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A Purim Sermon, 1947.

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A PURIM SERMON

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, March 9, 1947



The first approach of Spring was heralded by all peoples in ancient times and since then by festivals. And these festivals, celebrating the end of winter, of cold and of rain, the coming of warmth, the flowering and the rebirth of nature naturally came to take on a character of gaiety, exuberance, frolic. At times of great havoc and folly.

Among the ancient Greeks this was the season in honor of Dionysus, and the merry-making in connection with this festival was rather ribald and sarcastic. Songs which were sung on this occasion gave rise to comedy, just as another festival of another season of the year gave rise to tragedy.

Among the Romans this was the time for the festival of Bacchanalia with its unbridled revelry.

The modern carnival in Latin countries and the Fastnacht among Teutonic countries and peoples are Christianized versions of these ancient pagan Spring-time festivals. The term carnival is probably derived from the Latin "currus navalis". The wheels, the ship-car, which were driven through the streets of the city bearing the image of the deity or some symbol of the deity, bedecked gaily, decorated, round which people danced -- you still have these floats in connection with the mardi gras at this season of the year.

When these people of the ancient world were Christianized, these very primitive customs survived. The church was not able to abolish them. It did the next best thing -- associated them with some Christian ideas and tolerated them. And so the carnival began the season before Lent, forty days before Easter when the eating of meat is forbidden.

Our Festival of Purim must have been some such festival. Purim, as you know, is the holiday of merry-making, of masquerade, of games, plays, frolic. And it is celebrated at the beginning of the Spring season of the year. "Purim-Spiel", Purim play, the Purim parody -- they are the Jewish counterpart of the plays and burlesques connected with similar festivals in the pagan or non-Jewish world. On

this holiday Jews were permitted to masquerade, did put on the masques of the characters of the Megillah -- Mordecai, Esther, Haman, Ahaserus. To this day the Purim play has survived. And the mood of fun and frolic invaded even the synagogue. Young men, children, brought to the synagogue "Haman-Kloppers." Whenever the name of Haman was mentioned during the reading of the Megillah, that was the occasion for great noise, stamping of feet, whistling. And in the school, in the academy, in the Yeshiva -- there, too, the Purim spirit invaded. For the occasion a Purim Rabbi was ordained, a sort of preacher jester. He was permitted on that day to say anything that came into his head, utter nonsense and to indulge in criticism of all the teachers of the Yeshivah, to say things that were dangerous at any other time of the year. Children went about from house to house, begging gifts, singings songs. It was a day of drinking and eating, and a special Feast of Purim was held in every Jewish home. And so the carnival spirit is the same, and the holiday probably dates far back beyond the days of Mordecai and Esther.

But Judaism took over the flowering of Springtime, the Festival of Purim, proceeded to reinterpret it and to give it deeper content, deeper meaning. The Jews of Palestine at times sought to identify this holiday of merrymaking with ~~the~~ Judas Maccabee, this victory over Micanor, the Syrian general on the 13th day of Adar in the year 161 B.C.E. The Jews of Babylon associated that day with the victory of the Jews over Haman. And it was the Babylonian custom of associating this Spring-time festival with the great deliverance of Jews from doom. This holiday has been celebrated to this day.

The story told in the Megillah, Meggilah Esther, itself takes on something of a carnival spirit. You have the feeling when you read the Megillah as if you were watching some mardi gras, some topsy turvy procession of events. Many things happen upside down -- the unexpected, the unpredictable. The routine, the expected is thrust aside for the unusual and the unanticipated.

Here is Vashti, the queen, the legitimate queen who is unthroned at the whim of the King. She is rejected and cast out while an unknown maiden srom a humble home

is suddenly elevated and takes her place as queen. Unexpected, startling!

Here is a man Haman, second to the King who was passing by an unknown person, Mordecai who refused to bow to him who suddenly becomes so enraged, so vindictive, he resolves not only to destroy Mordecai but all his brothers, the whole tribe of Israel. But it is not this Haman who destroys Mordecai. It is Mordecai who destroys Haman. It is Mordecai, this unknown person who destroys this powerful Haman. When Haman boasted in the presence of his friends of the 50 cubic gallows set up in the court on which to hang Mordecai. But it is not Mordecai who hangs upon the gallows, but this Haman himself who is hanged.

A topsy-turvy world! A carnival world! The wind of chance, the unforeseen, the unexpected patterns! The customary, the routine is thrust aside.

