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A Proposal for Racial Progress in Cleveland, 1964.

A Proposal for Racial Progress in Cleveland



Address delivered by
RABBI DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

At THE TEMPLE, CLEVELAND, OHIO

February 9, 1964

You may recall that I suggested some years ago that Cleveland is one of the best kept secrets in the nation. This is no longer the case. A scarred and ugly image of our city has been messaged across the United States. When we spoke of Cleveland, we described it as a not very exciting place in which to live, but as a good home and a good place to raise up our children. How did you explain Murray Hill to your children?

There are two Clevelands. We are proud of one. So proud that we prate about it—our stately suburbs, the buildings and the beauty of our cultural center, the fine history of our voluntary welfare agencies. But there is another Cleveland—a Cleveland we contrive to keep invisible. How many of you have seen the welfare client making do with his pitifully inadequate public assistance check? How long has it been since you walked in the Hough area and saw at first hand its raw, restless—I almost said hopeless—poverty? You may cross the Cuyahoga River every day, but do you see it for what it is, Cleveland's racial wall; negroes to the east, no negroes to the west.

What I am saying today is not an overcolored oratorical response to last week's rioting and crisis. I recall some paragraphs I spoke to you from this pulpit more than two years ago:

The first glorious page of Cleveland's history revealed a dedication to free public education of high quality. Today education is still to be had, thanks to the sacrificial integrity of a noble profession, but education is no longer a focus of civic energy. I ask myself where are the graduates of our Cleveland schools of twenty-five years ago? By and large they have turned their backs on their alma maters, gone out and founded new schools—less crowded, less colorful schools. Where do we find these graduates? All too often, I am afraid they are to be found financing campaigns against the passage of city school levies and grumbling about the high cost of owning property in the city which nourished them and from which they have fled.

We once prided ourselves on our record of sympathetic and enlightened help to the less fortunate, to the new immigrant, to those of other colors and of other colored skins. Can we still claim the mantle of charity in a community which allots only eighty percent minimum subsistence to its welfare cases?

(So well did I preach, and so effectively, that we now allot seventy percent of minimum need.)

Can we who insist that artificially drawn municipal lines determine who shall pay the burden of welfare preen ourselves on our social vision and our citizenship? What does our fragmented tax structure insure? The cynic would answer, with some measure of truth, only that the poor must pay poor relief while the wealthy escape that burden.

The mother (Cleveland) has been virtuous. The mother has been kind. She gave us schools, and parks, and recreational facilities, and a fine economic climate. But I wonder if we, the children, have been grateful in measure for our bounty. The cycle of life in Cleveland has been centrifugal—outward. We have slammed the door on the home, picked up our baggage, walked out without looking back. Today as many of us live outside the city line as within it. This mass exodus has been typical of every major city, but in Cleveland we have raised the pace of this exodus to the *nth* degree. It is not at all impossible, and indeed it is quite routine for many to be of our city but never to enter it. There is a wall in Cleveland quite as high and quite as impenetrable as the wall which divides Berlin. We are today citizens of a divided city—one half well fed, well housed, well educated. The other half suffering a crisis in welfare. The one half boasting the richest suburb in the nation, the other suffering with one in fifty of its citizens requiring economic or medical assistance. The one gluttoned, the other impoverished. The one building swimming pools, the other lacking classrooms.

What was the picketing, and the freedom singing, and the sit-in all about? It was a desperate cry, "See me," spoken by the half of Cleveland which we contrive not to see. See me not as a welfare statistic but as a mother concerned with the place and quality of her child's learning. See me not as an hourly rated worker whom you hire from eight to five, but as a father, intimately concerned with the wellbeing of his family and with the decency of his neighborhood. If we have eyes but we see not and ears but we hear not, if we use these people but do not consider them (and we do), then they must resort to headline making, to the singing, to the picketing, and to the sit-in. They must shake us awake, for they, too, have a claim on the prosperity, on the privilege, and on the promise of our city.

What happened here last week can not be explained simply as a city-wide concern with the placement of some eight hundred negro children in three largely white receiving schools. To see the issue in these narrow and restricted terms is to misunderstand it, for the placement program governing these children, however misguided and morally indefensible, did not of itself arouse half a city to bitter anger. What we heard was the voice of the negro revolution. What we heard was a voice which will cry out and agitate until we listen. "We have been wronged. As human beings, as citizens, created by God, we have our rights to decency and dignity, to hope, and to a future."

