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Is Man Obsolete?, 1970.

IS MAN OBSOLETE? Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver December 20, 1970

Dr. Bruno Bettelheim is professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Chicago. At times Bettelheim can be a man of dramatic intellectual arrogance. He is always incisive. His ideas must be considered. Recently he wrote a piece entitled "Redundant Youth" which came to grips with some of the problems involving rebelliousness, revolts and the younger generation. He began his article by citing a number of case histories. One that I recall is of a 25 year old, highly intelligent, well-trained young man of American-Jewish background by the name of Marshall Bloom. In 1967, Bloom at the age of 23 was the instigator of the boycott of classes at the London School of Economics. Sent down for these activities, he returned to New York where he founded what he called the "Liberation News Service" a national news gathering agency to provide information to the underground press not available through the establishment wire services, United Press International, the New York Times service and the like. Soon there was an office schism at the Liberation News Service and Bloom left and founded another similar news agency. When that in time broke up, he went to Massachusetts and lived in a farming commune. Here again there was some difficulty. A year ago, on a morning in October, he was found in his car. He had turned the exhaust up throughthe floor boards and had committed suicide by breathing carbon monoxide fumes.

Doctor Bettelheim does not claim that the political activities of this young man or of others which he cites were not honestly motivated, not a response to their integrity, to a highly sensitive conscience and a highly developed sense of morality. What he claims is that it is wrong, foolish to take a man's verbal justifications of his actions at their face value. Such young men and women involve themselves in many causes which are just; but to understand why they do so with such intensity; why the frenzy; why the fervor -- we must understand something of the psychic makeup; of the churning within; of the deeper emotional forces at work. Only then will the pattern of their actions become meaningful to us. But he says, in so doing we must never forget the objective reality. Bettelheim does not deny that Bloom had reasons to organize a boycott of classes in the London School of Economics nor does he deny the value of devising alternative sources of news gathering beyond those committed to the present establishment; nor does he deny the value of creating communes to experiment and define new lifestyles. What Bettelheim does decry is the impulsive reaction of many adults who listen to an intense justification by a young person of his cause and nod their head in instant agreement -- what you say makes sense, go to it. Do your worst. Bettleheim is angry with such undis criminating approval because the worst is often fatal to the individual who marches off to holy war.

What Dr. Bettelheim is saying is that many of our young people come through the early years of adolescence into their late teens and early twenties without having resolved their identity crises, without turning into a fully articulated adult. This unresolved crises, tho is churning within the breast. This damned up psychic energy is then, with the encouragement of our society, projected out onto the world. He can not make himself out so he goes out to remake the world. In a more rigid

society, a young person who could not find himself, adjust to his role, answer the question "Who am I - What are the purposes of my life?"; such a young person would be forced by the obstinate quality of society to look at himself, hold a mirror up unto himself and to describe his own features, all the warts, all the acne, all the ugliness that goes with youth's charm and grace. But our society is so conscious of the evils of the social structure, of the wrongs of every given institution that a young person is encouraged by the medium, by his family, by his community, by his neighbors, not to speak of his own peer group to take all of this churning energy, this anger, this frustration, this aggression and to pour it out against institutions, the establishment, the family and to say "You have made me the inadequate person that I am and it is because of you, because of your callousness, because of your coldness, because of your cruelty, because of your inhumanity that I am unable to find peace with myself. The fault is your, not mine and therefore I feel totally justified in reacting with violent anger, bitterness, negatively, belligerently, joining in common cause with those who agree with me to pull down, tear down, rip up the institutions which have conditioned me, made me the inadequate person that I, deep down, know myself to be.

Many young people in a more formal social environment would have been forced to come to grips with their own inadequacies and their own limitations but are today encouraged to deny that these exist and almost incited to pour out their frustrations into alholy crusade. Yet, the inadequacy remains. The limitation is still there and the night of silence, the night of terror inevitably comes. There is

a moment when one must say to oneself, this is what I look like. Here is the person that I really am. I have not taken myself in hand. I am not self-disciplined. Yes, I complain that there is not enough opportunity but I have not really tried to take advantage of the opportunity that is there. Yes, I complain about the nature of freedom in our society but I have not explored the parameters of that freedom nor admitted to myself its concomitant duties.

