

The Timeless Message of Purim by Rabbi Abraham B. Hecht

All of the holidays will eventually cease to exist, except for Purim which will remain eternally (Midrash Mishlei). All of the Books of the Prophets and Writings will be terminated except for the five books of Moses and the Megillah of Esther, which will remain forever. (Yerushalmi Megillah)

The days of Purim will never cease to exist for it is written "and these days of Purim will never pass from amongst the Jews and their remembrance will never be abolished from their children" (Rambam, Hilchos Megillah 2:18).

There is, obviously, something extremely unique in the story and celebration of Purim which insures its eternal quality and provides its timelessness. In this sermon we shall seek to discover what it is that invests the Megillah with eternal teachings designed to outlast and outlive the confines of recorded time.

Superficially, the story of Purim appears as an ordinary event in the annals of the Jewish people. Persecution and pogroms are nothing new to the Jew, who has had to face a hostile world, ever since the birth of the first Jew— Abraham. Already, then, some four thousand years ago, it was apparent that he and his descendants would have to go it alone, facing a hostile world throughout their national existence. Abraham was called Ho'Ivri—Abraham the Hebrew. Because he was a grandchild of Eber, he received the designation Ivri, denoting his genealogical roots. But our Rabbis found a most interesting explanation for the name Ivri, which in Hebrew means "a side" and they declare, that the peoples of the entire world were arrayed against him on one side, and he, Abraham, stood alone on his own side. "Maase Ovos Siman Le'bonim," Our sages taught, that every event however minor in the lives of our patriarchs already foretold the unfolding drama of yet unborn generations.

Even a cursory review of our history will reveal this honest

evaluation, that of the Jewish people versus the nations of the earth. And, therefore, the events leading up to and culminating in the miracle of Purim, are really just a continuation of the evil designs of a Nimrod, Amrafel, Avimelech, Pharaoh, Amalek and the host of other perennial anti-semites who strode across the pages of history seeking to decimate the Jewish people. In every situation, the eternal watchman over the destiny of Israel—our A-mighty G-d, responds to our supplications and usually, miraculously and in a supernatural fashion, the Jewish people is saved from complete annihilation. For we have Heaven's pledge that "Netzach Yisroel Lo Yeshaker" the children of Israel being attached to an eternal creator, must of necessity, ever remain eternal and indestructible. Why then, should Purim be so different, in view of our historical experiences.

We must, therefore, seek for some deeper meaning to discover the secret of this elixir of eternity. It may be, that the timeless message of this threatened national catastrophe, lies in the manner in which the crisis was averted. For although the story is couched in natural sequences of unfolding events; the love of a demented King for his Queen Vashti matched by his devotion for her replacement Queen Esther; the mad and senseless sell out of the Jews into the hands of a vicious Haman and his subsequent replacement by the virtuous Mordechai; with the intervening seemingly coincidental happenings of the plot to kill the King, his rescue at the hands of Mordechai, the unmitigated drive for power by the demonic Haman, his family and followers, all of these events make for a most intriguing ancient oriental plot and conspiracy.

We should study the response by the Jewish communal leadership to this national crisis. What was the reaction of the masses to the early friendly gestures of the despot King and how did they react to the diabolic plot afterwards, to destroy them. If we will properly evaluate and comprehend these facts, we will be in a position to appreciate why our Talmudic sages found this event to be eternal and meaningful for eternity.

After seventy years of exile in Babylon the masses had apparently just about forgotten that they were mercilessly driven out of their homeland, Eretz Yisroel, that their Bes Hamikdash had been destroyed and that their promised land was now overrun and ruled by Persian rulers. For all intents and purposes, the Jewish nation had finally succumbed and ceased to exist. There were now golden opportunities for the original forced captives from Israel, who considered themselves immigrants who hailed from Eretz Yisroel, and who were about to achieve equal status with the native born Persians. They sat in the councils of the King, they were in positions of power and influence. They were rewarded for their new loyalty to Persia by being invited to attend the Royal parties and feasts, which lasted for six months, as recorded in the Megillah.

Because they were a tolerated and even privileged minority, made them forget and not really care, for what they had left behind in their homeland. This was a new country, with lenient laws and a place where you could make good, if only you assimilated and joined forces with the prevailing majority. Never mind that the food and drink at these feasts were Trefah and unKosher. Why care about the illicit relations with heathen damsels provided free for the party goers. Why be concerned that the Holy vessels of the sacked Temple were being displayed contemptuously and violated by drunken and depraved ministers of the royal palace. This was the sad state of affairs during the reign of Ahashverosh, Supreme Ruler of Persia and one hundred twenty-seven provinces, representing the entire populated world at that time.

