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The Popular Wisdom and Popular Folly, 1967.



## POPULAR WISDOM AND POPULAR FOLLY

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver  
Sunday, December 24, 1967

A fox was living peacefully and happily until a lion settled down nearby. To be sure, he was a neighborly, circumspect, and friendly lion, but the fox said to himself: "The lion will remain my good neighbor as long as the hunt is plentiful; but, if he goes hungry, I may well become his lunch." So, the fox plotted to preclude this unwanted result. One day, the lion came across the fox groaning and holding his head. "What's the matter?" "Oh, I have a terrible headache." "Can I help you?" "Well, I really don't know what to do. I've taken all the pills that I can. Oh, yes, I remember hearing from a gypsy that, if someone bound your wrists and your ankles and your blood circulation was constricted, this would clear your head. Would you bind me?" The lion agreed, and he trussed up the fox, and about an hour later the fox pronounced his head clear. Some weeks later, the lion had a headache; and all of the pills, with or without aspirin, with or without bufferin, didn't help one bit. So, he sought out his friend, the fox, and he asked the fox to tie him up, to constrict his circulation and clear his head; and the fox gladly complied. No sooner was the lion imprisoned, than the fox took up a stone and beat him to death. This medieval fable is not the usual kind of pulpit illustration. It illustrates the law of the jungle much more than any law of civilization; but, in its own way, it offers an apt and telling comment on the fearfulness of power, even of the most quiescent seeming power - fear of the powerless for the man of power whatever be his professed intentions.



Translate lion as 'whitey' and fox as 'Stokely Carmichael', and you have an amazingly contemporary fable.

Now, heaven has always been pictured as up there because it is clearly not down here. In this world some men are cruel; some men are vicious; some are paranoid; some are sadistic; many are greedy; a goodly number foolish; and any philosophy which is worth its salt must surely open the eyes of the simple and force the innocent to accept the simple fact that the world neither echoes nor reflects their optimistic innocence. Religion has often been accused of painting pretty pictures, of putting on rose-colored glasses, and of talking of a world which is unreal, talking about men and women who are somehow saintly as no man is saintly, who are somehow always decent, in a consistent way that no man presumably can manage. I cannot speak for other faiths, but I can say for our own that we have always encouraged our people to see life for what it is and as it is. I give you the rather clear-eyed, hard-boiled, proverbial wisdom which was read from Ecclesiastes this morning; about wealth, about power, about poverty, and about folly. I give you the book of Genesis which begins with Eve's deceit of Adam when she entices him to eat of the forbidden fruit, which continues with fratricide, Cain destroying his brother Abel, which tells us of young Jacob and his mother conspiring to get the unmerited birthright, and of the brothers of Joseph selling their youngest brother into slavery and lying to their father that Joseph had been killed. Our Bible pictures men without make-up; and my text this morning is just such a clear-eyed little book, one which I had occasion some weeks ago to pick up and to re-read. I'd like to share my thoughts on it with you this morning.

It is a medieval book. It was written some eight hundred years



ago and entitled Sepher Shaashuim, The Book of Delight. It was written by a physician of Barcelona, Joseph ben Meir Zabara; and it's a medieval potpourri, an anthology of fables, of legends, of incidents, of proverbs, of wisdom, of maxims, of medical theories, a hodge-podge of the knowledge of the day, from a uniquely Jewish point of view. Zabara was a clinician, and a good one apparently. Like all good doctors, he had the ability to see things for what they were and was willing to describe a tumor as a tumor, a cancer as a cancer, and not blush before the unseemliness of a wound. He saw life for what it is. He described life as he knew it, a world in which men do not need to invent devils because man is capable of every deviltry ever known. Zabara tells the story of a devil. This particular devil had spent some months in a village of gentle folk. He had been completely frustrated. He wanted to sow confusion and controversy; but the people were good people, and they went about their way and did not pay much attention to this stranger come among them. As he was packing his bags, preparatory to departure from the local inn, the chambermaid recognized him, and she said, "Devil, where are you going?" He answered: "I must be about my work. I can't make any business here." She said, "You can't make business? It's easy to sow confusion and controversy. I'll show you how you do it." She went down the hall, knocked on a door, and the lady who lived there answered the knock. While she was making up the beds in that room, the maid turned to the lady and said: "I've just come from outside the inn, and I saw your husband in the arms of another woman." The woman was thrown into confusion: "What can I do? What can I do?" The chambermaid suggested a remedy: "Tonight, when your husband is sleeping, take a razor and cut three hairs from his head. I've been



told that this remedy will guarantee that your husband will be faithful to you all of your life." Well, this woman, beside herself with anxiety, agreed to do as she was told. The chamberlady left. She left the hotel and found the husband. She whispered to him: "I've just come from your room, and I overheard your lady in the arms of a lover and they were plotting to kill you tonight." The husband came home and went to bed feigning sleep. That night, he saw his wife approaching his bed with a razor in her hand. What could he believe? He grabbed her hand, and they wrestled; and, somehow, while they were wrestling, the razor cut the woman's throat and she died. Her family vowed to take vengeance on his family, and his family vowed to take vengeance on hers (the Montagues and the Capulets); and two hundred and twenty people died before the malicious work of this chamberlady had run its course. What is the author saying?

