



## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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The City!, 1969.



THE CITY  
Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver  
February ~~23~~<sup>16</sup>, 1969

Words can be tyrant. Their associations and implications drive us towards unwarranted conclusions. One such word is "city." Everyone of us knows what a city is. Therefore, presumably we know what a city ought to be, and what the appropriate remedies are for our nation's urban crisis. The word "city" has been around for a long time. If I searched the Scripture I could find the noun \_\_\_\_\_ used in a thousand places, and as usual some Biblical references provide quite apt descriptions of the tensions and quality of life in some of our modern cities. Take Job's observation, for instance. 'From out of the populous city men groan. The sound of the wounded cries out. '

Familiarity breeds confidence and confidence is a dangerous state of mind for those who live in a revolutionary age. We have been talking about cities for a long time, but the truth of the matter is that the only similarity between Cleveland 1969 and an historic city, between any technologically oriented community 1969 and all of the cities until this generation, is the gross fact that they represent dense conglomerations of people in a limited geographic area. Ancient Athens, Caesar's Rome, Paris of La belle epoc, Imperial London -- these towns were essentially places of the privileged and places of power where the well-born, the powerful and the well-to-do drew together in order to be close to one another to carry out the business of managing their country, to oversee, protect and enlarge



their financial investments, and to provide for themselves the necessary servants and services, relaxation and culture which the wealthy and important look on as their due.

The ancient city was always a city of classes, of ins and outs. It was also a consumer economy which depended upon an agricultural surplus developed in the countryside, the tolls and tariffs of trade, and the army's spoil and loot. When there was no such economic surplus, when the city could no longer be a parasite, it simply ceased to be.

Being a place of power and of wealth, the ancient city was also a hothouse of culture, of museums, of libraries, of schools -- all of which grace life but depend upon a society's excess wealth and in these city schools and culture existed for the pleasure and the benefit of the privileged, not because they served the common good.

Let me illustrate all of this by speaking for a moment of ancient Athens. We think of ancient Athens as the classic model of a democratic community. In fact, far less than one-half of the people who lived in Athens were citizens, Athenians. The rest were metics, foreigners who were allowed to remain in Athens because they were masters of certain crafts, and willing to engage in the trades, which the Athenian citizen looked upon as demeaning; and the servants and the slaves, who day by day brought in the surplus from the countryside and the goods from the port of Piraeus imported for the pleasure and the luxury of the wealthy. The metics had no voice in Athenian affairs and the slaves were non-persons. They may as well not have been. They were not considered. They were



not seen. Athens depended upon the wealth of the countryside, upon the tariffs and the tolls of a maritime empire. Plato could conceive of a life of study and statesmanship because he and his class were provided for by the labor, the sweat and the anguish of others. Because he was a citizen, and they were slaves he and his class were graceful parasites. Not unexpectedly the philosopher-king of this ideal state is a man who never soils his hands with manual labor, never engages in trade or manufacture. Even such a genius among Greek geniuses as Aristotle, the prince of philosophers, looked on a slave as a living tool.

Such was life in any pre-modern city. These were places of class privilege, power centers of an elite, consumer economies and an essentially fragile, unstable unit for when the countryside could no longer provide the city with the surplus on which it fed, the city simply disappeared. Read the history of Europe in the eighth, ninth or tenth centuries of this era after the Muslim conquests had cut the trade routes to the east and the Norman incursions had disrupted the countryside and trade and the abuse of the land had destroyed its productivity -- the cities of Europe simply ceased to be. Caesar's Rome became a wasteland of ruins. Only much later in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when trade resumed, when the countryside was more intelligently farmed, when a surplus again was being produced, only then did the cities of Europe re-emerge.

What are the differences and what are the similarities between Cleveland and Athens, Cleveland and any historic city? Athens was a consumer economy. Cleveland has a productive economy. Athens was a parasite state. Cleveland produces



more goods and services for the countryside and exports these to the country. Of course we need agriculture. Our factories need raw materials. But our factories and our brains produce more real wealth here than we consume here. The city now, for the first time in history, is a place where the prosperity and the wealth of a nation is formed. The city is here to stay.

