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Purim Laughter, Purim Tears, 1974.

Purim Laughter, Purim Tears
Daniel Jeremy Silver
March 10, 1974

In the relatively calm confident years before the Holocaust a number of our congregations were of a mood to dispense with Purim. They felt that it was anacronistic, a reminder of another and now blessedly past age. They felt that Purim with its resonance of the oppression of Jews, the sense of the separate destiny of our people, the sense of its tragic destiny, this resonance was best put aside, forgotten. They held that these were new times, different, spiritual, texture and that Jews had better forget the shadows of the past, to learn to live ~~their lives~~ in the larger world and to live confidently in that world because it was a better world. The old prejudices, the old hates were presumably forgotten; the need to have a scapegoat, anti-semitism and all that it represents, was largely behind us, certainly in the more advanced nations. All that Purim did, these congregations felt, was to keep alive for Jews the terror of life, anxiety, fear, trembling, ^{that} and this was a new world and these fears had best be forgotten.

There's a second concern of these congregations and that was that the celebration of Purim was raucous, loud, all those awful noisemakers, those sounding out in the synagogue, as Jews tried to drown out the name of Haman. They felt that this was an age when religion ought to deal with all gravity and all solemnity only with the saintly, the high, the exalted, the spiritual, and somehow the whole mood of feeling, congregational enthusiasm, did not fit that age. It was an age which liked to forget that the Hasidim threw their arms around each other's shoulders and danced away the shadows and danced their faith in God. It was an age of dignity and decorum, a brand new, reasonable, hopeful, encouraging world. I know of no other holiday,

joyous occasion, whose celebration indicates more dramatically than Purim just how far we have moved emotionally in the last thirty or forty years. We no longer find Purim dissonant, anachronistic, something out of the medieval times, times which no longer exist. There have been other Hamans - Hitler, Stalin - there have been new Hamans - Kadafi, Asad, Arafat, Brezhnev, Kosygin. We recognize again the wistfulness and the despair and the whimsy, if you will, the old Jewish folk axiom that there are so many Hamans and only one Purim. Our lives have turned full cycle and though obviously we still hold on to some measure of hope we know that we do not live in a radically new age and that it is still part of life to live with fear, terror, terror of the unknown, of the uncertain and insecure, terror of the hate and the capacity to hate which poisons the human soul, terror at the capacity to be cruel, vicious, which lies, unfortunately, at the root of so much in human nature.

I wondered this last week just how the community in Israel was celebrating Purim. Since 1912 in Tel Aviv there has been a procession through the streets, a great carnival time, called Adlo yeh da. Adlo yeh da is a phrase taken from the Talmud which means until you do not know. And the text in the Talmud says that on Purim we ought to revel, to celebrate, adlo yeh da, till we do not know, we cannot recognize any more, the difference between the phrase avur Haman, cursed be Haman, and baruch Mardechai, blessed be Mordechai. In Tel Aviv, usually, there's a great procession through the streets, glamorous floats depicting the Purim story or I suppose many of the scenes of the saga of modern Israel. I have not yet read the reports of yesterday's adlo yeh da, but I'm sure that there was a kind of desperate joy to it, the very same kind of desperate joy with which Purim has been celebrated by Jews for these last two thousand years.

Purim has come back to us, which is to say that the world has turned back from its promise of what men believed to be its promise of eighty-ninety years ago. Now we make no claim, none of us, that Purim represents the highest reach of the Jewish spirit. It's carnival time. It speaks of despair and it speaks of relief. It speaks of a kind of joy which we ought to engage in, which we inevitably engage in, and suddenly the dangers are over, that sigh of relief, that hope that maybe now things will be better. Purim is simply part of life, even as terror is part of life, ~~C~~ruelty is part of life, and the occasional moments of deliverance are also part of life. Whoever wrote the Megillad Esther, the Megilla, the story of Purim, I think would be very shocked to realize that for the last eighteen hundred years we have bound the book in white buckram as it were, and the sense of holiness which pervades all of the anthology which we call the Bible, that we've given it to our daughters to carry at their marriage; we've given it ^{to} ~~for~~ our children at their Confirmation; for the book certainly was never written, the story was never told, ^{for} ~~so~~ it's obviously a great oriental folk story, as a holy book, as a holy story. In fact, one of the strange elements in the book of Esther is that the name of God is never mentioned even though there are a number of portions in which it would be quite natural for the author to have spoken the word God. For instance, when he says: ¹¹ And salvation will come to the Jews. ¹² He never mentions the word God as if deliberately wanting to keep this a secular text, ^a text which speaks of terror, ¹³ relief in the way that ordinary people know it and experience it, as if he really didn't want it to seem holy, to have to reach towards a degree of sanctity which the rest of the Bible tends to try to achieve. Yet, we have declared the book to be biblical. We have canonized it and the reason it was canonized in the second century of this era, the last of the books of the Bible to be

