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Can Civilization Survive?, 1969.

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## CAN CIVILIZATION SURVIVE?

The Temple

Sunday, October 19, 1969

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

The sweep of emotional tides have often flowed through history. One generation can see no light at the end of its tunnel, almost loses sight of the meaning of progress, social improvement, and the best spirits of that generation cultivate a fextonexist determined, different, A stoic control of their will and will not be broken bux by might. And the average spirit of that generation becomes cynical, power privileged, ways in which all men go about conducting their business. ANOTHER JENERATION also be pessimistic of the fail to see the possibilities implicit in their generation, they will be bouyed up by a great confident vote that somehow from the outside the god or gods will bring about an apocalyptic transofrmation. The Messianic age will dawn. The best spirits of that age leave that city and leave their preoccupations to prepare themselves spiritually for the new age, and the average sitizen is encouraged by the fact that sages, teachers and priests tell him it is a glorious time at hand. And, there are certain ages at which men are buoyed been up by a kind of surging confidence. They have a feeling that all is well. there are no problems that can not be surmounted. No obstacles which can not be o vercome and somehow men united will do away with the ancient ills of society. The best spirits of this age are the social reformers, crusaders of the world. average man of this age feels himself moving up the ladder of success, encouraged by his mobility.

One of the fascinating opportunities of history is the charge to describe the SOMETHING changing moods of men. And it is nothing more than idle research. Because if we AS TO will become sensitive how the philosophies and attitudes of other ages can be conditioned by their emotional preconceptions, how what passes for wisdom is little

more usually than a rationalization of a generation's emotional mood, Then perhaps

WE CAN gain some insight into our own generation, for here too, we also, are prone to

assume that the attitudes which are conditioned by the environment, a way of looking

at things which is unique to origin, is, in fact the true way. That the preconceptions

about life and the future, which the school, the family and other media impose upon

us are, in fact, a way to understand what life truly is. But want in order to keep

our heads above the roiling waters then somehow we must find a perch from which

to have our own judgment. That can come only when we can define the tides of Seeling

attitude which runsunder our age, and judge them for what they are, rather than

accept them as simply the truth.

I have no other purpose this morning than to attempt to chart for you one of the great currents of feeling which surges through our history. I would like to suggest to you this morning that we are at a time when the heavy tide of despair, of anguish, of doubt and of disillusion are beginning to sweep through our history. Most of us tend to wonder whether there is a future. Can civilization survive? Headlines are black. Our literature is bleak writing and detailing for us the ordinary, rather banal vulgarities of men 'The bright day is done and we are for the dark. And the average man, the ordinary man looks about him, at his cities c hoked with people, covered by filth, overlayed by violence, and he wonders. He shakes his head and he sighs. Is this what the life and the future is all about? Is there really hope? The shrug is quite a meaningful one when he speaks his philosophy. I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet, I can not describe for you the future, I can not tell you what it will be like and of what it will be made. But, I am going to suggest to you that if we can understand what is this sense of haplessness, whether is FACT what is this sense of hopelessness, what is the sense of doom and damnation, start.

to passing, that it is simply an emotional moment, tide, or whether it corresponds to the truth and will make a great difference in our lives. FOR, ISIN SACTEMETE is

no future, Is win fact, we are simply carrying on as men have always carried on that
until their awful day of the holocaust, then how different would our lives really be?

When we bring children into the world to a premature death? Why defer
pleasures? Why build for the future if there is no future? Why hold on to Judaism
and its disciplines if they can not make for progress and social change? Some of
our men have answered these questions as we do not wish to see them answered.

They have become careless of time. They have become indifferent to duty? Why?

To what purpose is the duty? What would be accomplished? Today, tomorrow, next
month, next year it will all end. So there are those who, what is the current phrase,
are brought about, and there are those who abandon their place in society. We
too wonder. We too doubt. Can civilization survive? How much of the pessimism of
today is merited? How much is simply a surge of anguish, of fear?

and lived through one of the great watersheds of human feeling. There are those here this morning who can remember a more hopeful and confident age. When they had assumed that they had been placed upon the earth endowed by a kind God with gifts of heart and hand and mind, which would allow them to overcome any problem, solve any social crisis and push back the outerperimeter of ignorance of darkness, would build to gige man control of the insteries of nature so that man could rule here upon the cultured earth. A decent society for decent men. We looked upon ourselves as white/men performing in a cubturestable opening a new door of possibility to a bright tomorrow.

