



Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.

Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated.

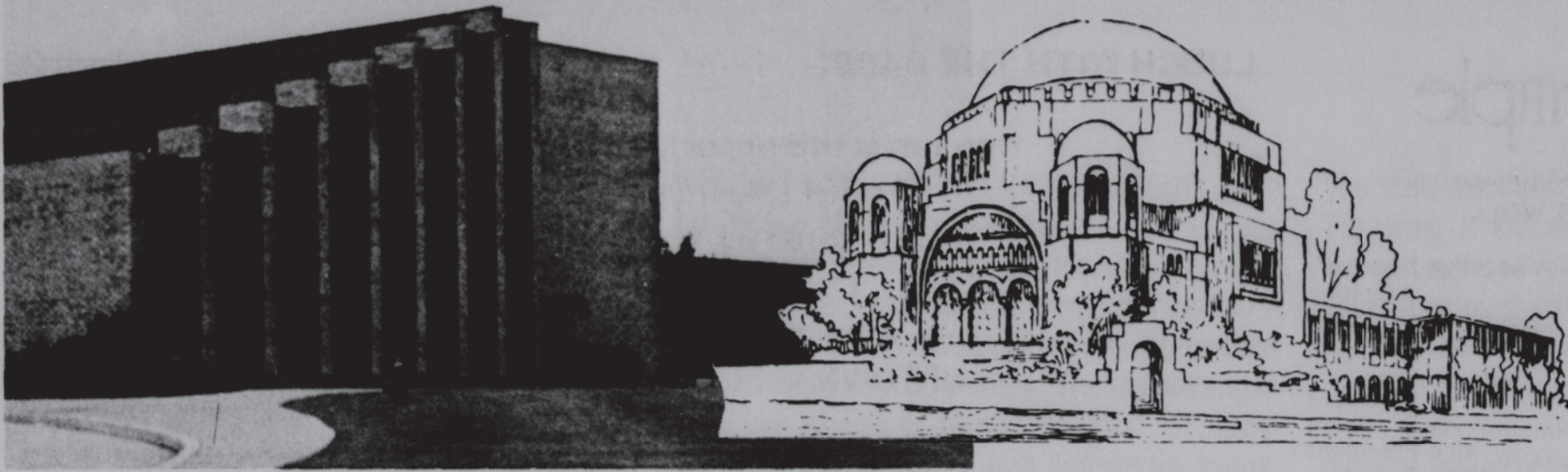
Sub-series B: Sermons, 1950-1989, undated.

Reel
62

Box
20

Folder
1244

From Esther to NOW: The Changing Role of Women, 1983.



April 17, 1983
Vol. LXVIX, No. 16

The Temple Bulletin

FROM THE RABBI'S DESK: From Esther to NOW: The Changing Role of Women
The sermon of February 27, 1983

This afternoon there will be several hundred Esthers running around our building in their mothers' finery. They'll come in all sizes, up to about three feet; and each of them will be carrying herself as the quintessential Jewish heroine. Esther's courage and beauty are certainly the classic qualities of a heroine. Nevertheless, I'd like this morning to take another look at Esther and at the book of Esther, and to do so not with a child's simple enthusiasm but as one who is deeply sensitive to the issues of feminine consciousness. My hope is that we will gain a better understanding of the long struggle within our tradition for the Jewish woman to gain her rightful place.

Two impressions emerge from a critical rereading of this scroll. The story of Esther reflects another time and a male-dominated social context, and it is Vashti, the deposed queen, who stands up for women's rights.

You'll recall that the story opens at a banquet. Ahasuerus and the nobles of Persia have been eating, feasting and drinking for seven days and seven nights. Towards the end of this revel the king, very much in his cups, begins to boast about the beauty of his queen, about Vashti's comeliness, and he decides on the spur of the moment to summon Vashti so he can show her

off to his drinking companions. Much to her credit, Vashti refuses to come. The company may be noble-born, but at this point they're nothing more than a bunch of drunken men and she's not about to display herself to them. For her courage, she is summarily deposed and disappears without further comment from the scene.