Bettelheim comments on a fact which mahy of us have observed but which he as a scientist seeks to understand, that so many contemporary crusades have such a short life span. One month we have the crusade about race, the next month we have the crusade about civil liberties, the next month we have a crusade about an election and the next month it is ecology. Each crusade is feverishly pursued and then quickly dissipates long before any realistic assessment would indicate that the cause has been won. There is still the smog in the air; there are still no goodniks in public office; racism lies deep within our social structure. What is it that makes so many of the crusades and so many of the institutions of the counter-culture so short-lived? Why do they so often describe their institutions as ad hoc committies as if flaunting the fact that they are temporary, uncertain and have a marginal life The answer Dr. Bettelheim comes to is that this lack of steadiness is directly due to the fact that so many of the young who from and staff these causes are as yet unstable, not fully formed human beings. Not having resolved their internal problems, not having come to grips with themselves, they cannot group themselves into a single issue, they cannot live without constantly posturing, talking about their integrity; about not being able to make any compromises whatsoever even

with those who are on the same wave length, who have the same life-style and who seek the same ends. There is constant who is orthodox and who is heretic tension. There is a constant conflict within revolutionary groups. Dr. Bettelheim lays this to the unresolved personal tensions which are at work deep within the lives, the souls of these young people, which they have not been forced to resolve because the society has made it too easy for them to appear as self-righteous crusaders, as people with a holy cause who must not be questioned because their cause is holy.

Dr. Bettelheim along the way has many unkind things to say about the homes from which these young people come from and these are our homes: Upper-middleclass, suburban - he does not use the word Jewish but I suspect an inordinate number of them are. Study after study shows that many of these young people, a disproportionate number of them, come from liberal homes, liberal politically, liberal socially, liberal religiously. One would think that the intense rebel would come from a home where he was intensely repressed; but it seems that he comes from a home where he was understood and encouraged, where many of his ideas were supported. One explanation that is offered is that these young people simply take their parent's table-talk into life. Transform the verbal liberalism of their parents into action. De. Bettelheim is not satisfied with that explanation. He feels the problem lies deeper and is to be explained by the fact that many of our homes have what he calls a conventional Freudian wis dom, by which he means we don't know the psychology that we talk about. By conventional Freudian wisdom he means that we have understood from the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry that repression is evil; that

repression can destort personality and prevent the talent of the young person from coming to flower. Therefore, we have said to ourselves, we must never discipline a child; take the child during his temper-tantrum and shake him out of it; cut short the most malicious and violent words of a young person and say to him, "You have no right to speak these"; prevent the child from establishing his emotional sway over the home by making it clear to him that it's a place of adults and designed as for their rest and happiness as much as for his. And as a result, to use the psychological terms, we have never helped him to develop his super-ego, a conscience, those inhibitions that come down on us when we are tempted to say what we know we ought not say and to act in an aggressive way that is inappropriate to the situation. Bettelheim goes further and claims that not only has the home encouraged the childishness, the temper-tantrum, the slack development of the super-ego; but the world has also taken unto itself this same "understanding" so that in school or camp the child also is not likely to be repressed, to be up against someone who says to him, "You can't say that to me. " Imagine a child out in the street who sees a teacher or a policeman and he gives vent to some anger and calls the authority figure a name and taunts him. If the policeman or the teacher slaps the child, we have created a soceity in which he will lose his job. No one will say, "Perhaps it was a good lesson that the child needs to learn. "

If a child goes out and gets vacation employment and doesn't like the way the employer is running the business and goes into the employer's office and tells him off. When he comes home his parents say, "Well, so and so probably had it coming. There are other jobs. You have your integrity. I am glad you stood up

and spoke out. " In effect, what we are doing is to deny the young person a chance to develop during the formative years an effective, conscience, an emotional structure which will always allow him to control his actions and responses in the adult world where there are no over-solicitous parents to protect him from all evil.