Except for that loyal handful of saintly scholars of the Torah, amongst whom Mordechai shone as the brightest star, the future of Judaism and the Jewish people appeared doomed to complete oblivion. Against this background of material plenty and opportunity, concomitant with the dismal backsliding and spiritual depression of the masses of Jews, the inevitable tragedy occurs. The anti semitic winds begin to blow in hurricane force, shatter-

ing the political tranquility of these "favored lackeys" who have just about forgotten about and written off their Jewish lineage. They are now face to face with the ominous threat of total extinction, because of their Jewish ancestry. Never mind the fact that they were intermarried, assimilated and Persianized. It did not matter to the dementia of the wicked Haman. His goal was the removal of the Jewish people in toto: men, women and children should be destroyed mercilessly and without regard as to their loyalty, devotion and dedication to the culture, politics and financial success of their new home in Persia, because they were born Jews.

The reaction to this threat is what occupied and captured the imagination of our sages, causing them to make their evaluations for posterity. The heroes of course, are Mordechai and Esther, who both displayed superhuman courage in the face of absolute adversity. Their trust and confidence in the A-mighty sustained them and showed the way to a helplessly distressed and confused populace.

The Queen persisted in her observance of the laws of Kashruth and Sabbath observance, despite the almost impossible conditions in the palace. Never for a moment did she allow herself to forget that she, too, was of royal descent, directly connected with the first Jewish King, Saul. Her loyalty to her G-d and people never faltered. In the most critical moment, when self preservation should have been her primary concern, she threw her lot in with her people, although this could have resulted in tragic consequences for her.

Mordechai never flinched for a moment and faced Haman's absolute wrath, daily. His faith in G-d was so strong, that he openly and brazenly defied the then almost invincible Haman. He wore his Judaism openly and proudly and was totally oblivious to the personal dangers he faced. He rallied his people to renew their commitment to G-d and return to the religion they had almost forgotten and forsaken. He inspired such a spiritual revolution in the masses, that our Rabbis in the Talmud were inclined to con-

sider the return to Torah by the masses, as a renewal of the acceptance of the Torah, first experienced at Sinai. In fact, the sages declare, that the recommitment to the Torah in Persia contained a fresh element of voluntary acceptance beyond that of Sinai. Such was the exemplary conduct of our heroes, which inspired such adulation and praise by our sages.

Because our sages knew that these Purim episodes would be repeated countless times during our long exile, they therefore attached such importance and significance to the events recorded in the Megillah. They recognized the eternal message of hope and trust that would be so vital for the confidence and trust of the Jewish people. They, therefore, insisted that we read, study and learn from the Megillah, those eternal truths which assure the eternity of the Jewish people. Only a generation loyal to Torah can survive.

How actual and real this message is for Jews world wide. The Megillah has not lost any of its brilliance, lustre or meaning also for Jews in the 20th century. May that we be good students and derive the full benefit of this eternal book, for the eternal people of our eternal G-d.

Finale

by Rabbi Philip H. Singer

On Purim, as during Chanukah, we recite "Al Hanisim." In this thanksgiving prayer, the stories of the miracles of both celebrations are related in a succinct synopsis.

But yet there is an obvious difference. In the "Al Hanisim" of Chanukah, there is a finale. "Thereafter your sons came to the Abode of your House, they cleansed the Sanctuary, purified your place of Holiness and kindled lights in your Holy Courts, and instituted these eight days of Chanukah for avowing thanks and rendering praise to Your great Name." However, in the "Al Hanisim" of Purim there is an abrupt ending. "But you, in your abundant compassion thwarted his plan and frustrated his intention and caused that which he sought to do to recoil on his head; and they hanged him and his sons upon the gallows.

What kind of an ending is this? Don't you feel suspended? Should there not have been a finale? Why not tell that the celebration of Purim was instituted with its reading of the Megillah, Mishloach Monos, alms to the poor and the Seudoh? Why was this portion omitted? Is it possible that the story of Purim is never-ending? Was Haman only an episode in the ceaseless hatred toward the Jews? But, though the history of our people is replete with a succession of Hamans, our rabbis would not indicate that in the Al Hanisim and mar the joyous celebration. Then why is there no uplifting conclusion to the prayer?

The answer is, I believe, because the high-point of the story of Purim was "Keeyemu Vikiblu"—that the Jews again accepted the Torah. Not as at Mount Sinai by compulsion but with love. It would have been erroneous and misleading if we would have ended the Al Hanisim with enumerating the various expressions of celebration. The outcome of the story of Purim was not the merry-making, nor even reading the Megillah or Mishloach-Monos, but the rededication to the Torah.