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The failure of the modern woman, 1931.

"THE FAILURE OF THE MODERN WOMAN" GIVEN AT THE TEMPLE BY RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22d, 1931 In discussing the failure of the modern woman I must repeat what I said last week in connection with the announcement which I made of the subject, that the failure of modern man is universally conceded. The modern male has settled ten cents on a dollar a long time ago. Woman's struggle for complete equality with man in modern times is of relatively recent occurrence. The feminist movement began about the middle of the last century and made its most momentous progress in the first two decades of the present century. The aim of the feminist movement was to achieve complete equality with man in the political as well as in the economic field. It called for the removal of all those disabilities in spheres of education. of law and of industry which disadvantaged woman in relation to man. Woman Suffrage was the expression in the sphere of government, of this feminist movement. It was militant. It fought bravely and bitterly. Riots, imprisonments, hunger strikes attended the struggle of woman for political equality. Finally the War achieved what perhaps the propaganda of woman failed to achieve for the power of woman was at no time demonstrated as during the War.

When men were summoned from offices and from the machines to the trenches women stepped in, well equipped, did the job competently and as well as the men did. It then became quite inevitable that they should gain their political equality.

In 1917 Great Britain finally granted suffrage to its women folks. In the United States in the middle of the Nineteenth Century where it had its gallant advocates in the persons of women like Susan B. Anthony, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, Mrs. Carrie Chapman Latt and others the movement for suffrage gained headway steadily until in 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified.

Today women can vote and hold office in every section of this country. And side by side with this political enfranchisement went the equalization in all other departments of life, commerce, industry. Doors which had been locked, were opened. Spheres which had been exclusive became inclusive as far as women were concerned. Prejudices were broken down. Today women are represented in every sphere of our national economy from clerks to managers and owners, in all forms of employment and in every profession. There are women lawyers, physicians, ministers, artists, writers, critics, social workers, and particularly in the field of education they are found in large numbers in every department from the most elementary to the highest.

So as regards status at least the modern woman has nothing to complain of. Here and there, there are still some prejudices which have not broken down, but it is quite clear that the victory belongs to woman.

In fact so much progress has been made by the modern woman that certain observers, largely of the male sex, raised the cry that this is a "Woman's Age." Foreigners particularly, who come to this country for a visit, mainly to lecture and make some money, have consistently maintained that this country is run by its women folk.

Far from being disadvantaged, the women actually have the upper hand in this land. The Europeans simply can not understand this position or privilege enjoyed by women in the United States.

Their relationships and attitudes are quite different.

You know the story of the delegation of German industrialists who visited the United States in the company of their wives to make a tour of inspection of the American railway system. They travelled with their wives across the Continent and studied the railroads and upon their return to New York and when asked what their impressions were, they said that they were impressed with our roadbeds, with our marvelous depots, with the regularity with which trains were dispatched. There was a little criticism however, of the Pullman cars. Not really their criticism, but the criticism of their wives. They thought that the Pullman cars were rather comfortable because they slept in the lower births, but the wives who slept in the upper births were not so comfortable.

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- 5 what with the actual legal control and what with delegated control which they receive from their husbands, a greater purchasing power than man possesses in the United States. Therefore in America life began to revolve around the women folk. The stores cater to women, not to men. The men sneak in, into a department store. Magazines and newspapers, manufacturers of commodities, music, art lecturers, churches, - all cater to women. Women undoubtedly dominate the cultural scene in American life today. This, of course, is not an original idea of mine. It is an accepted fact. If the American woman is envied by her sister across the sea, the American man is pitied by his, what shall I say, fellow sufferer both here and abroad. He cuts a poor figure. Sherwood Anderson in a recent article laments the decline of the American man. "He has become small, a drone in a beehive with woman as the queen bee. " - That's Sherwood Anderson's complaint, not mine. "Man's sole occupation today," according to this writer, "is business, commerce, trade and in this world man is not a heroic nor a romantic figure. And in such a world of goods and money, woman is bound to be triumphant." according to Mr. Anderson. "This is an age" he says, "without religion and without love. The machine has deprived man of his power and woman has been driven

to substitute material possessions for love."

