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Taking a Good Look at Ourselves, 1969.

Taking A Good Look At Ourselves Daniel Jeremy Silver February 2, 1969

During the last two weeks Mrs. Silver and I have climbed the narrow steps of many an ancient Aztec, Toltec pyramid shrine. We enjoyed ourselves viewing the most ancient of the civilizations of the Americas. Frankly, I confess that as I looked at these intricate carvings, these great buildings, being a rabbi I had to find some way of relating ancient mind culture to the Jewish problem. There were no Jews, I hasten to assure you, in Mayaland, but frankly, walking among the relics, these past dead glories, I began to think again of the mystery of Jewish survival. When the ancestors of those who built the great pyramids in Mexico and Latin America were still aborigines our people had already given the world the Ten Commandments and the Torah. Nothing remains that is alive of these ancient cultures in America. Their codices cannot be read, their history is largely unknown, all we have are these gigantic piles of masonry, sometimes intricately incized, very beautiful statuary, pottery, artifacts, the brute physical things of a people who was alive once, hopeful, dreaming of a glorious civilization. And, of course, what is true here in the Americas' new world was equally true in the old. If you were to visit Egypt you'd find that the great pyramids of Chiza are crumbling into the desert dust. Climb the Acropolis, you find these unroofed, unstabled buildings, the glories of ancient Greece, denuded of their classic statuary and relief, still grand in their emptiness, but empty, dead, nevertheless. The Forum in Rome is simply a room, not a very prepossessing one. And here we are, dreaming of the future, building our State, alive, we who bustled in the throngs knew the builders of these ancient monuments, builders who are no more. The empires are dead, dust, and Israel lives.

Now what is this miracle, this mystery, call it what you will, which is Jewish survival? How shall we explain it? You and I, being men and being Jews, are by mature curious. We don't like to live with the unexplained and what seems to be the inexplicable,

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and so even when a rationalization and an explanation doesn't fully cover all the contingencies doesn't really explain, we prefer it to the unknown. And so our historians, our thinkers, we ourselves have devised any number of explanations of Jewish survival. We have asked ourselves what would a mathematician have assumed the probability of Jewish survival to have been if he had been in the court of King David 3500 years ago? And we answer, he would probably have assumed that it would be nil, negative, less than zero. But we say there are some factors he could not have taken into consideration, what are they? What are the explanations?.

In the first place, we explain Jewish survival by the diaspora, by the scattering we are everywhere, ubiquitous. And though a tyrant may rise up in the east, the sun somehow shines upon the Jewish communities in the west. No one man has ever dominated the world, therefore, some Jewish community has always escaped persecution. Or else we say to ourselves, Judaism survives because we are essentially camelian religion; we are infinitely adaptive; we can somehow blend into any environment; and this capacity to be like unto all others at all times in all ways is the explanation of our survival. But I The nextdoor neighbors of the ancient Judeans were the Phoenecians. The Phoenecians' galley sailed the seven seas. The Phoenecians planted their colonies from India and southeast Asia to Ireland and there hasn't been a Phoenecian seen in the last 1500 years. The diaspora alone, scattering, does not explain Jewish survival. At one time the cult of the mother goddess, Earth, the great fertility cult, was the dominant pagan mystery of the ancient world. It was practiced in Spain, it was practiced in Italy, it was practiced in the Near East, it was practiced in Persia. Millions upon millions of people in one form or another worshipped the mother goddess and there hasn't been a worshipper of the mother goddess in the last 1500 years. Simply the scattering, the ubiquity, the blending into a background does not explain Jewish survival.

Most of us knowing this prefer another explanation. We explain Jewish survival

on the basis of what we call the pressure factor, anti-semitism. Because we couldn't become like unto the others, they wouldn't have us, we remained ourselves. Because we were constantly being persecuted we developed the skills of survival. We honed sharp our instincts, our intelligence, our basic reaction pattern. We never allowed ourselves to be deluded as to the real fundamental nature of the struggle which is life and so we have survived. This argument commends itself sort of instinctively to the contemporary American Jew because for the first time in Jewish experience, really, the barriers to economic and political advancement have come crumbling down. The Jew has seen himself as belonging to the larger community and he has seen many of the carefree and the careless and the lazy and the indifferent walking away and separating themselves and assimilating, so it seems to him that yes, the high walls kept the Jew in, but did they?

