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44

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14

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698

American Prosperity and the American Personality, 1958.

Kaddish

Friday Oct. 31

Nov. 2

Sunday

Those who passed away this week

GEORGE H. GOLDMAN
SARAH GORDON

Hyman 60
H. 37

Hahrzeits

HERMAN OPPER
HELENE R. HIMMEL
SAMUEL STERN
SOL DORSEY
HILDA W. KROHNGOLD
DR. JACOB SIEBERT
COLEMAN SPITZ
HEDWIG HENRY
BECKY ROSENTHAL
SIMON FOX
EDWIN H. WEIL
PAULINE WEINSTEIN LOCKWOOD
MARY O. SHAPERO

RAGE: MOSES J. GRIES
EDITH G. ZEMAN
MAX PAUL MEYER
MAURICE E. KESSLER
GEORGE H. COHEN
NATHAN R. CORNSWEET
EMMA REISZ
BERTHA HAYS EISENMAN

#92 32

AMERICAN PROSPERITY AND THE AMERICAN PERSONALITY

Has high living affected our high standards?

THE TEMPLE

November 2, 1958

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Since the dawn of recorded history the evil of poverty has been the most persisting and pernicious blight to affect the body politic. I speak of that back-breaking, spirit-breaking, hopeless penury which has been the lot of most of those who have toiled and labored. The Bible observes that all the days of the poor man are evil days. Impoverishment is a hopeless fact of existence. Nothing that is advantageous can be derived from it -- on the contrary, it is degrading, even more it is embruting and dehumanizing. It corrodes man's dignity and reduces him to humility. It corrodes man's will and reduces it to weakness. It corrodes man's generosity of spirit. It forces upon him a life of purely selfish animal cunning. It is as if such a poor man were a living dead man. His life has none of the bright colors ~~of hope~~ of expectancy which one needs in order to sustain a full and satisfying existence. ^{Such} This ~~kind~~ of poverty of ~~which I~~ speak has been the lot of most men who have ever lived. Economic historians observe that possibly ninety out of every one hundred human beings have suffered mass impoverishment. They have been born into overcrowded homes. They have been nurtured amidst want. They have been raised under the worst of possible living conditions. They have lived out their lives overtaxed, forced into overexertion and into a premature grave by the cupidity and by the greed of other men. It is no wonder then that an ancient teacher of ~~our people~~ was moved to observe that ^{if} ~~would~~ one put all the evils of the world into one pan of a scale, and ~~would one~~ ^{then} put the evil of poverty into the other pan of ~~the scale~~, the evil of poverty would outweigh all

the others. It is only in comparatively recent times, within the last century or so and within the more advanced nations of the Western world that the working man, the laboring man, the farmer, has for the first time been able to look at life with any confidence, ~~with any sense of expectancy.~~ For the first time in world history our modern age has been able to provide the worker with a decent wage, decent working conditions, decent hours of employment, decent shelter for his family and for himself. And this accomplishment is ~~purely~~ one of the climactic achievements of Western man. The ordering of our economic society where we have in a sense reduced the extremes of wealth and want for the first time in history separates our life and our society in a very dramatic way from almost all political orders and economic orders which have preceded us. And when we are prone to bemoan our fate, we ought to ponder well the observation of Lord ^{Keynes} ~~Gayne~~, the noted British economist, who emphasized that national prosperity is a relatively modern phenomena and who underscored for the modern man the blessedness of his birth at this time in world history. Our problems, however difficult, permit of some solution. The problems of the serf, of the slave, of the ~~Fallen~~ permit ^{ed} of no ^{ve} solution. And often these poor, down-trodden souls welcomed the grave ~~as a rest~~, as the first refreshing rest from a life of hopeless toil. In a sense this accomplishment by Western man vindicates ^{our} Hebraic ethic. The Hebrew spirit was never at peace with a world of economic inequality. Our prophets thundered ~~forth~~ against the misuse and abuse of wealth and power by those who were fortunate enough to be so dowered. And Jewish society in every age has attempted to mitigate the extremes of pelf, of affluence, of misery and of poverty and of lack. You know strangely we were one of the few great world theologies or philosophies which never made peace with social and economic inequality. Consider for a moment the religions of India, Hinduism and Buddhism. Consider their vaulted and vaunted theology. And yet remember that they were quite prepared to sanction the ~~stratification~~, the arbitrary stratification of class and of caste and to justify the assumption by the few of all power, all wealth, all leisure and all luxury. And remember that in