In the nineteenth and in the early part of the twentieth century long rays of optimism they surged through our history. And well is might. There seemed to be no accomplishment which was beyond human capacity. The century began with political revolutions. The American Revolution, the French Revolution, proclaimed great new doctrines of liberation, freedom, equality, fraternity, constitutionalism. Men hoped that at long last

the age of special privilege and special power was at an end. Then in one of the great productive triumphs of the industrial revolution where in the middle and many in the lower class suddenly had the amenity of things which only peers of The control of infectious diseases was developed. We doubled old had enjoyed. We gave to our children the opportunity for mass literacy, for man's life span. a good education. The economy of scarcity became the economy of adequacy. For government the first time we loded upon as something more than a system of repression which sextx saw to it that the class structure which existed in the society necessarily There was not enough for many, it was simply a question of had to persist. men of good will joining together in common purpose. There was no cesspool left over from the medieval world which was suddenly died up under the sunlight of the new age and man's new sense of power and capacity and control. Men walked confidently and they walked confidently away from the traditional ties of family and clannish tradition which had sustained them through the dark days of the Middle Ages. And they walked constantly away from the traditional duties which they looked upon as archaic, as too limited. There was a bright open new future. Let us be free. It was a grand time. They walked proudly, walked Then we began to think wer were gods.

We can chart this mood very interestingly in the essays and the preachings of the last generation. I read to you deliberately this morning from the First Chapter of the Book of Isaiah. The liberal pulpit, whatever its religious affiliation, echoed and delcared as sacred the emotional feelings which men already felt. There was nothing pietistic about these pulpits. They knew exactly where the ills were that society suffered from. They knew that there was a feeling men and the selfish men and the ambitious men. They knew that many classes were struggling to retain all that they had had in the past and they pointed their finger and they summoned man to a crusade against those who opposed unionism and those who

self-involved and be totally

opposed universal education and those who opposed the income tax, and those who opposed responsibilities throughout the world. It was a purpose of courage, pullits purpose of conviction, and they cited again and again the great stern, ethical requirements of the prophets. Seel do evil. Learn to do well. Establish freedom in the land, establish justice in the gates. Many responded. Pulpit and The writer and the reader went out to do battle for the Lord. out confidently for they read also in the prophecies, it shall come to pass in the end of days, the mountains of the Lord's house will be established as the top of the mountain. It shall be exalted among the hills, and in that glorious time they kexavex beat shall keak their swords and plon shares and spears into hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Do the good. BE citizens of quality and courage and in utopian days will often OFBN, near. Join together, citizens of good will of all persuasions and of all Attitudes YOU CAN and create a city of decency and amenity, you can create the city of justice and of freedom, you can establish a world government and peace. And there was the hope, and there was the teaching which has been declared to be sacred. But, unfortunately, there was a great little term in the prophetic teaching which was overlooked in their readings and overlooked in the texts. Yes, the prophets preached a stern ethic, cease to do evil, learned to do good, proclaimed freedom unto the taught that is men land, establish justice in the gates. Yes, the prophets cease to do evil & EARN to do good, there would be a good time. There would be a good society. There would be peace and justice. They also felt they were Skel'shted and burdened with this feeling that many would not take advantage of the b ECAUSE opportunity which was theirs The commandment was not a simple one. Give a few dollars to United Appeal, and yourtaxes was one which transformation demanded radical reformation of the individual. A man who would cease to be

