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The Jews of the Orient: Similarities and Differences, 1986.

THE JEWS OF THE ORIENT:
SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES
Daniel Jeremy Silver
March 16, 1986

I have a new definition of the generation gap for you. It's not only that you need the microphones a little bit higher, but the difference in which the Megillah is presented. At about 9:30 the youngsters of the school were here and the young people who read to us the Megillah read it then except the rabbi then was all dressed up in a black suit with Haiman's beard. After all, rabbis have to be the villains and every time Haiman's name was read there were 500 gregors sounding out to drown out his name. There you were, sitting so quietly as adults.

We are celebrating Purim today according to the Christian calendar and I put it this way because Purim doesn't come for another ten days, but since all of our children will be out of school when Purim comes, we wanted them to have a chance to celebrate it, we decided that we would celebrate Purim while they were still here and since our calendar doesn't, unfortunately, determine the public school calendars, we would forgive the public schools their calendar and we would simply accommodate to it. And reading the Megillah suggested to me the way in which I would like to begin this morning and that is to talk about writing, reading, ancient writing, modern writing. I don't know how it is with you, but when it comes to thinking and writing I'm something of a trogladite. I use a 79¢ ball point pen or a number 2 graphite pencil and paper. I find that I'm one of those people who can't do two things at once and that is I can't think and hunt and peck for the right letters on the typewriter. I admire those who can and when it comes to the modern miracles like a word processor, I am absolutely bedazzled by anybody who can manage them. I recognize

all the advantages that our machinery produces for us, but I'm tongue-tied; I'm reduced, I'm afraid, to recognizing that in many ways I am a member of a pre-industrial society, or at least conditioned by it. And when I began to think whether or not my reading and writing habits were, since they're so primitive, very much like those of our ancestors, I had to recognize that in some ways they were, and in many ways they weren't. I write longhand, but I have the advantage of a secretary, thank God, who can translate my scrawl into type and then someone can take the type and in a matter of minutes print up hundreds or thousands of copies. In the ancient world, in the world of our Biblical ancestors, every single manuscript had to be patiently and laboriously written out by hand which meant not only that there were many fewer books and manuscripts in circulation but that the standardization of texts was immensely difficult because inevitably when you copy anything you make mistakes, you change words, you omit a word or two or even a sentence or two. And so one of the problems which has come to any of us who do scholarly research is that even if a text seems to be of its time authentic it may not represent the intentions of the author because it may have passed through one or two or five scribal hands and have the compounding of errors in the process.

But there's another way in which my writing differs from that of our ancestors and that is I write within the framework of well-accepted rules. I have on my desk a dictionary. The dictionary tells me how words were spelled and how there is general agreement about the words and how they are spelled. I have books which deal with the rules of grammar and of punctuation. We were all taught these in school and so when we write we have a fair degree of

certainty that others will read what we write pretty much as we intended them to read it. Now, in the ancient world, in the Biblical world, there were as yet no accepted rules of grammar or punctuation or of spelling. Writing hadn't developed that degree of refinement. Moreover, writing, since it was difficult and laborious, was expensive and not only was it difficult and expensive to hire a scribe to copy out the book that you wanted, but the papyrus or the parchment were expensive things to use to write on and so it was a very costly enterprise and compression was originally the order of the day.

If you pick up a very early text from the ancient Middle East you'll find that there is no separation between words or sentences or paragraphs. Much is crammed into, compressed into a given space as can possibly be done and, obviously, when letters simply run on and there's no general agreement as to how they are to be spelled and there's no punctuation whatsoever, reading becomes something of a guess work game, an art, and one can in all good conscience read a particular phrase or a piece of paper in any number of different ways. And this leads to the fact that our ancestors read quite differently than we do. There were in their libraries no signs which commanded silence because no one read silently the way we do. We have fair confidence that when we train our children to recognize syllables and words they'll immediately be able to translate those syllables and words into meaning and we discourage children from taking what's on paper, sounding it out before it passes into their minds, because that slows them down. There's so much that needs to be accomplished when it comes to reading.

