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The place of youth in organized community life, 1940.

PROCEEDINGS OF FIRST ANNUAL YOUTH CONFERENCE

OHIO DISTRICT JEWISH WELFARE BOARD

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER - CLEVELAND, OHIO

THE PLACE OF JEWISH YOUTH IN ORGANIZED COMMUNITY LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The place of so-called youth in organized Jewish life is exactly the same as the adult occupies. In most of the large cities we have a well-organized community life. All you young people should be able to find a place in that well-organized Jewish community life. If there is no place, see to it that the place is made for you.

Jewish life is a very old, growing concern. We have through the ages developed a certain organized form of existence, certain institutions and certain ways of doing things, and that is organized Jewish life. Every Jewish community has its traditional forms of organization. If you want to be organized, you must begin with the forms that have been created and that have been tested by experience.

What are these organized forms? In the first place, we must recognize that we cannot solve the major problem of anti-semitism. If you were to go through life embittered because you have been discriminated against, it would be a hopeless business. However, if you want to be an interested and active participant in Jewish life, in a thousand interesting things to be done, we can discuss just what place you should occupy.

THE SYNAGOGUE

The synagogue and the temple have always been the centers of Jewish life, the centers of Jewish inspiration, particularly in times like these. Humanity is being destroyed because it has lost the spiritual "raison d'etre". It must recapture religious doctrines. The totalitarian state has taken sides against those that have a group of doctrines based on religion. Our own people will be completely defeated unless we experience a revival in our lives personally of the great spiritual concepts which have kept our people alive.

Identify yourself with a synagogue, not merely by a membership act, but actively. If there is no room for you, demand that room be made for you. Think of the synagogue for worship, for prayer, but link yourself with the synagogue for additional education.

ADULT JEWISH EDUCATION

Adult Jewish education has been a fraud in that everyone thinks of it in terms of the other fellow. Study -- without that, there is no adult Jewish education. Do not blame your rabbis for not offering courses. Every community offers through its centers and synagogues any number of courses. Avail yourself of them.

SOCIAL AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Social agencies serve vital needs. In those institutions you can find your place on the committees, on

the boards. In Cleveland we have in the last few years interested a great number of our young people in the work of the Jewish Welfare Fund. It helps them to become better-informed in Jewish life. I should like to see you young people actively identify yourselves with the Zionist movement, with the movement for the revival of a group culture. There are plenty of organizations, but not enough of our people want to get into those organizations. If these organizations lack financial support, it is your business to demand increased budgets.

ANTI-SEMITISM

The non-Jew who creates anti-Semitism will have to solve the problem of anti-Semitism. Efforts are being made to help solve the problem of unemployment. This is not only a youth or Jewish problem.

DEMOCRACY

Do not be beguiled by will-o'-the-wisp and messianic concepts. Our only chance for peace and security in the world is a sane and practical mind. For the first time in the history of the Western world, a concept of law was established which gave the individual certain unalienable rights. This came from all revolutionary movements throughout the world. Man is primary. The state is there to serve man. Man is man regardless of race or creed.

BEGIN WITH YOURSELF

When you young Jews identify yourselves with Jewish movements for economic reconstruction, never permit yourselves to deviate from true American democratic procedure. The Jewish approach is identical with the American approach. Do not transfer too much of your thoughts and responsibility to organizations, agencies and institutions. If I want the Jewish people to survive, if I want my people to be loyal to themselves, I start with myself. If I want new improvements, I will begin through a process of inner self-cultivation. To be a better Jew, sit down and begin to learn a little more. Study. One hour spent with Isaiah, Maimonides, the Psalms, is worth a thousand hours wasted on literature turned out by anti-Nazi organizations. If Jews are indifferent, what of it? Are you indifferent? Start with yourself. If you do these two things -- build yourself up first in Jewish knowledge, understand and then identify yourself with the existing institutions of Jewish life -- synagogues, national cultural movements -- I think you can lead a very satisfactory, interesting and colorful life in these trying days.

Our people are at their best when under stress. The Jew is at his best when under an extreme spiritual tension. From the days of ancient Canaan our history has been one of conflict, struggle and tension. I find my people fighting -- more alert because of tension. There is a challenge to us. Do not become confused or panicky. Keep your balance.

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DISTRICT YOUTH CONFERENCE

February 25, 1940

SPEAKER: Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

I am skeptical on the business of youth. I know that the accent has been on youth. Everybody talks about serving the youth of the world and everywhere youth movements are being called. I remember that after the World War there was a great deal of talk about revival of youth. The old generation had made such a botch of things that the world went to war and now the young people were going to show the world how to do things.