Rather now, therefore, when the child explodes into that world, he doesn't have the control. He lets go and feels that he is accomplishing; being himself when in fact he is, according to Bettelheim, simply running away from his own unresolved problems.

All this seems to me to make a good bit of sense to it. Some of these things I have said to you before in other ways, though I have drawn in the theology and the wisdom of our faith rather than psychiatry. Some of it is indicated in the Torah portion we read this morning. Joseph, the 17 year old, was an adolescent whose father and mother had not built into him the controls, not been strong in stress situations. Rather they had let Joseph go around feeling himself superior, emotionally in control, numero uno. I know best. His father didn't get angry at anything that Joseph did until one day Joseph began to say 'I know more than you do. In my dreams I saw you bowing down to me, "Father then got angry for a moment and probably told Joseph off and Joseph made him pay by precipitating a crises from which he would merge as a martyr. He got his brother, the hard-hats of the day, so angry with him that they sold him into slavery and only good fortune, or as the Bible would have it, God's providence saved him from that fate.

We consign our young people to a kind of living death when we do not give them during their growing up years the opportunity to come to grips with themselves. We do not force them through their identity crises before they begin to spill out their frustration, their anger, their aggression, all that churns within.

Bettelheim asks an interesting question. He asks why is it that these young people have made the United States of America the demon, Satan in so much of their ideology? Why is it America which is imperialist, repressed, cruel, racist and evil. America has no monopoly on repression, imperialism, cruelty, racism and evil. As a matter of fact, one can objectively make the case that the Soviet Union has at least as much imperialism in their foreign policy, far more repression of intellectuals, and is far more cruel to deviants. A Noble Prize winner of this year is being restricted to the Soviet Union at this moment. This evening the Jews of Cleveland and America will come together to protest what is obviously an anti-Semitic trial in Leningrad sponsored by all of the public relations media of the Soviet Press. The director of external relations in the Sovet Union, a woman, said only the day before yesterday, that if the Jews in the Soviet Union react as the Jews in the United States have reacted to the Leningrad trial, she would know how to handle them. Such controls are obvious, unabashed and yet it is the United States, where freedom is relatively unbounded, where abundance has few real limits, that is the devil in certain youth ideologies and Bettelheim asks why. Since one cannot find the answer in objective reality, he suggests we find it in psychology reality. There it would seem that the United States plays Satan's role because the United States represents the future danger. In our country technology has come closest to its ultimate triumph and when it triumphs, youth becomes a redundant. wants to make it any more in America? " one youth leader said the other day.

"What great glorious achievements remain to be achieved? What does society need of me?" How often has the young person been told that he must go to school, not so much to learn, not because it is a meaningful growing experience, but simply because he has to be kept out of the laboring force for another four or six or eight years?

The young person in America, Bettelheim says, feels himself irrelevant to society's needs. You can rally his energies for a Peace Corp or a Vista Program, the minute you indicate need, he responds. But we have been tentative about such programs. For the average young person there is the clear impression that society does not need him and the young person responds as does anyone who does not feel that he is necessary and significant by turning against, by tuning out, by turning off. The question I would ask is this: is this awareness shared by many of our young people in fact the reality for most of us? Is man obsolete? Are we, and not just our teenagers, superfluous? Are we redundant? Are we necessary to the society of the computer, the society where one doesn't have to work by the sweat of one's brow?

Two generations ago, a man worked from the sixth grade to the day before he went into the hospital with a fatal illness. A generation ago man worked from high school graduation until he was 65 or 70. The unions today seek what they call "30 and out." 30 years of four day a week employment, then a pension - one has completed his necessary occupational responsibility. We retire at 70, then 65, 62, 60. Obviously, man's place is no longer described by the work that he does. Most of what we do, in fact, is no longer directly connected to our role as homo faber, as a working man,

as a productive unit. Are we then obsolete? Are we necessary? Someone has said that what justifies his own existence to a man is a sense of participation in a shining cause. What cause do we have in a society where technologically we have shattered the old industrial problems and created abundance. What glorious, shining responsibility remains for us to achieve? What justifies our lives to us?