The king feels the need to justify his action against Vashti and he tells anyone who will listen that if he had not deposed her the women of Persia would have been encouraged to show disrespect to their husbands. As always, he had

(Continued inside)

If the Miss Persia contest in which Esther won the crown were to take place today it would be picketed by some of our more vociferous women's groups. Esther was chosen because she was a beautiful object and, if the story is to be believed, her courage rested on the single fact that she was willing to brave the disfavor of her husband at a time when a man's word was law. When Haman's decision to destroy all the Jews of Persia became public knowledge, the queen was really the only one who could make an effective representation to the king about it; but in ancient Persia even the queen was not allowed to intrude into the king's apartment unless she was summoned. Esther could not wait to be called since the date of the execution of the Jews had been set, and so she took her life in her hands and went unbidden to his apartment. If Ahasuerus had been out of temper or preoccupied and had been unwilling to receive her, her life would have been forfeit.

SUNDAY MORNING SERVICES

April 17, 1983
10:30 a.m.
The Temple Branch

Rabbi
DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

will speak on

NON-VIOLENCE!
DOES IT WORK?

April 24, 1983
10:30 a.m.
The Temple Branch

Rabbi
DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

will speak on

LEBANON: TO BE OR
NOT TO BE?

Friday Evening Service — 5:30 - 6:10 — The Temple Chapel
Sabbath Service — 9:00 a.m. — The Branch

FROM THE RABBI'S DESK

(continued)

only the welfare of his people in mind. We're tempted to say; that's a Persian king for you, Jew wouldn't act that way, but when we examine our tradition's record, we discover that no sage or commentator from the first century C.E. down to the 18th century was ever moved to praise Vashti's motives or to give her proper credit. Quite the contrary. To a man, and all the commentators were men, they impugn Vashti's motives. They suggested that she acted out of conceit or else out of necessity. Some say she couldn't obey the king because God had stricken her with an ugly skin disease as punishment for the fact that she had conspired to delay the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Others suggest that she was simply a vain and arrogant woman and they support Ahasuerus' concern that wives must obey the will of their husbands. They're not willing to even suggest that a woman's sense of her own dignity might appropriately lead her to deny an unseemly order from her husband.

This emphasis on a wife's subservience becomes even more pointed when we compare how these commentators treated Vashti with their treatment of Mordecai. Mordecai and Vashti are guilty of exactly the same offense. Both of them refuse a royal command. Vashti refuses the king's order to exhibit herself to the drunken lords. Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman after his appointment as Prime Minister although the king specifically has commanded that all members of the court do so.

To a modern reader, Vashti's disobedience is understandable, Mordecai's is not. In ancient Persia a bow was simply an acknowledgment of authority, a courtly convention; and Mordecai's action seems to be little more than an exhibition of personal pique or stiff-neckedness. Yet, the same male commentators who denigrate Vashti's behavior go out of their way to insist that Mordecai had acted out of the most worthy motives. They invent the story that Haman wore around his neck a large religious icon, and go on to say that if Mordecai had bowed to Haman it might have appeared as if he were bowing to the god and this worthy Jew would not perform an act tainted with idolatry. In the hands of our male commentators, Mordecai becomes the model of a good and pious Jew.

The problem is, of course, that there is nothing in the *megillah* which suggests that Mordecai was a pious Jew. Would a pious Jew encourage his niece to compete for the crown since the prize would require intermarriage with an idolator? When Esther enters the palace to

prepare for the contest Mordecai doesn't go to his friends who are in charge of the harem to ask them to provide kosher food for her. He visits these officials only to ask them to make sure that Esther commands the attention of the best hairdressers and coutouriers. There's nothing in the book of Esther to suggest that Mordecai was a particularly pious Jew, and yet the sages, the commentators, go out of their way to ascribe piety to him. A double standard surely: the woman may not disobey, the man may. Vashti's actions are demeaned and Mordecai's are praised.

We tend to have difficulty accepting the facts about our tradition's attitude towards women for whay they are because we're used to the idea that Judaism's ethics are on the cutting edge of moral sensitivity. When the world was mired in paganism we developed the idea of monotheism. When the world still believed that peoples had been created separately, Jews developed the idea of humanity: "Have we not all one Father, has not one God created us all?" When the courts of Egypt and Babylonia approved many forms of sexual deviation, the Jews condemned all unseemly acts and limited the relationship between men and women to those sanctified within the marriage bonds. When the world practiced infanticide Jews declared life to be sacred.