"Beware of the mendacious. Beware of the malicious; there are people among us who delight in sowing confusion, who take a demented pleasure in creating anger, bitterness and violence between people for the sheer perversity of it; but he is saying more. He is saying that there are always people who can outdo the devil in his own work, that we do not need to invent the dark demons of the night. There is within us all the guile and the cunning of any devil. Zabara was always nonplussed by the cunning of some people and by the gullibility of others. There is a particular kind of human being who is particularly impressed by experts, and the fact that you're an expert in medicine, of course, qualifies you as an expert in all other fields of life, or if you're an expert in the rabbinate, this qualifies you as an expert in all other areas of discipline and human knowledge.

In this respect, he tells a wonderful story in the pages of his



book. A fox coveted the cave of a leopard; and he had to use all his guile to get the leopard to leave his cave because after all leopards are stronger than foxes. So, he told the leopard of a beautiful valley paradise, where every kind of deer that was delicious to the palate of a leopard grazed. The leopard thought that it would be good to go to this place, and the fox offered to lead him there. The leopard went home to talk it over with his wife; and Mrs. Leopard, who had a 'yiddishe kopf', sensed what the fox was about. She advised the leopard not to go. The leopard came back to the fox and confessed that they had talked it over the night before and that he was going to stay where he was. "How can you do that?" said the fox. "Don't you agree with Socrates, the wisest of men? Socrates said, 'Yes, counsel with your wife, listen to what she has to say to you, and then do the exact opposite'." He neglected to tell that Socrates married one of the great shrews of all time, a woman named Xantippe. The fox cited an expert, and who is the leopard to argue with Socrates; so the leopard left his lair and 'shlepped' his wife with him, and they went to the valley which proved to be their death trap. It is good wisdom, this, to be wary; but wariness is not the sum of all wisdom, and the Bible certainly is not simply a series of warnings learned in a school of hard knocks which begin: "At least get in the first blow." The greatness of our faith is that we were clear eyed and that we realized that there was a rough and tumble world and a world beyond the hurly burly that was not coarse and ugly; that man was capable of selfishness and greed but also of sensitivity. We live in a jungle but we can pull ourselves up out of the slime, out of the jungle. How do we do it? Growth has something to do, perhaps most to do, with the goals that we set



for ourselves. If our goals are acquisitive, the gaining of money, the gobbling of experience, the demand for power, the lust for fame, if we are always trying to take for ourselves, then we grub in the market and wrestle in the political arena; and, if this is the whole context of our days, we are scarred by life and coarsened by it.

There was a fox, a hungry fox this time, terribly hungry. The fox came across a vineyard in which there grew the most succulent fruit; but the vineyard was completely closed in by a fence. The fox sniffed his way around the fence and finally found a small breach between two boards. He was all skin and bones, and he was able to creep through the breach. Once he got into the vineyard, he gorged himself upon the grapes, and he lived there happily throughout the long summer. Then, towards fall, the harvesters came, and the fox was afraid for his life if they found him in the vineyard. He ran quickly to that small hole in the wall, but this time he couldn't fit through - he was too big, too roly-poly. Now, we're the fox. We begin life and we see all the glories of the great world out there, and we want them...we'll make them all ours ... and many times we acquire a number of luxuries; we get a modicum of fame or a measure of wealth; our fortune is good, and we live among the dainties and we forget the cruel demands that life can really make of us.

Zabara's story line in this medieval tale is an interesting one. His hero, like Zabara, is a physician. He is a good doctor, happy in his practice, quiet and peaceful at home; and one day a man comes to him, a journeyer, a wanderer, a demon in the shape of a man; and he says to him, "Zabara, there is a great world out there, wonderful cities, views such as Man has rarely seen; how can you live in these four walls; how can you live a life which is so hum-drum, so routine? Live!" Zabara is enticed. He leaves his practice. He leaves home; he leaves the city where he is known and sets out on the great way



of life and finds the way long and wearisome. Oh, yes, there are great sights. At times he finds himself captivated. He hears some wisdom and meets some interesting people. Finally, this adventurer, this demon in human form, leads him to the most glorious of all cities .... tall buildings, marble palaces, sophisticated people, cold-eyed people, bitter competitive people, churlish young people. There is anger. There is violence among all of this luxury. In the end, what does Zabara want? To return home; to do those things which were soothing to the soul: 'Stand ye in the old ways and see which are the good ways, and walk therein, for therein shalt thou find peace of mind.' He quotes the prophets. He discovers that there are really two goals which a man can set for himself; one goal, material, acquisitive; the other goal, to live, to be holy, to be sensitive, to love, to share, to serve, to be yourself. Those who choose the second goal must live in the real world; there is no escape from it. The fortunes of the world become your fortunes. You need to survive; you need to supply the needs of your family, but you also need to live apart from the world. Gaining the world is <sup>not</sup> the ultimate end, but gaining your soul. Efficiency, speed, wealth; these are not the ultimate goals, but understanding, a quietness, peace of mind, peace with one's self are.