The issue in Cleveland was broadly racial. What happened at Collinwood was ugly, foreboding, and racial. What happened in Murray Hill was vicious and violent and racial. What happened on the third floor of the School Board Building was determined, even fanatic, and racial. Racial tension was the match that lit the fuse. Cleveland is a far more bigoted city than we care to admit. But again we mistake the context of last week's events if we see them purely in terms of a racial confrontation. When the United Freedom Movement made its presentation to our School Board late in the summer of last year, they were able to locate a few covert areas in which the school system had conformed with the existing pattern of segregation. If the children who had been bussed into Brett and Memorial and Murray Hill schools had been white, no one, surely, would have devised a policy of sequestration. If some of our labor unions did not have racial bars against negro membership, the vocational training program at Max Hayes High School would not be of limited value to negro students. It is true, also, that text books should reflect more accurately the physical realities of a megalopolis and not the sweet all-white, boy, girl, and dog atmosphere of Suburbia.

The School Board agreed to make the necessary changes. The School Board further agreed in September to appoint a citizens community relations group to investigate any further instances in which the system might be guilty of tacitly conforming to Cleveland prejudice.

But none of these issues, in and of themselves, was of sufficient size and dimension to explain what happened last week. You saw the pickets, but did you bother to read the picket boards? Some of them said, "Integrate Murray Hill School," "Integrate Brett." But as many of them, in fact far more, said, "End all ghetto schools." Hazeldell is a ghetto school, Brett and Memorial are not. There was implicit on these placard boards an attack on the entire educational structure. What we saw last week was a vote of no confidence in our public school system by the negroes of this city. What they were saying was pre-

cisely what the PACE report said a year ago. "The quality of education in the Cleveland public school district is steadily declining." Negro parents put it this way, "You are not providing for my children a responsible educational opportunity to prepare them adequately for urban life and modern economic competition. Our children need more than you are giving them. Our children require a better education than you are providing."

I heard many of you say last week, what are the negroes complaining about? Glenville was a ghetto school. Yet we never picketed the School Board. We never complained about it. We were quite proud that Glenville won most of the academic honors in our state. I suggest to you that Glenville twenty-five years ago was a far different school than it is today. The ratio of teachers to pupils has worsened. The amount of real money available for instructional purposes is significantly less. Education is not as easy in Glenville today as it was twenty-five years ago. Many of the children do not come from upwardly mobile, educationally motivated homes. Many of them need counseling and guidance. Much of that counseling and guidance is not available. The State of Ohio estimates that a school district must budget \$500.00 per child per year to educate adequately. In some of our suburban areas we spend \$700.00 and more per child per year. The Cleveland public school system budgets less than \$400.00. The State of Ohio recommends that there be fifty professionals for every one thousand children in a school system. In some of our favored school systems there are sixty professionals—sometimes more. There are thirty-nine in the Cleveland public schools. Where is the fault? It rests in an inadequate budget. For years we have starved the school system. We have not allowed it to do what it knows it must do—increase the quality of its educational program and the effectiveness of its curriculum.

These statistics do not state the whole sad story. In some of our public schools ninety percent and more of the children come from culturally deprived homes. There is no place in such homes for homework study. There is no educational motivation. There are no books. Employment is sporadic. In some of our neighborhood schools ninety percent of the children who begin a semester will not be in the same class with the same teacher at its end. These children require special tutoring. They require vocational guidance. They require reading rehabilitation. It is estimated that they require an expenditure of \$200.00 per child per year above the \$500.00 already suggested. Not a single cent of this money is available.

The children who require the most have the least. That is the cruelty of education in Cuyahoga County today. And that is the reason for the crisis of the last week, and it is the reason that I would

make this proposal. Let the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce, and the various landlord and real estate boards of our community, and the United Freedom Movement join with the School Board, either in May or November of this year, to promote and to effect the passage of a levy of sufficient proportions to permit the school system to provide superior education. Why the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce? Because business cannot thrive in an unsettled and roiling situation. It is high time that the Chamber and the interests which it represents recognize that Cleveland is something more than buildings and railroads and banks; that people, not machines, are our basic resource. Why the landlord and the real estate interests? Because for too long now representatives of these groups have held what is in effect a veto power over school levy submissions. Such is the political configuration of our city that these groups have held a balance of power. They have been able to go down to the School Board time and again and to say, this you do not need. This is frill. This program is unnecessary. Now is the time for these groups, which draw their income from the city, to replenish the basic resource of our community. And why the United Freedom Movement? Because it is proper for the negro not only to challenge and to confront, but to cooperate. Realistically, if such a levy could not muster a high plurality in the largely negro wards it would not pass. Realistically, it is essential that the negro recognize that his emergence is integrally bound up with the success and the development of public education. As you know, there are militant groups in the civil rights movement which have taken the position that the various metropolitan school systems must bus—move about—pupils until an arbitrary and theoretical integration percentage exists in every school—so many whites, so many negroes. End the ghetto schools. Eliminate the concept of the neighborhood school. An already straitened school budget could hardly pay the freight for bus rental and for gasoline. It would be a tragedy to have to do so. But it is an appealing concept to parents whose children are in largely negro schools, and who look about them at neighborhood white schools which are, in fact, a cut above. The white areas are less crowded. Twenty-three thousand people are crowded into a square mile around East Tech. Six thousand people are in the square mile around John Marshall. The teachers who are in the largely negro school, with too many children in their classrooms and too many new children, where they see the pathology of education, often find the allure of the suburbs more than they can pass up. An assistant administrator of public education in Cleveland estimated for me that the Cleveland public school system must replace its entire teaching staff every four years. The highest rate of professional turnover exists in these negro neighborhood schools. The appeal to end the neighborhood schools is an alluring one, and the more militant of the negro leaders are prepared to say that they would be willing to play