accepted into the canon, has to do more with the history of the previous century than with the intention of the teller of this tale for until modern times the cruelest century in Jewish life was the century which runs ^{from} about 50 of the CE to the next hundred years. In 66, crushed by the iron boot of Rome, brutalized by Roman exactions and taxes and the misrule of ~~the~~ procurators, our people rose in rebellion and by the year 70 the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed, the temple had been razed, the central sanctuary of Jewish life was no more. A million Jews were killed in that rebellion. And about forty years later, in the year 112 of the CE, many of the Jewish communities in the diaspora, Crete, Egypt and elsewhere rose in rebellion against Rome and they were brutally crushed and another million of our people seem to have been slaughtered or sold into slavery. And just twenty years later, led by Bar Kochba, the Jews of Palestine rose again in rebellion, and in time they were crushed. In 135 of the CE ^{and} again a million or more were killed or enslaved. This was a century of terrible tragedy and unparalleled defeat and a Jewish community which had been growing and had been finding a new sense of its political stature up to this time. Before the first century we Jews represented perhaps 20 percent of the population of the eastern Roman Empire. We were a strong and increasingly significant minority whose views, whose philosophy, whose faith, was increasingly noticed. Now, suddenly, we were a defeated people, a forgotten people, and we turned to licking our wounds and to finding a way to survive. Certainly during such a century the message of the book of Esther which is simply the message that salvation will arrive for our people— Remember the central speech of the book? The evil decree has gone out. Haman has gotten to Ashvarus, the Persian Emperor, and he has convinced Hashvarus that he is to have all of the Jews turned over to him and they are to be slaughtered on

the 14th day of Adar next. And Esther is the queen and Mordecai sends a message to her that the fate of her people is in her hands. And the message is phrased in these three stark simple sentences: ¹⁾ Do not believe that you will escape the king's house if you are silent now. Relief and deliverance surely will come for the Jews from some source. Who knows whether you did not come to royal estate for this purpose. ¹⁾ Surely, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from some source. Despite it all, relief and deliverance will come. Certainly that was a healing message. And more than this, there was a moral here for those Jews who over the centuries or in that century would have some position of authority, some opening, some way of contacting the princes, the emperors, the dukes, the Caesars. There were always Jews who ^{had} at times the ear of power and now that the armies of Israel had not been able to protect the people of Israel, now it was up to those who had this access, to use it, even at personal cost, to try and undo the evil decree, ^a ~~the~~ harsh fate, whatever the situation may be. Obviously, the book of Esther was included in the Bible because it was both a promise and it imposed a new morality upon those Jews who were thrown up into positions of wealth or power, that they must respect and be concerned with the fate of Israel.

But even as they canonized the Bible, the rabbis and those who translated the scripture into Aramaic, into Greek, into Latin, recognized that there were problems within the text, that it was a good text, that it was in a sense true to life, that there were many dangers and many needs for deliverance, but they used to interpret this book in a way to remove from it some of the questions, some of the moral problems that it poses. In the first instance the absence of the name of God, but, more importantly than this, the fact that though Esther is a beautiful woman, a royal