The pressure factor is a two-edged sword. At one time in the early centuries of this era, the early years of the Christian era, the faith of Zoroaster, the dualistic faith of the Persians, was believed by tens of millions of people. There was a primeval battle still going on between the forces of life and the forces of darkness, between good and evil, between Araman and Ahuramazda, and in that struggle was found the philosophic explanation for all the tensions and all the violence and all the uncertainty and insecurity of life. The magii, the fire-worshipping priests of the Zoroasters, can be found literally throughout the Middle East. When Islam conquered the Middle East the Muslim leaders went after the Zoroastrian faith century after century after century, they put pressure, persecuted these people, and the Zoroastrians are no more. Pressure can destroy people as well as give it life. If you need testimony from our own ask any of the survivors, the 30,000 who survive in Jewish Poland today, the 30,000 of three million, and they'll tell you how pressure, genocide, can break the will of a people, destroy a community, reduce it to ashes.

We Jews like our martyrs. We are like all human beings. They're heroes and we respond to courage, but we forget that as many martyrs as we have had we have had as many cowards. In 1392 when Jews were expelled from Spain they were given a choice, the bitter world of exile or baptism. A half a million Jews chose to walk the road of exile. A half a million Jews chose the waters of the holy fountain, Throughout the generations there have been the weak and the unstable and those who were dazzled by the opportunities that were held out to them if they would only join the true faith. Under Islam or under Catholicism or in Christian Europe they changed their faith under the screw, the tension, the pressure of an unfriendly world. Pressure can destroy a people. It is not in and of seelf an explanation of survival. Is there then an explanatin?

law is this - only those will survive who have developed a leg up in the race for life, who have developed the skills, the wholesomeness, the courage, the adaptive qualities, the qualities of mind which makes success in the struggle for survival possible. In other words, Jews exist because Judaism works. Let me try and illustrate this for you.

Every Sabbath we take from our Ark the scroll of the Torah and we read it.

We read it for its inspiration. We read it because the scroll, the Torah, the doctrine of our faith is not a sealed book. We have no truths which are limited for us by our ecclestiation. The Torah is read and it is always translated and almost inevitably there is a sermon, a commentary on the text, an attempt to interpret it in the light of that man's views and his generation's needs. There is no magesterium in our tradition and there has never been an attempt by a body of ecclesiastics, a body of synagogue rabbis, the sanhedrin, to define that which is true from which you as individuals, laymen, may not deviate. You are told to use your minds, to read the tradition, to learn, to study, to

debate, to discover. A synagogue is a shul. Torah, learning, is equal as a religious tradition to worship itself. Judaism begins, among other things, in a great faith, in your capacity, your ability to discover that which is true, that which is functional, usable, by you. No one has the truth to give to you. We have only a great wisdom literature from which you may draw inspiration. Now this basic faith in the individual man, each of our capacities to understand, to unravel the mystery, to make for ourselves a scheme adequate to life, a series of values which will grace our lives, is one of the fundamental drives within Judaism. How is it a survival value? Simply in this - whenever we were persecuted, whenever the normal attributes of our lives were taken from us, nationhood, the ability to govern our own destinies, whenever the inevitable persecutions and pogroms and attacks came upon us we found ways because we were trained to think on our feet, to think in emergencies, to use our mind, to trust our intellect, we found ways somehow to adapt to the new situation. Instead of being children who stamp their feet in anger and frustration, who cry out for their father, who are overcome by self-pity, we remained men. We took what life had in store, the bruising and the beatings, and if we couldn't have nationhood then we built within the context of our limited freedom a community. If we couldn't have community we maintained the solidity of our families. If we were taken from our families we somehow contained our own integrity. We were taught to use our minds. We were taught somehow to trust ourselves. The environment which is Judaism conditioned us to respect ourselves.

