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Queen Esther and Other Great Women of Jewish History, 1940.

WRHS AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES 553
QUEEN ESTHER AND OTHER GREAT WOMEN OF JEWISH HISTORY
A Purim Sermon

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, March 24, 1940

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impair'd the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Byron wrote this magnificent poem....which may be taken as a tribute to Jewish womanhood.

The Book of the Bible which tells the story of Purim is called after a woman, Esther. Another book in the Bible named after a woman is the following the Bible Book of Ruth. In the Apocrypha, that collection of short Hebrew writings/ there are other books named after women - Judith, Susanna. The album of the Bible is filled with the portraits of women, of women who are queens, prophets, judges, matriarchs. Women figures prominently throughout Jewish History and Jewish Literature. The Jewish world, in ancient times, or in modern times, was never exclusively a man's world.

Legally, the status of woman was behind that of man. It was so practically everywhere until very recent times. Woman possessed less rights, economic rights and political rights than did man, and had fewer duties to perform religiously and communally. She did not possess full equality, although her formal status was far better among the Jewish people than among any people in the world. And the trend towards equality for woman was far more rapid among Jewish women and began far earlier than any other people.

But the legal status of a person is not a decisive one and it would be misleading to determine the actual position of woman in Jewish history from a mere study of the legal position which she occupied. It is the conventions and the attitudes of every-day life, the accepted and quite unconscious basic human relationships - how a person acts, and how a person is permitted to act, and these are far truer indices to her true position. From that viewpoint, the position of woman in ancient Israel and thereafter, was anything but that of the weaker sex. There was no such thing as the superior man and the inferior woman. In fact, when one reads Biblical narratives, one sometimes is startled and asks just who was the inferior and the superior.

Who, for example, which member of that first pair of humans upon earth, Adam and Eve, would say after you had read the Biblical narrative, was the weaker of the two? Who mastered whom? Who persuaded whom to eat of the forbidden fruit? Adam couldn't live alone even in paradise. And when Eve was finally fashioned out of the ribs of his necessity, Adam found himself rather dependent upon this helpmate of his. Eve, if you read the Biblical account, was no helpless clinging vine. She became the very capable and competent mother of all the living. And by contrast, Adam appears to be something of a schlemiel.

Take the matriarchs of the Bible, the wives of the patriarchs - Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah - there is a masterful air about these people. They plan. They initiate. They manage. They direct their own destinies and the destinies of their households. They are strong in character, in purpose, in will. Take, for example, Sarah, the wife of Abraham. It was Sarah, you will recall, who tells Abraham what to do with Hagar, and he does it, altho, as the Bible says, "it was ~~x~~ very grievous in his sight". The Lord came to his rescue and saved his face, so to speak by ordering him to do what he knew he would have to do anyhow: "In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice!" But he knew that all along.

Take Rebecca. It was Rebecca and not her husband, Isaac, who determined who of the children "shall inherit the ancestral blessing"; and Rebecca very deftly outwits her liege and lord, and takes charge of the life and destiny of Jacob. And so throughout, these strong women played significant roles. They were greatly loved, and greatly respected, and at their death, they were greatly mourned and greatly missed. "Strength and dignity were her raiment."

A little later on, in the drama of the Exodus, the greatest epoch in Jewish history - of the going out of Egypt - then, too, a woman figures very prominently - the sister of Moses - Miriam. It was Miriam who watches/over by the banks of the River Nile that little ark containing the infant Moses, who was to become the leader of Israel. It was Miriam who competently arranges for his care and for his nourishment. Miriam was a prophetess according to the story of the Bible. Micah, centuries later, mentions her with Moses and Aaron as a leader of the people. And she had the courage to object to Moses' marriage with a Cushite woman. Sisters often do that. She object and she had her fingers burnt for it. But she had her say. "A marvelous well accompanied the children of Israel through their forty years in the wilderness after they deserted Egypt. And when Miriam died, the well disappeared."

She wasn't the only prophetess in ancient Israel. The Bible knows of seven of them. Perhaps the foremost of them was Deborah who was not only a prophetess, but a judge. "She sat under a palm tree, says the Bible, and all Israel came up to her for judgment." The Canaanites at that time were oppressing the children of Israel, and for twenty years, they groaned under that oppression. There didn't seem to be any man in the far flung posts of Israel who was strong enough to start rebuilding it. And it was this woman who sent and called "Barak" and told him to arouse the people of Israel and tear off the yoke of the Canaanites. Wise Barak said: "If thou wilt go with me, I will go, if not, I will not go."

