's all.

With eight and a half million women working in the United States, with two million married women working, this picture of the sheltered wife and mother in the home --it is a pretty one but it is an unreal one, a lackadaisical one. And I, for one, don't know but what there is more grace and charm in a life which is developed in the great world, which rounds out completely its full circle of human wants and needs and powers, than in the cloistered life.

On the other hand, while it is true that we must revise our traditional idealist's picture of woman, we ought not to over-estimate that picture, either. The chief function of womanhood is still as it has been since the beginning of time--that of home maker. Of twenty-six

millions of women in the United States who still find the rearing of children and the management of a home a full time responsibility, a full time job, less than five percent of American homes have servants. Over ninety-five percent of mothers in homes have to rear their own children, manage their own home, and it has been estimated that the period in the average American home when there are children under sixteen which need parental care and guidance is over twenty-three years, and that is a long time in the life of a person.

The average American woman is not wasting away because of idleness, and she does not require neurologists and specialists in psychology to save her from a mental breakdown because of the boredom of life, because of the tedium of life. By far the largest number of women look upon the task of rearing children and of training them into fine manhood and womanhood as their supreme obligation and supreme privilege; and when all is said and done that will remain so until the end of time. Nothing that woman can do is comparable to this task, the eternal task of life building and character building, which is her supreme privilege even as it is her biologic mandate.

And so whatever you hear said nowadays about modern woman, please remember that basically the role of woman in modern life has not changed. Woman has

a little more leisure today, fortunately. Labor saving devices in the home, more scientific management in the home, and the knowledge of how to relegate some tasks to others have given woman a greater degree of leisure. That is very fortunate,--fortunate for herself and for her husband, for her children. She is able to continue her development, her mental and spiritual development a bit, and by so doing she is able to enrich her home life of the children.

The married woman who works outside of the home, if that work is not taxing, and if it does not interfere with her proper management of the home, is a person who is not at all in need of our commiseration. In many ways she is to be envied. A woman who is able to combine the two jobs, that of the home maker and the wage earner, is not at all a person to be pitied. I know of no better cure for a restless and nervous woman who is trying to escape the futility and the loneliness of life, whose children are grown and the home no longer requires full time attention,--I know of no better cure for her than the procuring of a real job.

It is infinitely better than running from one card party to another, or from one tabloid lecturer to another. Being engaged in an occupational and professional way, meeting people in the outside world who are busy in the real business of earning a living, and

producing something of real economic value, cannot help but be a stabilizing influence in the life of anyone, of a builder of character; and for such a woman her home will gain in attractiveness and in loveliness when she comes back to it after a hard day's work, as to a place of refuge, and peace and beauty, rather than the home being, because of her unutterable boredom and idleness, a place from which to escape.

The woman who works and is to be pitied is the woman who has to work because our economic system does not make it possible for the average workman to earn a family wage; that woman who has to put in a hard day's work, who gets up early in the morning when it is very dark, or stays up late at night with her tiring eyes to keep her house from completely breaking down before her; whose children are not full grown; who has to place her children out with neighbors,--and there are hundreds of thousands of those women in America today,--it is this woman who is to be pitied and it is this woman who is an independent of our civilization. This woman does not belong to the "weaker" sex; she is the strongest of the strong. But our civilization is breaking her and destroying her.

I think all this talk about the feminist peril is what we are fond of calling "stus." It is academic balderdash. It is one with the yellow peril

and the red peril, the peril of democracy, and all this other kind of peril which weak stomached professors envisage whenever life moves away from their cherished hobbies and philosophies. Of course the professional feminist is a bore and a nuisance, but the modern woman is not a professional feminist. She is too sensible for that. What she wants and what she will get is the right to live and work as an equal; not as a superior or as an inferior but as an equal with man,--equal though different.

The quality does not at all imply similarity of identity. What the modern woman wants is to share equally in the burdens of life, but also in the compensations of life. She wants to be able to complete her personality as ideally as possible, so that she may in turn be enabled to enrich the personalities of those who come within the sphere of her influence. She wants a bit more of independence, so that she may become more intelligently cooperative. She wants more freedom so that she may become more intelligently self-disciplined.

And if man is losing out, it is not a criticism of woman but a criticism of man; and I think man is losing out in some departments of our national life. Man must acquire for himself a new set of values, that's all. If the only thing that is worthwhile in life is business and making money, then he ought not to

blame woman for conquering every other department in our national life. If man is satisfied to permit himself to be ground down by the machine, or to become a cog in a machine, and that's all, --if he thinks that is all that life is, and that is all of the glory and the beauty that life can offer, then he surely ought to have no criticism to make of women who find that life may hold other satisfaction and other adventure and other beauty and other glory.

Man must not permit himself to be crowded off the cultural stage of life, as he is being crowded off today. He too must discover a new equilibrium in his life,--on the one hand, activities for earning a living; on the other hand, activities for perfecting a life. When he does that he will find that he has nothing to fear from any competing sex, but that shoulder to shoulder with woman he will be able to advance along the climbing terraces of the free, full and adventuring human life, the life of mind and spirit.

There is no stronger sex and there is no weaker sex. Society decrees which shall be stronger and which shall be weaker. Society has now decreed that woman shall not be the weaker sex. It remains now to see whether society will decree that man shall be the weaker sex.

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