involved in the community. A man who would not

rationalize his own advantage As that which is socially advantageous. They knew that though they
when he spoke God's word, the Command the people advised that they see not, but they hear hot and their heart was heavy and sodden with excess flesh, and so the prophets spoke of hope and underscored their feeling that the nation would fall short and would be punished and sent into exile and destroyed. And what about these great visions of the future, when every man works sit under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make him afraid. Yes, they were great visions In the End of days of the future. as part of the Messianic vocabulary of the prophets. No prophet ever had the idea, really, that you and I efforts would/architect and build and sculpt and fuse a society which was just and peaceful. This would be God's will in the END of times.
They had no belief in the slow ASCENT of MAN. History
There was no illusion WASASTRAISHT LINE until God in his own good time, for his own good reasons, and the end of the days, intersere in history and bring about that condition for which all would suddenly cease The prophets hardly qualify as 19th and twentigth century optimists, But we read them for what we wanted them to say. We read them to encourage us in our labors, to give us a sense that a new day was truly This Mood dawning and that was what God had created this world to be all about. of hope and of confidence produced some very dramatic results. In medicine, science, in human thought. It encouraged men to set out, to live by a stern ethical sense of duty. But early in this century man began to realize that the k inevitability of progress, the sense of immediate accomplishment by man of decency in the society would simply not come about.

Look at the face of the ninet@enth century. There are essentially two. They are both overly confident. One is Communism. The new faith of the century.

Of what does it speak? Of the inevitable triumph of the accomplishments of the

proletariat. Of the inevitability of the socialist vision. In our own version of 19th century faith, the American version, of what did we speak? Of the inevitability of the Somehow, functionally, rationally, pragmatically euphemistically, American dream. men of all creeds and races of this country would unite together given the opportunity which was ours, and we would bring about the flowering of a great society. word in all these faiths was "possibility" almost inevitability. Now, man has recognized in the twentieth century progress is not inevitable, \* the great did not necessarily translate into triumphs in the city and farms and social living. I suppose at the watershed of these ceilings of hope and confidence in the beginning of the turning tide and pessimism and despair was the First World War. A stupid war. A foolish war. A war that was not fought for any basic reason or principle. A bloody Awas which was written as a history of the futility and the stupidity of human beings and those who call themsleves statesmen and diplomats, and the folly of citizens who followed their banners and their leaders and the fatherland for the mother That was in Europe, far away.

Americans by and large, continue to hold on to this naive sense of optimism and of confidence in the 1920's even through the great depression, that was and the large would overcome it. We ealled it a New Deal. We were centain we could organize our way out of it. But then in the 1930's a series of blows which no one could is in blink away descended upon the world. There was Manchuria, the Japanese invasion of China. There was Ethipia. There was the Spanish Civil War. There was the German march into Czechoslovakia and into Poland. There was Auschwitz and Dachau and Treblinka and twenty million dead, and half a continent reduced to ruble.

Now man really had to come to grips with their own role in the g creation of a society from which they dreamed. Were we adequate to control the power which our minds had given into ourhands? In the nineteenth century men had talked of evolution and

assumed that man's spiritual and moral capacities would evolve, would progress, would grow, even as his power grew. he twentieth century, beginning with Freud, has forced us to ask a much more bitter question, can we ever begin to transcend the ANIMA, the instinctual in our behavior? Is there something besides rationalization, sham and which makes us human beings, answer is not yet clear. All the 9005 to whom we so confidently have passed of fered by as as well as opportunity. Medicine brought us over of fered by as as well as opportunity. Medicine brought us over of fered by as as well as opportunity. s omething more than creatures of greed and creatures of lust. technology has given us

with we can

which originally invade privacy

the means, the computers, the electronic devices which originally invade privacy control people. Industry has given us pollution. All of our rods have proven their power is AWESOME and not necessarilly beneficial. Modern man 5445 that ho is confidently and but little lower than the anges crowned with glory, with honor. But we have to look again at the prophets to find the lest missing middle to recognize that we have eyes but we see not, we have ears but we hear not, that somehow every man is insensitive, brutish, lACKING INA WILLIAM response to to the urgencies of the hour. What's for it then? The Mood we know is black, bleak, It is one which men to drop into their hippie pads or suburban plots, gived up in despair and our

men to drop into their hippie pads or suburban plots, gived up in despair and our literature prepares us almost to expect heavier and heavier blows to morals, destroys any and all illusion. Art makes us see nature not in its beauty but cut up and destroyed even as our cities are spoiling over the earth and being destroyed. And we don't have the rationalizations we might have had a decade ago or two decades ago that spell out there is a criminal element and us. That we are pure, we are the men of good will, we are those who can and will cooperate for the good of our city, but that there are pure, we are the men of good will, we are those who can and will cooperate for the good of our city, but that there are pure, we are the men of good will, we are those who can and will cooperate for the good of our city, but that there are pure, we are the men of good will, we are those who can and will cooperate for the good of our city, but that there are pure, we are the men of good will, we are those who can and will cooperate for the good of our city, but that there are pure, we are the men of good will, we are those who can and will cooperate for the good of our city, but that there are pure, we are the men of good will, we are those who can and will cooperate for the good of our city, but that