If the judgment of Sherwood Anderson and his likeminded friends is to be taken seriously and to be trusted, I suppose it is high time for the persecuted males of the United Stated to organize a movement for the rights of man in this woman's country.

There is, of course, gross exaggeration in all this and not a little of hurt pride and peevishness. I am rather unimpressed by this masculine lachrymose dithyrambics that one reads from time to time. But it is clear that the feminist movement is largely played out in the United States for the simple reason that it has gained nearly all of its objectives.

Woman today is the equal of man as far as status is concerned. Even in the sphere of morals woman has achieved the same standard as man, however dubious a victory that might be.

we don't talk any more today about the single standard as against the double standard of morality. That used to be a very much alluded question twenty or thirty lears ago. Today it is no longer a question for the simple reason that there are no standards at all left. The woman today is as free as man is. When it comes to sowing wild oats women today are as good farmers as men. They make, drink; they gamble, if not as capably, certainly as avidly as men do.

They are free to choose their mates and other people's mates quite as much as men. They run to the divorce courts as quickly as men do, as often as men do, sometimes oftener. They clamor for the right to live their own lives, whatever that may mean, quite as the pagan male does.

As regards the younger set, it is oftentimes very difficult to discover who is the life of the party whether John or Jane. And Jane is as little under parental authority or under compulsion of certain restraints today as John is. The much maligned Victorian restraints in speech, manner, conduct are as little present in the one world as in the other. And public opinion which has been rather tardy in giving its silent approval to this equalization, to the moral - or immoral standards, if you will, is finally being persuaded to give such silent approval by the logic of the inevitable.

So that on this score at least, if on no other, woman today is the absolute equal of man. Which is not saying very much.

And yet with all these vectories won, yet the modern

and no longer regards herself quite as superior to her sisters of a generation or two ago, as she had been taught to believe Freddom, however desirable, is not enough. Seemingly freedom can become as heavy a burden and as sad a burden to carry as slavery. For after

And women have not learned that any more than the men have.

The world of the modern woman, has, I am afraid, more and not less of restlessness, of frustration, of uncertainty, of rivalry, of jealousy, of bitterness than the world of those generations of women who world the feminist movement.

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It is of interest to note that the American woman novelist, the American woman novelist, is for some reason or other not glorifying the modern woman. She seeks for her heroes not the emancipated woman of today, but rather the old fashioned woman, almost the Victorian type of woman. She seems still to appeal to the essential self of the woman as well as of the man because woman's domain is and should be as comprehensive and as wide as man's domain.

The is not that the American woman or the american woman woman is sphere as being

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exclusively the home. It never was. Woman always worked inside the home, outside the home, for the home, side by side with her men folk, in the field and on the farm, in the shop and in the factory, in the office and in the store, in the arts and in the sciences. Woman has always worked. There are eight million 5 1 women in the United States engaged in occupations. They labored,

plus the bearing and rearing of children, plus the education of her children, plus the domestic economy, plus the safe-guarding and integrity of the home. While woman's domain is and ought to be as comprehensive as man's, the chief, - the chief interest and destiny of woman is the home.

around her that the children and the home revolves. She is the focal point in that basic institution of humanity which is the home. While therefore, the home, marriage, motherhood are not her sole functions, they are nevertheless her principal contribution to the social sconomy. And nothing can after this fact. No radical theorist, no communist romanticist, no experimentation of farming out of children will after this biologic fact.

achieve equality with man. The real criterion is her wellbeing and her happiness, a happy, harmonious home and a satisfying and enduring marriage relationship.