But the ancients had to teach reading orally, that is to say, a teacher could not be confident he could put a text in front of the student and the student would be able automatically to read the text the way the teacher knew it should be read without punctuation and without conventions of grammar and, most of all, because of the nature of the alphabet. If you look at the Megillah or you look at a Torah scroll, you'll see that there are no vowels. There are none of the little dots that tell us whether b is to be read, be, ba, be, bo or bu. And the original alphabet of the ancient world has no vowels in it. It is a consonantal alphabet entirely and so even if you recognize where the word begins and ends you can read that word in any number of different ways. So instruction in the ancient world began with a teacher reading the text to the student, making sure that the student could read the text back to the teacher so the teacher would hear that the student had read it correctly, and going back and forth until the teacher was sure that the child had this particular classic text in mind. And so everyone was taught to read out loud and as late as the 5th, 6th century of our era St. Augustine mentions in his autobiography how surprised he was when he went to Rome and found in one of the schoolrooms there one of the senior scholars sitting in a corner, reading the way we read, silently, just reading the text without reading it aloud.

We often, when I was growing up, talked about the Chinese schoolroom and by a Chinese schoolroom we meant a place where everybody was reading aloud. Well, all ancient classrooms were Chinese schoolrooms, filled with babble, filled with sound, as children read. There was no such thing as reading something silently.

Now, because of the difficulties involved in reading, because of the needs of compression, because of the lack of agreement as to text, almost all the ancient texts are different from ours in one major respect and that has to do with brevity. The ancient rule was, much in little. Say as much as you can in as few words as you can because if you use too many words nobody is going to copy them out, nobody is going to take the time.

I have a friend, you've met him, Martin Gilbert. He's been one of our First Friday speakers. Among his other accomplishments he is the official biographer of Winston Churchill and he has already completed eight volumes of that official biography. Each volume runs to 500 pages or more. It's a magnificent piece of work but it's the kind of work which no author in antiquity would dare to undertake. Who would pay to have such a book copied? Some patron would have to want that book so desperately that he would hire a scribe and have to pay a living wage to the scribe which would support the scribe and his family for three, four, maybe five years in order to get a single copy of that text. And so the ancient texts deal with compression. They avoid many of the things which we take for granted. If you read the Biblical literature, there's almost no description of place. there's no description of physical presence, the look of a character. There's no attempt to explain motivation. What you have is incident and you are left to try and decipher, decode yourself the motivations which led the actors to do what they did do. We're not told, for instance, why Adam gave in to Eve and ate of the forbidden fruit. It's left up to us to decide whether she cajoled him into eating of the fruit, whether he wanted to in the first place and was looking for an excuse,

what the reason might have been. We're not told why Abraham was willing to attempt to obey God and sacrifice his son Isaac simply on God's command. We're not told why Moses decided suddenly one day to strike down an Egyptian taskmaster. It's left to our imagination as we read the story and because we come to these Biblical stories at various periods in our lives, we're thinking about different ideas. Our concerns and our ideas and our hopes are different. We tend to read the Biblical stories in a variety of ways, differently each time we come to them, and that's part of the miracle of the continuing popularity of the Biblical material. When you explain everything, once you've read the book and put it down you never pick it up again. And if a novelist has in a thousand pages told us everything he wants us ever to know about the characters in his novel, we may read it completely but we'll never look at it again. We've gotten as much out of that book as we possibly can. But you can read the Biblical stories again and again and again and read them differently each time you come to them.

Shakespeare, you will recall, said that brevity is the soul of wit. In a real sense brevity is that which introduces into a well-shaped and structured text surprise, mystery, the things which are compelling which draw us back to that text time and time again.

