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What Will Happen to People of the Book When People No Longer
Read Books, 1977.

What Will Happen To People of the Book When
People No Longer Read Books
Daniel Jeremy Silver
April 13, 1977

The day that the Program Chairman reminded me that I had this date which was, oh, maybe four or five weeks ago, I had conveniently forgotten that when we had our program committee meeting about a year ago I had agreed to be here. I covet these opportunities, but, you know, once you put them down in your book you forget about them and you forget that there's planning to be done, but once she talked to me about today I really hadn't done much thinking - that's an overstatement - about what I would talk with you about. And it so happened that that day when I went home I picked up the evening paper and I found in it a little article, one of a whole spate of articles, which have been appearing with unwelcome frequency in recent years, which said that the recent survey of tests of reading levels in the schools, I think it was of Chicago, had shown that once again they dropped. We've had articles like this about all the big city schools and their reading levels for a number of years now, the point of this article being that the reading levels hadn't dropped as much this year as much as they had last year. And it so happened that earlier that day Rabbi Geller and I had had one of a long series of discussions, not about the reading levels of youngsters in the center city or their inability to read, but about the reading habits of our own children. As you may know, the Confirmation year, among other things, is designed around a series of novels which we ask the youngsters to read. These novels are chosen because each is a slice of life which impinges in one way or another upon Jewish experience today. We ask the Confirmation class to read Hayim Potok's The Chosen which opens up for them in a very simple way the world of the Hasadim or of Chabad. We ask them to read the Exodus which, though it's a kind of thriller, has the great advantage of presenting between the

adventure segments a history of the establishment of the State of Israel. We ask them to read Abraham Kahan's The Rise of David Levinsky which is an excellent way for them to understand their grandparents, what they went through when they landed here in America, the whole immigrant experience. And we read with them one or another of Elie Wiesel's novels, usually Gates of the Forest or Night which makes them confront the cruel reality of the Nazis and the Holocaust. It's a good idea. It brings to life, humanizes, the concerns which impinge upon all of us.

Now, I'm a great believer in books and I believe that once you've looked through a book and you decide that there is nothing in this book that a ninth grader shouldn't be able to understand, that it's not too technically beyond him, you assign the book, that's the beginning and end of it. Rabbi Geller, whose job is that of educator, keeps telling me that the children of the middle group in our school can't read some of these books, at least not the whole of them, and he is pointing out to me that once you learn to read in school you are given very little practice to read. Reading, like any art form - the reading facility, as with any art form, grows with practice or repetition, and that if you look at the assignments in literature or history in areas where books are touched on in school you will find that for most in the middle ranks their assignments are minimal, more often than not they're given for a whole year an anthology, with snip-its taken out from this book and that book or the other book which gives them a superficial familiarity with the so-called classics or with history, and that most assignments run to four or five or six pages and, therefore, what we have to do with the middle group in our school is to xerox a few chapters of these books rather than give them the whole thing.

Now, I don't give in easily, some of you know, and over the years I have been disconcerted by the fact that he's right. When we assign, for instance, Exodus, which is a very simple book which can be read by any literate fourth grader, we find that

a good segment of youngsters of average ability in our school cannot complete it. It's not that the words are difficult or the thought, it's a very straight-forward simple TV thriller kind of book, it's simply that it's long. It's 800 pages long and their skills are not up to an assignment of that duration, and that's a tragedy. And so I was thinking a good bit about books and reading levels, those who cannot read and those who do not read, and somehow these sorry facts have been part of the life motif of my rabbinate. I remember that one of the very first lectures that I gave here over twenty years ago was built around the book which gained great popularity then, Rudolph Flesch's book, Why Johnny Can't Read, the problem is not a new one, and what Dr. Flesch did was to raise the old question ^{of} how does a child learn to read, you know, the debate between phonics and phenetics, those who say you look and you say and those who say you sound out and you learn the meaning of the sound of each letter and of each combination of letters. It's an old debate, but the fact was that way back then it was very clear that Johnny couldn't read. And I thought of all those discussions that we'd had in our school about our own, that Johnny doesn't read, and, of course, this takes us to television. I don't know how many of you saw the statistics I saw, I mistrust statistics, but this one seems somehow right, which said that in the average middle-class white community in America, they tried to take out all of the center city, lower-class distortions that might occur, the average youngster in the elementary and junior high school years spends thirty hours watching television for every fifteen minutes he spends reading a book. Now, if this be true, and it is true to some degree, obviously, our children are simply not in the practice of reading. They don't read, therefore, their reading abilities rust. And they learn that a book is a challenge rather than a pleasure, and often it's a challenge that they don't want to take and somehow, that evening, I decided on the topic for today. What will happen to people of the book when people no longer read books?

