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Is civilization outracing man?, 1931.



"IS CIVILIZATION OUTRACING MAN"

BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

THE TEMPLE,

Sunday, October 25th, 1931

Recently at one of the sessions of the American College of Surgeons the distinguished Dr. Mayo of the famous Mayo Clinic at Rochester, Minn. made the following pronouncement: "Man is falling behind the material civilization he has created, and the fruit of his lagging ability to adapt himself to the pace is an enormous amount of insanity...We pass through more of the wonders of life in forty years than was possible for old people in the past. The world has moved ahead so fast as regards material civilization that man has almost, for the moment, got behind in his power of adaptation. Every other hospital bed in the United States is for mentally afflicted, insane, idiotic, feeble-minded or senile persons. There is an enormous number of people who are almost fit for the asylum. Many people live to an age when they are dependent and senile. Only five percent of our people, at the age of 65 years, have independent means. I would rather die when my brain fails than live on."

This is not the first time that an eminent scientist has



warned the men of the modern era that somehow not all is well with civilization. From time to time distinguished men of science have pointed out to us that man is being subjected to certain ravaging diseases such as nervous maladies and diseases of the heart, to an increasing degree today in spite of the amazing progress which the science of medicine has made. And they attribute it all to the terrific tension and strain under which modern man lives, to the pace of his life, to the furious tempo of our acquisitive civilization, the noise and clatter in our lives.

Human invention has given us a tremendously increased population within the last century and has also given to us our vast industrial cities of millions, cities now approaching the staggering figure of tens of millions.

In these cities men are constricted. They are compelled to move about in canyons and caves of brick, stone and steel. They are compelled to live in cubicles or cages like ants, one on top of the other. They are forced to travel always in crowds, always in herds, on the surface, above the surface and under the surface. And the cities which our industrialization has built for us are frequently very ugly cities. Cities which have their unsightly and loathesome slum sections, cities with millions of miles of monotonous tenements with little room for breathing space, begrimed, smoke-ridden cities. And men have to live and



labor in these cities.

And our civilization is becoming more urbanized in later years. Men are taking from the country side to huge aggregates and men are fortunate if they have a few days in the year when they can leave their burrows, whether it be office, mill or factory, and get out into the open spaces where they can renew contact with the soil, the trees and the green grass.

Civilization has, of course, given these city dwellers many comforts and conveniences, electric lights, radios, central plumbing, central heating, but man has paid a terrific price for these comforts, the price which, according to these scientists, is in their health, which civilization was supposed to have protected.

Somehow civilization seems to be outracing man in other regards besides health, besides jagged nerves, besides our terribly high pressure. Civilization seems to be outracing man in other regards. Our scientific age has undoubtedly increased our wealth but it has not abolished our poverty. Physics, chemistry and engineering have multiplied the wealth of the human race a thousandfold in the last few centuries but these sciences and other sciences somehow have failed in teaching men how to apportion this wealth or how to wisely control his production and distribution, or how to make man more secure in his possessions and in a means of earning a livelihood. With the result that in the most civilized countries of the world, the three



most civilized countries of the world today, Germany, England and the United States, millions of men are eating out their hearts in idleness, unable to earn a living and unable to get a fraction or a pittance of that huge wealth of abundance which is all around them, which science has created.

So that the world today is filled with misery and discontent and threats of revolution and disaster. Seemingly it is not enough, my friends, to know how to produce wealth by scientific methods. Seemingly it is just as important to know how to control that production and to distribute the wealth which our new knowledge is making possible. Our mechanical civilization in this regard and for the time being at least, has outraced man and his real interests.

Again the last war has demonstrated how our rapidly developing civilization can suddenly get an attack of nerves and begin smashing things up on a large scale. Thus in four short years of the World War the most civilized countries of the world coralling and compelling the less civilized countries to join with them in destroying the wealth which our scientific civilization produced, and destroyed the billions of wealth created by human hand and mind, slaughtered millions whom civilization was to protect and whose happiness it was supposed to advance. And over night that moral restraint and that moral discipline



which we thought to be the protection of civilized society was suddenly slugged off and mankind returned to the jungle. The science of physics and chemistry and aviation and navigation and the subtlest ingenuity of man were employed during those years to destroy man himself. Man can not control the forces which he himself let loose. His knowledge, his increased power were exploited in the preparation for the ghastliest holocaust ever known to mankind. And here it is clear that civilization has outdistanced man. Man can not keep pace with that speed which he, himself put into motion.