Now, all this is by way of introducing some of the joys, the unexpected joys, of the Megillah. The Megillah of Esther is one of the last books of the Bible. It was probably written some time around the 2nd century B.C.E. By Biblical standards it's prolix, it's verbose, that is it contains 165 sentences. Now, imagine a whole novel being written in 165 sentences and imagine that the judgement made on that novel is that in fact you could cut it

down a bit. It includes, you know, the heavy language of a number of the statements put out by the Persian bureaucracy, but still, it is at one with the rest of the Biblical literature in that it presents us the incident without description or without explanation of motivation. The story begins as we heard it read today with the enjoyment, or endurance, perhaps, of this long, long expensive banquet, organized by the Akomian Persian King Ahashuarus for his nobles. It's a banquet that lasted 180 days and 180 nights. Now, I'd be tired after the first week and I suspect that it was only the fact that the king's command was arbitrary that kept most of the nobles at the table, but be that as it may, we have simply the statement. There was this lavish banquet, we're not told why the king suddenly decided in the third year of his reign to hold this banquet, but he did. And we are told that at some point in this orgy he ordered his Queen, Vashti, to appear, to put on her royal diadem, that the people and the nobles might approve of her beauty. And the first question of motivation which fascinates us is why did Vashti refuse to obey the king's order. We're back in times where the king's whim is his command and anyone who fails to obey the king's command will be summarily executed. why should Vashti disobeyed her liege lord? Now, one is obviously suspecting of the feeling that the author simply had to find a way to depose one queen so another queen could come to the throne. But, of course, if we read the story of Vashti in modern terms, in terms of the women's movement, we read into her actions one of the first historic protests against a woman being treated as a sexual object. She's not simply going to allow herself to be paraded before a group of men

in which she would find it degrading to have that done, therefore, she refuses the command. And women's magazines are filled with interpretations of Purim of this kind. Indeed, Purim is for the Jewish woman's movement the favorite holiday of them all. They have a hero. Notice, I didn't say heroine.

But it's interesting when one looks back at the commentaries written on this story by those who lived in the oriental world, much closer to Vashti's world in time, that they don't read the story quite this way. They remind us that Vashti was noble born, unlike Esther, and self-proud and they postulate that the reason that she refused the king's command was not that she was unused to his calling her to appear before his lords, but the Bible says that he ordered her to appear before the peoples and the lords and that for a noble-born woman to display herself for the hoy-paloy, before the lower classes, was an act which had been seen demeaning, that she acted out of pride, in other words, rather than out of gender principle. And this suggestion seems to carry some sense of weight to it and it suggests that the king's command itself, which includes the word to appear before the populace and the nobles may have been deliberately demeaning, that he had something else in mind beside displaying her beauty. But, be that as it may, Vashti is deposed. There is room now for Esther on the throne and we get to the question of motive which most concerned, disturbed the more pious of our ancestors. How could a nice Jewish girl enter a beauty contest? It's not the kind of thing that nice Jewish girls do. Moreover, how could a nice Jewish girl enter a beauty contest whose prize was to marry a pagan? a non-Jew? Now, when they face this problem their usual explanation was to excuse Esther on the basis

of immaturity. Esther, after all, could not have been more than eleven or twelve and that's true. In the oriental world the women who were brought into the harems of the potentates were youngsters, 11, 12, at the very most 13 and there was a great premium who thought in these terms on extreme youth. I won't go into the Freudian basis of all of that but accept it as a statement of historic fact. Now, obviously a little girl of 11 or 12 is not equipped to make the kind of serious judgement which would say, this is not the kind of thing that a nice Jewish girl should or should not do. So then the onus falls on Mordecai. We have a different problem. Mordecai is an adult. He's a courtier. He's her uncle. He's her guardian. He ought to know better. Not only does Mordecai know that the prize of this contest is marriage to this pagan king but he knows that even if Esther is refused she must stay in the palace for half a year and he certainly knows that the palace kitchens don't prepare kosher food and he certainly knows that there isn't a minyan in the palace so that Esther can on the shabbas daven and on the holidays she can attend public worship. Why should Mordecai, this good Jew, have acted in the way that he did?