Here the King is sleepless one night. He calls on his servants to bring him the log to read. And as he reads he comes upon the story of how two servants of the king conspired to kill him and how a certain Jew by the name of Mordecai overhearing this reported it. There is no record of any reward offered for saving the king's life. So in the morning, the king says to Haman: What shall be done to the man whom the king desires most to honor?" Haman certain that this man whom the king wishes to honor must be he says: Let him be dressed in royal raiments, led through the streets and let some important person walk before this man and proclaim: "Thus shall be done to the man whom the King desires to honor." This is the logical thing, the expected thing. But the illogical happens. The king said: Take Mordecai and array him in royal apparel, place him on a royal charger and you shall walk through the streets before him and proclaim: "Thus shall be done to the man whom the man desires to honor."

And on the 13th day of Adar the Jews of Persia were to be put to death. But it was not the Jews who were put to death, but the enemies of the Jews. So as you read this ancient Megillah, you get a feeling that you are in a world of the unpredictable,

the unexpected, a topsy-turvy world.

The ancient peoples used to think a great deal of chance. They exalted chance almost to a devinity. Chance and whim, they said, governed the world. Chance dispenses life with unequal justice. It is chance which round the affairs of men. When you read the lore of Greeks and Romans ^{of the} many peoples of antiquity, you get the impression that they were greatly impressed that it was chance which really governs the lives of men and of nations.

And from the Megillah you might receive the same lesson. Suppose that Esther was not as beautiful as she was supposed to be. Suppose that she was not selected from the many as queen of Babylon. The Jews of Babylon would have been destroyed. It was mere chance that this maiden approached the king and interceded in behalf of the lives of her people and thus saved them. All that is not the lesson of the Megillah at all. This is only surface reading.

The Megillah is against the background of carnival spirit.

But the real note of the Megillah is a very serious note -- that beyond chance, beyond accident. It is the enduring, the stable and permanent moral law which may for a time be defeated, but which ultimately has its way -- truth, justice, character, and courage and faith to win out ultimately regardless of the surface. The river may have on its surface many cross currents and on the surface you get the impression of confusion. But in the deep river are eternal channels of God, channels of history. The Jews were saved because there was a Jew by the name of Mordecai who had character who had courage, who had persistence, who had faith, who did not submit to the dictum of a cruel persecutor, who fought back against seemingly overwhelming odds, who aroused his people. The Jews were saved because a woman named Esther, at first timid, confused, was strengthened by Mordecai, risked her very life to go to the king to plead for her people.

As you read your Bible, you will find this note repeated over and over again.

"The house of the righteous -- that will endure. The house of wicked -- that will be destroyed." Now it may seem at the surface that the house of the wicked is built on

strong foundations, rocks and stones, more impressive, more enduring. But because it is the house of the wicked, it will be destroyed.

In 1938, just before the second world war, I read a book called "The House that Hitler Built." And this author gave a very impressive picture of this amazing house that Hitler built -- a house built on power, might, on pride, on great organization a house which its builders said would endure a thousand years -- the house that Hitler built. But that house was built on lies, hate, on aggression. The house did not last a thousand years. It did not last a thousand months. He sent millions to be burned in gas chambers. He himself was burned; like Haman, ^{and} his followers, his henchmen were hanged. And upon his land he brought ruin and disaster. The house that Hitler build, the house that Pharaoh built -- an impressive edifices, pyramids, might. There was a house built on slaves and on the lash of the taskmaster and upon the drowning of children for fear that the Jews of Egypt might multiply... And that house collapsed.

And so the house that Haman built was a house built upon hatred, plotting, the house of gallows. So he himself was hung upon the gallows which he had built for others. "This is the fate of all those who forget God. He will lean upon his house, but it will not stand up." "If it isn't the Lord who builds the house -- in vain labored they who built it."

That is really the heart of the story of the Megillah. A people that builds its house on faith in God, on love, on freedom, on peace -- such a people is indestructible. A people which in an hour of crisis can produce a Mordecai, an Esther -- this is the House of Israel. The reason why Purim was beloved festival among our people was because that same experience of our forefathers in Persia was repeated time and time again in the history of our people and we experienced it in our own lifetime. Unfortunately our experience was not as happy as the experience of the Jews of Persia. The Jews of Persia, according to the Megillah, were all saved. The Jews of Europe were not saved -- all of them. Millions of them tragically

perished. And so it is impossible for us to really have a Purim Hitler, or a Purim Germania, or a Purim Berlin. Why? Because millions of our people perished. We shall forever remember them in sorrow and recall them among the murderers of our people. And we shall also remember that that might which sought to destroy the whole of Israel and to extinguish our name from the face of the earth, that might which declared a war of extermination upon our people, that might is broken and shattered, and our people diminished in numbers, it is true, and having suffered greatly and grievously it is true, is yet alive and is facing the future with courage and hope and faith. We have gone through the valley of the shadow of death and we are coming out into the light of a better and brighter day.

