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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Masque of Life, 1937.

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THE MASQUE OF LIFE  
A Purim Sermon

WRHS  
By  
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver  
At  
The Temple



On  
Sunday morning, February 21, 1937



Connected with the Festival of Purim, Friends, three mitzvot are enjoined upon the Jewish people. The first is to rejoice. It is actually obligatory upon the Jews to enjoy themselves upon Purim - to eat, drink and have a good time. Few religions in the world today command men to have a good time, to drink a little more wine than he customarily does. That is the law. You can understand that for a people with an experience like ours that is so often sombre and at times cleansing it is good for the cleansing the soul to have a period set aside to enjoy oneself, to laugh away sombre thoughts.

The second mitzvah is to send gifts to the poor. No Jewish holiday is quite complete without giving charity to those who have less. No one shall eat or drink, according to the law, until he first sets aside some food, some gift of food for the poor. "Shalachmonos" - sending of gifts - is characteristic of the Festival of Purim.

The third mitzvah is that of reading a book. Seemingly the symbolic acts of sending gifts, rejoicing are not sufficient to bring home to the Jewish people all the nuances contained in this Festival of Purim, so the Jew was commanded to read a book out of which he would distill all the wisdom associated with the book this Festival of Purim and which he was commanded to read in the morning or the evening - boy, man, woman or child, in the synagogue or at home is the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther.

When you read that story of Esther which is found in the Bible, you realize what a strange document that really is - as



strange as life itself, as full of surprises, as full of disguises as full of masquerade. It is, I am sure, quite as exotic and as colorful as any ancient bazaar in ancient Shushan must have been. The Book of Esther is a gorgeous tapestry of ancient Persia across which move kings, queens, satraps, eunuchs, conspirators, all the wise men and all the foolish men of <sup>the</sup> far-flung empire of Persia.

In this Story of Esther, we find almost every human emotion - love, hate, pride, anger, loyalty and courage - all tangled up as it were in a web, in this strange fantastic story.

Through the tale stalks the spectre of death, too - doom over-hanging the people - death which finally leads the all-to cunning conspirators to the gallows. Here is a story of banqueting, and fasting, terror and salvation. And against this background move two stately heroic figures, Mordecai and Esther - Esther the Queen and the Mordecai the captive in a foreign land. There is no tale quite like it and the whole of the Bible is full, as you well know, of so many marvelous tales. There is no tale, no story which matches it for intricacy of design, for sharp definition of character, sustained interest and surprising denouement. There is no story like it unless it be the Story of Joseph and his Brethren found in the Book of Genesis. And definitely, out of this story come two ideas which the writer of the story very effectively conveys to the reader.

The first was this - that life is full of strange things,



of chance and change and contrariness and topsy-turviness; secondly, that within this seeming confusion and accidents of fortune, there is nevertheless an underlying logic, a unifying moral permanence. These two ideas - that of chance and permanence are the ideas which the Megillah wants to convey to thoughtful readers.

Just how does it convey it? Just think a moment how many incidents in this Story of Esther depend upon a chance whim. "hy the whole story wouldn't have taken place if it were not that by pure chance a queen blushed, didn't feel well. A woman had a mood, and when the king asked her to show herself she didn't want to do so. Whether out <sup>of</sup> pique or not, she didn't want to go and she didn't go. You know how those things are. On that pure accident of the mood of a woman, the whole story of Purim rests. Because of this mood, the king became angry and dismissed the queen, and the door of destiny is flung open for Mordecai and Esther to step in.

Chance plays pranks all through the Megillah. The two chamberlains of the King who guard his door conspire to kill him. Sho should chance to over-hear the conspiracy? Mordecai. What does he do? He goes to Esther and tells of the conspiracy. Esther tells the King. The King is displeased. He has the two conspirators put to death and has the whole story recorded in a book of chronicles. It chanced one night that King didn't sleep well. Uneasy rests the head of a king! He wanted to read. It chanced that of all the chapters he turned to <sup>in</sup> this scroll, he chanced on the chapter of Mordecai. He was greatly impressed. He wanted to do something for Mordecai, so he



asked, "Who is in the Court?" And it chanced that Haman was in the Court. And he asked, "What shall be done to the man who does honor to the King?" Haman thought that it was himself who was to be honored. But it chanced that it wasn't Haman who was to be honored but Mordecai. Chance! In fact the day upon which all the Jews of Persia were to be put to death was selected by chance. Purim actually means the casting of lots. The whole fate of the Jews of Persia depended on chance, upon a strange conjunction of uncontrolled events.