Now, their problem was that anything that made it into the Bible tended to become well-known, obviously, and that people modeled themselves after the behavior of Biblical heroes, so what if one begins to model oneself after Mordecai? What does that mean that fathers will do in terms of their daughters? So a story emerges which you can find in the Talmudic midrash and that story tells us that Mordecai did not, in point of fact, decide that Esther should enter the beauty contest. Quite the opposite. He knew that she

not whole people will be saved.

had a beauty which was already well-known. He was afraid that the secret police of the Persian king would hear about her beauty and when the order went out to bring in the most beautiful maidens of all the kingdom she would be caught in that net and so he hid Esther and he tried to have her escape from the security police, but they were very efficient and they found her out and it was not Mordecai's decision which sent Esther into the palace but simply that she was force marched there by the police of the Persian Empire.

Now, on what does one base this particular invention? Well, one bases it on the fact that there is no explicit statement in the Megillah that Mordecai enrolled Esther in the contest, he filled out the registration form. The text talks about Mordecai and Esther and then says simply, and Esther was taken into the palace, and they read the verb was taken as meaning was taken by force into the palace.

Then there is another pious explanation in the Talmudic midrash. It begins with the question, on whose authority could Mordecai have proclaimed Purim to be an annual religious observance? With the exception of Hanukah, all our other holidays are ordered to us in the Torah by God through the agent of the prophet Moses and it's assumed that the establishment of holidays require someone who has the authority of the prophet, so Mordecai becomes a prophet. And, obviously, a prophet can foretell and, obviously, one can then create the story that Mordecai was able to foresee that Esther would be the agent of Israel's redemption, and far from disobeying anything that God would have disapproved of, he is obeying God's will by seeing that she gets to this place from which her whole people will be saved.

The questions which interests me most about motivation when it comes to the Megillah, is the motivation of Hayman. Hayman does not appear until nearly a quarter of the story of the book of the Megillah has already been told and suddenly we're told that the king appoints Hayman to be second in command in the empire, the vizier. We're not told why he merited this appointment but simply that Hayman the son of Hamadata, the Aggagite, is appointed as the chief officer of the kingdom; that the king orders that all courtiers are to bow to him as a mark of hi office, a mark of respect; that Mordecai refused to do so and that Hayman became angry and determined to destroy Mordecai and all of his people. Now, one of the questions, of course, is why should Mordecai have refused to bow to Hayman. Interesting question because there's nothing in the law which says that we may not show as a mark of respect our respect to those who have authority. And the answer is, of course, to invent another story, and the story is that Hayman carried around his neck a golden chain from which hung an idol and that Mordecai simply refused to perform any act which might seem as though it was an act of idolatry, bowing before some foreign god.

But the more interesting question to me, and the question which is rarely seen by us which testifies to a peculiar way in which we've been conditioned, is why this act by a single courtier, Mordecai's unwillingness to bow the knee to Hayman should have led to Hayman's decision to commit genocide, to destroy the whole Jewish people. Now, it says something about our conditioning that this question is rarely looked at. We simply assume that if one attacks one Jew somehow all Jews are suspect. For two thousand years in the Christian world and the Muslim world, if a Jew ran afoul

of the law, the whole community might have been exiled, the whole community was endangered. And we take this idea of the community of Israel as being one as to destiny for granted. We know that we play a peculiar role in the theology of the peoples of the west and so when they attack a Jew, they tend immediately to think of the sins, presumed or otherwise, of all Jews. But I remind you that the book of Esther is set in the Persian Empire, that is in the 6th, 5th century B.C.E., 500 years and more before Jews came to play a symbolic role in the theologies and the thought systems of the west.

In the Persian Empire there are any number, hundreds literally, of ethnic communities, of nations, who were scattered about here and there. And there is nothing in the Zoroastrian tradition, the authoritative tradition of the Persian Empire. There was nothing in the culture of the Persian world which will have led people to think instinctively that if Mordecai is a Jew, somehow all Jews are to be made to suffer. Why, then, this sudden decision that all must somehow pay the price?

