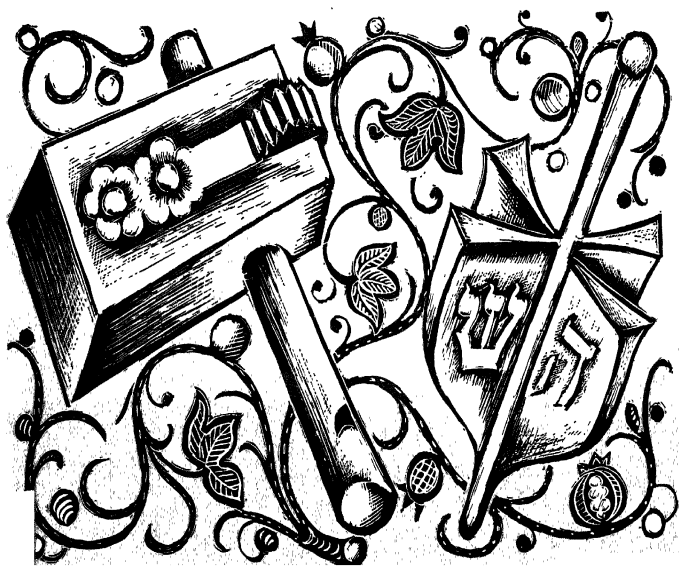


PURIM  
AND  
HANUKKAH  
IN CUSTOM AND TRADITION



THEODOR H. GASTER

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## PURIM AND HANUKKAH

In Custom and Tradition

*Feast of Lots and Feast of Lights*

By THEODOR H. GASTER

PURIM AND HANUKKAH—the springtime Feast of Lots and the autumn Feast of Lights—are two of the merriest yet most puzzling holidays in the Jewish calendar.

They are linked together as feasts of liberation.

Scholars have long suspected, however, that beneath the veneer of seemingly historical explanations there lie the traces of more ancient and primitive festivals, such as are indeed observed by other peoples in many parts of the world. The search for these original forms has led through devious and intriguing paths that make a fascinating story. That story is here retold in a series of absorbing chapters, describing the celebration of the two feasts through the ages, recounting, in vivid fashion, the quaint legends, customs, and traditions which have gathered around them. Here is all the fun and frolic of Purim—the sprightly songs and parodies; the *grogger* and the *hamantaschen*. And here, likewise, are the lights and games and songs of Hanukkah—the *trendel* and the *ketowaus*.

Nor is the more serious side of the festivals neglected. The book includes a completely new interpretation of the Book of Esther and informative disquisitions on the artistic embellishments of both the Purim Megillah and the Hanukkah Lamp.



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# PURIM and HANUKKAH

IN CUSTOM

AND TRADITION

*Feast of Lots*



THEODOR HERZL GASTER

*Feast of Lights*



HENRY SCHUMAN

NEW YORK



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DESIGNED BY MARSHALL LEE

*For*

CORINNA MICHAL

*on her first Purim*





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# Purim

∴

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## FOREWORD

IT is difficult for any man of middle age to recall exactly all the events of his childhood and adolescence or to trace with accuracy the complete course of his mental and spiritual development. Memory plays him false, and is eked out, as often as not, by pious inventions which he takes for fact; what was once a sharp outline becomes a mere blur. All he knows for certain is that he has been the subject of many and varied influences and experiences and that these, together with his inherited traditions, have made him what he is.

What is true of individuals is equally true of popular customs and institutions, and especially of festivals. For a festival is essentially an expression of the folk mind and spirit, and is therefore equally subject to continuous growth and change. Every generation recasts it in its own pattern, according to its own circumstances and situation; and every generation reads into it a significance and emphasis born of its own particular



## FOREWORD

experience and outlook. A festival is thus a dynamic, not a static, thing, and there can be perforce neither constancy nor permanence in either its form or its meaning. Moreover, once its true history and origin have been forgotten, later generations are no less prone than are private individuals in similar circumstances to eke out the deficiencies of the record with myth and legend and to attach to these products of their imagination the sanctity of fact and the sentiment which comes from time-hallowed tradition.

To trace the true evolution of a festival is therefore not to walk upon a single beaten path but to follow a dozen obscure trails, some of which indeed converge while others become irretrievably lost. In the nature of the case, the final account must depend at many points upon pure inference and conjecture or upon "reconstructions" suggested by the presence of analogous usages elsewhere; and at all times the critical student faces the charge of sacrilege on the part of those to whom the traditional version is a sacred heritage and a prized possession.