princess, and in time she becomes a heroine, it's quite clear that she's not the most apt model for a Jewish girl to pattern herself after. For, obviously, until the time when she reveals herself as a Jewess to the king he's not aware of her faith, of her religious loyalty. Now how could the queen of all the Persians have remained anonymous, a morono if you will, if she had not failed to observe the Sabbath, if she had not failed to observe the holidays, if she had not failed to observe Hashrute, the dietary laws? Obviously, as one who had dissembled about her Jewishness she had simply ~~not carried out~~ the practices of the Jewish people. More than this, in the eyes of the moralists, worse than this, since Jewish life believes implicitly in modesty, decency and morality Esther was hardly in this respect the model for a very lovely young Jewish lady. But what had she done?—She had entered a beauty contest in order to become a concubine of the king and instead of spending her time spinning and weaving and doing homely things she spent six months anointing herself, being massaged and perfumed and her hair being coiffed and doing all those things that starlets do in order to make themselves into sex symbols and somehow a Jewish girl was not to make herself into a sex object. And she had obviously gone in to the king as a member of his harem without marriage, again, hardly the very model of what a Jewish father wanted his Jewish daughter to be.

Early in the second century BCE, before the book of Esther was canonized, a Jew from Alexandria, named Demetrius, took a translation of the book of Esther with him from Jerusalem, the translation which had been done by a certain man whom we know as Lisamokis. Now we don't know much about Lisamokis except ~~that~~ we know

that instead of providing a Greek translation simply of the book of Esther he had drawn out the book and added to it things that he felt were of moral uplift, which made it fit for family consumption. And these additions, if you ever want to read them, are available now in English. We've translated them, they're part of the apocryph, or part of the other books of the Bible which were not canonized. They're called the Additions to Esther. Lisamokis published this text around 116 BCE and he turned Esther from a concubine, a sex object, a non-observant Jewess, into the very very model of a proper Jewish maiden. How'd he do it? Very simply - he tells the story exactly the way the story is told in the familiar scroll, and then just before Esther is to enter into the audience chamber to make her plea to Hashuvarius to free the Jews from this terrible edict, he has her utter a prayer to God. And the prayer sets everything straight. Let me read a part of it to you:

Then Queen Esther, caught up in this deadly conflict, took refuge in the Lord. She stripped off her splendid attire and put on the garb of mourning and distress. Instead of proud perfumes she strewed ashes and dung over her head. She abased her body, and every part that she had delightfully adorned she covered with her dishevelled hair. And so she prayed to the Lord God of Israel:

'O my Lord, thou alone art our king; help me who am alone, with no helper but thee. Save us by thy power. Help me who am alone, who have no helper but Thee O Lord. O Lord, Thou knowest all; thou knowest that I hate the splendour of the heathen, I abhor the bed of the uncircumcised ~~or of any Gentile~~. Thou knowest in what straits I am; that I loathe that symbol of pride, the headdress, the crown that I wear when I show myself abroad. I, thy servant, have not eaten at Haman's table; I have not graced a banquet of the king or touched the wine of his drink-offerings; I've kept the dietary laws. I have not known festive joy from the time that I was brought here until now except in Thee, O Lord, God of Abraham.

In other words, by private public confession Lisamokis manages to undo all the suspicions about Esther that many had already written, found in her actions. Lisamokis continues because he is faced with a problem in Mordecai. Mordecai is a

great hero; Mordecai is loyal to the emperor; and you will recall Mordecai reveals to the emperor, Hashaveros, a plot against his life. He comes across in the story of Esther as the man who hears of Haman's acts against the Jews and warns Esther to enter into the audience chamber and plead for her people's lives. He's a hero. But there's only one trouble, or two or three, if you want Mordecai to be a very model of a Jewish gentleman. The first is that it is under his guidance that his ~~notice~~^{ward} and ward, Esther, enters the harem of Hashveros. Now what fine uncle will allow his ward to become a member of the harem of a movie producer, or to enter that kind of jet-set life? More than this, it is his action which endangers the life of all Jews. He had, as you recall, refused to bow down to Haman. Now the suspicion is there ~~that~~^{He} He did this for no better reason than that he was vain. He didn't like Haman and he wasn't about to bow down to him and because of his vanity, the vanity of one courtier to another courtier, he endangers the life of a whole people. Why had he refused to bow down? The book of Esther doesn't indicate a reason, or perhaps it codes the reason. About the only reason which we can derive from the book of Esther for this act which had such dramatic consequences is the fact that Haman is called an Agodite. Now according to the Bible Agan was the king of Amalek, one of those small communities that lived in the second millennium BCE on the east bank of the Jordan River. And the Bible tells us ^{that} when the children of Israel left Egypt they asked the right of peaceful passage through the land of Edom, the land of Moab, the land of Amalek, and that the Amalekites had granted to them the right of peaceful passage, but as they'd gone through, a matter of few days I suppose, the Amalekites had suddenly ambushed the community of Israel. They attacked first the rear guard and then the whole camp,