The rabbis seized upon the phrase in which this decision is detailed in the third chapter of the Megillah. And it was a matter of distress in the eyes of Haman that Mordecai would not bow down to him; therefore, he determined to destroy all his people. We often use the phrase, power corrupts. One of the ways in which power corrupts is that we feel having power we need to assert it. And what the rabbis of early times suggested is that it was distressful, shameful, in Haman's eyes simply to avenge himself on the single human being. Why? Because, obviously, the second in command of the king who had the king's seal could arbitrarily imprison

anyone he wanted to execute him, that there was no way of proving power, but in order to show the magnificence of the power that he now enjoyed, he had to perform some great act and, indifferent to the human cost of that act he determined quickly, out of anger, that he would avenge himself and prove his power by attacking the whole people, by genocide. And so what we have, I think, is an exhibition of one of the peculiar vices to which all of us are prone if we are fortunate enough or unfortunate enough to enjoy power. And that is that we need to display, teacher to students, employer to employee, political figure to those who come for favors or out of need, we need to display our power and we are often tempted to do so without thought to the cost to others of the anger or the arbitrariness of our decisions.

The Megillah story is not one to be thought of in terms that are familiar to us as another evidence of anti-semitism in the western world. The Persian world did not know what it meant to be anti-semitic. The myths of deicide, the myths of the pariah people, the attempt to create new religions out of our religion, none of this had yet come into being. The story is best understood, and certainly the motivations of Haman are best understood as examples of human frailty, human failing, of the fact that all of us are tempted to use power arbitrarily if we have it and that when we use power, power always claims its victims.

passing, writing with very small letters - That's
 a fine judgment. 200's with small letters - That's
 at right angles the other 100's of an ordinary type with -
 the middle of a word processor, one hundred
 in the same way, one hundred and
 in 200, 200's of a hundred, one, one, one, one, one
 writing angles, but actually used judgment with 200's
 more advanced - - What 200's can be used with 200's
 in 200 and 100's, one hundred and one, one hundred
 The only way the secret could be revealed is that

30

Q. 2. Write in general, you at 1 by attracted
rule: concurrent reading desires has made and
to be order, granted now is presented and penetration
simples. 2 in the first part but not 2 part from
on paper needs to read in the 2nd is. No on not
another enjoyed but in literary -

Der
 request include both number -
 The below subject was purely unintentional - No other
 would like understand.
 I read "12a" ? ? ? ?
 were not standard until after the war 1st
 period. Der Term means large is the number in
 the period from about the 2nd century BCE has no
number origin in penetration mark - C is used
 level in the mark and number 1 says and

may 4/100 blood and other evidence to him to expand that in-
to that and you need 100 minutes recovery in the
veg. - Breeds, Shakes more slowly the more you eat - the
more also that activity about always improves in the
become it enough to mail to feed out the desired - so
allows for expansion IT is real emotion to write
a long book than a short one.

[illegible]

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 of the year - the reason for the revised plan is, as I said
 120 years, as a school - in fact, it is a school of
 the same size as a school in the 3rd year of
 school was vacant - I think - you would, - before
 a school in the 3rd year in the 3rd year in the 3rd year
 of the 3rd year

[illegible]

Las Vegas and Las Vegas

a man who might make him useful - can
 make - last night was a pleasant one - a happy
one - and it is starting to commence - we can't read
 a report as a gift of public - we imagine - valuable,
 by us, we need have - but business we can use
 the key words in the diary named the paper - we
have papers - a man a to the papers - for public use
used - in general public is it no better if all good
must have - and good has many discovered valuable

[illegible]

While appears because she used to disappear - Either
 her to after her father's second law disappeared - Just nobody
 has means a kind of disappeared can never find concealed
 her that she knew no in a way with seems unbelievable
 For a new through girl -

with more people in front and
get a better grasp of the
newspaper to an understanding
the king?

likely needed some stone to replace masonry, etc.
from the one on the left to the right side, which is not
marked in the plan. The masonry of the side wall is
older & masonry is better - masonry work, however, has been
overlaid now on the country, the masonry side has not
taken - only perfect masonry work is seen - and the masonry
side is a perfect masonry known to a perfect test. The
should be added in the context - because they have
delivered several times to spread