Now let me give you the opposite example. There are faiths which are traditionally doctrine, which tell the individual, the layman, you are not to think in these areas, you must accept the teachings of the church exactly as they are given. There is an authority, an ecclesiastical heirarchy, and they and they alone know what is true and what is right and what you must believe. What happens to the people who are trained in this tradition, for which this is their environment? Look in southern Europe; look in Latin America; look in the Islamic Middle East. In each of these areas you have millions upon millions of people, the same hopes, the same dreams, the same aspirations that you and I have. They want freedom, they want abundance, they want opportunity. They know that they are oppressed by oligarchical governments or dispardic governments and occasionally, as you know, in all of these countries there are democratic revolutions and sometime democratic revolutions win through, but then what happens? Because these people have never been trained to have faith in themselves, in the arts of give and take, of compromise, of group living, because they've always been brainwashed by some higher authority they quickly, if they win through to their freedom, find they're squabbling among themselves, they split into narrow ideological parties of the far left and the further left and the furthest left and quickly some reactionary privileged group interposes itself in the name of order, brings authority back into this confusion. And so none of these countries have been able to establish a truly secure democratic way of life. We have had it for two thousand years in our communities. They cannot have it because our Judaism has taught us, conditioned us, prepared us, to have respect for ourselves and for others in the arts of give and take, social compromise.

Judaism exists: Jews exist; because our environment or religious tradition works for us, because the basic emphases which we have institutionalized, the emphasis on the dignity of man, the emphasis on the dignity of the human mind, the respect for the individual within the social context, the respect for community, and of our responsibility beyond our own grabbing and injesting and greed, our emphasis on this world, what is possible here rather than some ultimate promise, our emphasis on the practical rather than on the apocalyptic, our emphasis on religion as a way of life rather than as religion as a Sunday morning mystical experience which will somehow bring us into a communion

with the Divine, all these emphases are functional, they make possible survival.

Will Judaism survive? We have everything going for us. In science there is only one test and that is can an experiment be repeated and if it can be repeated and the terms of the experiment are identical then we have established a natural law. In every environment in which Jews have found themselves Judaism has been sufficiently wholesome and healing, capable, to permit survival. But there's something more. One of the great survival teachings of Judaism is the covenant, the idea that there's a contract between man and God. We place ourselves under certain obligation. At Sinai God gave the Commandments and Israel said, we accept them. The Jews have never assumed that this contract is binding upon son as upon father, upon grandson as upon his grandfather. Each generation must reaccept, make the commitment anew, and so on Passover we're told always think of yourself as if you were standing at Sinai and accept the responsibilities which they accepted so long ago. What I'm saying is simply this: Judaism is effective and functional and will remain effective and healing and functional as long as Jews commit themselves to Judaism, but when Judaism is a label, when Judaism is a birthmark which has no other meaning in your life, it cannot work for you, it's not part of your unconscious, it's not part of your world, it's not the conditioning environment any longer, it's simply a mark, a distinction, something which separates you out perhaps, but doesn't make you different. Let me give you a historical parallel to our times in the full knowledge that parallels in history are very difficult and dangerous.

I give you the city of Alexandria, the great port city on the Nile in Egypt.

This city was founded in the year 325 B.C. E. by the great conqueror, Alexander the Great.

It was to be the showcase of his empire. Alexander died shortly thereafter. One of his generals, Ptolemy, became the king of Egypt and there was a Hellenistic dynasty in Egypt for four centuries known as the Ptolemaic Dynasty. The Ptolemies made Alexandria into

the great port. It was here that all the grain of Egypt was trans-shipped to the western world and we hear that all the goods of the western world were brought to be shipped a hundred miles or so down the Nile, trans-shipped across the narrow bit of desert to the Persian Gulf and from there to India and to southeast Asia. Alexandria was for the last three centuries Before the Common Era and the first few centuries of the Common Era probably, next to Rome, the richest and most powerful city in the world. Now, being a new city Alexandria needed citizens and Egypt is close to Judea and the Hellenists recognized the intrinsic ability of the Jews to manage as a middle class, as businessmen, as physicians, as scribes, as teachers, and the Ptolemies, the early leaders, the early Hellenistic kings of Egypt invited the Jews, many of them, to come to Alexandria and to settle. And this city which may have had two and a half million people in the first century of the Common Era had among these two and a half million people a million Jews, perhaps more, perhaps a little less, and this was a wealthy Jewish community, and it was a good Jewish community. It had culture. It was welcome in many areas in the total Palenistic community. Jews could use the same tutors as the Greeks. The Jews went to the gymnasium as did the Greeks. The Jews wrote tragedies for performance in the theater as did the Greeks. They wrote histories of the community of Alexandria. Jews were among the librarians of the great Alexandria library which had some three quarters of a million scrolls which literally had in its records the entire literacy, the entire legacy, of world knowledge up to that time. The Jews were among the original settlers of the city. They took part in its great birth and burgeoning and flowering and many of them became wealthy with the wealth of Alexandria. It was a grand community. There were Jewish hospitals and Jewish service institutions. One synagogue, the main synagogue of Alexandria, was so large that the people in the part back of the basilica could not hear the words of the service spoken on the pulpit and so standing next to the hazan, the man who conducted the service, there was a man with safor flags to wig-wag to the