and there had been a terrible slaughter. And there is in the book of Deuteronomy a warning which begins Zahorat Amalek. Remember Amalek. ¹¹ When you crossed the wilderness Amalek attacked you in a dastardly way from behind in ambush. His word had been given and he was not true to his word. Blot out the memory of Amalek from before me. ¹² And this phrase, Zahor at Amalek, has become a watchword term in Jewish life for beware of the enemy, beware of the sudden danger. Haman also presented a sudden, unexpected danger as had Amalek before him. Presumably because Mordecai recognized in Haman, a descendant of these hated people whom Jews are to be aware of and beware of constantly, he refused to bow down to ^{him} ~~them~~. That's possible. No other reason exists in the biblical text and so the suspicion obviously arose early that Haman had acted, then Mordecai had acted simply out of vanity. In order to protect the good name of Mordecai, Lisamokis writes another prayer. Just as Esther had voiced a prayer before she had gone in to see the king, so Mordecai voices a prayer just before he reveals to Esther what she must do, asking God's help, and it's phrased in these terms:

O Lord, King, thou who rulest over all, the whole world is under thy authority and when it is thy will to save Israel there is none who can stand against Thee. O Lord, Thou knowest all things; thou knowest, Lord, that it was not from insolence or arrogance or vain glory that I refused to bow before proud Haman, for I could gladly have kissed the soles of his feet to save Israel; no, I did it so that I might not hold a man in greater honour than God; I will not bow before any but thee, my Lord, and it is not from arrogance that I refuse this homage.

In other words, an explanation of his act is put into this confession. He had refused to bow down to Haman because Israel must bow down only to the one God. Now there's only one trouble with this confession, this explanation. We know ^{absolutely} no custom in ancient times which precluded a Jew from bowing to ^{someone who was} ~~an~~ overlord. What we do know is that among the Greeks, the free Greeks, the custom had grown that a

Greek must not bow down before any man and apparently during the Greek age, the Hellenistic age, this custom became widespread. It was a sign of one's dignity not to bow to any other man. The Jews took it over from the Greeks, and here in Greek times Lisamokis is giving an explanation to Hellenistic Jews, Jews who had become Greek in many of their attitudes, for the reason that Mordecai did not bow to Haman.

The need to interpret Esther, to fumigate it, to make it fit for religious consumption, has existed from that day to this. I cite you the oldest of the Megillishim, the oldest of the set of editions. There are many others. Josephus tells another story. The midrash tells another story. The so-called Aramaic translation, the targum, ^{re-}~~cases~~ the story in a slightly different way, all of which suggests that from the very beginning our people were quite aware that the book of Esther does not represent morality, the standard of rectitude ^{and} righteousness and saintliness which is incumbent upon every Jew, but it represents, rather, history, reality, tension and release. And the story, in fact, ^{these} is phrased in quite human terms. It's phrased in terms of the human comedy and the human tragedy, in terms of farce, an occasional nobility, in terms of tragedy, unexpected tragedy, undeserved tragedy, and relief, joy, unexpected relief, and deliverance. Let me try briefly to suggest to you these four themes, how they exist in this story.