For the side still had laying down about the
middle, the masonry work is the ^{same} ~~same~~ : Every
side the masonry work is the ^{same} ~~same~~ as the court in
front of the house, the masonry work is the same as the
what was happened to the masonry work but the masonry
work is still the same & repeat in the masonry - the
side with some masonry - the masonry work is
the masonry work is the same as the masonry work - but
the masonry work is the same as the masonry work
the masonry work is the same as the masonry work -

A good masonry work masonry work is
country, the masonry work is the same as the masonry work
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the masonry work is the same as the masonry work - the masonry work is the same as the masonry work

Do you see the inference as undoubtedly the intention
of the man - 'I would just as to a Q. would he always
intended me: my old friend and as he said?'

There is not sufficient evidence to show that the
1941 was enough - In unexplained manner taken down, he
has been shown to be possible of utility - now only he
can say - 'I am told nothing by the police - ~~attitude~~ of
that he had the high office - that cause was rejected &
small chance to be used he found - that means
refers to the so - that there are good words - are
because of man's own, referred to that is denied to many
himself and on matters, but as so he found

My husband a small as a letter found and
the deposition?

He is ^{is} concerned to the matter in which for
him seen several of deeds - that is out of the
matters - signed as evidence for the work, that -
that is just from the deposition because that to
except not. The of him is only as my paper of King's
Tennessee's deeds have been -

But the bond of the man would reveal
evidence before X³ appeared with some - he for
so good, and not always as that of some piece
at the proceedings of the work of the record. The
business of the man would be of arranged

people's religious traditions - I have observed ^{many} ~~many~~ ^{of} ~~of~~ ⁱⁿ ~~in~~ ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{media} - I followed to ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{media} of a Jewish Toronto -
where many new right left middle as can see - How,
in the end, was not doing what was con nationally,
to Xmas and many reports the last second 1000
years -

What did he ~~do~~ to get conclusion?

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kill the judge, he change that the young no not say the
King's laws can be offered The King 10,000 Tubats
order for the agreed.

Drop of good love to me - The King of the right to
Baruch Chaim with love and agreement - For the to the
remains and the peace to the people and the people and the people
very personal - It was the subject any to be done
to help - if you would accept that the peace
discovery - because we need as well.

But not him, even to next degree, and
for a series of reasons - and a series of commitments
made - today to say how much much more to
is that Hebrew is not the same for -
now a moment of the past - Now a
peace, he felt in need to display his peace

[illegible]

Flood much ago: Hame "DOLDAINON To Lny hand
on run down alone": 1'1'1'1' - It was a matter
of share in his eyes to Reg-L-ly a murderer alone. He had
all seen occasion in which he seemed to have been placed
by a terrible fate to the man in danger & he left /
under a ~~dark~~ ^{dark} in the shadow of a ~~man~~ - a recent
+ Duck served - returned to him ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~man~~
secret of his power -

Page empty

9-1 need to test & compare
need to select it

on June 1. 1941 - from Room 60 photo of
 all villages - because he ~~had~~ ^{asked} one of the men
 finished a set of villages - 6 sets of sets - 4 sets -
 on 2/10 - no movement ~~that~~ it needs to be made
 power at all times - & see no ~~movement~~ ^{change} of
 the hand of other -

From the desk of—

RABBI DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

Brevity is the soul of wit

" introduces no allusion of mystery

it is much easier to write a long book than
a short one.

In general pride is at the bottom of
all great mistakes - Ruckin

"ESTHER, TOO, WAS TAKEN INTO THE PALACE"

"EVERY SINGLE DAY MUNDENI WOULD WALK
ABOUT IN THE COURT IN FRONT OF THE HANON,
TO LEARN HOW ESTHER WAS FEELING AND
WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO HER"

"DISDAINED TO LAY HANDS ON MUNDENI
ALONE"

14:42 5:21