And there are other indices that man is falling behind his own scientific creations. All about you, you see today how life is being mechanized. Man is becoming the adjunct of the machine. In the important thing, the machine which produces commodities, man is only a hand, no more, not a human being, but a hand. When the machine produces too much and no longer has need for the workingman, he is thrown out of his job. He is fired. When he is too old for the speed of the machine, when he reaches forty or forty-five years of age and can't keep pace with the speed of the machine, he is scrapped and thrown on the waste heap and no provision is made for his future. The workingman today, and this is a sad fate to contemplate, the working man today in relation to his work is much less



of a personality than he was one hundred or two hundred years ago, much less of the artisan, much less of a creator. He has been absorbed in a process and his personality and initiative, to a large degree, has disappeared. He is much less of a personality and much more of a robot today and he is becoming more and more of that. And that's not good for man. Happiness does not lie in that direction. Happiness lies in the direction of a man's ability to express his gifts freely, not when he is grooved and confined.

There are other indications in his life, too, which contribute to his unhappiness. Our civilization seems to be not only mechanizing life but standardizing life. It is cheaper to produce and market a standardized product. The whole world is being flooded with standardized commodities. So that we have the same gas station in New York as in San Francisco, the same talkie in Berlin as in Ohio, the same dress today in South Africa as in America. Life is being standardized, we look alike, act alike and think alike.

And this big city civilization is producing a standardization not only of the commodities produced but of the producer himself. It is compelling the conformity and identity of the man who produces it. Here again the individuality of people is being washed out by huge standardization which is going on all over the world. And so civilization, for the time being, is giving us a standard of values which is not contributing to human well being.



We admire and stand in wrapped admiration today before magnitude, size and quantity. These are the things which impress us. And we use them as a standard of our valuation.

The important thing in society today is the man who has amassed things, who can control things.

And certainly our civilization, with all of its ten thousand schools, universities and hospitals, and its marvelous roads and swifter communication and speedier transportation, and all of its scientific medical and physical laboratories, this civilization of ours, has not made us any happier than the men of the generations of long ago.

Happiness, security, contentment are the tests of a civilization. And our civilization has not given us those in any greater measure than in any previous generation. In that extent it has given us less.

Again it is outracing man.

I came across a poem the other day which summed up what is going on in the world today. It is called "A Dirge for Civilization." - -



Here is a man dying. He has been caged in stone,  
Paying starvation with a beggar's penny  
Too many years. A few more cannot matter.  
He was young once, and being young, a poet -  
Wondered about stars and questioned life and dreamed  
Of something that might be beautiful. Now  
Only his shadow remembers.

Better the best that lusts hot-flanked and, velvet fotted, kills;  
Better the savage lazy in the forest  
Who earns no wage and laughs under the sun;

Here is a man dying. It is a long time since  
He has felt rage or pleasure or desire  
Burn in his veins. The flesh has lost its meaning,  
The tongue its taste. Nor does he remember  
When rivers and green hills slipped from his sight  
Into the shadow. The stalk of the red flower,  
Beauty, is broken, and he does not care.

Here is a man dying. All day he sits  
In a steel cage with others. He makes money.  
He is methodical, he markets flesh, and buries  
Under corruption in the name of law  
The corpse of love. In his steel cage he sits  
Fat with conformity - complacent, civilized.

Better the best snarling, the sun-dark savage  
building his jew-jew against evil spirits;

Time laughs in his sleeve. There is no reason  
Why we should take the matter seriously. But  
Here is a stone cage with ribs of steel,  
- And here is a man dying.



Now what shall we say about all this? In the first place the situation is not as hopeless as it may seem. Technical progress has brought man a large measure of happiness. We must not beguile ourselves into thinking that the older days, the days of which we know less than we do about our own days, were the halcyon days, a paradise. That's naive and not borne out by the facts of history.

The older days were much worse than ours. The older days were days of greater poverty, of ignorance, of superstition, of intolerance, of pestilence, of squalor, of bigotry and of war. Let's not idealize the past or select from the great past of the human race one or two bright moments in history and hold them up as typical of the great past of the human race.