First, the farce. The very opening of the book is farce. There's a great, great celebration in Susa, the capitol of Persia. It's lasted for 180 days and 180 nights. The emperor has had all the notables of Persia from the many, many provinces from the west all the way to India at his royal banquet table. There is gold, dishes and silver, dishes, goblets, ~~in~~ the most splendiferous kind of display, and after 180 days and 180 nights you would think that the party had worn a little bit thin, but, no, the Persians had not had enough and they proclaim another festival which would last

for seven days and for seven nights. Their appetites are being jaded and at this point in order to encourage jollity the king decides to summon his queen, Bashti, and he orders Vashti to appear before his nobles that they may enjoy her beauty. And Vashti, who, by the way, to my mind is one of the great unsung heroines of woman's liberation, Vashti, without reason, simply says, no, I'm not coming. I'm not your sex object, the centerfold of Playboy Magazine. I won't appear that way before your nobles. And she refuses. And then the farce really begins. This mighty emperor, sitting there in his cups with all of the great nobles and powerful men of the kingdom before him, doesn't know what to do about a single woman who says no. So he summons a great council of state, the seven wisest counselors in all of Persia, and this great emperor whose word is law, whose word can kill a man, says plaintively: what shall I do? And Memoukan, I can see him now, standing there, his hands clasped, rocking back and forth, the immemorial way a counselor listens to the king's plight, pulls a little bit of his beard, wonders what he can answer the king that the king wants to hear. Mamouken thinks and paces the floor and he says finally: My Lord, you must put away Vashti, the queen, but he can't say it simply that way, he must put her away. He must put her away because in doing so you're doing a service for all of Persia. It can't simply be your own anger at her, your bitterness, your frustration, for my Lord, if you do not put her away every woman in Persia is going to learn to say no to her husband and what will the world come to? Aha, says the king, my anger at Vashti is now justified. There's a purpose to it all. And so he orders a letter to be written that's one of the most pompous, amazing letters of all time to be sent out to all 120 provinces of Persia from Syria to India, from Turkey to the Sudan, which says in effect that every man is to be master in his own house by order of the Persian emperor. So be it. And I presume because of that letter every man in Persia became

the master in his own house. But, in any case, what we have here is the authoritarian family, pettiness, a woman who will not have her dignity trampled on, and the kind of satire which is delightful, that here, the center of all power, frustration exists, stupidity exists, folly exists. And that's farce.

And what about the occasional moments of nobility? We often forget that Esther and Mordecai were really not very nice people. What were they really? Mordecai was a coniving courtier and Esther was really little more than his willing pawn. Mordecai is not a hero figure. He is a man who was attracted to power, who wanted his bit of it and so he comes around the court and he's around where there are largess and power and he's looking for his opportunity. And he seems to find it when he overhears conversation about a plot against the king's life and he reveals it to the proper authority, but he's frustrated because though the matter is written down in the royal record there's no immediate reward for him. And then, fortunately, this disposing of Vashti gives him a chance. He'll use his neice, a youngster, girl, in order to further his advantage and she's willing to be used. She's eager enough for what? A vial of perfume? Some servants? Some music, the "good things of life" to go along with this game. She goes to the harem. She enters the contest and, fortunately, for the story, she wins. But why was she there? They're not very nice people. They're shrewd, they're ambitious, they're selfish, they're self-indulgent, call them what you will. And that's the way I suspect many people start out, but the test of people comes ultimately when the moment of truth is there. When the moment is there when Mordecai and Esther have a chance to escape a fate which might be imposed

on all others but them or at least on all others but Esther, they're willing to stand up and to be counted. They're willing to gamble everything that they've won for a larger cause than their own selfish advancement and that's a mark of nobility. It's not the greatest nobility in the world, but it's a true mark of nobility.

And then the tragedy and the very nature of tragedy - Haman, for trivial reasons, decides that all the Jews must be killed. His reason is no more than the fact that his nose is out of joint that a Jew has refused to bow down to him. And what does he do? He gets from this foolish king the right to kill all of the Jews and the promise to hand over to the king a rather royal sum of money which the king needs for his own indulgence. Now very often life tragedy, the tragic, hinges on a very minor kind of event. Somebody doesn't like us in the office. We don't get along well with certain kinds of people. We speak our mind at a time when someone else finds it appropriate. We bear a label - Jew - someone acts prejudicially. That's true, the tragic often enters our lives not for reasons which we can control or even understand, but because there are people out there who simply react in ways which are unpredictable. Anti-semitism has a long and bitter history in Europe, but who could have predicted on the basis of that history that in the frustration, in the fulminations of a wallpaper hanger in a German jail, would come this bitter hatred of the Jew which would lead to holocaust. Tragedy comes to peoples, to individuals, for strange and unexpected reasons and the same is true of relief. It's interesting in the way which the book of Esther tells of the final release of the Jews from this terrible danger. No one may enter the royal audience chamber unless he is called. Esther

