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

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The gift of laughter, 1942.



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THE GIFT OF LAUGHTER  
The Gay Artistry of Purim



By  
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At  
The Temple

On  
Sunday morning, March 1, 1942



Purim is one holiday which is identified with the experience of our people in exile, the diaspora. It is one holiday which is tied up with the great moment of Jewish history which occurred outside of Palestine, and in no relation to Palestine. There are other holidays -- Pesach, Shabuoth, Succoth which are tied up with national experience of our people in Palestine.

Purim speaks of the distant empire, of the Jews who lived in the generation of our forefathers who lived in diaspora -- a homeless people. Because of that, this holiday is perhaps closer to us so far as our experiences in the world are concerned, even more than the holidays which are tied up with the soil and the national spirit of our people.

Purim reflects that status of insecurity, dependency in Jewish minority life all through the two thousand years of the national homelessness of Israel, - being dependant upon a sweeping turn of fortune, upon the whim of a ruler, a conspirator, a tyrant, being subject to the will of some cunning schemer, agitator, who out of spite, out of a desire for profit would sacrifice a whole people over night. That is an experience which is characteristic of Jewish life in the galut -- in exile -- one which so many Jewish communities in recent years so well understand.

Therefore, though the holiday is a joyous one, a holiday of pageantry and carnival and feasting, there is beneath the surface<sup>of</sup> that festivity and jollification, sobriety -- the fate which overhangs the majority of us. We are asked to remember the long unbroken line of enemies of the Jews who from the days of Amalek down through the long weary centuries. We are asked to remember the continuity of hate, hostility, the persistence of evil in the world which must be overcome in every generation.

Yet, in spite of this sober and earnest tone which one finds in the heart of the Purim Festival, the Festival itself is meant to be a gay one, a day



of feasting and joy. It has always been all through the ages an occasion of great rejoicing, dancing, song, when the Megillah of Esther was read in the synagogue, when young and old give expression to their sentiments in the jest and mockery of Haman, then of rejoicing for the redemption of our forefathers. It is a happy day.

Of course, like all happy days, it is tied up with giving of gifts to the poor, inviting the less fortunate to share in their joy, for no joy would be complete without sharing it with the less fortunate.

Why was so much stress laid upon the thought of rejoicing, festivity? It isn't only in the Festival of Purim that our religion stresses the note of joy, happiness, song. Some people associate with our religion, for some reason, a mood of sobriety. However, if you read your liturgy, your Bible, and especially the great outbursts of religious lyricism which we find in our Book of Psalms, you will find clear refrains and reverberations of a happy note: "Sing unto the Lord! Rejoice unto the Lord! Let the whole earth rejoice!" These Psalms themselves were songs which were sung in The Temple accompanied by the harp. Singing and dancing!

Life would be untenable without the element of rejoicing and laughter. It should be an essential part of every normal existence, -- for laughter, good clean, earnest wholesome laughter, not laughter which is fantastic laughter of other people's sufferings, but laughter which is good, warm, clean -- that laughter is an affirmation, a proclamation of life's basic sanity, basic soundness.

This particular event which is provocative of laughter, and rightly so, that is only an incongruous departure from the sane, sound. You can afford to



laugh. Laughter which is based on that which inconsistent, that which incongruous, and the contrast between the ideal and the real, if you will, between pretense and actuality, that which is out of proportion, the extreme, the bizarre, fantastic, fanitical, the unexpected -- that is provocative, and justly so

Hence when we laugh, we help to restore our perspective. We vindicate the basic logic of life. We re-establish the norm of existence. It is an expression of human confidence in the stability of society. And laughter is a curb. By making certain things laughable, ridiculous, we help to correct that which sharply divides us from the norm, the normal, sound, the just. Certain things, certain wrongs, certain curbs will not yield to logic or to argumentation. They may be made to yield, they may be destroyed by humor, by laughter, by satire.

But laughter has a real moral function to perform to society. It also softens defeat and failure. A little bit of humor can go a long way as a boon to the hurt spirit of man. That is why people who have suffered much, who have been long depressed, produce the highest kind of humor. That humor is not only healing to hurts and indignities. It is also an armor which protects them from foes whom they could not destroy in any other way but by their laughter and humor. It also served as a relief for over-wrought spirits of men. They are over-burdened souls.

That is why the Jewish people was able to produce a rich humor despite the desperate sufferings to which they were subjected all through long centuries. Jews who could not laugh at misfortune, who could not laugh at their persecutors, their oppressors, could not be contemptuous of them were in danger of having their morale broken.

I read the other day, and you read the sad account of the ~~high~~ author German-Jewish Stephan Zweig who entered into a suicide pact with his wife, put



an end to their lives because they could no longer bear the misfortune of being exiled from their home. They were spiritually exhausted. So they died. We need not criticize such acts. Judgment belongs with the Lord. But surely that spirit of spiritual collapse, of defeatism in the face of overwhelming adversity was never the spirit of our race. If it had been, we would long ago have disappeared. For what Stephan Zweig experienced in his own personal life the Jews experienced over long dark centuries as exiles, wanders, in ghettos, concentration camps, Inquisitions, yellow badges -- everything that the corrupt, cunning mind of our persecutors, inquisitors, fanatics and criminally cruel could invent our people were subjected to. Yet our people never succumbed to it. It hit back. And one of the forms with which it hit back was biting, sardonic humor.