If Esther hadn't found favor in the eyes of the King - because it was under pain of death to approach the King - if the King hadn't chanced to look and see Esther and if she hadn't chanced to find favor in his eyes - No Purim - Nothing!

Chance! And how much in this Megillah, in this story of Esther there is of contrariness, of reverse, of topsy-turviness. Just think! Haman, anti-Semite, enemy of the Jews, comes to the King and asks him to destroy the Jews and bribes him with an offer of ten thousand talents of silver to destroy the Jews. In our history, it is usually the reverse! It was the Jews who came to the king to try to bribe him to allow them to live. How often did the Jews have to buy protection from the king, from the state, from a tyrant for the sheer privilege of living.

There is a strange reversal of roles here. Haman is supposed to be led through the streets of Shushan bedecked in royal robes. Instead, the one he hates most, Mordecai <sup>who</sup> goes around in sackcloth and ashes, is led through the streets bedecked in royal garments. There is a mighty strange transformation. Haman



erects gallows for Mordecai, of course. And who hangs upon the gallows? Haman! Haman wanted to entrap the Jews and he was himself entrapped. He wanted to destroy the people and speedily was destroyed himself. The self-same ring which was given to Haman to kill Mordecai was now given to Mordecai to kill Haman.

Chance- topsy-turviness and masquerade. Esther, too, masquerades. She was told by Mordecai not to tell that she is a Jewess and she does not. So you have in this story a strong compilation of mimes and pantomimes, luck and ficke chance. And that is life - that is certainly characteristic of much in Jewish life. It is no wonder, therefore that the Festival of Purim was always celebrated in this very spirit, dress-up, masquerade, pantomime.

Yet, if these were the only elements in the Story of Esther, it would have really been a madman's tale, a witch's there brew. If these were the only elements, then / would be no logic, no meaning in human history. If life were made up only of accident, chance, fortune, life would be a crazy thing. There is much more to life. The e is will. The e is human purpose. The e is human effort. There is human planning. There is human courage. There is human wrestling with chance and accident which befuddles it. Thee is character which brings order out of chaos, human will. The moral sense, if you will, of mankind frequently acts like a catalytic agent which compounds moral reality and value out of chance, change and the whimsfulness of life..



The permanent elements in the Story of Purim are the moral characters of two people - Mordecai and Esther. In their character you find nothing is desultory, unpredictable. In the character of Esther and Mordecai you find clarity, durability, dependability. Here, in this whirling world of Persia of toppling crowns, wild plotting, conspiracies, intrigues, bribery - here, in the midst of the swift flux of change and chance, like an immovable tower of strength stand the characters of one man and one woman, Mordecai and Esther.

Mordecai is firm. Mordecai has strength of character. He does not kneel. He does not bow to shifting fortune. He is true to something which is eternal and permanent in himself - his conviction. Mordecai is unafraid. Mordecai is loyal. He seeks the good of his people. Mordecai is zealous. When impoverishment threatens his people, he does not seek his own personal security in flight. He goes out, summons his people, tries to control this tragic accident which has come into their lives. So with Esther. Here character, too, is dependable. She is brave. After the first moment of fear, she evidences in her character, bravery, courage. She faces death, if necessary. She does not hide herself in the palace and say to herself: "I am safe, I am secure." No, she also speaks of "I and my people". And it is against the impregnable strength of character of these two, and of people like them, that all the tidal waves of Jewish persecution have beaten. It was the same all through these long weary tragic centuries. Israel survived all the Hamans because there was always a Mordecai and there was



always an Esther.

There is a keen observation made by one of the later rabbis. When Haman was angered by Mordecai because Mordecai would not kneel to him, he was not satisfied to kill Mordecai alone. He wanted to destroy all his people, all the people of Mordecai.

It is of the genius of our race in an hour of tragedy to produce a Mordecai and an Esther. That is why, my friends, we are admonished to read the Megillah on Purim because there is in it, the distilled wisdom of experience. Jewish life my friends, in the diaspora is a wandering one. A wandering life is so full of mishaps, accidents, of misfortune. How often the fate of the Jews in exile depended on the eccentricities, and caprices of some tyrant, schemer, extortionist, paramour, fanatic or apostate. How often have world events over which the Jews have no control - plague, war and economic depression - how often have these accidents of fate broken myriads of people upon the wheels of torture.