But no people is uniformly clear-sighted and sensitive. We have had our blind spots, and one of these, perhaps the major one, has been in the area of women's rights. This is somewhat surprising since we began fairly well. In pre-exilic times there were women who played active roles in the life of their time and who excercised independent judgment. The Sarahs and Rachels have their limitations, but they enjoy a certain freedom and live with their husbands more or less as partners. Certainly, they were not kept in a harem. In pre-exilic times we find a woman like Deborah who is the effective chief of all the tribes; the prophet Hulda whose word was accepted as God's own; and a reigning queen Ataliah. But after the Babylonian exile the independence and freedom of Jewish women was increasingly circumscribed.

To be sure, our post-exilic Biblical writing includes the well-known acrostic poem which describes the Woman of Valor. Apologetes point to its tender verses as proof of the respect in which ancient Israel held women. But when

you look carefully at this text in the book of Proverbs, it becomes clear that the woman being described is a homemaker who does not share her husband's life in the outside community. Nowhere is it indicated that she goes out with him or is consulted by him in business or political decisions. She's praised for being diligent, industrious, a good manager, a tireless homemaker — that she fulfills ably an enabling role. "The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her/She riseth while it is yet night and gives food to her household/She lays her hand to the distaff and her hands holedthe spinkle/She makes for herself coverlets; her clothing is fine linen and purple/She is not afraid of the snow for all the household are clothed warmly/She looks well to the ways of her household and eats not the bread of idleness."

The literature of our tradition is full of praise for the good wife who makes no effort to interfere in her husband's life. But what of the woman who shows some independence of mind and wants to share her husband's life or lead her own life in the community? What of women who have opinions of their own?

The book of Job reflects one of the negative images of women which looms large in our tradition: the woman as the temptress, the woman who leads her man astray. When Job is bruised by God his wife says to him: "Curse God and die, why do you hold fast to your integrity?" The Bible begins with Eve, the temptress. In the opening chapters of Proverbs woman becomes the quintessential seductress, the cause of men's sins. In most of the rabbinic texts the woman is praised when she does those things which serve the man and allow him to be free to take part in the real life, but is not to lead a full life of her own. A woman may not initiate an act of divorce. The testimony of women is not accepted in court. A woman may say to her father: 'I do accept your choice as my husband, but the father need not accept her demural.' Women were not counted in the *minyan*, the ten people who are are required to make up a congregation. Like children and the intellectually limited, she is not obliged to obey many of the commandments.

To study history is to discover that our tradition was far less sensitive than many circlces in the Greco-Roman world as far as the women's role is concerned. At the very time that the Book of Esther was written and the outline of rabbinic Judaism was being shaped, that is, from about

FROM THE RABBI'S DESK

(continued)

the third century B.C.E. to the fourth or fifth century C.E., the outside world experienced a significant transformation in its ideas about women — and this transformation did not effect Jewish life.

In classic Athens a woman was expected to remain at home, her place. Her role was not unlike that of the wife in Japan. To be sure, there were in classic Athens women called *heterai*, courtesans, who went to the feasts with the men and satisfied their desires for entertainment of all kinds. Some of these courtesans had reputations as being sprightly and bright, but for the most part, they were treated as objects and their role was that of the geisha in pre-modern Japan. The wife never went out socially with her husband. She did not go with him to the theater or to the hippodrome or to the gymnasium. Her role was to breed a legitimate son. Then for reasons we don't yet fully understand, a new, somewhat romantic, spirit began to be manifest in the Greco-Roman world. Men began to show some concern for the dignity of women. Plato suggests that daughters ought to be educated the same way as sons, and he seems to have had at least two women among his students. Later, Zeno and the Stoics suggest a view of marriage as partnership. Zeno assumes that women can share with the man the activities of the community, going with him to theater or out to dinner. Hellenistic and Roman law began to make provisions which allowed a woman to initiate a marriage arrangement or a divorce proceeding. For the first time a woman's testimony is accepted in the courts. Interestingly, when archeologists uncovered Pompeii they found campaign posters supporting women who were running for public office on the walls of some of the buildings. These were centuries when women began to develop a persona of their own, but not in the Jewish world. If anything in our communities the woman's role was becoming increasingly restricted.