these Eastern theologies it was resignation, not social revolution, that was preached. Consider the philosophies of Greece. Consider even the Utopian logic of a Plato, and remember well that the mass man, the laboring man, the slave, was considered by him rabble, vulgar, a living tool. ~~On~~, the better classes had the responsibility of providing this laborer with his shelter and with his food, but in no way could ~~this~~ member of the lower classes achieve for himself his rightful ~~self-determinative~~ place in God's sun. To Plato it was inconceivable that any social order be achieved which gave to all men equality of opportunity and a fair measure of life's wealth and of life's blessings. Consider Christianity in its most classic formulation. Remember that ^{Jesus} they felt that the poor will always be among us, ^{and Paul} that this world will always remain a vale of tears, that we must render unto Caesar those things which belong to Caesar, that we must make our peace, as it were, with social inequality because it cannot be eradicated, it cannot be changed, that man's true achievement of equality will come not in this world but in the next. Consider even those men of our own day or of the last century who are considered to be the classic economists of the Western world, men of the stamp of Adam Smith and Ricardo and ~~Malthus~~ and Spencer. Remember that these men too felt that a better economic ordering of society could not be achieved. The poverty of the lower classes was a datum of social experience which could never be eradicated because of the competitive nature of the market, because of the tendency of our world to overpopulate itself, and because of the innate cupidity of man. It is no wonder that such a social critic as Carlyle was wont to express his thoughts about these classic economists by labeling them "the respectable professors of the dismal science". Only Judaism was never willing to sanction, to rationalize, to accept a philosophy, a social order ~~of~~ which permitted of social inequality. Our prophets thundered against the abuse of wealth. Our teachers refused to sanction any social order which did not concern itself with ameliorating and mitigating want and need and poverty wherever it exists. They refused to sanction any of those arbitrary conventions of class or caste by which

the wealthy and the powerful have sought to lend a certain aura of sanctity to the rights which they have arrogated ~~to themselves~~. Judaism refused ~~also~~ to accept the rationalization of so many of the wealthy even in our own day -- that their wealth is due to superior talents, to determination, to a willingness to labor and to exert themselves, and that the poverty of the poor is due entirely to their profligacy and to their indolence. Wealth, Jewish tradition tells us, is a matter of luck, of birth, as ~~well~~ ^{much} as of hard work, and the lower classes have no monopoly upon profligacy and indolence. Jewish society insisted that charity mitigate poverty, that a free public school offer a measure of democratic opportunity to all members of the community, and it insisted that a social and democratic philosophy be preached in the synagogue in every age -- a philosophy which commanded the rich to be stewards of their wealth, not to abuse their privilege, to concern themselves with the well-being of the whole community, and to treat the poor, not patronizingly, but with respect. And as we read the history of our Jewish communities -- four thousand years of our history -- and compare it to the history of so many other communities of our world, we are struck by one salient characteristic, and that is that our community - our Jewish community - has known less of artificial social stratification and less of the inequality of great wealth surmounting great poverty than any of the other communities which our world has known. The achievement by Western man of an age of relative prosperity is then a vindication of the realism of the Hebraic ethic. It is also a vindication of the appeal of the Hebrew ethic, for in large measure our present achievement is due ~~entirely to the fact that~~ ^{at least} the spirit of Hebrew prophecy ~~was captured~~ by Jew and non-Jew in every age in every clime. It infected them, it enthused them, it enabled them to commit themselves to social causes and to achieve the world which we now enjoy. ~~And~~ ^{And} our modern world causes us to remember that our job is not yet done. The poor are still among us even in our own land, and when we consider the larger world we are reminded that in the vast hinterlands of Asia and of Africa and of the Near East and of our own

South America the majority of men and women still labor under the most abject impoverishment and of the worst type of conditions, and that the vision of the Hebrew prophets of the time of prosperity and peace and equal justice has not yet been achieved. And in our own immediate community we enjoy what the Harvard economist ~~John G. Galbraith~~ has labeled "an affluent society". And if we are not all wealthy men, and we certainly are not, at least we all recognize that we live in an age of great prosperity and national well-being, that we live in a society which has found the techniques of dispensing its prosperity to the vast majority of those who are its citizens, and we rejoice in this achievement. To look at our society with a scrutinizing view is to recognize that affluence alone has not brought happiness. The affluent society is not necessarily the good society. One has only to consider the millions upon millions of tranquilizing pills which are dispensed each week in order to make us at least achieve some measure of peace with our world. One has only to consider the vast number of men and women who require mental therapy of ~~one type or another~~ in order to adjust themselves to the realities of our social fabric. One has only to consider the popularity, the mass popularity, of the "Peace of Mind"s and the "Peace of Soul"s and of the "Guides to Confident Living" in order to recognize that our affluent society has not in and of itself, as wealth has never brought, brought peace of mind and brought happiness. For wealth is not the key to self-fulfillment, although wealth may be the key to the enjoyment of many of the opportunities of life which we might otherwise not enjoy.