- whim, chance, fortune

If these were things known in our experience, our experience would have been a nightmare and the morale of the Jews would long ago have been shattered. There was always more. There was racial intelligence, racial courage. There were the Mordecais and Esthers against all the uncontrollable factors in Jewish experience. Against our seeming defenselessness, homelessness, our people, a wandering people, was always able to set off as a counterpoise to that which was uncontrollable in its experience those powerful agents which ~~x~~ were definitely within its control - faith, confidence, truth, courage, and in all moments of crises,



rare spirits of the breed of Mordecai and Esther.

"Chance and change lay not their hands upon truth."

That is the recondite theme of the Story of Esther and as long as we have these, we can rejoice. As long as we can count in our midst a number of men and women of the breed of Mordecai and Esther who never lose faith, who never lose courage and who are ready to face doubt for the sake of the people, so long will night turn for us always into day, darkness into light, sorrow into joy. "To the Jews there will always be a full measure of joy, happiness, rejoicing, pride and happiness."

Three mitzvot you must perform this coming Purim. In 1937 the Jews of the world need to have a day to rejoice when so many of our days are bleak. Let us rejoice in the sense of our eternity, of our mastery over fortune, of our capacity to survive Hitlers and Hamans. Let us give gifts to the poor. The second mitzah is to make ~~happy~~ yourself happy by making others happy and thirdly, read the Megillah, the story of Esther.



## RIGHTS OF MAN

3

- ~~1)~~ Sovereignty, as a matter of right, appertains to the Nation only and not to any individual; and a Nation has at all times an indefeasible right to abolish any form of government it finds inconvenient and to establish such as accords with its interest, disposition and happiness....Every citizen is a member of this Sovereignty, and as such can acknowledge no personal subjection; and his obedience can be only to the laws.
- 2) What we now see in the world from the revolutions in America and France are a renovation of the natural order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth and the existence of man, and combining moral with political happiness and national prosperity.
- 3) Declaration of Rights of Man and of Citizenship - adoption of the National Assembly of France - "Natural, imprescriptible and inalienable rights - liberty - prosperity - security and resistance of oppression."



LINCOLN

2

- 1) No important men in American politics since Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams had spoken so strangely, intimately and sympathetically of roamings and findings in a Bible that was a personal companion and a spiritual resource.
- 2) Congressman Deming, soon after Lincoln's death, was called upon to deliver a memorial address before the legislature of Connecticut, and among other things he said that he asked Lincoln one day why he refused to join a church; and Lincoln said unto him: "I have never united myself with any church because I have found difficulty in giving my assent without mental reservation to the long complicated statements of the Christian doctrine which characterize the articles of belief and confessions of faith. When any church will inscribe over its altars as its sole qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of the law and the gospel: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heatt, with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,' - that church will I join with all my heart and with all my soul."



①

- 8 -

men who believed in God as the Jew believes in God, who feel that religion has nothing of the supernatural or mysterious about it. The Deist in many ways may be likened to the Unitarian of our own day.

Washington was a religious man who gave voice to his religious sentiments more than once. In fact he maintained that the moral life of a people must be grounded in religion. In his farewell speech to the American people he stated: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports; and let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education in minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

He was a man of religion, a man of great faith, but he was not a technical Christian or an orthodox Christian. This is of course true of Jefferson and Franklin and many of the other great leaders of the new America.

Therefore those who would insist today that America is a Christian country really do not know the history of their own country and really do not understand the mentality of the men who fashioned it.







topsy-turvy - there is also in it a confusing logic - a <sup>to</sup>  
~~few~~ moral permanence which holds it together.

4. Think how many things happen in E. as pure chance, and  
how ~~much~~ much great & momentous events rested  
upon these accidents & fortune!

① The ~~the~~ whole story would not have taken place but for  
a chance! Vashti refused to be King! and by so  
doing opened the door of destiny for Esther & Mordecai.  
The whole story, Purim depends on a green frog - and a  
King's anger. A green did not want to make a show of herself  
- and a King who insisted on being a Master in his own  
house!

② Chance plays his queer pranks again. Mordecai sits  
in the King's gate & by chance hears of the King's chamberlain  
conspire to kill King. H. tells E. E. tells K. - His secret  
revealed in W. K. / chamberlain - takes on King chance  
to be sleepless - each chosen - chance upon 1 stop -  
- Reward - Who is in the court? Haman chance  
to be there at that fatal time.

③ The very day - Lot! Purim! the very name!