And then as so often happens when you've decided on the topic and it lies in the back of your mind you find a lot of things impinging on your thinking. As I'm sure most of you know, Miriam Leikind is retiring as librarian of The Temple this year. I was able last year to talk Miriam into staying through this year, but she's spent nearly half a century with us and she has a right to her menuha and rest as well as anybody else. And, by the way, while I'm thinking of her, I hope that all of you will save the evening of the first Sunday in June, which is Sunday, June 4, I think, when we're going to pay a congregational tribute to Miriam, a tribute of love and respect and I'm sure you'll want to be there. In any case, facing Miriam's retirement it became necessary for us to do something we've never done before, in recent history at least, and that is have a Librarian Search Committee, and one of the first things you do in a search committee is to work out a job description. Miriam was the job, that job never had a description, so we began to put down on paper what the job, what the librarian of The Temple is, and I began to realize that a librarian's job is no longer simply the book. The libraries are now places of machines, audio-visual machines of all kinds, records and record players, and machines to store information, machines to reproduce information that you've stored on microfilm and microfish. I remember when the new Director of the Cleveland Public Library came to town several years ago, he was being a little non-plussed when he said in an interview which was reported in our papers: one of the things I found about the Cleveland Public Library is that it pays too much attention to the book. And I was a little startled by that. Then I began to look at our own library and clearly, the librarian cannot spend attention just to the book. Clearly, the library is a repository of the culture and civilization of society and our society more and more is piling that culture with information on to tape and film and cassette and record and not simply into the bound volume.

So what's going to happen the people of the book when people stop reading books? Well, where do we get the title anyway? - the people of the book. We didn't give

give it to ourselves, it's got an interesting history, and if you permit me this diversion into history perhaps I can make the case I want to make with you this morning, this afternoon.

The man who first labeled Jews people of the book was Mohammed, strangely, and Mohammed labeled Jews the people of the book at the same time he labeled Christians the people of the book and Parsis the people of the book. The term people of the book was used originally as a legal description. According to Islam, the Koran is the perfect copy of the book of God. Mohammed, the prophet, not only heard voices, as prophets have a way of doing, but he saw God's book, he went up into heaven and was allowed to read that book, and God's book is in Arabic and he simply transcribed what he saw into the perfect copy of the heavenly book and that is the Koran. Now, according to Islam, there are three levels of religion. There is paganism, idols and idolatry, but not simple idols and idolatry, the belief that the gods are somehow the powers which are innate in nature, which animate nature and all that is. Paganism is characterized by not having scripture, by not having written down its sense of what is right, the god's words into holy book or holy anthology. And then he said there's a second level of religion where there is a scripture. Judaism represents that level of religion and Christianity represents that level of religion. The Zoroastrian tradition represents that level of religion. Here the prophets of the religion have written down a book, but the book is the imperfect copy. The book of God is written in Arabic. The Hebrew scripture is written in Hebrew. The Christian scripture was written in Greek. The Zoroastrian scripture was written in the Persian language. And, therefore, language distorts and the prophetic apparatus of Moses and of Jesus and of Zoroaster was not perfect, it was distortive the way a bad receiver distorts the sound of your radio or of your hi-fi. Now, these religions represent an approximation of the true religion, they're not totally false, they're largely false, but

not totally so, and those who belong to this religion he called the people of the book, and being people of the book they are allowed to do one thing that the pagan world is not allowed to do and that is live because according to Islam pagans are not to live in Dar-Islam, the land which has converted to Islam, where Islam is dominant, but the demie, the people of the book, are to be allowed to remain provided they acknowledge the dominance of Islam and in no way demean the teachings of Islam and do all the other things that minorities must do. So the term the people of the book was not originally a description of the fact that we are readers, or that we read books; it was a legal description that said the Jews have a scripture and, therefore, are allowed, like Christians and others, to remain alive, to retain their communities within the Islamic world.

