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Reel  
162

Box  
58

Folder  
779

Is the American Home Breaking Up?, 1948.

762  
IS THE AMERICAN HOME BREAKING UP?

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



Sunday, November 14, 1948





✓ Much of our thought, friends, in recent years has centered overseas. We have been concerned with world reconstruction, with relief of the peoples abroad, with saving mankind from Communism. We have considered many ways of how to strengthen democracy abroad, but it is well to take stock of conditions at home. How sound is the American way of life? A critical barometer of the American way of life is the American home. How secure, how stable, how strong is the American home? For it is the American home which, when all is said and done, is the basic institution. If it is sound, America is sound. The success of our democracy as a way of life is ultimately reflected and gauged by its success in the home, and the quality of family life will, in the last analysis, determine the quality of our national life.

X Let us have a look at the stability of the American home. Divorce in the United States has now reached an all-time peak, and it is the highest in the world.) In 1890 divorce ended one out of 17 marriages. In 1930 divorce ended one out of 6 marriages. In 1945 divorce ended one out of 3 marriages. That is for the entire United States. In our own Cuyahoga County in 1937 there were 9,673 marriage licenses issued. The same year there were 3,948 divorces filed. In 1947 there were some 19,000 marriage licenses issued and some 9,000 divorces files. Every divorce means a broken home, and not only are the lives of the divorcees affected, but even more serious are the lives of the children affected. In our County here in this last year of 1947 some 4,185 children were involved in the divorces which were granted.

Now divorce is generally the climax of a series of conflicts and unhappinesses in the home which may extend over a considerable period of time, and it is in such an atmosphere of strain and tension and frustration that these children are raised. And frequently they are fought over, and at divorce they are frequently deprived of one parent or the other, partially or entirely, and the



psychological effect upon an impressionable child who, above all else, requires for his normal development a sense of security, love, may well be imagined. They say the psychology of such a child may be . The impact upon such a soul in its impressionable years is frequently disastrous and will carry over into adult life the scars, the traumata of their early childhood experiences in a home full of hate and wrangling, and sometimes later in life in times of crisis these early childhood memories strike at the individual and undermine him. And with this staggering increase in the number of broken homes and the breakdown in the morale, one can understand the appalling increase in juvenile delinquency all over our country. When the parents fail in the disciplines of life, how can their children, far less trained and mature, be expected to succeed?

The emotional pattern of the child's life is determined in the home. When a child is surrounded in a home with affection, solicitude, respect, mutual give-and-take, where responsibilities are the daily climate, this child will take into adult life these same moral values, for they will remain associated in his mind forever with happiness and security and wellbeing. And the converse is also true. Parents who are home-breakers unconsciously condition their children to be law breakers. Only the secure family can raise children whose conduct will insure the social stability of our nation. Of course, there are many causes for this staggering increase in divorce rates in our country.

The wars have, of course, contributed materially to the divorce rate. Wars are always disrupters of families - they always lower the morale of the people. Hastily-entered-into marriages of soldiers leaving for the war frequently do not last long; long absences are not strong cement for marriage. Returning veterans are not easily re-adjusted to civilian life and to family life. During the last war some 15,000,000 Americans migrated from their previous homes to locate



in war industries - 15,000,000 men, women and children uprooted, placed in new environments, unadjusted, frequently suffering from housing shortages and from many other frustrations. To this day hundreds of thousands of families of returning veterans have no decent living quarters. This is a disruptive factor in family life. It is a sad commentary on a nation that is pouring out its resources to save the world, that is arming half the world to fight the other half - that such a nation cannot provide decent homes for its own veterans for whom it had no difficulty to find barracks during the war.

But war and housing are not the only factors, nor even the main factors in the situation. It is the entire industrial civilization in which we live which is making it increasingly difficult to build and maintain a strong and secure family life. The earlier agricultural civilization and economy under which most of our people lived contributed in a very real way to family cohesion and interdependence. The family was economically bound together as a unit, but our industrial civilization has turned in the opposite direction, and as a rule it scatters the members of the family. And the industrial civilization also brings with it a fast-moving life, different kinds of living, a loosening of traditional restraints, a decline in relationships and attachments, all of which have their impact upon the home.

I came across recently a rather interesting article<sup>h</sup> in the Survey magazine which contrasts the life of old and the life of today as they impinge upon the constitution of the home. The author contrasts the older form of life with the modern form of life:

The far reach of grandfather's broad acres, spreading out from the old homestead surrounded by the barns and barnyards, corn cribs, milk house and chicken coops - the social, economic, and administrative nucleus for a complicated enterprise of which he was the titular head in that rural America where more than two thirds of the people lived. The roomy abundant kitchen with the fires ever burning in its huge wood stove, the cool damp cellar with well stocked shelves - eminent domain of the family's distaff side.