Athens was governed by a class. Athens was the possession of the well-born. Cleveland has the rich; the not so rich; the poor and the not so poor; but everyone is a citizen and has at least the vote. Power is more widely divided; and increasingly power is going out to the people. It is no longer easy to point to one man or ten men; to one corporation or ten corporations, to one political grouping or both parties and say -- here are the men who will sit in a smoke filled room and determine our history.

Athens decided to build a great theatre into the slope of the Acropolis. A number of squatters occupied shacks on the land which is now Central Park, they simply ordered them out. The police went in and Central Park was cleared. Today when the mayor of Cleveland wants to build public housing upon empty land, he finds that he is opposed by groups antagonistic to public housing, neighborhoods rise in indignation and organize protests and lawsuits, there is delay. He is beaten. The mayor cannot do even such a simple thing without going to the people with his program and gaining broad concurrence. Power no longer is concentrated in one man or one place in our city. A generation ago they said with a shrug, "you can't fight city hall." which meant that once a decision was made there was nothing



the average citizen could do. Today when someone says "you can't fight city hall" it is a challenge to take up the placards, and go down and sit in the mayor's office, to organize and you find ways to make the city's decision-makers change change their minds.

The modern city is set on an irreversable course in which power is being bled from its traditional establishment place and is slowly passing down to those groups who claim or in fact do represent neighborhood groups and the ordinary people. It is they who will ultimately have authority.

What I am saying is simply this: Most of us continue to look upon the city as if it were a familiar entity. We bring to our discussions many of the attitudes our fathers and grandfathers developed by experience with cities of an older mold and most of these prejudices, most of these attitudes are misleading. I believe that much of the failure of the so-far attempted solutions to the urban crisis can be traced directly to the fact that very few of us, including the so-called city planners, have accepted the simple proposition that the city is a radical, new creation. It has never existed before and requires a radically new orientation of mind if we are to deal with its problems. Marshall McLuer said in another respect much of what I have been trying to say so far. "Very few men look at the present with present eyes. They tend to miss the present by translating it into the past, seeing it through a rear-view mirror."

What do we see when we look through a rear-view mirror? Traditionally the city was a place of noise, of the maddening crowd, of confusion. It was a place of prosperity for the few and, therefore, of jaded tastes and expensive restaurants.



It was a place of such tension and stimulation for the privileged that when he needed to be philosophic, to get a perspective on his condition, he went to the countryside, to find solitude, to find peace of mind, the quiet of contemplation. In ancient commentaries we discover that the question why God chose a wilderness of all places as the location for the revelation of the law, suggested that He chose Sinai precisely because it was wilderness. It was empty space. Here man was alone. If God had gone to the marketplace of a city-state and revealed His law, He could not have been heard above the shouting of the hawkers, the police tramping back and forth, the shouting out of the town criers. No one would have bothered to stop and listen. In the countryside where there was quiet we listened to the inner voice and revelation revealed itself.

All of us I think look at the city with this particular rear-view mirror. Whenever we become jaded, whenever our ears cease to listen, whenever we know we are overtired and are no longer responding intelligently, we head for the green hills, for the countryside. But the countryside is finite and there are three billion earthlings. Soon we find that our quiet hideaway is surrounded by transistor radios, noisy car horns and someone is building a house right next door. Vernon will soon be a crowded New York suburb. But we still plan as if there was quiet country instead of concentrating on ways to build quiet into the city, by building apartments where every sound travels will not travel from room to room; by building homes with interior courts which are open to the air; by building parks around and in our city where a person can go and find the sunshine and the peace

museums, bigger and better palaces of culture. This was accepted in the past.



and the open space; we let life in the city continue on its frenzied way. We build without thought to our human needs and we assume that there will be enough peace in the countryside always to provide for that need.

We look at our cities through a rear-view mirror. Looking through that mirror we become convinced that what we need to do to renew our cities is to do what men have always done when cities needed to be renewed; widen the streets, build taller buildings. The old imperial response. We build bigger highways, broader boulevards, more monumental structures, grander palaces of high culture. A facade is formed from the city so men won't ask too many questions about the quality of life beyond the broad avenues. Urban renewal remains a question of bricks and mortar.