In pre-exilic times men and women seem to have been able to enter the same areas of the shrine. During Second Temple days women were excluded from its inner precincts. In the early synagogue there is no indication of a *mehitza*, a physical barrier between men and women, but by the Talmudic period such barriers were in place. Rabbinic law ruled that many of the commandments which applied to men did not apply to women. Women need not hear the shofar blow on Rosh Hashanah or dwell in the *sukka* or hear the *megillah* read on Purim. The

sages admitted that there was no prohibition against women reading from the Torah, but discouraged the practice nevertheless for fear of its effect on the congregation. Women were seen as a cause of distraction. Some sages said that one who spends time talking with a woman will be led into sin. The ground work for the male dominating forms of Jewish practice were put in place at a time the host culture was opening itself up to the concept of personhood.

How are we to account for this moving against the tide? We really don't know. Some argue that this was a period when large number of Jews were in the Eastern countries where they picked up many of the concerns of ritual purity and taboo then current in the Persian-Indian world. After the destruction of the Temple, Jewish life, as you know, turned in on itself in order to survive and in that turning emphasized separation from the outside world. Some suspect that the rabbis had been suspicious of the outside world ever since the time of the Maccabees and the Hasidim who had fought so bitterly against the Hellenization of Jewish life, and that they continued to associate the pagan world with sexual perversion, infanticide, homosexuality — all practices which they condemned. Presumably, in turning against the vices of the Greco-Roman world, they disabled themselves from seeing its virtues. Those who defend the separate roles of women in our day argue in just this way.

To be sure, you can find here and there during the rabbinic period men who showed respect for their wives or were concerned with the education of their daughters, but the school and the synagogue were male places; and those women who achieved a certain independence generally achieved a certain notoriety at the same time.

Jewish life centered on the man. A wife had fulfilled her duty when she delivered a son. Ethical writings describe the woman as having a clearly defined role, honorable, but separate from the man's, quite apart. When the history of Reform Judaism is finally written, whatever other judgments are made, the record will say that from the first Reform Judaism caught the mood of the times when it insisted on the personhood of woman. In 1810 when Reform services were first held in Germany, the *mehitza* was taken away. There were family pews and a mixed choir, men and women sang together. The most important innovation of the

early Reform movement was the co-educational school. The *heder* was for boys. The *yeshiva* was for men. The Reform Sabbath school was for young men and young women. Confirmation, which was the first ceremony created by Reform Jews, was designed to make possible a co-educational graduation. Until then Jews had celebrated only the *Bar Mitzvah*, the boy's coming of age. It's obviously not a matter of chance that by the 1840's you had women as officers in Reform congregations and that by the 1920's in some small-town Reform congregations in the United States the widows of rabbis continued their husband's work. Today, of course, we have women cantors and women rabbis. The identification of the personhood of women has been one of the major themes of Reform Judaism and represents, I am convinced, an irreversible change in our tradition.

In our times women can no longer turn to Esther as a model for heroism. Esther's heroism consisted in manipulating her man. Today women, as men, describe heroism as standing for what a person believes to be right and struggling for it, by doing what they can in the public arena as well as by meeting their personal and family obligations. I would hope that the days of manipulation of women by men and of men by women are over. They're not, of course, but that's the hope. We rejoice in the fact that change is taking place but recognize its complexity. Change is easy for us. It's harder on our children. It will be harder yet on theirs, but God willing, in time women will have a much greater understanding of how to balance their needs and society will have created the institutions and the laws which will make personhood truly possible. As for Purim, I hope there will always be a gaggle of little Esthers at our carnivals; six-year olds don't need to think too deeply on the philosophic implications of their costumes, and the theme of Purim is a happy one. They'll have plenty of time later to face up to the ambiguities of their role.