people in the far balconies when it was time for their responses. It was a great community. And then what happened? Alexandria produced the first and important translation of the Bible intonother language, the Septuagint. As Anrea produced some of the great apocalyptic literature in Jewish life, Alexandria produced the finest Jewish philosopher of the day, Philo. Shortly after this great efflourescence, this renaissance of Jewish literacy, the Alexandrian community lost its soul and almost literally ceased to be in a matter of a century. Now why? As a historian we look for social and economic reasons. We search first to see if perhaps Alexandria as a community went into an economic nose dive. Did some other port arise? Did something happen in the history of the world which caused Alexandria to be a backwater community? We find no, not at all. Alexandria remains the major port in the ancient Mediterranean til the 4th or 5th century of the Common Era. We discover that these are the great days of the Roman Empire when Roman peace was established by the force of Roman arms throughout the world and where Alexandria was their great port. We cannot find an economic reason for the decline of the Jewish community, but perhaps subject to a terrific attack, anti-semitism. There was anti-semitism in Alexandria. There was a man named Monetho, one of the early apologetes of hate. There were attacks on the Jewish community, but if we were to draw a bar which measured the intensity of anti-semitic activity which any Jewish community suffered over the years, dering the century or so this Jewish community of Alexandria would find itself just in the middle. There were attacks, there were moments which were unhappy. There were Jews who were ostracized. There were some breedings, but there was no genocide. There were no pogroms. There were no major riots as such. The Jewish community disappeared It is my feeling, of course, during a time of relative peace. Why then did it disappear? we can't chronicle this at this moment in time, that the Alexandrian Jewish community ceases to be an important center because it lost its own soul, because it ceased to be

Jewish, not that Judaism, the institutions weren't there or the literature wasn't there or the opportunity wasn't there. The people really didn't care that much any more. The Hellenistic world generally was a world of philosophic syncrotism when people were talking about being like each other. Men had just discovered comparative religion and sociology. They discovered that all peoples had rituals. Instead of looking at the rituals for their intrinsic value they looked at them as scholars might to discover what they meant to other people as their quaint customs in their way of life. People became very sophisticated intellectually and their lives became rather vulgar and rather common and rather crude and the parallel, I submit, exists to our own day for we, too, live in a syncrotistic age. We, and especially our younger people, tend to feel that all religions are essentially the same and they teach the same things. What was the slogan on the billboards a year or two ago - it doesn't matter where you go on Sunday, just be sure you go - and you saw the spire and the synagogue in the background. I am told very often rabbi, I don't have to go to temple, I don't have to have the shabbas in my home, I don't have to have a Jewish home, as long as I'm a good human being that's what religion's about, isn't it? And I look about myself and I look at this world. Can I honestly say that modern western society is a saintly society, a disciplined society, a society which respects the rights of individuals, which respects the family as a unit, which respects its own intelligence? I see a great deal that's coarse, common, vulgar and I hear some of these same coarse, common and vulgar people tell me, I don't need to do all this ritual, I don't have to be part of the way of life which is Judaism as long as I'm a good human being. I've discovered long since that being good is an elastic term. Every man describes it exactly as he wishes. To some being good is simply paying his taxes and not cheating the government. Otherwise he has complete freedom. To some being good is simply not throwing the trash on the neighbor's lawn or not backing his car into the neighbor's fence, otherwise he has complete freedom. To some being good is to be

saintly, but I haven't discovered very many saints in modern America. I've heard a lot of vulgarity and I hear a lot of people crying at the top of their voices about the glories of a new society and I look at their feet and I see litter, and I listen to their words and I hear oaths and curses, and I look at their lives and I fail to see love and loyalty in them. I'm afraid that there are too many parallels between the Hellenistic Alexandrian Jewish world and this American syncrotistic Jewish world. To many Jews the most important high holiday is Brotherhood Week where we get together and slap the back of some one customer of ours or someone who sells us something who has to come to our meetings and we feel that because he's there at this celebration and we're there we share great affection for one another and all that's good and valuable and noble in the world.