Now, this is interesting because it says the people of the book is really a statement about the book, not about all books, that what distinguishes us is the fact that we have the sefer Torah, the scripture, not that we have library cards and go to the Cleveland Heights or Shaker Heights Public Library and take out several books every week or so.

In the 19th century European writers and scholars picked up this old Muslim expression and they used it to describe Jews. They didn't use it to describe Christians, interestingly, somehow Christianity is not associated with the book. Why? The Catholic tradition insists the dominant Christian tradition insists that authority begins in the book but is transmitted and expressed through the vicar of Christ on earth, through the living personality who represents the authority of the Church. And in the 12th-13th century in the Middle Ages it was actually a crime for a laymen to read the Bible. He must listen to the living authority who represents the magisterian, the authority of the Church. He is not to read the Bible because he might be misled by

what he reads there. Now when Protestant Christianity evolved and rebelled against the Roman Catholic tradition they proved that the Catholics were right in ~~the~~ ^{the} saying that if people went back to the book they might challenge the authority of the Church, and Protestant Christianity is based upon reading the book, each person reading the book, each sect reading the book and interpreting it. But somehow Protestant Christianity tied this concern with scripture. It was not concerned with learning as a religious value by itself and that as one read scripture and one was inspired by scripture one did not need to read what other people had said about Scripture. On the old tables of the Puritans and of others in America when America was still a believing Christian society was the Bible. Every night you picked up the Bible or every morning and you read from the Bible to the family and whatever the Bible said to you directly that was its inspired meaning. There were no commentaries and there were no super-commentaries and you really were not concerned what other people said about it, that the inspiration was an immediate and direct one. And if you looked at the churches of Europe they were churches, sanctuaries, a school is hardly noticeable, a school building is hardly noticeable around them. But when the sociologists began to look at the Jewish community they noticed that Jews somehow always had their noses in books, and if they went into the synagogue they noticed that there were bookshelves filled with musty volumes and almost always these volumes were tattered and somebody was sitting there ~~shuckling~~ ^{shuffling} over a book and reading it - the book was always there. And then they realized that the Jews did the strange thing of calling their religious leaders not priests^{or} holy men, but teachers, rabbis, rav. And then they began to realize that the central act of our worship was taking out the book and reading from it and interpreting it which is the essence of a sermon, and somehow in their minds, quite naturally, we became the people of the book.

And then a strange thing happened. As Jewish life became secularized, as we moved away from the shtetl and ghetto where life was one and integrated for us, we translated this love of learning which we called the Torah almost naturally because we were instinctively book people into loving all kinds of books and we became the great book readers and writers of the modern world. But that's not what the term the people of the book meant. The people of the book meant that we were tied to this book, and that it was this book which determined our status and our very nature.

Let me take you back into history again. Jews being the people of the book is really the creation of and the achievement of the Pharisees and the rabbis. In Biblical time, at least for the first half millenium of Biblical times, there was no book. There was only an oral tradition which was spoken to the tribe or to the congregation whenever it needed to be spoken. The first indication that we have of a book comes from the seventh century when we're told that a scroll of the law which was believed to be part of the book of Deuteronomy was discovered during a refurbishing of the Temple. The first public reading of scripture doesn't occur for another 300 years until 44 BC when we are told in one of our records that Ezra read some of the laws about the Passover to the Judeans who had returned from the Persian Exile. About two centuries later the Torah emerges in its present form, but as long as the Temple remained in existence of the year 70 of this era, there is no indication that the Torah was ever taken out in the Temple and read as a central act of worship. It's only with the emergence of the synagogue, with the teachings of the Pharisees, that the book becomes the central element in our tradition.