The routines of daily life - chores at dawn for the masculine contingent, stoking up the fires for the feminine copartners in preparation for a loaded breakfast table. Plowing the south forty, mending fences, putting in the winter's wood, husking corn, shocking wheat, beating showers to the hay mow - each according to its season. Cooking, baking, canning, mending, tending the chickens and the garden. Children trudging off for the little red school house - to an interlude from which they return to do their part in the evening chores. The trip to town on Saturdays - an eventful episode both for those who went and those who stayed at home. On Sundays everyone strangely self-conscious in his best attire, piling into the surrey and off to church; the women to congregate before and after, in little groups, to gossip about neighbors and babies; the men by themselves to talk of weather, crops, and politics; the youngsters surreptitiously pulling pigtails and trading shop talk of their own affairs.

The setting will seem different, the family pattern of our forefathers colorfully varied, if the "March of Time" takes us to the East, the South, the prairie land, the turbulent and pioneering West. Over much of the land, the American family was on the move, flowing ceaselessly into unoccupied corners, adapting to circumstances and surroundings out of this world to the eyes of our modern generation. Yet underneath, the pattern was much the same. Urban life in the villages and towns was still rooted in an agricultural economy. Cities were just beginning to grow apace, but their family life was bound together by outside forces and traditions, making each member dependent on the others.

"Time Marches On".....the patterns of fast moving, growing, insurgent, freedom-loving twentieth century America, with its vast material enrichment of life, new opportunities for freedom and flexibility in personal growth and self-expression, the pace and confusing pressures of daily living, the very absence of traditional restraints.

Then in a shot of a present day setting, the screen brings us the modern American family. The three small shelves in a frigidaire instead of a well stocked cellar. A frequent and easy trip to the corner grocer or downtown store instead of the weekly journey to the village. The graduated ladder of boys and girls reduced to a mere footstool of juvenile inheritance, traveling to graded or progressive schools by chartered bus. The homestead, if not an impersonal apartment, at least a gadget-equipped house, serving as a point of departure from which father goes to work, quite possibly mother, too, the children to kindergarten, grade school, high school, college or specialized vocational training. Sunday, to be sure, will still be a day of rest, but the family will be seen engulfed by the Sunday paper and, perhaps - but only perhaps - making a brief visit to a nearby church or Sunday School, with city dwellers seeking a motor driven glimpse of out-of-doors.



Yet the screen will miss the mark if it shows these scenes to contrast a pastoral idyl with a pointless way of streamlined life. Life for many in those earlier days was hard and rugged. Minimum wages and maximum hours were things unknown. Security was a wholly personal and family problem. People became sick, got well or died, without benefit of clinics, hospitals, or modern specialists. The individual members of the family moved within an orbit restricted by its very need for self-sufficiency and self-maintenance. Their social, economic, and emotional life suffered from the liabilities no less than it gained from the assets of an essentially collective enterprise. Each member of the family attended to the tasks assigned to his or her division of labor. Frustrations were commonplace. But in those earlier days, rebellion was not easy.

Few in our audience would, even if they could, go back to those tribulations, conventions, and restraints. Their nostalgia is for the comprehensive purposefulness, the outer forces which bound the family together as a unit, and gave more than an emotional reason for its being. They would, by looking backward, turn their eyes away from the more democratic demands of modern family life, where marriage must be held together by the capacity to give and take, the willingness and ability to accommodate, each member to the others, where a surplus of love and affection must substitute for a family-centered social and economic way of life.

And this last is a very profound observation. ~~All that is said here simply~~ goes to point up that it is far more difficult to maintain a secure family life today than it was in olden days and that, therefore, greater demands must be made upon the individual, upon the inner spiritual strength of the individual - man or woman. Greater wisdom, greater courage, greater idealism, greater sportsmanship to preserve for themselves and for society the one institution for human happiness - the home. For what profits it a man if he is a success in business, if he is a failure in the home; or for a woman if she is a success in whatever interests she may have, if she is a failure in the home. One who fails as a husband and father or as a mother and wife fails in the most significant reaches of human life. And what profits it a nation, rich and beautiful, if millions of its homes are torn by discord and become breeding places of twisted childhood personality which later on become the law breakers and the rebellious in the life of the nation. Society as such must do its share to protect the home. Society must evolve a system of greater economic stability so



that business cycles and prolonged unemployment do not put an unnecessary strain upon the home - strain which often men and women cannot bear because it is too great for them. Society must seek to avoid war because there is no more disruptive influence in forcibly breaking homes than war. Society can provide proper housing facilities, decent homes for families. Society can and should provide adequate education - preparation for family life - and social agencies to help men and women solve the problems confronting them.

