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What must we do to remain free?, 1941.

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WHAT MUST WE DO TO REMAIN FREE?
Our Precarious Heritage of Freedom



By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, February 16, 1941

Freedom, my friends, is a precarious heritage which can be easily lost and easily frittered away. It can be snatched away. Peoples can surrender it. Peoples can be swindled and tricked out of it. Freedom is not a one-time purchase. It must be continuously re-acquired and the price is high, sometimes as high as life itself and the blood and tears of men. Freedom is not a permanent unforfeitable possession. It is sometimes inherited from earlier generations. It can be lost overnight. It can be slowly squandered away.

No generation has seen so many peoples deprived of their freedom, so many people divested of their freedom as ours. No generation has seen so many people enslaved like ours. In fact, freedom has come to appear to most people today as the most evanescent and the least secure of all the private and public possessions. We have ^{come} to fear for our heritage of freedom, even in this country where even those who went before us enjoyed it for more than a generation and a half.

One major fact ought to be borne steadily in mind and it is this: While some people lose their freedom, most people destroy their own freedom. The peoples of Norway, Holland, Czechoslovakia -- those countries were invaded and conquered. Slavery was foisted upon them. But Germany was never conquered in the last few years. Italy was not conquered. Spain was not conquered by a foreign foe. The destruction of the free institutions of these countries and of numerous others, great and small, came from within. It was the inner weakness, the inner confusion, the inner decay which made those countries go. They did not know how to solve their political and economic problems through the sanctioned procedures of democratic life so they brushed them aside and adopted other procedures. They suspended their liberties, they thought temporarily, for the duration of the emergency. Actually in every instance where liberty was temporarily suspended, the people lost it permanently.

The last world war defeated aggressive imperialism and ostensibly made the world safe for freedom, for democracy. But many of the nations which were thus free for a democratic life were so saddled by the war with economic difficulties that their political institutions could not meet those difficulties. So it broke down. The desperate nations tried other methods. In most of these nations there ensued, following the world war, a bitter class struggle. Economic groups tried to project themselves with interests, by seizing control of government, by scuttling Parliamentary procedure and by liquidating the opposition party. Hitler, Mussolini, Franco did not destroy Freedom in their countries. When Freedom in their countries became helpless and inoperative because of the hostile conflict of seemingly irreconcilable classes, they stepped in and established themselves on the rot of broken-down democratic procedure.

Today many people hope for a return of freedom after this war. Certainly there will be no freedom after this war if the axis powers win this war. As long as these dictatorships remain in control in nearly all of the countries of Europe there is little prospect of Freedom. And a victory for Nazism and Fascism will rivet slavery on the continent of Europe for generations to come.

But the defeat of these dictatorships in this war will not necessarily make Europe free. It will not necessarily secure freedom for the peoples of Europe, or for the people of the world, for that matter. Following the war, Europe will have to be so reconstructed politically and economically as to make it possible for people to enjoy economic security within a democratic way of life. And the first requirement for a reconstructed Europe, if it is to be a free Europe, is a satisfactory economic existence for the peoples of Europe; and secondly an organized peace, a world organized for peace which will give the peoples of Europe the sense of Freedom.

But even that will not be a complete and automatic safeguard for the freedom of these peoples. Much more is required for people to remain free. Much more is required for our people in this country to remain free. And I should like to speak of a few of those requirements this morning.

First and foremost, within each nation, our own included, there must ensue a never-flagging and continuous agitation for freedom. And by agitation I mean an education plus enthusiasm, an education plus a moral passion for Freedom. We in the United States, we of this generation obtained our Freedom very cheaply. Therefore, I am afraid, that many of us esteem it very lightly. Others fought for that freedom which we inherited.

This month of February brings to our minds the names of two Americans each of whom is reminiscent of a great struggle for freedom, a struggle in which men died that other men might be free. This month is the birthday of Lincoln and Washington. Washington is reminiscent of a revolution fought for political independence in which many men suffered and perished for the sake of political independence and human equality. And Lincoln, of course, is reminiscent of another symbol of Freedom. Lincoln fought in a Civil War in which half a million men laid down their lives, first to save the Union, and secondly to extend freedom to slaves. Others have fought and died for Freedom. We inherited it. And up until recently, when the fear of triumphant dictatorship gripped our hearts, we took that freedom rather lightly. We assumed that it is the product of mere existence in this land of ours, as a matter of course, and that it will always remain ours. But the tragic life of nations overseas who enjoyed freedom as we did and lost it over-night; great peoples fighting and heroically sacrificing their lives to preserve Freedom -- Finns, English, Greeks; the tragic life of millions of refugees made homeless overnight and impoverished by the brutality of tyrants and destroyers of human liberties have made us in this country realize what a precious thing this Freedom is that we have taken so lightly, how fortunate we are and what a great blessed heritage is ours.

And we must never forget that again. A never-flagging education and re-education of the young and adult in the duties, in the obligations, in the responsibilities, and not merely in the privileges of citizenship in a free system must be ours.

The enemies of Freedom will always be there undermining, exploiting and always discrediting Freedom and democracy. Subversive propaganda grows continuously. The Fifth Columnist is ever there. The forces of human liberties must also be vigilant in their counter-propaganda. We must work at this thing called Freedom. So, the first requirement for remaining free is vigilance. Of that even the Founding Fathers of the Republic already warned their people in their day.