Now what did the book do for our tradition? It gave it context and shape. It meant whenever we lived, whatever generation, wherever we lived in whatever community in whatever part of the world the same book was being read to Jews, the same

texts were known, the same words were heard, the same idiom was picked up, the same language to a degree was spoken, and so there was something which emerged which was a Jewish identity and that Jewish identity, though it was shaped somewhat differently in India or in Persia or in Spain or in the United States still had a great deal in common wherever you were and whenever you lived. But to achieve that aim, which was the aim of the Pharisees from the beginning, they did something which Jews do not generally realize and that is they pushed away all other books.

If you take a course in Bible at the university you'll discover that about the middle of the course they'll begin to talk about a process which is called canonization. Now canonization is the process by which those books, those scrolls which ultimately became part of scripture were declared to be Scriptural. Until the Biblical canon emerges there are just a lot of scrolls existing out there with more or less religious validity associated with it, but now a process of selection sets in. We can't quite describe how it operated, but it took place, and we know what was selected in, but what happened to those books that were selected out? And the answer is very clear. They were pushed away. They were hidden. They were deliberately left aside. The Jews were not encouraged to read all books, but only the authorized books, the books which would give congruence, coherence, unity to the Jewish community. If you pick up a non-Jewish Bible, particularly if you happen to pick up a Roman Catholic one, you will find that it consists of three parts: what they call the Old Testament; what they call the New Testament, their Scripture; and what's called the apocrapha. Now the apocrapha is a series of books under the heading The Hidden Books, that's what the Greek word apocraphas means, the books that were hidden away. And we hid them away. Now why are they there? Because the Church saved them, dug them out and kept them. The Church found various values in these books - they didn't keep all the books we kept away, but some of them.

They found value in them for them. We didn't keep them. If it were only for the synagogue these books would no longer exist.

Alexander the Great brought Greek culture to the Middle East in the late fourth century B. C. E. and a great literature began to develop among Jews who wrote in Greek in the great capitals of that world, particularlyⁱⁿ Antioch and Alexandria in the 3rd, 2nd and 1st centuries B. C. E. and the 1st and 2nd centuries of our era, we know of tragedians, we know of historians, good, pious, honorable Jews, and all we have of that literature comes to us because here and there a church father or someone else outside the synagogue read these books and decided in his writing he wanted to quote from. That's the only reason they are still alive. We didn't keep them. The greatest philosopher of the period was a Jew by the name of Philo, he was often called Philo Judeas. Philo was a learned Jew. Philo was a preacher in the great synagogue of Alexandria. Philo spent most of his life as a commentator on the Bible. Professor Harry Ostran Wolfson of Harvard who has analyzed with depth^a that no one else in our generation has equaled, the development of medieval philosophy claims that Philo in the first century set out the basic terms which philosophy was to follow for the next 1500 years down to Spinoza. Not a word of Philo is ever quoted by any Jew down to modern times. What exists of Philo, and a great deal exists, a whole library of books by Philo exists, courtesy of the Church, courtesy of Greek philosophers who kept these books, who found value in them, but not courtesy of the synagogue. There were our books, the book, and all that grew organically from it; and there were the starim hitzonim, the outside books, all the others and no Jew was ever encouraged to spend his time in those.

I saw a modern variant of this a couple years ago when my mother sold her house and I was given the task, a very pleasant but a difficult task, of deciding what to do with all those books which comprised my father's library. Many of you have