But when all is said and done, this problem is primarily a personal problem for individuals, and it cannot be unloaded on society and on government. The great effort must be made by men and women, and they can make that effort only if they accept and acknowledge and live by a clear philosophy of life; if they accept a standard of values, a code of conduct, and live by it. When the mandates of tradition have broken down for men and women, then they must evolve or accept methods of their own and abide by them and their disciplines. Without such voluntarily accepted codes of conduct by which men live, they are lost. Even with proper housing and even with economic self-sufficiency and all the protected safeguards, that home will crack.

If men and women believe that love is the basis of marriage and that their marriage was an expression of love, then they must accept the commitments which are intrinsically involved in love. These commitments are quite simple and well known. They selflessness, faithfulness, forgiveness, eager sharing of burdens - else what they thought was love was not love at all. Love grows with the years, deepens with tribulation, is exalted in tragedy. Do men and women believe that the bearing and rearing of children is the most exalted experience that they can have in life? Then they must accept the commitments which go with that. The care of the young life demands the combined best of both father and mother.



It demands the mandate of example. It has to be surrounded by a world of goodness and brightness and security if it is to grow up normally, healthily and beautifully. Do they believe that the democratic way of life is the best way of life? Then where is the better place to practice it than in the government of their own home? Respecting each other, each other's rights, each other's privileges, the differences, but also eagerly cooperating in the business of maintaining a home, for the essence of democracy is the acceptance of differences of the composition of all elements for the sake of unity and harmony.

Democracy is freedom with responsibility, and freedom is not happiness; freedom is opportunity for happiness, and men and women, if they want to be free, what exactly do they mean. It is only in the joyous fulfillment of our moral undertakings that we are truly free. Men die in defense of their country. Why should not men and women sacrifice for the preservation of their home? Fundamentally, then, the problem is one of the fostering of basic ideals or the rekindling of what we choose to call religious convictions about the home.

Among our people we find less concern about divorce - no jurisprudence. There were hardly any legal curbs among our people about divorce. It was very easy to get, but our people was concerned with the way of life which made divorce rare and it was looked upon as a catastrophe. There is a beautiful saying of the Rabbis: "He who divorces is even the of God in the sanctuary sheds tears over him." Marriage was something holy; that is to say, when men and women enter the bonds of wedlock they accepted a host of sacred commitments. It was a vow to themselves and to their God. The Hebrew for a man is "ish" and for a woman is "isha". The two letters which they do not have in common are the "yod" and the "hai", and the Rabbis say that when a man and woman marry, God's presence dwells with them, and when they break their marriage vows, the "yod" departs and all that is left of both of them is the "hai".



The united family life, the pure family life, that was the fiercest challenge which our people carried to the old pagan world with its loose family life and moral corruption - that and monotheism; two radical new conceptions of life which the Jew introduced into the world and by which he lived. And that is why the Jewish home remained a model of family unity.

Unfortunately, the impact of the war today is being felt even there. The home was a little sanctuary and every member in the home was like a priest officiating at the highest altar of God. Now those homes of our forefathers were subjected to many strains, too. There was poverty then and insecurity and many tensions because they are a part of life, but they understood that it was the business of men and women to overcome them. They exalted themselves spiritually, psychologically to preserve that which they regarded as holy and as supreme in life. In this connection I must say that they understood as some fail to understand today that perhaps the greatest challenge to preserve the home lies with the woman in the home, with the mother in the home. "It is the wisdom of the woman that builds the house," we read in the Bible. It is the foolish woman who destroys it with her own hands. Because woman is closer to home and to childhood, because she does understand or should understand more the values of home. I read you the beautiful tribute to women paid in the Book of Proverbs. I do not recall any such tribute paid to man. "She looketh well to the way of her household. Therefore, her children rise up and call her blessed. Her husband also he praiseth her." The business of home, though not exclusively, <sup>is</sup> the business of the women. Therefore, the modern woman is rather foolish when she strives to be like a man as regards moral standards and conduct. She is the loser in the long run.

Is the American home breaking down? Statistics seem to show it although statistics are not the final indices. They are like pollsters, ~~by~~ they are a



but they are a danger sign. It is imperative for the American people, who have a fine sense of realism and who have noble traditions of home and family, and who understand how vital for the preservation of American democracy is the sound , happy, integrated home - it is well for them individually to begin thinking less about saving the world and making the world safe for democracy, but saving their own homes and making American life safe for wholesome, normal secure, happy families.