has not been called. She takes her life into her hands. She enters the chamber and the king graciously receives her. And instead of asking directly for the blessing then and there for what she wants she invites the king and his prime minister, Haman, to a banquet and she offers them that night a lovely banquet and at that banquet again she does not reveal what she has in mind and invites them back a second time. And that second night when she has again placed all of the delicacies of Persia before the emperor and his prime minister she finally makes her plea. I am a Hebrew. I share the fate of my people. How can you have allowed this man to have our lives in his hand? And the king, this foolish king, what does he do? He doesn't say to Esther, I take it all back. He doesn't say to Haman, what did you do and how could you do it or I agree with you, I will stay with what I said to you. According to the Bible he runs out of the garden. He wants to avoid the whole problem. Haman is worried though. He doesn't know quite what the king will do when he comes back and he falls down, almost kneels before Esther, asking her to forgive him and as he kneels he throws himself across the bed, the chaise lounge, the sofa of this room, and when the king comes back and he sees Haman across the bed of his wife, and instead of being worried about these hundreds of thousands of Jews of the kingdom what is he worried about? The fact that Haman may have made some advance to Esther. That's the only thing that concerns him and it's because of that concern that he turns angrily at Haman and orders him out and to be hung. So the Jews were saved in ancient Persia because a foolish king foolishly thought that his prime minister was making advances to his wife almost in his own presence. Again, salvation, advancement, release, deliverance,

often comes to us from unexpected places and in unexpected ways. There's an element of fate, there's an element of mazel, or lo mozon, no mazel, to life. And that's also part of this story of Esther.

What of Esther then is history, it's life, it's release, it's a masquerade which is one of the ways, by the way, in which we deny reality. We dress up as if we were someone else and deny the reality of those events. This afternoon in the Temple Branch there'll be hundreds of youngsters dressed up as Esther, or Mordecai and a few brave souls will dress up as Haman and a few who would like to be president will dress up as Hashouweris, the emperor, and they'll be a howling success at the carnival this afternoon. It's carnival time as we try and masquerade, deny by putting on masks, that there was a cruel reality to the story itself. And that, I suspect, is true also. And one of the best, most effective ways that you and I have of dealing with this world as it really is, is simply not to look at it as it really is. That's why we dress up. That's why we complain about the black headlines, give us some good news. That's why we forget as quickly as we can about the pain of illness, and the anguish of the 1930's and the 1940's and 1950's and early 1960's. We look at the sun of a bright March day and forget the grayness of the day before. We invent a rather romantic masquerade which we call life and somehow we allow that masquerade, that image, that illusion, to carry us along. And if the book of Esther has any meaning it says that it works sometimes, that there are times when we change from sorrow to gladness and from mourning to a celebration.

Now it's very hard to end a sermon which has to do with the ways in which we cope rather than which the values we should achieve and that's the problem, really, with any speechifying about Purim because it doesn't tell us the level of

nobility
 grandeur and ~~ability~~ which we should attain. It simply says something about the
 terror of life, the need for relief, release, for ~~earthly~~ catharsis, and for a masquerade.
 So how shall we end it? I suppose the only ending that we can have is simply this.
 The Jews have been reading from the Megillah for two thousand years and what we do
 is not simply read the text. We chant it. We try to turn history into a song and I
 suspect that that image, that symbol, is an appropriate one for all of us. If we can
 take life with all its pedestrian elements, all its danger, all the literal cruel facts
 which surround our daily lives, and somehow turn our lives into a song, a song of
 hope, a song of care, a song of professional accomplishment, then truly we will have
 won through. The jungle will have given way to civilization. The terror will have given
 way to beauty. Fear will have given way to possibility. So let's sing this Purim
 away and sing away the shadows