We have in many ways improved upon the past. We have more knowledge today, more freedom, greater security of health and we have a larger measure of equality today, more of tolerance in the world today, than in the past. And let's not think as those naive eighteenth century romanticists believed, that the ideal period in the human race was when the people lived in an idealic existence, in some bucolic state of nature in the past, when they were shepherds in a sylvan woods, when they knew only peace and contentment. The fact of the matter is that there never was such a period in human history. When man lived a nomadic and primitive life in the jungle, he had his hates, his wars, his diseases and his dark fears, his pain and his sorrows. And it is folly, my friends, to want to



destroy the machine age in the hope that with the destruction of the machine man will regain his lost happiness. And it is folly to ask for a moratorium on science, to ask that laboratories be shut down for an age or two so as to catch up with the machine. That's not possible. The human mind will go on discovering. It has discovered a method of progress and will not easily surrender it, that man is capable of mastering all that his mind can produce if he uses his mind intelligently. Civilization must now proceed to use its intelligence to control the mind which produced the machine for human betterment and happiness.

We shall have to realize, all of us, that while technical progress and power over nature ~~do~~ contribute to human happiness, they are not the only conditions of human happiness. There are other indispensable conditions to make the human race happy and well. We must gain not only power over nature but power over our own natures, over ourselves. We must not only exploit the power of nature but the spiritual inner resources of our own minds and souls. We must have a higher level of social morality.

We have been paying not too much attention, but we have been devoting most of our attention to the physical sciences and not enough to the social sciences. We have been turning our attention to what physical science could do for us, what medical science and what engineering could do for us, we haven't ~~been~~ focussed our attention on the social sciences, economics, ethics of government, of international relationships, to see how these sciences may be made to contribute to a large degree to our



human happiness. When we once do that and the ingenuity of the human mind can be scientifically turned to these social problems of the race, man will catch up with his physical problems and master them.

For example, through the intelligent science of eugenics, not in its limited sense, I mean the science of man's physical well being, we could raise generations of men who are better equipped physically, as well as mentally, to stand the strain of the new civilization. We could learn how to weed out the weak and how to make possible ~~the~~ generations of the well and the strong who will not easily break under the strain of the intensified mode of living.

Through a more courageous economic adjustment we shall be able to distribute the wealth which men produce more fairly, more helpfully all around. We shall insure a juster distribution of social goods, freer access to the economic wealth of the earth, for all are entitled to have a share in it. We shall give man greater security in his work and greater reward for his work. That can be done and it may be done without revolution, bloodshed and disaster. Through giving men more leisure and through teaching him how to use his leisure creatively we will not only enable man to recuperate from the strain of our scientific industrial civilization but we will enable him to develop his own personality,



to save himself from the mechanization and stabilization of life. He will have time for himself, hours in the day, days in the week, weeks in the year in which to live his own life just as he wills it. I mean inconsiderate of the machine, a free undirected life, all his own.

Leisure will give to man in the future more and more an opportunity to have another world in which to live besides the industrial world. A world of books, of play, of comradeship, of adventure, a world in which a man can renew almost daily nature, the trees, the green grass, the sky, - God.

The machine doesn't need us for more than for or five hours a day. Man can have hours of leisure to live his own life. And through a wider cultivation of the arts, on a wider and more democratic basis, we can have, in the future, we are beginning to have, cities that are better planned, cities of greater beauty, cities of beautiful public buildings and beautiful public parks, wide avenues and attractive homes. Even the modest homes of the poor can be beautiful.

Some day we shall look back with horror upon these clusters of grime, smoke, filthy, ugliness which are the sore spots



of all the large cities of our present day civilization. City planning, city zoning, city vision, will give us in the future, cities which will rival the beauty of ancient cities.

And lastly through international cooperation we shall learn and we can learn, how to banish the ghost specter of war from the habitations of man. The most encouraging feature of our civilization today is that we have become aware that these things need not be, that they are not in the nature of things inevitable, that war can be annihilated if nations once resolve to do so, that poverty is not preordained by nature or by nature's God. It is within the competence of man and the competence of man's intelligence to destroy these evils of humanity.

We shall have to train our generation into international mindedness. We shall have to foster the larger loyalties of international solidarity.

"This commandment which I give you this day," says the Bible, "is not in the heavens. It is very near to us." (Hebrew

If man will follow step by step these lines of progress, he will not only catch up with civilization but he will fully master and control a much more advanced, a much finer and nobler civilization than we could even dream of today. And they are not impossible tasks to follow.

Men could live rich, beautiful, happy lives without the so-called scientific appurtenances. Men have lived, in the past, contented lives without automobiles, radios, without wireless, railroads or



central heating. It can be done. It has been done.

Athens produced an art and a philosophy and a mode of life, minds such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and all the beauty and grace which was Greece. Athens was able to produce all this without the things which science has given to us. It can be done.