I am rather skeptical about this talk about youth. I am suspicious and fearful of these youth movements because in the old world at least they were the fore-runners of all kind of fascinating adventures. Every schemer.....made dupes of them and capitalized on the fine ardour and enthusiasm of them to serve his own particular interest, and that business of capitalizing on youth is still going on. Youth are being duped. I think a group number of them were duped in Washington at the American Youth Congress a few weeks ago. It was evident to those who are more acquainted with the devious ways of politics and who know the intrigue behind it.....They were exploited by those who know exactly that they want and have a technique for getting what they want.....

Whenever I hear of these movements and youth organizations, I stop to think. I ask myself, what is a youth?.....According to Jewish tradition, a youth stopped being a youth when he was Bar Mitzvah. Then he became a full-fledged member of the Jewish community.....Boys, up to the age of thirteen, assumed no formal responsibility. After thirteen, they were men who assumed full social, moral and religious responsibilities.....

This brings me to the one thought I would like to say to you this afternoon - the place of so-called youth in organized Jewish life. My answer to that is that their place is exactly the same place that the adult occupies. In most of the large cities we have a well-organized community life - too well organized. All the young men of your age - the young women - should be able to find his place in that well-organized Jewish community life. If there is no place, see to it that the place is made for you.

What is this organized Jewish community? What is organized Jewish life? This is an old business. It was in existence over a generation ago - that Jewish began to organize itself. Jewish life is a very old, growing concern. We have through the ages developed a certain organized form of existence - certain institutions and certain ways of doing things. That is organized Jewish life.....Every Jewish community has its traditional forms of organization and it is a way of looking after organized communal life. If you want to be organized....you must begin with the forms that have been created and that have been tested by those of experience and have not been found wanting. Do not approach life as though yours was the first generation of young Jews.

What are these organized forms of Jewish life? If you want to act as Jews, if you want contact with Jewish life.....You can do nothing about discrimination. Anti-Semitism will always exist. We cannot solve the major problem of anti-Semitism. If you were to go through life embittered because you have been discriminated against, it would be a hopeless business. If you want to be interested, active and loyal participants in a Jewish life in a thousand interesting things to be done, we can discuss just what place you should occupy.

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Then I will call your attention to some of these organized expressions of Jewish life. First, the synagogue; I want to talk about identification with the synagogue and the temple. They have always been centers of Jewish life - the hub of a wheel.....The synagogue has always been a center of Jewish inspiration, particularly in times like these. There have been those people who have tried to find substitutes...There have been those who advocated...substitutes....There have been those who have maintained that all that is necessary for organized Jewish community life is a full force of social agencies....

I think that is a mistake and a failure. There is not enough to nourish the soul of the Jew. All these are expressions of Jewish life and are not the heart and soul of the Jewish people. Whenever that soul begins to languish, all those institutions begin to languish and one by one, disappear.

There are those who have said that nationalism is a substitute; but Judaism is more than nationalism. I have become very suspicious of nationalism.....The Jew is never satisfied with political national organization.....Even in Palestine of old, there was still a great need for the Jewish religion to teach people the ways of God. In modern Palestine, political national Jewish life is re-integrating itself. ..There are demands for spiritual needs expressed through the synagogue. Humanity is sick of Godlessness. When God is dethroned, what gods take his place? That is what has happened. Humanity is being destroyed because it has lost the spiritual "raison d'etre". It must recapture religious doctrines. The totalitarian state ...has taken sides against those that have a group of doctrines based on religion.

....In my judgment our own people will be completely defeated unless we experience a revival in our lives personally of the great spiritual concepts which have kept our people alive. Why do we not meet our foes on a battlefield which we choose and not they? The bitter struggles are essentially Jewish issues - we are today champions of ideals of the world - human brotherhood, spiritual traditions of Judaism, of the synagogue, etc.

I would like our young people in the next two decades.....to develop a pride to compensate for lack of organization.....If you were to ask me what forms of organization you should identify yourselves with.....I would say the synagogue. I am trying to give you the advice I would give my boy. Identify yourself directly - not by a membership act - but actively with the synagogue. If there is no room in your synagogue for you, demand that room be made for you. You are fully equipped to take your full share of responsibility in organized Jewish temple life. Thank of the synagogue for worship - for prayer. But link yourself to the synagogue for additional education.

Adult Jewish education has been a fraud. Everyone thought of it in terms of the other follow.....If you believe in adult Jewish education, you do it and the way to do it is to learn. Study - without that, or without application there is no adult Jewish education. Do not blame your rabbis for not offering courses in adult Jewish education. Every community offers through its centers and synagogues any number of courses, but you do not avail yourselves of them.