Maybe six years ago when Cleveland State University was first announced, an editor of one of our papers decided that here was found money with which to build his pet project, a giant cultural hall which would stimulate the cultural life of Cleveland and be a major building element in its renewal. He saw a chance to build a great Cleveland Opera House. God knows that the Public Hall is an accoustic monstrosity and, certainly, an opera house plus a music hall of size and beauty would be of advantage to many of us. But if anyone were laying out the priorities of urban renewal, an opera house for the city of Cleveland certainly stands at rock bottom. It is another suburban luxury, not an urban priority. The last thing that needs to be done, not the first. He was looking upon urban renewal as have privileged classes in every age, in terms of a fine symphony hall, larger museums, bigger and better palaces of culture. This was accepted in the patrician



society the cities of old and such buildings are lovely to have, but a modern city must provide for ordinary human beings and ordinary human needs -- neighborhood centers not elitist gathering places. Nor could he accomplish his project for it was a requirement of a class which has lost control of the reigns of power.

Unfortunately, even those of us who are not to the manner born have the habit of judging a city's progress in terms of high rise building instead of rising general standards of living. We build schools, recreation centers, multiple health centers, broader streets; we plan mass transportation systems and we assume that in this building we will find somehow a solution to the urban crises.

Nothing I say today denies the value of many of these programs. Some are both valued and urgent. But what I would suggest today, with every bit of persuasion of which I am capable, is that no building project can touch the fundamental problems of the city because that problem is human and not one of construction. You can live poorly, in a drafty room, but if you feel yourself useful, you have dignity. You can live on an inadequate diet and write a great novel, or you can live in a fine home amid many luxuries and abuse your lands, your city and your family. We need to rebuild our cities and to rebuild men so they can live in cities. We can't maintain cities if men remain primitive animals who foul their nest. No city can survive when everybody seeks to get his own. We must learn how to maintain citizenship in a place thronging with people. We must learn how to live with a certain degree of violence without becoming violent in response. We must



learn the job skills that are necessary in an urban job market. We must learn how to budget our time, our energies and our citizenship and really be of service to our community. And, these lessons are not easily learned.

I remember vividly testimony which was offered a year ago to the Mayor's Commission on Public Welfare. We heard the experts and we heard from citizens. The difference was shocking. The educators spoke to us of the need for new schools, centrally-located educational centers, multi-purpose educational centers. Parents spoke to us of smaller class sizes, of more sensitive teachers, of a more flexible curriculum. The social workers spoke of adequate levels of maintenance, new forms of relief. The clients spoke to us of more sensitive case workers, of understandable forms, of people who would give practical advice. City planners spoke to us of low-cost housing. The city dweller spoke of twice-a-week garbage collection, of rat control, of safety on the streets. Allowing every possibility that you want, which begins with the simple fact that all of us are more annoyed by niggling problems than overall causes and that we are sometimes short-tempered and lose sight of the major issue. It is still true that the people were talking about life in the city and the experts of the city itself. It wasn't that they didn't want better housing, the new schools and higher levels of assistance, but that in terms of living in the city what they required was a new relationship with the professionals who are responsible for many of these programs, a new sense of partnership with the institutions which presumed to serve them, a sense of belonging, to feel a part of and partially responsible for the city.



The tragedy of our cities today is that we are still acting as if we can authorize by fiat and impose by law and solve by expertise the problems of our lives. Power rests with the people. Progress depends on human developments. I don't know what else the riots in Cleveland, Detroit, Watts and Washington prove but they proved this to me: No one can any longer simply order a city about by bureaucratic decree, by city hall authority, or by industrial leverage. No one can arbitrarily prescribe a particular remedy for the city and assume that because it seems reasonable it will be effective and it will be abided. The people have said: "We will do what we want to do, what we feel must be done and you will not order us, or force us to do it."