Daniel Jeremy Silver

- ל 21 She is not afraid of the snow
 for her household;
 For all her household are
 clothed with scarlet.
 פ 22 She maketh for herself cover-
 lets;
 Her clothing is fine linen and
 purple.
 נ 23 Her husband is known in the
 gates,
 When he sitteth among the
 elders of the land.
 ו 24 She maketh linen garments and
 selleth them;
 And delivereth girdles unto the
 merchant.
 י 25 Strength and dignity are her
 clothing;
 And she laugheth at the time to
 come.
 פ 26 She openeth her mouth with
 wisdom;

- And the law of kindness is on
 her tongue.
 פ 27 She looketh well to the ways of
 her household,
 And eateth not the bread of
 idleness.
 ק 28 Her children rise up, and call
 her blessed;
 Her husband also, and he
 praiseth her:
 ג 29 Many daughters have done
 valiantly,
 But thou excellest them all.
 ש 30 Grace is deceitful, and beauty
 is vain;
 But a woman that feareth
 the LORD, she shall be
 praised.
 ת 31 Give her of the fruit of her
 hands;
 And let her works praise her in
 the gates.

And plead the cause of the poor
 and needy.

- פ 10 A woman of valour who can
 find?
 For her price is far above ru-
 bies.
 ב 11 The heart of her husband doth
 safely trust in her,
 And he hath no lack of gain.
 ג 12 She doeth him good and not
 evil
 All the days of her life.
 ד 13 She seeketh wool and flax,
 And worketh willingly with her
 hands.
 ה 14 She is like the merchant-ships;
 She bringeth her food from
 afar.
 ו 15 She riseth also while it is yet
 night,
 And giveth food to her house-
 hold,
 And a portion to her maidens.
 ז 16 She considereth a field, and
 buyeth it;
 With the fruit of her hands she
 planteth a vineyard.
 ח 17 She girdeth her loins with
 strength,
 And maketh strong her arms.
 ט 18 She perceiveth that her mer-
 chandise is good;
 Her lamp goeth not out by
 night.
 י 19 She layeth her hands to the dis-
 taff,
 And her hands hold the spin-
 dle.
 יא 20 She stretcheth out her hand to
 the poor;
 Yea, she reacheth forth her
 hands to the needy.

This PM was badly made be Teams sent down little
repeated
Ester's in all these notes; funny - 27: We PM your house
Graham and Ester is an authentic Jewish house - love and
and beauty are in our beautiful combination in the
house becomes - - and especially on the day of ENA and happy
moments unconsciously ~~you~~ you to find in our house,
make transition - among all these make eyes & unconscious
& look in house where a True house - almost
by one and all.

I don't want to be a spoiled part - sent previously because
of the Temple of our time 2 weeks once in some winter
in Turkey & down road at Ester - Her beauty
alone would suggest that an effort might be necessary -
But our second look at the story of Ester made
show - 2 in of all - and it was unlike by reflect
needed in actual scenes near center - object
rather than person - and but almost no reflex -
I suspect that none of our more experienced women's
Jewishness would have predicted the main
person Beauty center where Ester was her
home - - - and even under the ideal of one
given Ester would not visit much in
her home under central be specifically sent for her -
The proof of Ester's way see on the fact -
but she must be spend much the way - almost

Hence - ~~though~~ she had not been recognized - - and
if Lee King had not intervened at ~~that~~ moment to remove
her - her life would have been forfeit.

In my view, the modern spirit
 of the United States has more of the modern feminist spirit
 The story goes on a royal feast - lunch - day -
 2 days & 7 nights of eating & drinking - at the small
 long novel dinner to the king - the king - much
 in his cups began to boast of the beauty of his
 queen - - & to praise her past orders as excellent
 and superior to her own to answer Vasil
 to show off her beauty. Vasil
 refused - She has no intention of being pleased with
 by a pair of drunken men - however while then
 among the king & queen at Vasil's displeasure
 or even her deposed and handed - He flatters
 the decision by saying that if he does not do so
 all the manner of penes will begin to act
disrespectfully towards her authority - TRANSLATION
 This means that they must immediately obey
 All their orders.