Now we have to admit that we too are somehow caught up in the whole makestrom of evil. We, our government, we dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The banality of Vi is not only proved at Nurenburg, it's proved in the atomic ash of those cities. And what is the hidden tragedy of the war in Vietnam? It is that we, those of us who held on to the American dream, it is that we can defoliate the forest and We have by the land so that it can not produce and we do it with All the of xxkx rationalizations as a sense of duty. But so did the Storm Trooper, so did the young men in the Communist party. And here they are, men and women of good will in our own city. We are actually we think capable of sitting down together and rationally and reasonably work out the problems of the city. Have we? It Is our what the streets. We know we are breathing cancerous agents. It is not any criminal who has pushed these in the air. It is the respectable people of our city who are conducting respectible businesses according to a respectable American formula.

Stripped, naked, suddenly aware of his own file suddenly cynical about all the great words of history, justice, righteousness, brotherhood, cooperation, we despair. We are caught up by the tide of pessimism. Is that all there is to life this sense that times are getting darkers the bright day is done and year all in the dark. I asked a class of young people a few weeks ago "Can civilization survive?"

Half of them said no. None of them said to me that is a foolish question. Can civilization survive? Not if we give in to the sense that it is those who will give in to it, and their actions can be traced in the last generation, those who give in to it are given to irrational acts, to turning against society, to the language of tooks art of the NECLEMARY ways in which social reform and social revolution in fact to take place. What should encourage us? What can allow us to hold our heads above this surging tide of frustration?

In the first instance the fact that our world is changing ed. We have in the last seventy-five or hundred years created and brought into being the greatest social and economic revolution mankind has ever known. We have almost turned the economic pyramid end on end. Time was when economics was a dismal science and there was e nough only for the few and the many necessarily had to be KENT with inadequacy. And then we produced a world in which many could share RELATIVELY EQUALLY

brought A Composition thanks

fought the economic and political revolution came into being where many can share in the business of government and governement need not be simply the imposition of authority above, law and order and to see that the police, the MATIVES the serfs, the laborers are kept I'N I'N . We have brought heath and healing to our bodies. And we have brought about an educational revolution. children can be trained up to the limits of their capacity. Much has happened but not We took advantage of the change. We took advantage of our industry of our science our power and we did not always use our minds to watch carefully to prevent abuse, to create the new laws, the new philosophy which would allow us to understand the dimensions of the revolution and use it advantageously.

I am saying simply this. Civilization can survive. We may What am I saying? squeak through. We have new powers. We still have our capacities. There are still those who live saintly lives, whose lives are devoted to service sk to others, to Vista. JEREM. to the Peace Corps, to their city. But, unfortunately, most of us listen th these listen to these analyses of the times, even as our forefathers did in Judah, 28 to 2900 years ago, and nod our head in agreement, and that is the beginning and the end of it. Our lives are c ontinued on the exact same basis which they were before. Why do we have a new surge of radicalism in America? Because the urgency is appaarent to all those who are not blind. Because we do things as we have always done them, 99% for ourselves, 1% for our communities provided it is tax deductible, is not to do Anythiws. BECAU low timut to bu our lives towards professional success, towards social achievement, toward the

gaining of respectability is to continue a way of life which is no longer viable

A SEVENTH decade of the twentiet century. There is only a dirty narrow opening

to the door to the future. There are tremendous problems and building A decent

future to continue our politics as usual, society as usual, business as usual, education as

usual, religion as usual, is to guarantee we will not get there.

Jam tired now and the needs are urgent. We used our powers to unlock the secrets of nature. I am convinced that we could use our powers to unlock the secrets of our own resources. A chance to create a new life style, a new deducation, a new set of priorities, a new set of commitments. But, I confess, also, that I hear many speeches urging this but I see very little evidence of it. Like ook the tides of history we come, we hear, we go. Like the prophets of history we speak we urge we are burdened in a terrible sense of the shadows.

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