Kaddish

Friday

Sunday

MAR 10, 1974

Those who passed away this week

DR. HENRY STEUER
 NORMAN RABINE

Vahrzeits

MATILDA DANZIGER GOODMAN
 JEROME J. SQUIRES
 SAM ROGOFF
 ELMER M. KRAMER
 FRANK I. KLEIN
 LOUISE W. HELLER
 JACOB BASS
 JULIE BAER
 MAUDE SINGER MEISTER
 IGNATZ ASCHERMAN
 JOSEPH H. GROSS
 JUDITH MEYERS
 ESTELLE K. SCHAFFER
 DOROTHY LEVITT
 MINNA G. KERN

16 destruction of thy chosen people, thine from the beginning. Do not disdain thy own possession which thou didst ransom for thyself out of Egypt. Hear my prayer, and have mercy on thy heritage, and turn our mourning into feasting, that we may live and sing of thy name, Lord; do not put to silence the lips that give thee praise.' And all Israel cried aloud with all their might, for death stared them in the face.

14 Then Queen Esther, caught up in this deadly conflict,^a took refuge in the Lord. She stripped off her splendid attire and put on the garb of mourning and distress. Instead of proud perfumes she strewed ashes and dung over her head. She abased her body, and every part that she had delightfully adorned she covered with her dishevelled hair. And so she prayed to the Lord God of Israel:

4 5 'O my Lord, thou alone art our king; help me who am alone, with no helper but thee; for I am taking my life in my hands. Ever since I was born I have been taught by my father's family and tribe that thou, O Lord, didst choose Israel out of all the nations, and out of all the founders of our race didst choose our fathers for an everlasting possession, and that what thou didst promise them, thou didst perform. But now we have sinned against thee, and thou hast handed us over to our enemies because we honoured their gods; thou art just, O Lord. But they are not content with our bitter servitude; they have now pledged themselves to their idols to annul thy decree and to destroy thy possession, silencing those who praise thee, extinguishing the glory of thy house, and casting down thy altar. They would give the heathen cause to sing the praises of their worthless gods, and would have a mortal king held in everlasting honour.

11 'Yield not thy sceptre, O Lord, to gods that are nothing; let not our enemies mock at our ruin, but turn their plot against themselves, and make an example of the man who planned it. Remember us, O Lord, make thy power known in the time of our distress, and give me courage, O King of gods, almighty Lord. Give me the apt word to say when I enter the lion's den. Divert his hatred to our enemy, so that there may be an end of him and his confederates.

14 'Save us by thy power, and help me who am alone and have no helper but thee, Lord. Thou knowest all; thou knowest that I hate the splendour of the heathen, I abhor the bed of the uncircumcised or of any Gentile. Thou knowest in what straits I am: I loathe that symbol of pride, the head-dress that I wear when I show myself abroad, I loathe it as one loathes a filthy rag; in private I refuse to wear it. I, thy servant, have not eaten at Haman's table; I have not graced a banquet of the king or touched the wine of his drink-offerings; I have not known festive joy from the time that I was brought here until now except in thee, Lord God of Abraham. O God who dost prevail against all, give heed to the cry of the despairing: rescue us from the power of wicked men, and rescue me from what I dread.'

15 ON THE THIRD DAY Esther brought her prayers to an end. She took off the clothes she had worn while she worshipped and put on all her splendour.

2 When she was in her royal robes and had invoked the all-seeing God, her

^a caught . . . conflict: or seized by mortal anxiety.

preserver, she took two maids with her; on a befitting fine lady, while the other followed blushing and in the height of her beauty; her lovely, but her heart was in the grip of fear. She and reached the royal presence. The king was full array of his majesty. He was all gold and an inspiring figure. He looked up, his face glanced at her in towering anger. The queen fainted and swooning on the shoulder of the maid went to the king.

Then God changed the spirit of the king to clemency. He leapt from his throne and took her in his arms. He soothed her with reassuring words: 'Fear of me, your loving husband; you shall no longer be a subject. Come to me.' And the king lifted up his hand to her neck; then he kissed her and said, 'I saw you, my lord, looking like a woman awestruck at your glorious appearance; you have grace, my lord, that I look on you in wonder. She fell down in a faint; the king was distressed and comforted her.