the part of Samson, and to pull down the entire educational enterprise around their heads and ours, because, they say, that is the only way that you—you—will understand the depth of our anger and the depth of our determination.

I tend to agree with Dr. Kenneth Clark, a negro civil rights champion and professor of psychology at the City College of New York, who insists that priority must be given now not to some theoretical integration of schools but to the development of superior education within existing neighborhood schools. But I would say to you that in Cleveland the time for this was yesterday. Indeed, I would make this prediction: unless we succeed in significantly and substantially improving the quality of education in our city, within three years, there will be such confusion, picketing and boycotts and crisis and anger, that the minimum level of present efficiency will disappear, and the entire educational enterprise will be endangered.

The hour is late. I wonder if we recognize the lateness of the hour?

What of us? What of us who live outside the city school district? I would suggest that we initiate an annexation petition in each of our school systems. Its purpose? To allow these school districts to be annexed by the school district of Cleveland. Surely, the city can use our abundance. Surely, the city can take advantage of our excellent and carefully selected teaching staffs. I am not so naive as to believe that these petitions would be successful, but surely as we argue and reveal our concern with educational quality for our children, we will be less tempted to criticize the strategy or the timing or the tactics of the negro group as it struggles for its children against inadequacy and indifference.

I am tired of the prejudiced who said that what happened last week happened because of outside agitators, Communists. I am tired of the queasy who said, if only the police had acted with greater decisiveness. I am tired of the morally uncertain who said, if only the ministers hadn't picketed. The truth is that Murray Hill was inevitable, like the Fate of a Greek tragedy. It did not have to happen there and then and in that way, but it had to happen. And Murray Hill will happen again, and again, and again, until you and I reknit our fragmented city. There are thirty-two school districts in Cuyahoga County. Thirty-one of them exist as counter-districts to the negro and to the city. There are a hundred and four governing bodies in Cuyahoga County. A hundred and three of them exist because we turned our back and fled.

We cannot exist twain, two cities, pulled apart. One surfeited, the other gutted. One of plenty, the other of bitterness. As long as this separation exists, Cleveland will be a city of increasing violence. Make no mistake about it, though you enlist another negro in your lodge or in your club, though you welcome a negro couple into your home for tea, though you listen patiently and nod that you, too, agree with a speech on integration—this is not a sufficient answer. The answers now are structural, and political, and economic. They require major changes in our way of life. They will not be made easily. The forces of hate are strong. What Cleveland requires now is a sturdy leadership. What Cleveland requires now is an understanding of the real issues, for these have hardly been met. All week long, the line with which Voltaire captioned the last chapter of "Candide" ran through my mind: "A conclusion in which nothing is concluded." The racial crisis in Cleveland has just begun. Thirty, forty years of turning the back, of cold shouldering, of moving away, of building outside, is bearing fruit. The invisible city insists it will be seen. We can achieve a better tomorrow by evolution, by political means. I opt for that solution. But violence is close to us. Simply agreeing to be agreeable is no longer enough. We need votes. We need action. We need metropolitan government. We need an adequate school budget. We need all those programs which have been spoken at city forums and from this pulpit for so long. And we need them now. They need not be studied again. Cleveland is the most over researched city in the United States. We need them now. And we can establish them cooperatively. This is our hope. Fortunately, the fundamental crisis is not racial. Both white and negro require decent education. Both white and negro require a healthy employment situation. Both white and negro require stable neighborhoods, decent housing, and effective zoning. Far better cooperation for basic needs than a separation into violence.

But make no mistake about it. The hour is late, We can only pray it is not too late.