There was a woodcutter, and he married the daughter of a woodcutter. The first day after their honeymoon, they were sitting around. She was darning the socks, and he was cutting the wood. She watched him cut for a while with his right hand. Finally, she said to him: "You're not very efficient. My father, the woodcutter, can hit with the axe with both hands; when one arm becomes tired, he picks the axe up with the other and he completes twice as much cutting in the course of a day as you do and he is twice as wealthy as you will ever be." The woodcutter complained that there was nothing he



could do. He was right-handed, and that was the only way he could cut wood; but she insisted and she nagged, and such is the way with women that, when his right arm got tired, he picked up the axe with his left and he banged on the board and cut off his thumb. Now, he no longer could manage the axe with his left hand, nor hold the axe with his right hand. "What profit ye if ye gain the whole world but lose your soul." This is the higher wisdom of our people, that there is a goal quite apart from the ordinary goals, "To thine own self be true," that there is a purpose to life quite apart from the ordinary, acquisitive purposes of life: to understand what this life is all about, to understand yourself, to obey the higher laws, to obey your truest self. Along the way, we discover that, yes, heaven is up there, if it is at all, because it is not down here, and that hell is down below, if it is at all, because patently hell is not here on earth. This world is neither paradise nor burning inferno. It's a place in which people live, struggle, hope, search; and the wise among us, the truly wise, reach out for those ends which are truly satisfying and meaningful to us.

Amen



6 for loved ones by a Jew. They become companions, he'll be  
for several years saying to himself - 'He will be my friend as long  
as game is plentiful, but one will come a day when he will be  
hungry and I will be in danger'. To forestall his danger, the fox made  
plans.

One day the fox noticed the fox grooming & holding his head;

What's the matter?

I have a terrible headache.

Can I do anything for you?

Thank you, I have taken all the pills and nothing helps - I  
thought I'd try a homoeopathic remedy I heard about one. I went off  
and bought the remedy. & as the remedy was so good to the head and was

very good - should you take me?

The fox gladly complied and

for pronounced himself cured.



was of no use to the

Some weeks later the fox developed a headache. Nothing  
would help and he thought he might be neglected for help and so  
besides the fox happily complied and once the fox was

fully helped, he proceeded to take the fox to death

This wicked fable is hardly what one would expect

as a subtle identification. At all the fox is hungry

single rather than the game is plentiful

but it is - now all the fox and

fox - a terrible identification of up as it needs - of the

fox who is even the most hungry man & authority man

in the breast of the man - and of the struggle & struggle

to make the man person man to protect man against



an uninvited guest. I remember him as unlike me &  
For as Steady Character & the judge became impressed  
relevant.

However his feelings were put into an upset because all  
as put into an upset because all  
put into the innocent from these things - it must be that we  
which life is really like - the world - the world - the world - the  
world - the world of men. Now then we have also a sense  
religion of being enriched - by providing character enrichment which  
to not like the world as blended quality of life. I can not  
speak of the world; but I can speak of life. I can speak of life  
that in any period of our life it has helped men to keep their eye  
open & the world around them. I can speak of the world around them  
one and trading & to show your world around them. Thinking and trading  
as I recently noted Joseph & Max Zubov's - Joseph Zubov's -  
Best of Dilemma, Zubov's world is 800 years old. It is a world of  
life, peace, helpful medical world, (Zubov is a physician  
of Zubov's), and philosophy. Zubov is blended with the  
keep analytic age of the world - nothing escapes his attention -  
He is not sympathetic to disorder the world and trading world  
best to sympathetic. He knows that respectability is not high  
religious office not sympathetic integrity. The former high  
of one of the great sympathetic world is one of his world to  
be a good world world, which integrity is not world



2 volumes work on the title - Super Slaves - The

Book of Judges - for at first reading the ~~book~~ <sup>people</sup> of people of people  
are ~~very~~ <sup>very</sup> ~~bad~~ <sup>bad</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~delighted~~ <sup>delighted</sup> - Indeed, at one of the many republics  
which ~~the~~ <sup>you</sup> ~~conquered~~ <sup>conquered</sup> the work 2 volumes make the point that  
there are republics of for public republic can be found  
here,  
here,





















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# Kaddish

Friday 12-22-67

Sunday 12-24-67

Those who passed away this week

JAMES VAN BAALEN

ARTHUR E. FRIEDMAN

SOPHIE BERNSTEIN

PHYLLIS CALDWELL

## Vahrzeits

SOLOMON S. FIRTH

SAMUEL FRIEDMAN

BENJAMIN LOWENSTEIN

MINNIE WEINBERGER

SAM KLEIN

CHARLOTTE HAVRE

JEROME R. GARDNER

MARIE V. FALK

LILLIAN R. SCHWARTZ

NATHAN E. POLSTER

FANNIE KURZ OPPENHEIMER

JOSEPH ROSKOPH

NATE SCHAFFNER

MAX MYERS

MORRIS H. RICH

MAX BEATUS

CAROLYN B. FISHEL

ISAAC ALSBACHER

THEODORE LEVINE

WILLIAM GOLDSMITH