In the present book an attempt has been made to sketch the true history and development of two familiar Jewish festivals, and at the same time to describe the manner of their observance throughout the ages. Both of these festivals have long since been invested with certain established interpretations, and the writer is therefore conscious of the fact that his own variant account may sometimes evoke a raising of eyebrows or even a less sympathetic reaction. He would therefore point out in advance that the object of the following pages is to present not only the traditional, but also a critical view of how Purim and Hanukkah came into being. In the

## FOREWORD

writer's view, such an approach increases rather than diminishes the appreciation of the festivals, for it helps to see in them the expression not only of one mood or aspiration, nor the commemoration of one particular event, but rather the vehicle of a people's constant striving and achievement. Moreover, in defense of the fact that his own presentation is largely conjectural, the writer would observe that so too is the traditional version; the only difference is that the latter has come to be accepted as fact, while the former is offered, frankly and candidly, as a mere plausible reconstruction of available data.

\* \* \*

This book is concerned with the observance of the festivals, not with their expression in literature and art. Discussion of such topics as the Apocryphal additions to the Book of Esther or the Scroll of Antiochus have therefore been excluded, nor has it been found necessary to discuss the many adaptations of the Purim and Hanukkah stories in modern prose and verse. For the same reason, too, nothing has been said about the amusing Purim parodies which constitute an especial *genre* of Hebrew letters. On the other hand, special care has been taken to include abundant specimens of the Purim plays and mummeries which, so far as the writer knows, have never before been translated into English.

\* \* \*

In each generation, the values of the festivals are differently assessed. In ancient times, their primary significance lay in the fact that each commemorated a deliverance from oppression. Today, it may be suggested, they possess an even deeper meaning. An essen-

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## FOREWORD

tial element of both the Purim and the Hanukkah stories is not only opposition to tyranny from without but equally to complacency from within. Esther's courageous appeal to the king was inspired by Mordecai's express assurance that those in high station could not seek escape for themselves by concealing their identity with their people or by holding aloof from the common cause; while the foes of the Maccabees were not only the officers of Antiochus but no less the degenerate leaders of their own people. To a generation which has seen the perils of "collaboration," and reaped its bitter fruits, the message of Purim and Hanukkah may well be that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.

PURIM

FEAST OF LOTS





## WHAT IS PURIM?

THERE is no merrier occasion in the Jewish year than Purim, or the Feast of Lots. Purim, which is celebrated as a secular holiday, falls on the fourteenth day of the lunar month of Adar, which corresponds roughly to March. According to tradition, this festival commemorates a singular deliverance of the Jews of Persia from the destruction planned against them by Haman, vizier of King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes I (485-465 B.C.). The deliverance was accomplished by that monarch's Jewish wife, Esther, and her cousin, Mordecai; and the events are related in the Biblical Book of Esther, which is read publicly in the synagogue as the "theme text" of the day. The name *Purim* is said to mean "lots" and to commemorate the fact that Haman and his fellow conspirators chose this day by lot for the execution of their plan.

Scholars have had little difficulty, however, in showing that the Book of Esther is a work of fiction

## PURIM

rather than a sober historical record. In the first place, none of the Persian kings who bore the name of Xerxes had a wife called Esther; indeed, Xerxes could not have had a Jewish wife at all, because the law of the Medes and Persians permitted the sovereign to marry only into one of the seven leading Persian families, and the selection of his bride was therefore a matter of the closest scrutiny. Secondly, there is no mention anywhere but in the Book of Esther of a queen named Vashti, a vizier named Haman, or a courtier named Mordecai who eventually replaced Haman. Thirdly, Mordecai is said in the book (2:6) to have been one of the exiles deported from Jerusalem when Judah was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. But that famous deportation took place a full 112 years before Xerxes came to the throne. Mordecai would therefore have been incredibly old at the time of our story. Lastly, there is no Hebrew or Persian word *pur* meaning "lot."

We are faced, then, with two alternatives. Either the festival of Purim is an aberration, based upon pure romance, or it really originated in some quite independent fashion and the story of Esther was subsequently associated with it in order to explain and validate its observance. With but rare exceptions, scholars have preferred the second view, holding that Purim is no exception to the general rule that the festivals of one nation may be borrowed by another and justified by new interpretations, or that ancient institutions, the origins of which have long since been forgotten, may be rendered intelligible to a later age by the invention of appropriate "historical" legends. If this hypothesis is correct, Purim would have devel-

## WHAT IS PURIM?

oped in much the same way as did, for example, Easter or Christmas: by the transformation of an older, "pagan" festival.





## 2

### HOW DID PURIM BEGIN?

IT is one thing to say that the Book of Esther is not historical and that Purim must really have originated in some pagan festival which the Jews took over and adapted; it is quite another to identify the original festival with precision. The plain fact is that the earliest reference to Purim, outside of the Book of Esther, dates only from the first century B.C. and that we know nothing of any stage in the development of the holiday anterior to that described in the Bible. All reconstructions, therefore, rest, in the last analysis, upon speculation and conjecture. The latter, however, are the legitimate offspring of research, and scholarship has never disowned them. Accordingly, several different solutions of the puzzle have been proposed.