, the Rabbis asked, "Who is the truly wealthy man?" And the answer was "The man who whatever his purse may have weighed was able to find satisfaction in his lot." It is not your bank account but your sense of personal worth which determines your happiness quotient ~~in life~~.

The affluent society has brought to us a series of new social problems. It has brought to the attention of the men and women of ~~our day~~ tens of thousands of

temptations which in poorer times the average citizen was ~~not faced~~ and did not have to meet. We all know the observation made by Benjamin Franklin two centuries ago, when he wrote in his "Poor Richard's Almanac" "Success has ruined many a man." And to look at our society, our affluent society, is to recognize the aptness of Franklin's observation. For each of us has been friendly with good people, decent people, who when they have achieved some modicum of prestige or of fame or of wealth, suddenly developed an inflated ego, an unbecoming arrogance. They suddenly assumed that their success had been entirely due to their own efforts. They suddenly forgot their friends, their social responsibilities, and ^{wholly} began to live ~~an~~ ingrown and perhaps pleasure-seeking life. Once the appetite has been whetted by material things, all too often the appetite is an insatiable one, and a ~~race~~ ^{contest of ~~ambition~~ ~~competition~~} is undertaken with many similarly ^{material} insatiable neighbors in ~~visible~~ ostentation, ~~in the visible display of the things of the world.~~ We have all of us seen men and women to whom wealth was most unbecoming. If we look at our world with candor I think we will admit that we have seen in our society an unbecoming grasping quality. Our world is the wealthiest world that mankind has ever known, but the institutions which support this world have not been sponsored by the citizens of the affluent society in a way commensurate with their affluence. We have spent one hundred times as much on ourselves, on our leisure and on our luxury, than we have spent on all the institutions of medicine and of education and of culture and of recreation and of religion and of welfare which support the body politic. And certainly in this, the week in which our United Fund failed in Cleveland, we can understand that affluence in the highest order does not necessarily lead to an increased generosity of spirit. Certainly the goal of our United Campaign was not an overwhelming goal for the million and one half citizens of greater Cleveland. Certainly the need was of paramount importance. And yet we failed -- failed to achieve even a minimal level of giving. We have spent tens of thousands of dollars on ourselves, on our trips, on our homes, on our cars, and we give in tens of dollars, hundreds of dollars. The comparison

is not in our favor.

The affluent society has affected our homes in many ways. It has made our homes economically more secure. It has vitiated the necessity of making marriage a matter of economic adjustment. We base it now on what it should be based, on love and attraction, and yet consider this and consider this well, that in 1890 ninety-three out of every one hundred marriages was lasting and binding until death did the couple part. In 1955 sixty-five out of every one hundred marriages lasted until death. And the sociologists are telling us that at the present rate of growth in 1970 only fifty out of every one hundred marriages has any chance of stability. The affluent society has given especially to the woman in our home a great deal of free time and of leisure which she did not have before. Free from many of the back-breaking tasks of family raising and home making she is able to spend more time with her children and more time in self-fulfillment, in civic service, in volunteer organizations, in engaging in all types of educational and cultural activity. And many of our young mothers have so spent their free time. Many have realized how dowered and blessed they are compared to the back-breaking, time consuming efforts of their grandmothers. And yet many of our young mothers have found the card tables and the bars at their clubs the most attractive of leisure time recreation. Alcoholism has in the last decade alone in Cleveland increased by eighty-eight percent among our women. Many of these young women are unable to find time from their pastime to spend with their children. Many a professional of our social welfare agencies has told me that surprisingly in this day and age some children from good homes are coming to the agencies, troubled by what they call "starvation for affection", in need of love. Their mothers especially have made pastime into vocations and forgotten the primary concerns of their lives.

The affluent society has also deeply affected the growth of our children. It has made it possible on the one hand for us to present to them a rich variety of educational and travel and cultural experiences. The world of our children

is a much vaster, broader world than was the world of their grandparents. It has made it possible for us to increase the extent of their education. We no longer need to prematurely abort their training because of economic necessity. We want for our children a childhood free of strain, full of pleasure. And yet the affluent society has been a society which has showered upon these children all matter of material possession. The affluent society has been insistent upon exposing these young people to adult social and sexual recreation long before they are prepared for the adult world. And we have made, in our society, adolescence into a much more traumatic experience than biology alone would demand that it be. What, after all, can a young girl look forward to in her college years if already in her junior high school she has been exposed to night-long proms and knows of no curfew? And what will a young lad have as a sense of new adventure if at sixteen he owns a car and an unlimited allowance and is allowed to come in at all times of the night? In a sense our very concern with the wellbeing of our children has caused us to overwhelm them with too many things and to destroy what is so precious among the young - their sense of perspective and balance which alone permits them to grow and to grow healthily. One of the saddest and most incongruous sights in our society is to see young couples establish themselves in the early years of their marriage in most pretentious homes, ^{when they are not} ~~they could not~~ even ~~be~~ earning enough for the bread and the salt which appears on the table. What values can we expect such overindulged young people to have established? They are surrounded by a world of things, not by a world of goals, and it is not at all surprising that the generosity of spirit, the charitableness of the parents is very seldom reflected in a similar generosity of spirit and charitableness among the children. The children live in an unreal world of things, a world which their parents have built up for them. I am reminded of this familiar but apt story of a wealthy senior citizen who was much troubled of mind. He consulted every doctor and every psychologist and every psychiatrist in his community without much relief. Finally he came to the rabbi and he told the rabbi of his troubles.