I want to talk for a moment about the importance of being one's self, of being a Jew. I know it's all important in our world to be universalistic, to talk of the broad values and glorious dreams which all men share but I submit to you that nobody becomes a man until he becomes himself, that nobody can serve other men until he knows exactly who he is, that you can't love another person until you respect yourself and you can't raise children until you know the values which are yours and you abide them. You have to be a distinctive human being before you can help anyone else. And all these professional saints I see about myself so eager to help everyone else, when I look at their biographies I wish they would help themselves a bit and stop being so weak, so dependent upon alcohol or upon sport or upon being a member of the jet set or keeping up with the Jones's or drugs or what have you. I look at the saints, the true saints of modern life. I look at Ghandi; I look at Schweitzer; I look at Martin Luther King. Now these men had very definite philosophic and religious convictions. They minced no words about who they were and what they believed in and the disciplines which were theirs, and yet, they served all men. If you want really to serve mankind first take what the tradition has to offer

you in which you were raised and use it. Then, once it's become part of you, to serve others. Don't go on like a Don Quixote, without any tradition, without any particular identity in order to "serve mankind."

I want to talk about being Jewish. It's the one thing Jews talk least about.

We take it for granted. We want to be servants, we want to be citizens, we want to help others. Let's first think about being ourselves. What does it mean to be Jewish? How do I become Jewish? How do I take advantage of this great tradition which can teach me to survive, teach me what is needed, teach me how to be a full human being? Only by living it, only by being part of it, only by making its discipline part of my life and part of the life of my home. You can't be a vague humanitarian American without anything that's distinctively Jewish in your life and expect your life to have a Jewish imprint, expect somehow to be infected by the tradition, the wisdom, the insights, the teaching, the conditioning which is Jewish.

Let me go back to Alexandria, to what those Jews in those days forgot. Most of them were raised by tutors, Greek speaking men, who taught them about Aristotle and Plato about Eperticus and Epicurus and Zeno, about the great philosophers of ancient Greece. Now, all these men, as you know, taught us to look for that which is truly beautiful, truly good, truly universal for mankind. Taking these teachings in a very juvenile way, these young Jews of first century Alexandria said - what we need to do is to be liberated beings, free spirits, why should we stay within the narrow confines of a birth tradition, doesn't the birth tradition impose upon us barriers which separate us out; let's be like unto all others for that is the true end and aim in life. They were very very poor philosophers and historians and the things we forget about Greek philosophy is that each of these philosophers had a school, a monastery if you will. Aristotle had his garden; Zeno had his stoa; Plato had his school; and those who came came not simply

to take class notes or to write in the quiet and solitude of the library some logical proposition, they came to discuss, but they came specifically to live a certain regimen by a certain way of life. When you entered the stoa, the great stoic schoolhouse, you undertook a regimen which is not unlike the monks' regimen in the Benedictine monks of the Middle Ages. There was a certain time to get up; you ate in a certain way; you spoke with a certain language; you treated your teachers with certain manners and certain courtliness; you gave up many of the worldly things; you turned away from business; you lived off of the activities of the school; you engaged a certain number of hours in occupations which brought some money into the schoolhouse. You were a disciplined human being, conditioned by an environment. It wasn't simply the words, universal, good, true, beautiful, you knew the way of life and that knowledge gave meaning to the words.

Now what the Alexandrian Jews forgot and what so many American Jews, I believe, are forgetting is this other level, the practical level, the level by which we are nurtured, that which gives meaning to the words which we utter. I believe in goodness.

I believe in truth. I believe in universal values. I believe all men are brothers. I believe that our altimate purpose is to serve others even as we serve ourselves, but I know, I know that unless I am disciplined and encouraged and trained and conditioned and inspired by my tradition, unless as I stand as a Jew, I cannot really go out and serve others.

And when the Jews disappeared from Alexandria, when they melted into the melting pot, when they became part of the great stew, the Alexandrian communities at large lost what spirit it had. It had been a great cultural center, now it became simply a haggling market, it became simply a commercial city. It no longer had a culture, it no longer had a tradition It no longer had a Jewish element commanding it to be concerned with human values, with decency, be sensitive to the needs of others, to think of literature as that which gives beauty as well as that which simply titillates, simply gives pleasure.