She tried to tell him that he was not very brave. He said: "I will surely go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thy honour; for the Lord will give Sisera over into the hand of a woman." It will not look nice, but if thou wilt go, I will go. He didn't go without her.

There was another important prophetess, Huldah. When they discovered the scroll of the Law in the Temple - the book of Deuteronomy, the discovery of which ushered in a great reformation in Israel - the king sent a messenger to a woman, to Huldah, the great prophetess to be guided by her as to what the people ought to do. The Bible said she was not only a prophetess, but a teacher. The Word of God, or words of wisdom were not limited to the male of the species, especially, my friends, that wisdom which has to do with making a home, the rearing of children. That was never left by the sages of Israel to men alone. Men and women shared equally in this responsibility, with a slight tilting of the scale in the direction of woman. "Listen, my son, to the instruction of thy father. Do not forsake the Torah of thy mother. Torah - the wisdom of life, the religion of human conduct - that came from the lips of a woman, just as much as from the lips of a man. Lemuel, the King, said in his writings that he gave the wisdom which his mother taught him. This King, who wrote down, who crystalized the wisdom of life's experience, attributed that wisdom, that instruction to his mother.

The building of a home - not the physical building, not the financial support, but the building of a home, morally, spiritually, has always been regarded by the sages of our people as principally the work of a woman. "Every wise woman buildeth her house." Whenever the Bible speaks of the house, say the Rabbis, they refer to the woman of the house. "His house and his wife - the mother of the house."

Here is a conception of a woman which is a sort of ethical guidance and inspiration, and as the essential or primary factor in the maintenance of a peaceful and happy home.

Now there were other very colorful and attractive personalities of women in the pages of literature, many - too many to enumerate. Hannah, for example, the mother of the prophet, Samuel, who prayed for his coming, and then dedicated him to the Lord; Ruth - the story of deathless devotion. Ruth who cast in her lot with the people of Judah, Ruth who became the ancestress of King David. There is the story of Abigail, the wife of David, who because of her sagacity, wit and charm, averted disaster to her household. There is the story of Judith who redeemed her people. There is the story of Hannah who chose to see her seven sons slain rather than give up their faith and worship idols.

Jewish history is full of women, not alone of grace and charm and beauty, but of courage.

That brings us to Esther, the glorious figure in the story of Purim. She is a beautiful character. Esther, if she had wished to, could have remained completely unknown in the Palace of the King. She could have turned her back completely on the situation. No one in the Palace knew she was Jewish. She was a queen now and greatly beloved by the king. The world was at her feet. She was safe. She was secure. She had all the things people could want for in life. Yet, when the threat came to her people, she did not permit herself to seek personal security. She preferred to risk her own life on the chance of saving her people. She came to understand fully the words which her cousin Mordecai had said to her which every great people in an hour of crisis must say to itself: "Who knows, whether it is not just for such an emergency that you have been fortunate enough to reach such a high eminence in life." "If I am lost, then I am lost, but my first duty is to save my innocent and greatly threatened people."

When she finally appeared before the king, in her first words, she briefly and loyally identified herself with her people. She did not appeal to him in any abstract way. She completely identified herself with her people: "I and my people have been sold into death. She had not been sold to death. She was safe as the queen of a gre t empire , but she said: "I and my people". She was loyal, brave, courageous. No wonder, the Rabbis said, that Esther remains eternally young.

Esther joins the great galaxy of women in Israel who helped to mould the character of our people through the critical hours of our fate, who helped to save our people in the every-day business of living and brought strength and fortitude and wisdom as well as beauty and grace to Jewish life. Fortunately that chain of great women did not stop in Biblical times. It has continued unbroken to this very day. Throughout the long history of the Diaspora, when our people found itself scattered through all the corners of the earth, frequently degraded and humiliated, crowded into dark and filthy ghettos, it was the Jewish woman who build the soul and mind and spirit of our people in the home, the sanctuary of peace, avenues of spiritual beauty that make life livable.

It was the Jewish woman who helped to raise generation after generation of young men and women, who prepared to make, if necessary, the supreme sacrifice. And if we have martyrs who walk singing to the ~~autodafes~~ autodafe, it is due to the inspiration of women, if we find men to prefer to stretch their necks on the guillotine, rather than give up their ancestral faith, if we had men and women throughout the centuries who walk strong in dignity, proud-in memory, it was because of the myriads of mothers of Israel who quietly and heroically, within the sacred ~~precincts~~ precincts of her home prepared the bread and the wine for the spirits of these people.