But man can not live for a long time in the midst of the things which we now have, without breaking under them, unless he learns to bring into his life those inner values of mind and soul which the Greeks had, unless we bring into our civilization a larger measure of social intelligence, of social idealism, of respect for the individual and in his relations to the community, respect for his social rights; unless we bring more of self restraint, more of beauty, more of the quest of truth, more of the love of the quiet hour of contemplation, of serenity, of tranquillity, of peace, into our lives.

That, I take it my friends, is the undeniable challenge which confronts this and will confront the next generation, - how to keep civilization from outracing us indefinitely.



AN ABSTRACT OF THE ADDRESS

BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

ON

"IS CIVILIZATION OUTRACING MAN?" - THE TEMPLE

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 25th, 1931

Recently Dr. Mayo warned our generation that man is falling behind the material civilization which he has created and that the fruit of his lagging ability to adapt himself to the pace is an enormous amount of insanity.

This is not the first warning that medical science has given to the race. From time to time distinguished medical men have called attention to the startling increase in diseases of the heart and in nervous derangements which are ravaging the race today in spite of the remarkable advance which medical science has made in recent years.

They attribute it to the tension and strain of our machine age, to the furious tempo of our permanently acquisitive civilization. Human invention has given us our machine civilization, whose symbol is the huge modern city where millions of men move in herds through canyons of brick and stone and steel, living in cubicles and caves one on top of another, travelling always in crowds on the surface and above and below the surface, suffering from jagged nerves and banished from the soil, the open spaces, the clean skies and the fresh air.



Our scientific age has produced far more wealth but it has not abolished poverty. Physics, chemistry and engineering have increased the world's goods a thousandfold but they have not taught man how to apportion his wealth intelligently, how to control his production and distribution, or how to make men more secure in their possessions and in a means of earning a livelihood. With the result that in the most advanced civilized countries of the world today, England, Germany and the United States millions are unable to find work or to satisfy their elementary needs out of the abundant wealth which the scientific era has produced all about them.

Seemingly it is not enough to know how to produce wealth. We must learn its intelligent control and distribution.

Again the last war demonstrated how far civilization had out-distanced man. The ape in man reached out and used the science which civilized man produced to destroy him. The sciences of physics and chemistry and aviation and navigation and the subtlest ingenuity of man were exploited to bring about the ghastliest holocaust in human history. Civilization, too, is at least for the time being victimizing man in its tendency to mechanize and standardize life. The worker today is less of a personality in relation to his work than formerly and more of a robot. And the individuality of man is in danger of being submerged in the tidal waves of collectivisation and conformity which is sweeping over the world.

But the situation is far from hopeless. Technical progress has brought a large measure of good to man. The olden days were not better than these but worse. Man's Paradise was not in the past but in the future. One should not single out two or three bright moments in the past of the



human race and hold them up as typical of the ages which have gone by. They were filled with slavery and ignorance and pestilence and war and intollerance and squalor. We have conquered some of these afflictions of mankind. We enjoy more knowledge, more freedom, better health, more tolerance and greater equality today. Above all, we are keenly aware today that the evils which do exist are not in the nature of things, necessary and unavoidable, but that they can through organized effort, be annihilated. It is folly to hanker after an imaginary, beatific state of long ago when man lived completely happy in a bucolic paradise. Such a condition never existed in the human race. It is pure eighteenth century romanticism. It is folly also to want to turn back by destroying the machine and by asking for a moratorium on science and invention. The human mind will not relinquish its sovereign right to quest, search, inquire, invent and discover. It has discovered the method of creative experimentation and will not abandon it.

Our salvation lies in turning out attention as deliberately to the social sciences as we have in the past turned it to the physical sciences. We should bring the same unbiased, free, intelligence of man to work in the realm of economics and government and ethics and international relationships as we have in the realm of physics, chemistry and biology. Through courageous economic readjustment we can insure a juster distribution of social goods, freer access to the economic wealth of the earth to all who deserve it and a greater measure of economic security for all who labor.

Through greater leisure and an understanding of the creative uses of leisure the man of the future will not only have a chance to recuperate regularly from the drive and stress of his life but he will also have an opportunity to develop his personality away and independent of the machine.



He will have another world in which to live, a world of books, of play, of comradeship, adventure, of constant contact with nature.

Through the cultivation of the arts on a wider and more democratic basis the men of the future will have cities which will be more beautiful and which will rival the glories of the magnificent cities of antiquity. Through international cooperation man will banish the spectre of war, the world which is fast becoming economically a unit will also develop a unitary intellectual and spiritual bond and man will have the larger loyalty of international solidarity and good will.