been in that house and know that there were books all over it. There were books in the living room. There were books on the stairwells. There were books in all the bedrooms. There were books in the basement. About the only place in the house where there were no books was in the dining room and the kitchen. It was a library as much as a house. And I had always known because I had used the library often and our interests obviously were complementary, that the books were arranged by subject matter and area matter. History was here, and Talmud was there, and rabbinics was here and philosophy was there and the encyclopedias were over here, comparative religion was there, but until I got my hands on the books and had to spend a number of days with them I hadn't realized that there were upstairs books and there were downstairs books. The upstairs books, that is the books on the first floor in the study and so on and upstairs were the books which had some, in his mind, lasting value. They were books of wisdom, books of tradition, books of interpretation, books of history and philosophy, books of consequence. And downstairs was the ephemera. Downstairs were the novels, the mystery stories, the travel books, the books that had made quite a splash, everybody had been reading them at some point and they had been quickly forgotten, the books written by somebody who was of greater notoriety than of consequence, all the books that you pick up, you leaf through, you put down, because you want to know what is happening in your culture. Those were the downstairs books. When we were growing up I wasn't conscious of that so there was obviously no attempt to keep me from the downstairs books and I suppose that when I was twenty I would have said that I had read more of the downstairs books than I read of the upstairs books, but, nevertheless, there was this separation. Jews were never encouraged to be indiscriminate readers. Reading just as reading is not a Jewish virtue. What is the Jewish virtue was to read and to be part of the development of all that flows from Scripture, all that becomes part of what was, what they called

Torah. That we read and that we studied and the study of those books was declared to be a religious virtue equal to worship, equal to prayer. The Talmud says if a man is busy studying, reading, doing this kind of reading he need not interrupt his reading to go to services. It was a religious value equal to prayer.

So I would submit to you that there are really two questions in our topic. The first question, and the unexpected question, is what happens to the people of the book when they begin to read all kinds of books. And the second question is what happens to the people of the book when people no longer read books. Let me try to answer both of them briefly.

What happens to the people of the book when Jews begin to read all kinds of books? Well, here are the answers. What happens to us when we begin to read all kinds of books is that our Jewish identity ceases to be natural and becomes problematic. All of a sudden our minds, our souls, become formed by a series of ideas which have not been neatly woven into the slowly emerging civilization. There are all kinds of ideas and now it's hard to put them together. We become split personalities, split religious personalities. We're comfortable being Jews but we would be hard pressed, most of us, to describe precisely what a Jewish identity consists of and we lose more and more the ability to share together the conventions of a common language. It becomes more and more difficult for a rabbi to make a reference to a text or a midrash or a Biblical character and assume that his people know what he is referring to. That sense that we share a common experience becomes more and more attenuated, so in a sense reading books makes you less Jewish, and in another sense reading books makes you more human because you're becoming more and more part of the larger world out there. And it's a paradox, there's something to be gained and there's something that is lost, but then all life is a paradox.

And what happens to people of the book when people to cease read books? Well, clearly, we become different kinds of people. Now no longer is our spirit informed by the printed word but by visual impression largely, sensual impression. We've got to wrestle now with the problems which Marshal McLuhen first popularized for modern man. If I read a book I can read slowly, I can go over the paragraph, and if I'm not sure I agree with the man I can put the book down and think about it; or I can put the book down and go to some other books and check up if he's lying to me or if he's misinterpreting the information or if in fact he is a fairly reliable reporter. And I have time to go over and work it through and make up my own mind and I can also find ways of providing context to what I read. But, if I no longer read I am simply dinned at with a momentary visual impression and that's it. Now I can decide today that I want to go home and learn all that I can learn let's say about the Arab boycott. I'm going to be preaching about it on Sunday, I ought to know something about it before I stand up here and speak, I know something about it. But let's say I decide I want to speak about it. I go to the library, I take down the books, I review the history, I review the law, I review the politics of the situation, slowly it comes together. But let's say I can't read. How do I find out about the Arab boycott? Either I have to go to somebody who presumably knows something about it, which is not always easy, or I've got to depend upon the fact that when they turn ^{on} the evening news they're going to talk about it and if they do talk about it what are they going to say? They're not going to give me law; they're not going to give me history; they're not going to give me background; they're not going to give me qualification; what they're going to give to me is an event and an event which can be photographed, visualized, and all of it has to be done within a minute and a half. Now it may take me hours and days to understand what the Arab boycott is about, but now I'll know about the Arab boycott only if some news director decides to inform me about it and then only what he manages to compress within the medium, that

is, within the time slot and the visual medium with which he's dealing. I am going to become, because of the media, particularly the visual media, much more of an open, sensitive, passionate person, that is, the appeal is to my senses directly with less of the sensor of the mind in operation, but it's going to be much more difficult for me to become informed and to take reasonable opinions and to be able to work out a reasonable argument and to do so with some measure of confidence of the concepts I am dealing with, the facts I am dealing with are in fact accurate.