The rabbi advised this man to go to the window of his study and to tell him to describe to him the scene that he saw outside on the street. The man observed and reported that he saw men, women, busy at their work, shopkeepers in their stores, children on their way to school. And then the rabbi told this man to turn to the mirror which was hanging on the wall of his study and to tell him what he observed in the mirror, and of course this wealthy man observed only in himself. And the rabbi commented to this man, "You see what a simple thin sheet of silver does when it is placed on a sheet of glass. When the glass is without the silver you can see the open world about you. When the glass has been silvered it becomes a mirror. You can see only your own reflection and your own image."

And so very often our society, by putting a thin sheet of silver about our young people, destroys for them the vision of the larger world with its fulfillments and its struggles and its problems and its tensions and its opportunities. It forces them to think of things, not of goals, to worry about possessions, not of life plans. This is not a healthy state for them. As I considered the problems of an affluent society I was reminded of a very beautiful short prayer which appears in the Book of Proverbs in our Bible. It reads thus:

"Oh, Lord, give me not wealth or poverty. Feed me this day with my daily bread, for if I be filled, I may be moved to say, 'Who is God?', and if I be poor, I may be moved to steal and so profane the name of God."

Oh Lord, though we are prone to seek favors for ourselves alone, Wealth, as this ancient teacher so well observes, so often perverts the perspective with which we view life. We become ashamed of our littleness, and we forget our health, our conscience, our talent is a gift of God, not a creation of our own. We forget that we would not be born into this age of plenty had not hundreds upon thousands upon millions of men in ages past struggled to make our civilization and our science, and our economic order what it has been, what it is today. We forget that we could not live amidst the pleasure and the luxury with which we live were it not for the thousands who labored diligently and determinedly and devotedly to bring the goods which we use in our homes into our homes and the possessions which we enjoy into the market where they can be purchased.

If our age needs any philosophy to guide it through its own affluence to greater achievements, it would be some understanding of the need for humility, for recognizing that affluence alone does not testify to our worth-whileness, that unless we are willing to dedicate ourselves to all manner of social concern our affluence will not remain long with us. Wealth permits, my friends, a generous hand. It permits man to be kindly to his neighbor, to help the man in need. Leisure, which is a by-product of an affluent society, permits man the opportunity to serve in all manner of civic responsibility, on all types of worthwhile Boards and institutions, in all areas of volunteer service. It permits us to work for our bread and also to serve our fellow citizens. And these are our rich blessings and rich opportunities, and ^{if} we would live well and happily in the affluent society then we must undertake to fulfil these larger responsibilities which affluence poses upon us. We must learn not to be overly absorbed with material possessions and we must learn to be wholly absorbed with the ministry of service which affluence permits. No age has been so rich in opportunity and potential as our age. We should not be unworthy of the obligations which this imposes. And I would close by reading to you a prayer from our prayer book which in so many ways sums up all that I have been saying, and which I would commend to your hearts and to your minds as a guide sufficient for an age of affluence.

"O Lord, though we are prone to seek favors for ourselves alone, yet when we come into Thy presence we are lifted above petty thoughts of self. We become ashamed of our littleness, and we are made to feel that we can worship Thee in holiness only as we serve our brothers in love. How much we owe to the labors of our brothers! Day by day they dig far away from the sun that we may be warm, enlist in outposts of peril that we may be secure, and brave the terrors of the unknown for truths that shed light on our way. Numberless gifts and blessings have been laid in our cradles as our birthright. Let us then, O Lord, be just and great-hearted in our dealings with our fellow men, sharing with them the fruit of our common labor, acknowledging before Thee that we are but stewards of whatever we possess. Help us to be among those who are willing to sacrifice that others may not hunger, who dare to be bearers of light in the dark loneliness of stricken lives, who struggle and even bleed for the triumph of righteousness among men. So may we be co-workers with Thee in the building of Thy kingdom which has been our vision and goal throughout the ages."

Amen.