Recall that remarkable sentence in one of the Psalms - "Why do the heathen rage?" God sees in heaven these little, petty tyrants, fussing, scheming to suppress and subjugate the world. "He who dwells in Heaven, he laughs at them. And God's children, too, learned to laughter at these persecutors from Pharaoh down to the present time with the essential optimism that things will come out right.

Life is topsy-turvy. Life has its terrific and sudden ups and downs. The things you expect sometimes never come true. Things you frequently expect to happen do come true. Some at the top topple down and sometimes those at the bottom by a turn of fortune rise up.

That is Purim. That is the whole spirit of Purim, half legendary, half factual. A queen is suddenly banished from the kingdom and Esther replaces her as queen. Haman is elevated to become vice-roi to the king. An unknown Jew by the name of Mordecai is thrown by destiny in contact with a drama of personal hate and rivalry. This man plots to destroy this man. The plot is



cunning. By a strange turn of fortune, this one is lowered and this one is raised. This one has it all planned to ride through the streets of Shushan on a white charger in royal apparel led by this one who is forced to proclaim: "Thus is to be done unto the man whom the king wishes to honor!" But actually this was not how it happened. It was Mordecai who was dressed in royal apparel and led through the streets by Haman who proclaimed "Thus is to be done to the man whom the king wishes to honor. And strangely enough when the king was being plotted against, it was not the king who was assassinated, but the two who plotted his death. This man Haman had it all fixed and planned. He had it worked out in his book, "Mein Kampf". He had it all worked out that on a certain day and on a certain hour Mordecai was to be hanged. He had it fixed that on the 13th day of Adar all the Jews in the Province would be put to death and Mordecai was to be hung on a tree. And he had the tree all rigged up and he invited all his friends to come and see him hung. But by strange fate it was not Mordecai but Haman who was hung.

A turn of the wheel of fortune -- the ups and downs of life... . Things come out right in the end if only you have faith as Mordecai had faith and as Esther had faith.

And, my friends, faith is the only thing left to us and a sense of humor to fight our fight in the world today. Faith and Unity. The first thing that Mordecai did when he heard of the decree of Haman about the fate which awaited his people tens of --/thousands of his people was that he send for all the Jews, rallied them to sustain their morale, to plan with them in unity and strength their future. This principle which our people defined through the ages: "All Jews are brothers"; we all must stand together because singly we fall apart. That is one of the principles of our survival all through the ages. It is our defense.



Faith! Unity! Leadership! The Jews of Egypt had their Moses. The Jews of Persia had their Mordecai. The Jews of Palestine had Judai the Maccabee. God favored our people in every great crisis...

Hitler is not the first Haman. He probably will not be the last. His program is exactly that of Haman -- to exterminate the Jews. He thought at first it would be easier than it turned out to be. This business of destroying a defenseless minority proved even tougher than destroying a socialist government. Here is a people that did not have the best military equipment that the Russian people had. It could not throw legions into the field, tanks, planes. Hitler has been at work now for over ten years to destroy this people in this country and in other countries which he has conquered. And he has failed miserably. He has made the lives of many miserable. Certain people have perished in concentration camps, in ghettos which he established. Many were driven into exile to other countries. There has never been such a sweeping retribution in history as that which has taken place in recent days. Israel is still here. Israel will survive Hitler. We need faith. We need unity. We need leadership. I think that we have all of this. "God will not forsake the righteous. He will fill thy mouth with laughter, and thy lips with song."

You can take heart from the Festival of Purim.....



1. Purim - Diaspora - all others - Reflects status of insecurity -  
whims - cunning schemes - spite - profit - no recourse -  
intrusions - prayer -  
Event  
Sad - Beneath pagantry - grim menace of defensible humanity  
1/25 all - Amass - constant battle

2/ Yef - Purim meant to be gay festival - Always way -  
Carnival - masks - plays - music - noise -  
Of course - gaudy pictures - to the Purim -  
could not exist without - Irreversible - sanity  
Essentially an affirmation - basic soundness for life - thus  
particular event - an incongruous departure - and you  
can afford to laugh at it.  
laughter based - inconsistent - coherent - ideal & real;  
premise and actuality -  
out of proportion - unexpected -

3/ Here when we laugh at them - (1) betas are punishment  
(2) Vindicate our logic (3) Re-establish the universal Prayer  
to coercion - Excess - Fanatic - extreme - dependent - unhappy - we make it  
ridiculous - laughable  
Certain things will not yield to logic - argumentation  
Humor will destroy them =

Softens defeat - forbids - See a bit of humor - Jews - suffering  
make his enemies ridiculous - count on it -  
Jews had fine sense of humor - all oppressed people -  
armor - release - Mr. charged, Mr. bordered soul  
Stephen Zwerger - Barth Firth - Jews - Humor



4. Essential of Judaism - Things will come out all right <sup>for</sup> <sup>דברים יצאו כהלכה</sup>  
religion remembers with them } Joy - Confidence -  
Personal life - full of reverses - Ups and Downs -
5. Certainly Jew. life - Up & Down - all story of Purim -  
Juan Vashit - Esther - Haman <sup>elevated</sup> Washkar = Plotters -  
Lead them streets Tree <sup>There who killed</sup> - an End -
6. Things come out right in End - if only - 1st 2nd 3rd  
① Faith - ② Unity ③ Leadership
7. Hutter = God laughs - reals etc. -  
God will not forsake the righteous  
He will fill their mouth with laughter  
And they begin with song.
8. Coin - sack-cloth sashes  
Crown