④ The very act of saving her people depended upon Chance -  
Cord - golden sceptre -

5. And how much is reversed, contrary & topsy-turvy  
in this story!  
Haman offers money to King - 10,000 talent silver - Paid for protection <sup>over</sup> <sup>from</sup>





Right to live, to work, to pray -



@ Honor want for H. goes to M. - From Sackcloth - to Royal  
Gallies .. .. M - .. to H.  
Place belonging to H. .. to M.  
13th order - Jews to H. - Their enemies are slain.

garb.  
31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31  
31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31

Day - 1/1/31 2/1/31  
Ring given to H. to destroy - given to M. to save.

Jews terrified - now 31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31

~~Everything~~ Everything seems to be changing places with everything else!

6. Element of Masquerade. 31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31 31/1/31

Chance - Confairners - Masquerade! These go to make  
up <sup>no wonder Purim was a festival for Jews - masques - pantomime & dances</sup> ~~story~~ And yet of such elements alone fate can  
concoct only a madman's tale - a witches brew.

If there was nothing else to human history but  
luck, whim, casualty and blind chance, there would  
be no direction ~~and~~ a reason or progress in it.  
There is more to human experience! There is will,  
purpose, directed effort, intelligent planning, conscious  
~~and~~ wrestling with forces of life, masking over  
the blind ~~facts~~ accidents of fortune.

There is human character which overleaps chance  
- circumstances, rewrites fortune, brings order into  
chaos of blind chance.

The human will, the moral sense, man, the human  
values of faith, courage, loyalty, self sacrifice, act  
~~as~~ <sup>presently</sup> as a catalytic agent ~~comprehending~~ the element  
of chance with an ~~aim~~ <sup>achievement</sup> ~~gain~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>moral values to</sup> ~~outcome~~.



7. The permanent in the story - what holds the story <sup>happens</sup> together - is the moral character of Esther & Mordecai.

There is nothing demerit, undependable, unpredictable. Just the  
Carrae, here is durability, and clarity and certainty.

~~Man. - his life moral sense is.~~ In a whirling world  
of change & chance - toppling cranes - wild plotting &  
conspiracies - intrigue, bribery and deception - here  
stands an unmovable tower of permanence - the Moral  
Character of a man or woman -

① It is from -  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10^8$  to  $10^8$  years

" " unafraid —

" " ~~zoo~~ logical - "seeking the good, his people"

61 " *Zeabur*

② Esther is brave - after first moment, fear, Endangers her life.  
" " faithful - In palace - does not forget her people -  
" " " and my people".

8. Against such impregnable strength - which has been found  
in Israel through the ages - the ~~tidal~~<sup>wave</sup> of chance & circumstance  
hurled Ees in vain. Israel survived it all because  
of Mr. Ees this -

① אֲנִי זֶה הַיּוֹדֵעַ וְזֶה הַמֵּדַבֵּר

128711 PR - "It seems contemptible" -  
There is a people of Mordcais!"







8 - This is why - א ל ו נ

Jew. life full of chaos - Galut - Whims  
erratic, eccentric, capricious

Wars -

Tragic nightmare! Morals!

Much more! -

Against these ~~uncontrollable~~ uncontrollable - defenceless  
our faith - confidence - Truth - Cause - M. I. E

Change by not their hands upon Truth

9. Having there - refuse - our rights to day  
1166 1166



1- Joy- Pain - a sign - seemingly  
Strange document -  
Full of surprises - as exotic - unpredictable  
Here is a gorgeous Tapestry -  
Here is love - tangled  
There tale starts death - Banqueting -  
Against this background -

2 - There is no tale - And definitely -  
Think how many - The whole story - Vashti -  
Chance again - King's gate -  
Very Day - Lot -  
" Act of Unbeliever - 6, 20

3. And how much - reversed - contrary - topsy-turvy  
Haman offers money - 10,000 - Paid for protection  
Honor meant for H - Sackcloth  
Gallows ...  
Palace ...  
13<sup>th</sup> Adar - slain - fear -  
Ring - Changing places -

4. Masquerade -

5. Chance - contrarieness - Masquerade - These go -  
No wonder -



But if this - madman's Tale -

If there was nothing else to history - luck, which  
there is more! Will, Purpose, directed Effort. Planning  
conspiring working

There is human character - brings order -

Human Will - Catalytic Agent - confounding

6. The Permanent in story - moral Character. M. RE.

Here is nothing desultory, unpredictable

Just the contrast - durability, clarity, certainly

In a whisking - tower - character M. RE.

① M. is Firm - 10/11/11

Unafraid

Loyal - 1/11/216 613

Zealous

E. is Brave

Faithful - "I and my People"

7. Against such unfathomable strength -  
Israel survived Hamans see. M. RE.

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