One of the things that reading does for you, it makes you master of your own destiny. I can decide to learn about something and go out and learn about it and then do something on it. If I really don't know how to read I am totally dependent on what others decide to tell me. I am the prisoner of the television program and that's true whether I'm concerned with politics on a serious issue or simply with having a pleasurable esthetic experience. I can go to my library any night I want, any day I want, and pick out poetry, a novel or a travel book, anything I'm in the mood for, but when I come home and I turn on the television set I'm the prisoner of what somebody else decided I should see between nine and ten o'clock on that particular evening. I have three or four choices, but that's all, and they made the choices for me. I didn't make the choice for myself. I become a more dependent person by not being able to read. I become a person who it's easier to appeal to because emotions can be moved and manipulated. I find it increasingly difficult to work out the facts for my own self. I am dependent upon others to a much greater degree. All these are consequences of not having developed the capacity to read. It's a bother, isn't it, it's a worry. It worries me. I know when I set youngsters' Confirmation class or in college even to work out a paper and they take a topic which is of some interest, that most of them are not able to do the basic kind of reading, critical reading, which would qualify them to do some critical

thinking. That goes back to what we started with, that the capacity to read rusts because throughout the childhood years, the adolescent years, were not encouraged to read. I think a certain blandness also has entered our lives. I remember, I think it was Volzak, once describes having been to a particularly dull party and he'd spent all evening long listening to banal people talking about banal things and he was fed up to here and he went home and he went into his library, he looked around and he started to pick out a book or two and he heard himself saying, well, now I can get to some interesting people.

I had in my library the opportunity to converse with some of the most interesting and the most brilliant minds that have ever been created and I wouldn't give away that opportunity for anything. I live in a nice community and I live among very interesting, very pleasant people, but each of us is limited and our circle of friends is limited and there are many times we want something more, a sense of the larger life, a sense of other ideas, a sense of a different perspective. You can't get it unless you can read because the television rarely produces it for you. It gives you the banalties of the street culture, sometimes it does better, but generally that's where it is, but here it's all there. It's enriching.

What happens to the people of the book when people no longer read books? Well, I suppose a number of ministers get up and they say, well, the answer to it is to read the Bible, that means we are in fact reading the book. The other year a student ran up to me and she said, I read the Bible last week. I said, well, did you like it? And she said, well there are too many details but parts of it were alright. That's not really what we're talking about when we talk about being a people of the book. It was a lifelong study. The Bible was taken out every week in every synagogue and parts of it were read. Bright men like myself found something to say about that portion every week of every year in every community in every synagogue that Judaism has

ever had. You don't read the Bible by reading it through a semester course at the university or in a week if you've just taken the Evelyn Wood course. I'm afraid that the years in which we could define ourselves as people of the book are finished. Jewish life will never again have that warm consistency which it had before emancipation and enlightenment broke us open. Something is gained, something is lost, but I certainly hope and pray, though I have no way of guaranteeing it, that the next generation and the next will somehow carve out of the mass media world enough time to learn to read and to practice reading and to become capable of handling almost any kind of reading because a very important element which makes for critical discussion, critical thinking and just sheer aesthetic pleasure will disappear unless this is in fact possible. And that's it.



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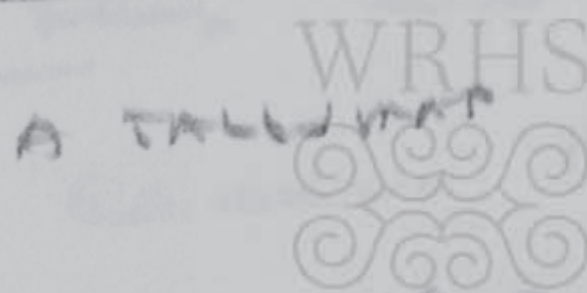
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