Therefore the real criterion

And so, I am afraid, the modern woman has not been altogether successful. It is anwise to generalize. It is unscientific to generalize. The American home is still sound and not in danger

and moral reserves in the American home and loyalty and a sense

of devotion and self sacrifice have not yet utterly vanished from all
the dwelling places of our people. But increasingly there are
evidences of the undermining of the home. Increasingly the
evidences crowd in of the growing impermanence and disruption of
the home. Staggering figures of divorce and broken homes are
evidence not morely of change but of a tragic collapse in the
moral standards. That it is the women who will suffer most from
the home. Women first and then the children. Death beguile
yourselves on that secre.

The modern woman has yielded too readily, I am afraid, to the secularization of those fundamental human relationships which bring into existence the abiding unions among men and women and which build the home. She has been beguiled into a too easy surrender of that subtle element in human relationships, in these grounded basic fundamental relationships which we call senctity, the human relationships which cement a union and preserve the home, - love, marriage, parenthood. And the home can never endure on the sole level of expediency or convenience or physical satisfaction.

Much more is required, my friends. Something of the spiritual

quality is required. That is something towards which our age has become superior and cynical, - reverence, delicacy, modesty, self restraint, loyalty. In other words a sense of holiness.

A sense of holiness....

And here I believe is one of the conspicuous failures of the modern woman. The home has been secularized, marriage has been secularized, relationship between parents and children has been secularized. Something has gone out of that world which has been desperately needed in it. When "Shachina" departs from the home very little is left my friends. When dignity and sanctity, reverence, respect and these words which we are afraid to employ today, duty, discipline and obedience, those old fashioned human phrases, love, peace, human relationships, when these depart something departs which was essential and the loss is trrevocable.

The American home is not as safe and secure as it once was and woman is suffering most because of it.

The modern woman, I believe, has failed too, in the political field. We had hoped, those of us who worked for woman suffrage years ago that the coming of woman into the political field would stave off some of the political corruption, that woman

alert, finely equipped, intelligent and now influential, may look for the preservation of those social values which not only safeguard society but which particularly protect and shelter her and her children. It is for the American woman and I believe she will do it.

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The cheapening and the vulgarization of life, the moral shoddiness which is the muddy backwash of the saturnalia of last war is fast disappearing as I knew it would, as I said it would. We are returning to the basic sanctity in life. These days of depression have contributed a great deal towards knocking a lot of foolishness out of our heads. The American women will look toward a reintegration of the home as a place of moral influence, as a place where the youth will look for moral guidance. There are certain laws which youth must obey quite regardless of youth's early judgments about these laws of life. A home where moral refinement, where moral reticence, cleanness, proprieties, conduct, where devotion and piety and reverence will help to mold character and draw souls to souls as marriage was wont and meant to dc.

The only thing that I am afraid of is that modern woman having had so much freedom and having become disillusioned may become a terrible disciplinarian as regards the next generation of modern women.

tion of these symptoms, as critics have often done. Hence one is concerned with the degree of civilization attained by the society in which one lives, not on such grounds as my correspondent might regard as more or less fanciful, but upon the solid ground of security. An uncivilized society has in it the seeds of dissolution, it is insecure; and the lower the degree of its civilization, as measured by the means I have indicated, the greater its insecurity. The race is always instinctively in pursuit of perfection, always looking beyond an imperfect society, putting up with it perhaps for a long time, but in the long run invariably becoming dissatisfied with it, letting it disintegrate, and beginning anew with another.

Our American society, mainly on account of its wealth and material prosperity, has always come in for an uncommon amount of observation and criticism. Every complaint of it on the part of both native and foreign critics, as far as I am aware, is reducible to the simple thesis that it is not a civilized society. These critics do not use this precise formula, - not all of them, at least; some of them do, - but it is the sum of what they have to say, and this is as true of our most kindly critics as well as the most unkindly. It is the sum of Mrs. Trollope's observations at one end of the long array, and of Mr. Dreiser's and Mr. Sinclair Lewis's at the other. There is a complete consensus that our society leaves the claims of too many fundamental instincts unsatisfied; in fact, that we are trying to force the whole current of our being through the narrow channel set by one instinct only, the instinct of workmanship; and hence our society exhibits an extremely imperfect type of intellect and knowledge, an extremely imperfect type of religion and morals, of beauty and poetry, of social life and manners.