Recently scholars met to discuss "utopia," the dream and the description of the world that will emerge, that is to be. One would think that a Utopianist, yes there is such an academic speciality, would be a happy man. All he has to do is to dream about Vermont, clean snow, clean air, carefree people enjoying their leisure time, able to do pretty much what they feel that they want to do. But as I read through these papers, I found these Utopianists to be bitterly unhappy human beings. Their talk is grey. They haven't the vaguest idea, any of them, how man will live when he doesn't have to work by the sweat of his brow. They haven't the vaguest idea what man will do with himself when he is burdened with free time. Imagine talking of free time as a burden which lays heavy on one's hands and it can. Yet some of you who are retired know that it does and these Utopianists wonder what will fill man's mind, his spirit, what will encourage him to get up with some gusto every day when he has nothing to do, no accomplishments, no shining purposes to move him out.

As I read these articles I felt glad that there was employment at least for these scholars. They had something to do. But I felt that they had overlooked the one significant his torical model of a society of superfluous men. A society which had survived with dignity and maintained a sense of personal worth and of community

for centuries. I refer, of course, to the ghetto society of the Jews in Europe.

These people were superfluous. They were declared so by the environment.

No one wanted any part of them. They were not asked to join Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad in deeds of daring do. They were not invited by the Bismarks and the Mazarins to join the business of the state. No one wanted them in government.

Civilization did not depend on their knowledge. No one wanted their art or music.

They were not invited to be part of the planning for the future of their communities.

They were social outcasts, superfluous, redundant, obsolete men. And yet for all of that, though they lived locked in, they lived with dignity, with quality and with a fine sense of personal worth.

How did they manage? In the first instance by Torah, by prizing the world of the intellect, by prizing ideas. If you can think a free man's thoughts you do not have to be physically free. Their world was a world of books and they went back in time and ahead in time, down and up and up and down the time tunnel from Abraham to the Messianic Age, debating, describing, enjoying one another's intellectual tastes, learning to live with one another, which is the fundamental skill any society of superfluous men must magnify. For those who were not so bright or learned, there were all kinds of cooperative ventures; groups in every community to take care of the sick, to provide for the poor, to welcome the wayfarer and to provide health care for the elderly -- they lived in the world of ideas and of graceful human relations. Many learned. Those are the arts, I think, which a Utopian society requires and they are the same thing really that any society requires. Men can

learn to live without the sense of physical adventure, without the power struggle, without the feeling that we fulfill ourselves only if we are the first to step upon a new continent or a new planet, or the first to uncover one of the secrets of the universe. Almost all that we do and the work that remains to be done, and much more work remains to be done than the Bettelheim's and the Utopians admit, must be done cooperatively. We went to the moon. Three men were on that capsule, but millions of man hours had been invested in the mathematics and the computation and the astronomy and the engineering of their craft. We are now members of the corporate society. Scholarship is interdisciplinary, a group accomplishment. How many of the men who win the prizes of scholars achievement, or medical research have worked alone? So it is in this new world which emerges, though we may be redundant in terms of finding the holy grail, we are not redundant if we make our goals corporate goals to find and describe the arts of interpersonal relationship, of community, of shared ideas, of a rich shared cultural life. In their world, the ghetto, the Jews turned to Moses, the strong liberator, the man who had bearded Pharoah, the man who by iron will led an ex-slave people for forty years through the wilderness, into Moshe Rabbeno. Moses our Rabbi, teaching the Talmud to a group of disciples.

What we need really is a new set of heroes. Heroes of community instead of lonely driven explorers. We need heroes. Let's make an Albert Einstein into a hero. Let's make Ghandi into a hero. Let's make the men who look within to understand their own souls. Men who did not wear the scabbard on their belt.

Men who do not keep the fists clenched, ready to strike out in bold adventure.

Man may be obsolete in the sense that he is not needed to push the heavy weights which move the instruments of production. But man is not obsolete when we look at the jobs in the main to be done. We must take this accumulate of people, all it a society or a community, the vast hundreds of millions, the billions of earthlings and somehow give to our cities, give to our societies, give to our families integrity, direction, quality. We must learn the arts of living and in that I submit there is work aplenty for all of us.



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