It is not a but line - that the murder would
a double standard - What was Vukitch's son? - But she
disobeyed a royal order - Who did she disobey a royal
order? - Murderer - Was he the apparent murderer in
P.M. - he was the one to bow to him - Murderer
refused - & in doing so came for himself Humanity,
Enmity - & for some endings the whole found
community of Russia -

But when ^{Vukitch} ~~Murderer~~ was discovered in the
communities - Murderer is praised, Humanity was
murderer was to be praised for refusing to perform
an act which involved no more than a
routine execution - the same communities who
dispraised Vukitch's act, praised murderer & murderer
said no undated that he refused murder
simply enormous - Human - by no - was
meaning the murderer known and the murderer
to have been to the murderer been a
act of identity

Murderer is not praised in the murderer &
murderer of murderer murderer - It murderer murderer
has murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer
as interwarring - When the murderer the
murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer murderer
be murderer murderer murderer murderer

[illegible]

~~subjective factors~~ ~~are~~ ~~a~~ ~~non~~ ~~restrictive~~

2. ~~Can't~~ ~~bring~~ ~~the~~ ~~Company~~ ~~around~~ - ~~Use~~ ~~it~~
not possible in ~~position~~ and ~~mean~~ ~~over~~ ~~length~~ ~~of~~ ~~text~~
and 4 ~~other~~ ~~days~~, ~~the~~ ~~will~~ ~~be~~ ~~retained~~ - ~~can~~ ~~then~~
not ~~include~~ ~~the~~ ~~former~~ ~~parts~~ - ~~which~~ ~~are~~ ~~not~~ ~~included~~
at ~~present~~ ~~time~~ - but ~~can~~ ~~add~~ ~~mean~~ ~~that~~ ~~at~~
time - ~~we~~ ~~will~~ " ~~we~~ ~~will~~ ~~add~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~end~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~
" ~~last~~ ~~part~~ " + ~~to~~ ~~be~~ ~~the~~ ~~original~~ ~~text~~ -

[illegible]

own initiative - because, they were allowed to
be equal citizens - when new voting companies were
introduced to produce for them - election posted in
the name of Temple and that means even
now for many people there is not any

We are beginning to see some signs of recovery every
from since the same period - ~~2-3~~¹⁰ and only moderate
left - we have been found - a number of upland deer
young - B.S.V. - new age for personal beauty.

Like the lamp showing on the incense
Lamp-stand is a beautiful vase on a well
proportioned body ~~it is a beautiful vase~~

A woman's beauty depends on
her skin, which is the

The day went well except during

A man who respects his word and
be well respected by all, not one
who proudly despises him with to know
by all his wicked

1. Write a good copy in pen - but the name
is clear and is a perfect name of great

Thurs

I would sooner keep house with a lion
Or a dragon than keep house with a spoiled
wife.

and the field of vision to the young Tuba

Woman's beauty has led many astray

DO NOT GIVE YOUR SOUL TO A WOMAN, FOR HE
TO TRAPLE ON YOUR STRAITS

DO NOT BE TAKEN IN BY A WOMAN'S BEAUTY,
NEVER LIE YOUR HEAD OVER A WOMAN -

One of the stories of the time - is the
woman as temptress - One woman came - John's
wife looking her husband's "Cousin Bob and Bob"
- The story said something -

WRHS



I don't think the woman is the same - My
all the time the woman is of the same -
house - for some reason - but she is
questioned her only one time

She is not up with the rest of the world

And supplies in business for her household

She sets her hand to the old task

Her fingers work the spindle

She suffers no restrictions - for her household

AND NEVER WITH NO bread of filthiness

pleasant - loving - busy - gentle - but she

limited to be severe

of all age
Wore - long robes 13, silver robes provided
for boys & girls to wear because of the weather - A
Ming + N - 2 also registered - a woman's place was
to observe - not to participate - The day was -
a very nice day for the time - but a lot
of people were A woman went to the car towards
to probably send her to the table out of
respect for the community -

My dear friend left home at around 10:00
noon - all the way, she had the incident -
her - would be with her - she was very
in a moment of time - she was -
with her - she was - she was -
with her - she was - she was -

① We need to find a way to learn - a
way - a way - a way - a way -
which we should all have -

(Lester H. H. H.) TURNING AROUND FROM ALL
THE IS CROWD

② A number of the members of the
group were - there is a lot of
present and companies who play

to be sent
to be sent to the
in

3 The 1st of the year was October - 8 card
to October number by October - 6 October - October
RESTRICTIVE and October October October - October

TA 6003

Where the October is October October October
turned October at the October - October October October
have been October - - October October October
purchase of October October October October October
October October October October October



October October October - October October - October
October - October October October - October October
October

Let me
October October October - October October
has October - October October - October October
October - October October October October October
more October October October October October
own October - October October October October
more October October October