What am I saying? If we as Jews want to survive we can. There is nothing that is archaic, medieval, passe, outmoded, fossilized about the way of life which is our way. If we want to serve mankind, if we are truly concerned with the poor and the outcast and those races which have never had their chance within the larger body polity, let's be Jews and draw the inspiration from the prophets and from the rabbis and the sages. Let's find the strength for the long haul, not simply to protest today for an hour, and then to move back into our humdrum routine, to live a life dedicated to the larger good. Let's find that encouragement and that wisdom within our tradition, it's there. To find it we must live it, we must live within the discipline, we must live within the tradition, we must live within the past and find the relevance of that tradition to our lives.

We built no pyramids. There's no Jewish ruin any place in the world that we can clamor up and clamor over and take pictures of. The Jewish legacy, civilization, has been a restlessness, an intelligence, a concern for basic values. We are conditioned to this by our tradition and what can we help but pray that each of us and our children and our children may remain within that tradition and continue to be inspired by it, continue to giving to the world that vision of hope to all of us that we desperately need.

TAKING A GOOD WOOK AT OURSELVES

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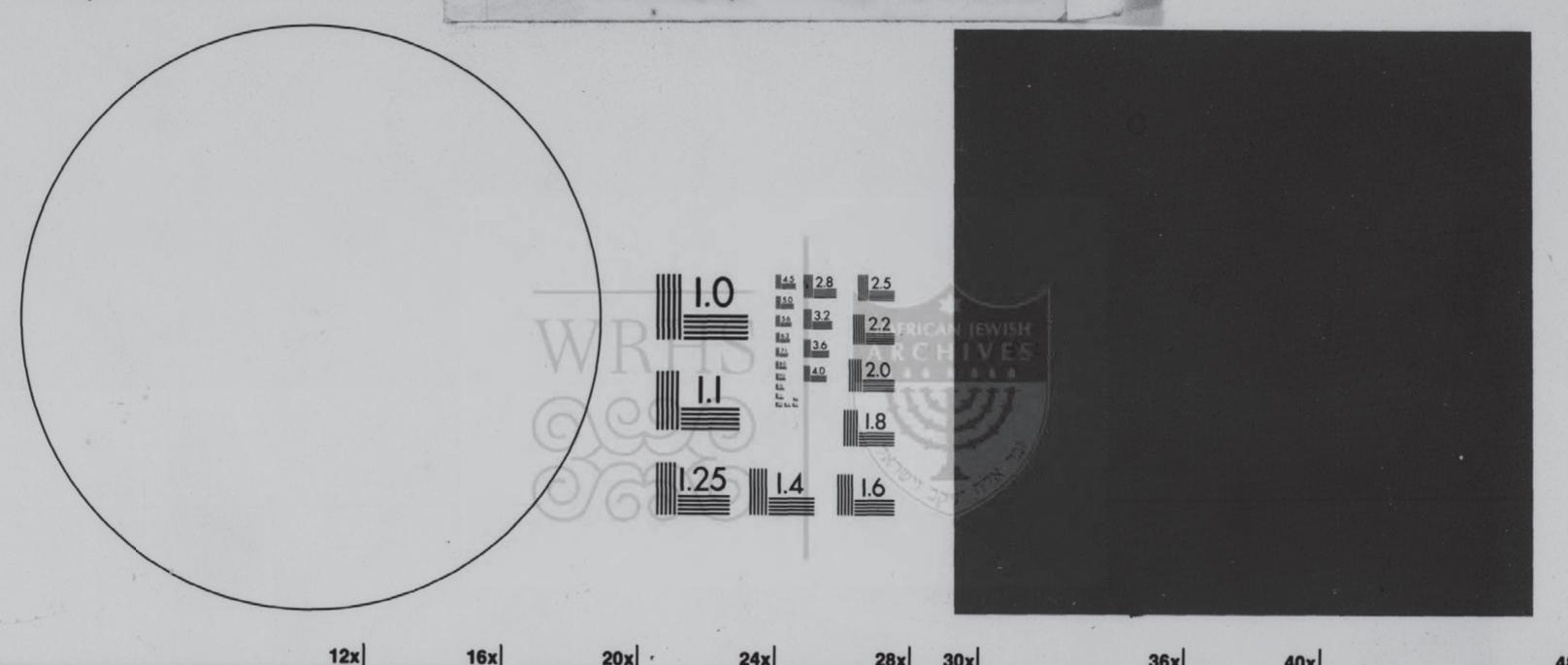
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