The second requirement is Unity. Liberty endangered should draw men together to make common cause for its defense. Whatever tends to divide into hostile groups is a threat. Nothing divides people so much as race and religion. They disrupt. They shatter spiritual unity.

And the classic tactic of conquering dictators is to launch first a psychological attack on the Military people which they marked out, to paralyze the spirit, to bring about its spiritual collapse. They do it by arousing and fomenting internal strife, but turning one citizen against another, by stimulating all the primordial hates, fears and suspicion of peoples. And the hatred of the Jew has, of course, been the most common and successful device in this technique. Through that hatred men are beguiled into joining movements or party whose real objective is to destroy democracy and establish Fascism and Nazism. And never was the slogan so apt, so relevant as it is today -- "United We Stand!" -- we, all of us, the Jew, the Protestant, the Catholic, white, black -- all of us, first one, then the other, then the third. Unity -- that is the second requirement for people to possess who want to remain free.

Thirdly is a deep and compelling sense of religion. This is not Homiletics, my friends. This is a fact demonstrated over and over again, and more particularly in recent years. In God man finds his Freedom and in God man retains his freedom. Judaism declared that when God's laws came into the world, Freedom came into the world." Christianity declared: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." And only as long as man believes that he is a child of God, endowed by his Creator with certain inalienable rights and inviolable dignity and therefore can not be completely subjugated by any human institutions, not even by the state, that therefore, he possesses within his life areas of freedom where the State dare not trespass -- only if man believe that deeply and profoundly will they remain free, will they be able to resist the encroachment of the totalitarian state.

And it is important to teach our children, the citizens of tomorrow, in the home, in the Temple, basic religion, faith in God and the faith in man made in the image of God. It is no accident that all totalitarian systems of government have based themselves on outright Godless philosophy. And it is no act of impulse on their part that the first thing they do is to set about destroying religion.

The last requirement for a people who want to remain free is self-restraint. Edmund Burke, many years ago, declared that "Liberty, too, must be limited, in order to be possessed." When you try to restrain others by force, that is tyranny. But when you restrain yourself voluntarily, that is liberty. Those people who in their eagerness and impatience to get all they think they are entitled to, resort to head-long and precipitous and extra-legal methods to get what they want -- those people help to destroy liberty. The method of freedom, the method of democracy must not be sacrificed at any time to achieve ends which some people deem to be highly desirable and urgent. Violence and dictatorship are never shortcuts to freedom. That is

how many people are beguiled -- a little bit of violence, a short period of dictatorship and you will have all the freedom you want. Free men must learn to restrain themselves. They must learn the art of advancing through compromise, through concession, through give and take.

When capital and labor, for example, decide to fight it out regardless of the cost, that is the beginning of the end of Freedom. When labor begins to fight for power, prestige, splitting up in rival groups and contribute to the dislocation of ^{the} economic life of the people, causing loss, disgust and resentment and discontent among the people -- that, too, is the beginning of the end and the door is opened wide for the demagogue to step in to destroy them both.

Self-restraint, self-limitation -- that is another requirement for human beings who want to remain free, for organized groups of citizens who want to remain free.

Another requirement is limitation on government. Liberty, my friends, began when man began to resist our government, the powers of government. Liberty consisted, and still consists in delineating, in sharply defining the area and scope of government, in pre-empting certain activities from the operation of government and government control because total government control and human freedom ~~are~~ are absolutely incompatible.

When men, to meet temporary pressing needs, invite the government to step in more and more, they are unconsciously and unwittingly subjugating themselves more and more to the power of government and reducing steadily their own liberty and freedom. Because, the more you seek of government, the more power you must grant that government to enable you to get x what you want from it. When we overload our government, government breaks down. Free government breaks down. Dictatorship steps in. Free men must therefore make every effort to retain every possible activity of all kinds -- economic, intellectual, cultural, philanthropic -- they must make an effort to retain as much as possible

those activities within voluntary free associations of human beings outside the control of government.

Lastly, we require for men who want to remain free, for themselves and their children, a larger and increasingly larger economic justice among all peoples. Liberty without food, without jobs, without economic security can not long survive. Freedom languishes in hunger. Dictators find their most eager disciples among the under-privileged, the unemployed and discontented. In 1929 to 1939, there were more than fifteen million unemployed people in our country. That was dynamite. One third of our people living on the verge of, if not in actual poverty, in poor and unsatisfactory dwelling places and in the midst of a constant threat of unemployment. As a free people we have not yet developed that statesmanship which enables us to distribute justly what can be produced in this rich and abundantly endowed country of ours. We have not yet learned to make intelligent use of the resources which are ours, resources which would enable us to take care of every human being living in this land. For there is enough to go around. It is important that we bulwark Freedom with economic security, with the well-being of our people. Fortunately, as far as this land is concerned, we have it in our power so to do because it is not a land which is by nature doomed to economic scarcity, to poverty. In our mines, rich forests, oceans and the genius of our people God has placed the wherewithal to supply the needs of all of our people in a fair and adequate way. Therefore, lovers of freedom will exert themselves to the utmost in these critical days to protect our liberty by satisfying the economic wants of all of our people.

My good friends, these are battle days of freedom. We are converting ourselves into an arsenal today to help those peoples who now have to fight with weapons, with their bodies, with their blood to preserve their freedom. Let us take a long range view on the preservation of Freedom. A long range

view requires that all men who want to remain free -- vigilance and unity and religion and self-restraint, deliberate limitation on the power of government and lastly, earnest and concerted effort in behalf of social and economic justice.