Unto this very day we find women in Israel engaged in work of charity, philanthropy, of culture, of education, of strengthening, of upbuilding. Our community life would be poor indeed throughout the land, throughout the world, if not for the women, if not for the wonderful work, rich and purposeful, of Jewish womanhood. In the great task which has faced our people in recent years, in the task of saving the lives, the unfortunate lives of our brothers abroad, of providing shelter for homeless, and looking after little orphaned children, Jewish womanhood has again asserted herself magnificently.

In the great historic task in which womanhood is interesting herself, in the upbuilding of Palestine, and establishing in Palestine a national homeland, Jewish woman are today playing a magnificent role. The work of the pioneers would have been unbearable if it were not for the love and inspiration of Jewish womanhood.

Great organizations of Jewish women, like the Hadassah and other organizations have rendered heroic effort in that historic task. Thank God for the inspiration of Jewish women, from ancient times to this.

Gratitude wells up in our hearts strongly as we bring to mind Esther the queen, loyal, brave and beautiful.

who tells Abraham what to do with Hagar - and he did it, altho' it ^{was} very grievous in his sight. The Lord came to his rescue ^{and} saved his face by ^{ordering} ~~answering~~ him to do what he knew he would have to do anyhow: "in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice". Rebecca, and not Isaac, determines who shall inherit the ancestral blessing - and Rebecca nurtures her boys and herd, and takes charge of the life & destiny of Jacob; ~~and so throughout~~ ^{and so throughout}. These strong women played significant roles. They were greatly loved, and greatly respected, and at their death were greatly mourned and missed. ^{26:12 / 27:1 / 18 - "Strength + Dignity in her doings"}

- 3/ In the drama, the Exodus - ^{arrangements} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~figure~~ a woman figure prominently Miriam. Watches ~~her~~ ^{her} ~~refuses~~ ^{refuses} - she objected to Moses' marriage to a Cushite woman said so. She got her finger burnt for it - but she had her say. Miriam mentions her with Moses & Aaron as a leader, the people. A manna will accompanied the Israelites in wilderness. When M. died the will disappeared. ^{Seven - 49 is. came up to her for judgment} ^{palms tree "The children"}
- 4/ She wasn't the only prophetess. Deborah - also judge. ^{Canaanites}. 20:13. oppression. "And she sent and called Barak" - "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go, but if thou wilt not go with me, I will not go;" "I will surely go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thy honour; for the Lord will pitch his tent into the hand of a woman" - The great Barak learned on a woman. He wouldn't go with out her.

- 5/ Huldah - when Hilkiah found the scroll, the Law - took it to her - Teacher - word of God or words, wisdom not limited to the male, the species.

6). Exp. that wisdom which has to do with rearing children, building and maintaining a home, and developing character in youth - equally shared by man & woman - with a slight tilting the scale in the side of woman.

"The words of Samuel, King, & the ^{wisdom} instructions which his mother taught him"

וְהָיָה שְׁמוּאֵל כֹּהֵן לַיהוָה - "Every wise woman buildeth her house"

וְהָיָה בֵּיתָהּ כֹּהֵן לַיהוָה -

Here is a conception of woman - as a source of ethical guidance and inspiration - and as the essential, nay primary factor in the maintenance of a peaceful and happy home. -

7). Other vivid, vital personalities, women emerge from the pages of Bible

Ruth - her ^{selfless} devotion - who cast in her lot with the people of Judah - ancestress of King David. (Just) Thomas Hood

8). One could speak of others many others - Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who prayed for his coming, and then dedicated him to the Lord; + of Abigail - ^{averts disaster - suggests - charm - wit.} - Nabab - David - + of Judith who slew Holofernes & saved her people + of Hannah, who ^{lost her sons, rather > idols} sacrificed her seven sons, rather > idols + of many others.

9). Esther: Loyal - She could have remained ^(escape) unknown - ^{Beautiful} she was Jewish - In love - Brave - risked her life. Spirit - spoke up! Her plea! ^{George} Eternally young. One of history - full of grace, beauty, power and inspiration. - Chanter - Palestine - To this day

10). Byron (Just) Hebrew Melodies.

1/ Book called "Esther" - "Ruth" - ^{of Bible} Album filled - Inews, prophecy, judges, material
So post-Biblical - Apocrypha - "Judith" - "Susanna" - (Esther). Women
figure prominently in J. history to this day - & in J. literature.
+ J. world in ancient & in modern times was never a man's world.
- Legally - her status was, as a rule, behind that of man. It
was so practically everywhere until very recent times. She
possessed less rights, polit. econ., and had fewer duties to
perform religiously & communally. She did not have full
equality, altho^{even} her formal status was far better among the
J. people > among the non-Jews. The trend towards equality
was far more rapid & began far earlier among Jew, among
non-Jews.