A few weeks ago I read, as many of you did, of Roxbury near Boston, Massachusetts. Roxbury is a teeming black slum. Roxbury's first problem is unemployment. 35% of the adult males in Roxbury are out of a job. Well-intentioned city, state and Federal city planners and job specialists got together and prevailed upon one industry to build a plant in Roxbury. The government gave certain tax credits to the business on the promise that all the employment at the worker level and middle-management level would be given over to those who lived around the plant. All seemed to be going well. The land was razed. A factory was built and when it opened its doors to hire people from the neighborhood, it found its doors blocked by local pickets. No one had bothered to go into that neighborhood and to ask the mothers there what they thought of heavy trucks coming to that plant while their children walked to the elementary school next door. No one had bothered to go into



the neighborhood and say, "is this where the factory should be built?" "Are these the buildings that ought to be torn down? Perhaps we should put this plant someplace else not in a residential area as we do in the suburbs, not so close to schools and to the library where the noise will interfere with your children at work, study and play." People will not accept the castor oil today just because a doctor says it is good for them. They have to convince themselves. That is the fact of life in the city today. But most of our governmental institutions and most of our attitudes still assume someone can tell the people what is good for them. Taxes are taken from Cleveland, they go to the county, they go to Columbus, they go to Washington and there some expert decides how much shall come back to Cleveland and for what projects. One of the achievements of this last administration was the encouragement of grass roots organizations, neighborhood groups organized around complaints, something which city hall, something which the County Commissioner, something which the state government is not doing. These groups are now threatened by the new administration. They get in the way. Inevitably they embarrassed those who felt in charge of things.

I am a rabbi, an historian, and not a city planner or urbanologist. I don't want to today suggest specific programs for the city. But, I do want to suggest that unless we are radical in the way we go about building up community participation, grass roots organizations, neighborhood opportunity centers, bloc political groups, unless we find a way of giving to the city its voice, the four hundred programs of state and national government designed to voice our urban crisis, and the billions



of dollars we are spending to activate these projects will miss the mark, be a bandaide which covers but does not heal the wound. Why? Because the people will not feel they are a part of the solution. Institutions are being created for them rather than they being partners in the institutions. They are not being consulted. They are not being humanized.

Our Bible has no knowledge of the modern city. Scripture knew a city of a different order and of a different kind. But with its usual insight, the Bible does suggest the state of mind with which we must approach the urban problems. There is only one command for a man who lives in the city. "Seek ye the peace of the city." We are not told to seek new buildings; we are not told to develop new mass transportation schemes. It is assumed that the technical and engineering will happen. We are told to seek the peace of a city. Work with people. Re-tool ourselves. Look at the human problems and form partnerships to find solutions.

There is an old Midrash with which I will close -- the story of a man who left a will. In that will he left all his money to his son, provided his son became a fool. The judges who were responsible for this will in probate did not know what to do with it. So they went to the most learned scholar in the whole country. As they approached his shouse they found him down on his hands and knees on the front lawn making goo goo noises to his four-year old grandson. They hid in the bushes nearby not wanting to embarrass the justice by catching him in such a position. Finally the grandson and grandfather went into the house. The visitors waited a moment, they knocked on the door and were ushered into his stody and presented their problem to this most learned of all jurists. What to do with a will in which



a man left all of his money to a son provided his son become a fool. The jurist just laughed and said, "whenever we love we become fools." Whenever we share our feelings openly with another we have turned off reason and are foolish, for we are exposing ourselves. Whenever we play with a child we act foolishly. The child needs our love and we need the child's love. Without such folly, without such empathy, without such an awareness of people, families do not bind themselves tight, children do not grow to care and the world does not move on.

I am speaking this morning in praise of folly. I am asking us to go beyond all expertise. Expertise is necessary. But beyond all of the layers of blueprints and plans of architectural drawing we must work with people. Think in terms of people-oriented programs.

Six weeks ago the Cleveland Museum of Art had a large display put on by the AIA, of architectural rendering designs for Cleveland twenty-five years hence. These were lovely buildings and large green spaces, an airport in the lake and all the other things which probably will come about, but I confess that in this entire exhibit the only thing that moved me was a wall of pictures, made not by the architects, but by elementary school children from the center city who had been asked to draw what a city was to them. These are the people we should be listening to. They and their parents. They drew shaking rooms and dirt filled streets. Buildings will be built. Welfare will be updated and reformed. Schools will be revised. But ultimately the solution to the crisis in our city lies in the solution to a human problem. If this be folly let us all be such fools.