[Then the king said, 'What is your wish, O queen? Up to half my empire, it shall be given to you for me', said Esther. 'If it please your majesty, let Haman with you, to a banquet which I shall give for you. Let Haman be sent for in haste, so that Esther and I may both go to the banquet to which Esther is invited. The king said to her, 'What is it, Queen Esther? Shall I be yours?' Esther said, 'This is my humble request: may your majesty and Haman be invited to the banquet which I shall give for you both, and have done today.'

So Haman went out from the royal presence pleased with himself. But when he saw Mardocheus in the courtyard, he was filled with rage. He went home and his wife Zosara, and held forth to them the honours with which the king had invested him as a man in the empire. 'Queen Esther', he said, 'will accompany the king to her banquet; and I am invited. Yet all this is no pleasure to me so long as I see Mardocheus in the courtyard.' Then his wife Zosara and his servants put up, seventy-five feet^a high, and in the middle of the city, a gallows and have Mardocheus hanged upon it. The king to the banquet and enjoy yourself.' Haman planned, and the gallows was made ready.

^a Gk. fifty cubits.

DO NOT BELIEVE THAT YOU SHALL ESCAPE IN THE KING'S HOUSE
 FY YOU ARE SILENT NOW, RELIEF AND DELIVERANCE WILL COME
 FOR THE JEWS FROM ANOTHER SOURCE; WHILE YOU AND YOUR
 HOUSE SHALL PUNISH -- WHO KNOWS WHETHER YOU DID NOT
 COME TO ROYAL ESTATE FOR THIS PURPOSE

mourning and lamentation among the Jews, and they put on sackcloth and ashes. When the queen's maids and eunuchs came and told her, she was distraught at the news, and sent clothes for Mardocheus, urging him to take off his sackcloth; but he would not consent. Then Esther summoned Hachrathaeus, the eunuch who waited upon her, and ordered him to obtain accurate information for her from Mardocheus.^a So Mardocheus told him all that had happened, and how Haman had promised to pay ten thousand talents into the royal treasury to bring about the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the written decree for their destruction which had been posted up in Susa, to show to Esther; and he gave him a message for her, that she should go to the king and plead for his favour and entreat him for her people. 'Remember', he said, 'those days when you were brought up in my humble home; for Haman, who stands next to the king, has spoken against us and demanded our death. Call upon the Lord, and then speak for us to the king and save our lives.' Hachrathaeus returned and told her what Mardocheus had said. She sent him back with this message: 'All nations of the empire know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court unbidden, there is no escape for him. Only one to whom the king stretches out the golden sceptre is safe; and it is now thirty days since I myself was called to go to the king.'

When Hachrathaeus delivered her message, Mardocheus told him to go back and say: 'Do not imagine, Esther, that you alone of all the Jews in the empire will escape alive. For if you remain silent at such a time as this, the Jews will somewhere find relief and deliverance, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows whether it is not for such a time as this that you have been made a queen?' Esther gave the messenger this answer to take back to Mardocheus: 'Go and assemble all the Jews who are in Susa and fast for me; for three days take neither food nor drink, night or day, and I and my maids will also go without food. Then in defiance of the law I will enter the king's presence, even if it costs me my life.' So Mardocheus went away and did as Esther had bidden him.]

AND MARDOCHEUS PRAYED to the Lord, calling to mind all the works of the Lord. He said, 'O Lord, Lord and King who rulest over all, because the whole world is under thy authority, and when it is thy will to save Israel there is no one who can stand against thee: thou didst make heaven and earth and every wonderful thing under heaven; thou art Lord of all, and there is no one who can resist thee, the Lord. Thou knowest all things; thou knowest, Lord, that it was not from insolence or arrogance or vain-glory that I refused to bow before proud Haman, for I could gladly have kissed the soles of his feet to save Israel; no, I did it so that I might not hold a man in greater honour than God; I will not bow before any but thee, my Lord, and it is not from arrogance that I refuse this homage. And now Lord, God and King, God of Abraham, spare thy people; for our enemies are watching us to bring us to ruin, and they have set their hearts upon the

^a Some witnesses add (6) So he went out to Mardocheus in the street opposite the city gate.

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14:11-19

3

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WRHS



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 based on 1915

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Approved name -

The manuscript & name

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