That is ^{the} law of history. And that is the law of God. Truth will prevail and justice will be vindicated. That is the lesson comes to us as we read our Megillah. Sorrow will be turned to joy and darkness to light. The House that the Nazis built has been destroyed. What will happen to the house that democracy built -- what will happen to the house of that America builds -- that only the builders of it will determine. If we wish the house of Democracy and the House of America to endure, we must see to it that it is built and rebuilt, strengthened and re-inforced with self-sacrifice, with cooperation among our citizens, with tolerance, with good will. This is the way to preserve the house which Democracy builds. Let us not for a moment assume that there are not forces at work to undermine this house that Democracy built, that there are not forces to undermine, that there are not Hamans, Hitlers in our midst preaching race hate, intolerance, bitterness, spreading lies, false rumors, inciting suspicion, who will bring this house down in ruins.

No house is permanently secure. That is also the lesson derived from the reading of the Megillah... Lovers of freedom, true builders of free society must be on the alert to ferret these out, to expose them, to break their power, to defend the beautiful edifice of a free society. If they do that, we shall bring in our lives something of the spirit of Esther and Mordecai. America will be a secure, and free society. Jewish life will be secure in the world. Purim, thought it is a festival of

frolic, fun, masquerade, you may derive from it a great and sustaining moral lesson.



1) ~~With~~ the first approach of Spring was heralded by all peoples by festivals.

These festivals, celebrating the end of winter, of cold and rain, and the coming of warmth, flowering and the rebirth of nature took on a character of exuberance and gaiety; of frolic and mirth. At times of great hilarity and folly.

Among the ancient Greeks this was the season of the feast in honor of Dionysos - and the merry-making connected with this festival, and the ribald and sarcastic songs sung gave rise to comedy -

Among the Romans, this was the time for the festival of Brundabum, or Saturalia - with their unbridled & revelling.

The modern Carnival in the Latin countries and the Faschnacht in the Teutonic countries are Christianized versions, their ancient pagan, ~~nature~~ springtime festivals.

The term "Carnival" is probably derived from the Latin "curvus navalis" - Vessel on wheels - the ship-car, which was driven thru the streets, the city ~~to~~ bearing the image of squelch, the duty - our present-day floats in a Mardi Gras procession.

(2)

When these people were Christianized, these primitive customs survived. The Church could not abolish them. It did the next best thing. It associated them with Christian ideas, and tolerated them. The ~~fast~~ ^{the 40 days before Easter} became the season before Lent, ~~but~~ when the eating of meat is forbidden.

2) Purim originally must have been some such festival.

It is a holiday of merry-making - of merrymaking - of games, plays and frolics. The "Purim-spiel" is the counterpart of the ~~entire~~ plays or burlesques connected with masquerades in the May or June - Jewish world.

The most of fun frolics included the king game where "Haman-Clapper" & the "Brogger" were introduced ... and in the street clubs - where a Purim-Club was appointed to as a jest game to talk with non-serious & intelligently in entertain of teacher & pupils to his heart content children - collected gifts.

Haman was burnt in effigy.

It was a day of drinking & eating - to the pleasure -
- a special holiday to be observed.

3/ Jordan - took over this story from Isidore, unable to
understand it - and re-interpreted it - gave it a
deeper content - (3)

In Pal. - they sought to identify it with the victory
of Judas Macc. over Nicanor, the Syrian general
at Adasa - 13 Adar year 161 B.C.E.

In Balyl. - with the victory of Jews over Haman.
The latter won!

4/ Story told in Shema. Something, the Carved
spirit penetrates even into Shema -
a tearing - tearing world! (1) Vohti. (2) Haman. (3) other

(4) Shema - Shema (5) Jews say.
Unpredictable - hidden chance
(1) Serious - surface - Moral Law!

5/ Chance - ancients exalted Chance - divinity.

"Chance within governs the world -"

"Chance disposes of with unequal justice"

"Chance whirls round the affair of men -"

6/ Not so! only on purpose - Truth - Justice - Course.

- אין אין אין אין אין
אין אין אין אין אין

7). ~~the~~ 36. "The House that Hitler Built"

Power - Pind - 1000 year.

Born on Dec. 1871 - Rose - aggression -
He sent millions to ^{his} churches - He hurried - His
hunchmen changed - His other men

8. The House that was built -

Pyramids - Slaves - Loth - Dinnering ^{children} Red Sea

9/ The House that Hansen Built

How that Hawson must
Hester - Cry away -
How Henry - falls!

פ אברהם
 חסד וחסד - חסד וחסד
 חסד וחסד - חסד וחסד
 חסד וחסד - חסד וחסד

10). But a people - that breeds its freedom - Peace -
in food - love / humanity - freedom - Peace -

(1) can produce $\omega \gamma \gamma$ - (a) money (b) love -
 (c) self respect (d) devotion
गोले - मन्दिर - साधना -

11). This is fish, 212

214 1/2 N.H.C. 1/1