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What I have said about these social agencies, I hope will not be interpreted as depreciating their importance. They are very important and they serve vital needs. In those institutions you can find your place on the committees - on the boards. You should bring your counsel and help to those communal activities. In Cleveland we have in the last few years interested a great number of our young people in the work of the Jewish Welfare Fund. It helps them to become better-informed in Jewish life....I should like to see you young people actively identify yourselves with the Zionist movement, with the movement for the revival of a group culture. There are already existing many such organizations. There are plenty of such organizations, but not enough of our people want to get into those organizations. If those organizations lack financial support, it is your business to demand increased budgets.

These are the organized forms of Jewish life. Organizations are now being established to help young Jews find jobs, help find the treatment for discrimination in employment. But I would like to remind you that this discrimination is not directed only against Jewish youth, but against all youth. It is a serious problem, but we will not succeed in solving most of it. It may be solved when the....world undergoes a transformation. That will depend on the outcome of the present world war. One of the best things we can do is to recognize the limitations of what we can do and not reach for the moon.

It is a good thing to know that you cannot square a circle. You cannot go forward and backward at the same time and there are certain definite limitations to the entire problem of anti-Semitism....and we would do well not to expend all of our energies into that one problem. The non-Jew who creates anti-Semitism will have to solve the problem. I think that that thought is beginning to dawn on more and more sections of the non-Jewish world. Efforts are being made to help solve the problem of unemployment. This is not only a youth or Jewish problem.

.....Do not be beguiled by will-o'-the-wisp and messianic concepts, but a sane and practical mind - that is our only chance for peace and security in the world.. ..For the first time in the history of the Western world, a concept of law was established which gave the individual certain unalienable rights which on one can deprive him of. This came from all revolutionary movements...throughout the world - that man is primary - the state is there to serve man. Man is man regardless of race or creed.

My word of counsel to young Jews is that when they identify themselves with Jewish movements for economic reconstruction, never permit yourselves to deviate from true American democratic procedure. I am therefore at times worried to see young Jews with the best intentions run to the right or to the left in their impatience to improve what should be improved. The Jewish approach is identical with the American approach.

I have given you no new great revelation. Generally speaking, I would advise you ...not to transfer too much of your thoughts and responsibilities to organizations, and agencies and institutions.....It has come to a point where most American movements concern themselves with government and that is a dangerous thing because it helps to undermine government.....

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If I want the Jewish people to survive, if I want my people to be loyal to themselves, I start with myself. This is the generation of the Jew. If I want new improvements, I will begin through a process of inner self-cultivation. To be a better Jew, sit down and begin to learn a little more - study. Saturate yourself more and more with that marvelous culture which is ours. One hour spent with Isaiah, Maimonides, the Psalms is worth a thousand hours wasted on literature turned out by anti-Nazi organizations...If Jews are indifferent, what of it? Are you indifferent? Start with yourself. If you do these two things - build yourself up first in Jewish knowledge; understand and then identify yourself with the existing institutions of Jewish life - synagogues, National cultural movements, I think you can lead a very satisfactory, interesting and colorful life in these trying days.

Our people are at their best when under stress. The Jew is at his best when under an extreme spiritual tension. From the days of ancient Canaan our history has been one of conflict, struggle and tension. I find my people fighting - more alert because of tension. There is a challenge to us. Do not become confused or panicky. Keep your balance.

Transcribed 2-27-40

E. Rice



1) Accent on Youth - 1930s.

After War "Revolt of Youth" - Now 40!

Suspicious of Youth Movements: dupes -

First recruits - Short-cuts - Forgets

A. Y. C. - exhibition - led astray

2) When is a youth - a youth? at 13.

Common worship - tasks - problems - 11/12

{ Coddled into prolonged infantilism -

{ Mature people in intell. short-pants

3) This is my approach to Place of Youth in

There is a well-org. J. community - Too well
fine or make his place there.

4) Synagogue - all centers there - inspirat.
esp - Age of Persecution + Martyrdom

"Einsatz" - Soc. Work -

- Nationalism - Jud. is more - Pol

- Communism - Messiah -

Humanity has sickened - Wofan - Wannan

Mars - Defeated

Needs Dopnasg R - God-Child, God

Jew. People - too, - will be defeated -
revival of faith - what will it

Meaning & Dignity -

Our Program - Our God - Our Humanity

Let us meet our foes - therein we
choose - Spunt - invariable

5/ If Syn. & Temple - are not properly org.
Admin- eqv. WRHS - change it!

Demand Repren. in name of our Heritage!
Worship!

Adult Education - for yourself -

"Learn" - sit down with a book!

6/ Soc. Service - Welfare Funds -
Zionism - junior org -
larger budgets

7/ Jobs? Discrim - also Rel - family
unemployment? - also am - Jews
Work for better social order together

8/ Don't transfer too much of your pers.
resp. to ag = Govt.

First Person - Eviziles

Diogenes - not Barb

9/ Other Dark Ag - Survived

① Pers. resp - Rel. loyalty - Home
- courage -

② Helped maintain J. institutions