I am not concerned, at the moment,

to comment on the soundness of this criticism; I say only that this is the sum of every criticism that has been passed on our society. Try this formula on any observer, native or foreign, and you will find, I think, that it covers the centent of his opinion.

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Thus one is led rather seriously to wonder whether, in encouraging our women to do only the things that men can do, our feminists have not been encouraging them to take quite the wrong way with themselves. For my own part, I suspect it may be so. One may easily see how our society, if it had to, might get on without women lawyers, physicians, stockbrokers, aviators, preachers, telephone operators, hijackers, buyers, cooks, dressmakers, bus conductors, architects. I do not say we should get on without them; that is another matter entirely. I say only that we could get on. We cannot get on, however, without woman as a civilizing force. We cannot get on at least, I see no way whereby we can get on - unless women apply the faculty which they have, and which men apparently have not, to the task of civilizing our society.

In encouraging women to do only what men can do, our feminists have encouraged them to put still greater stress on the instinct of workmanship, the one instinct which all critics say is already over-stressed to the breaking point; and this virtually decreases the stress on those which are already intolerably under-stressed. It causes a still more violent disturbance of balance between the claim of workmanship and the claims of intellect and knowledge, religion and morals, beauty and poetry, social life and manners. [Considering the available indexes of these several claims, it would appear that our

opinion in the matter) have a good deal on their side. The development of a sense of spiritual activity as social, as something popular and common, in which everybody may and everyone naturally does take some sort of hand — this development seems really not to

have got very far.

There is, for example, a great deal of music in America; yet compare the development of our sense of music as a social expression with that which you perceive at work naturally and spontaneously in almost any German village! Similar observations may be made with regard to our literature. We all remember Mr. Duffus's examination of the state of the book market, and we are all aware of the extremely exiguous and fear-ridden existence of anything like a serious periodical literature among us; well, compare this state of things with what one finds in France, or indeed in any Continental country, for I believe our rating is reckoned lower than any of them - as I remember, we stand eighteenth on the list of nations in this particular, though I am not sure of the exact figure; it is, at any rate, shockingly low. So one may go on, through the whole roster of spiritual activities. It appears, then, that further stress on the over-stressed instinct, and further repression on the others, are not what will do us any good.

Here, I think, comes in the point that feminism is in a position not only to direct interest, but, for the first time in the world's history to direct as much purchasing power as men have, or perhaps somewhat more. We have already seen that, in a commercial sense, women's interest controls all our organized expressions of spiritual activity. Take the advertising matter in any newspaper or magazine, and consider the proportion of it that is aimed directly at women's purchasing power,

and you can see at once how far publishing policy must reflect specifically feminine views of life. Consider the proportion of woman's purchasing power represented on the boards of our orchestras, in the contributions to churches, in the maintenance of schools, forums, lectureships, and you will see at once the direction that their policies must take. It is a commonplace of the theatre that the verdict of women will instantly make or break any production, instantly establish any general mode or tendency, instantly reverse one already established. Test the question of women's commercial control of organized expression anywhere in the realm of ethics, manners, art, anywhere in the realm of general culture, and your findings will be the same.

Hence it would seem that there is here a great social force out of which our society is at present getting but little good. I believe it is a much greater force than our feminism has any idea of; and this is my justification for suggesting so directly to feminism that it should recognize and measure this force, and then do everything possible to give it a better direction. Our society cannot be civilized through women's attainment of the ends that feminism has hitherto set before them. laudable and excellent as those are. It can be civilized by giving an intelligent direction to the interest and the purchasing power of women. At present these are exercised very irresponsibly and casually in the direction of civilization, largely because women have been over-preoccupied with the idea of doing what men can do. Modern feminism has unquestionably encouraged and abetted them in this preoccupation; and hence it seems competent to suggest that feminism should henceforth concern itself with recommending a higher and much more rational ideal of social usefulness.

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