But the legal status is not the decisive status. It is the
conventions and attitudes of every-day life, the accepted ways
^{losing human} ^(how they act & are allowed to act one towards another) of relationships which are the true indices. From that viewpoint,
the position, woman was anything but that, ^{- Superior} a weaker sex.
+ Which, the first pair of humans upon earth - Adam Eve - would
you say, after you read the Bib. story, was the weaker, the two?
Who worked whom? Who persuaded whom to eat...
Adam couldn't live alone - even in paradise. - And when Eve was
fashioned out of his rib, his weakness. - to be a helpmate - he be-
came pretty much dependent upon her. Eve was certainly no
helpless, clinging vine. She became the ^{very capable} competent mother, all the living.
Adam by contrast is something of a scholar.

2/ Talk the matriarchs of the Bible - Sarah - Rebecca. Rachel - Leah
There is a masterful air about them and their doings.
They plan. They initiate. ^{they manage} They direct the destinies, their households.
They are strong in character, in will & in purpose. It was Sarah

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

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Which waves in every raven tress,
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How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!



RUTH

She stood breast high among the corn,
Clasped by the golden light of morn,
Like the sweetheart of the sun,
Who many a glowing kiss had won

On her cheek an autumn flush,
Deeply ripened; such a blush
In the midst of brown was born,
Like red poppies grown with corn.

Round her eyes her tresses fell,
Which were blackest none could tell
But long lashes veiled a light,
That had else been all too bright.

And her hat, with shady brim,
Made her tressy forehead dim;
Thus she stood amid the stooks,
Praising God with sweetest looks:

Sure, I said, Heaven did not mean,
Where I reap thou shouldst but glean;
Lay thy sheaf adown and come,
Share my harvest and my home.

Thomas Hood (1799 -1845)

Sermon 553

ABSTRACT OF ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER AT THE TEMPLE
ANSEL ROAD AND EAST 105TH STREET ON SUNDAY MORNING, MARCH 24, 1940

QUEEN ESTHER AND OTHER GREAT WOMEN OF JEWISH HISTORY

The album of the Bible is filled with portraits of great women who were queens, prophets, judges and matriarchs. There are Biblical books named after women, and also books of the Apocrypha. Women figured prominently throughout Jewish History and Literature. At no time was the Jewish world exclusively a man's world. The Bible knows of no weaker sex, no superior man and inferior woman. Legally, her status was as a rule behind that of man. But the legal status is never the decisive one. The attitudes and conventions of every-day life, the accepted ways of basic human religion are truer indices. From that point of view, woman is quite the equal of man throughout Biblical Literature. There is a masterful air, for example about the matriarchs of the Bible. They plan. They initiate. They direct the destinies of their households. There is mettle in their characters. They are greatly loved and greatly respected, and at their deaths, they are greatly mourned and missed. This is true of some of the other great characters of the Bible - Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Judith and Esther.

The word of God, or words of wisdom were never limited to men. Especially that wisdom which has to do with the building and maintaining of a home, the rearing of children, and the developing of character in youth. It was the wise woman that "buildeth" the home. "Man's home," said the Rabbis, "that is his wife". Children were admonished not to foresake the teachings of their mother. Here is a conception of woman as the source of ethical guidance, inspiration, and as the primary factor in the maintenance of the peaceful and happy home.

In many critical ~~moments~~ moments of Jewish history, great and inspired women played decisive roles as in Persia, in the days of Mordecai and Esther. If the Jewish people survived the persecution of long and weary

centuries, and the attempts of many Hamans to break their spirit by denying them human rights, and if Israel produced men and women who were strong enough to chose martyrdom to apostasy, it is largely due to the bread and wine of the spirit which Jewish women throughout the ages prepared in the homes of our people.

Today the spirit of Esther x reveals itself again in the heroic work of myriads of Jewish women throughout the world in behalf of the victims of the hate-ridden tyranny of the new Haman whose doom is as certain as that of the first Haman. In the care of th hungry, in providing food, raiment and shelter to young and x old, and in the heroic work of pioneering in Palestine, Jewish womanhood is again displaying those rare qualities of strength and competence as well as matchless loyalty which characterized the great ancestresses of the race whose stories fill the pages of sacred writ.