One theory is that the festival really dates from the Greek rather than from the Persian period of Jewish

history, and that its original purpose was to commemorate the victory of Judah the Maccabee over the Syrian general Nicanor on the thirteenth day of Adar, 161 B.C. The Book of Esther, it is surmised, is simply a political squib, retrojecting into a remoter Persian past the conditions which obtained in the time of Antiochus IV. On this assumption, Xerxes would stand for the monarch himself; Haman, for Nicanor; and Mordecai, for Judah the Maccabee. The objection to this theory is, however, that in the Second Book of Maccabees (in the Apocrypha of the Bible) it is stated clearly and explicitly (15:36) that the victory over Nicanor was celebrated "*on the day before the day of Mordecai.*" Moreover, this view does not account for the name of the festival, and it does not explain why a Jew living in the Greek period should have gone out of his way to interpret that name from an exotic *Babylonian* word (*puru*) which would have been completely unfamiliar both to himself and to his readers. Also, it may be added, it does not explain the role of Esther; for there is no feminine character in the Maccabean struggle to whom she could correspond.

Another theory is that the name of the festival derives from the Hebrew word *purah*, which means "wine press," and that the festival itself is simply a Judaization of the Greek festival of Pithoigia, or "Opening the Wine Casks." But, first, a wine *press* is not a wine *cask* and, while the opening of the casks takes place in spring, the press is appropriate only to operations which take place in the fall. In the second place, the plural of the word *purah* would be *purôth*, not *purim*.

## PURIM

A third theory seeks the origin of Purim neither in Persia nor in Greece but in Babylon and holds that the festival was adopted by the Jews during the Babylonian Exile. According to this theory, the prototype was the Babylonian New Year festival, held at the beginning of spring. At that festival, it is supposed, a ritual pantomime was enacted portraying the victory of Babylon's leading deities, the male Marduk and the female Ishtar, over those of the neighboring state of Elam, the male Humman and the female Kiririsha. This pantomime was later transmogrified by the Jews, when Babylon fell under Persian rule, into the story of Mordecai and Esther's triumph over Haman and his wife, Zeresh, the setting being changed appropriately to the Persian court. As for the name of the festival, Purim would be connected with the Babylonian word *puru*, "lot," but it would originally have referred to the fact that on New Year's Day the gods of Babylon were believed to meet in conclave and determine the lots, or destinies, of mankind for the ensuing year. Alternatively, it has been suggested, it may have alluded to the selection of civic officers by lot on that occasion and have therefore meant something like "Election Day."

This hypothesis is undoubtedly attractive, but it, too, encounters fatal objections. In the first place, the Babylonian New Year was observed in the month of Nisan (April), and the celebrations lasted a full *ten* days. It could not, therefore, have been the prototype of a festival which is said specifically to have fallen on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar (March). Secondly, although we know a good deal about the Babylonian New Year, we have no evidence that it

was ever called "Day of Lots." Thirdly, it is extremely doubtful that there was in fact a major Elamite god named Humman—only a minor Khumban or Khuba is attested—and that his consort was indeed called Kiririsha. Fourthly and lastly, it is somewhat difficult to understand how Jews residing in the ancient Elamite capital, Susa could ever have dared to circulate a story so thinly disguising the discomfiture of Elamite gods!

A fourth theory starts from the fact that in the ancient Greek (Septuagint) translation of the Scriptures the festival is called not Purim but Phruraia or Phurdaia and that the historian Josephus (c. 37-100 A.D.) knew it by virtually the same name. This has suggested that the form *Purim*, and the explanation of it from an alleged *pur*, "lot," arose only out of an early corruption of the text and that the original name derived rather from the Persian Farwadigan, a five-day All Souls' festival celebrated at the end of the year or, in earlier times, toward the middle of the last month of the year. Traces of this festival are recognized in the three-day fasting of the Jews (4:15-16)—originally a funereal abstinence or lenten period—and in the distribution of gifts (9:22)—originally presents to the departed, who were believed to revisit their kinsmen at this season.

The tenuousness of this proposed solution has been conceded, however, by most recent authorities. Apart from all other considerations, it would seem to attach far too much significance to what may be mere textual errors in our extant manuscripts of the Septuagint and of Josephus; and it also fails to establish any

## PURIM

reasonable connection between the Farwadigan festival and the story related in the Book of Esther.

Lastly, we come to a particularly ingenious reconstruction, proposed by the distinguished Assyriologist Julius Lewy, of Cincinnati. According to this theory, the original form of the story of Esther was concerned with the hostility between two religious elements in the city of Susa. The one consisted of the Mardukians, or followers of the Babylonian god Marduk; the other, of the Bagians, or followers of the Persian Baga—that is, the god par excellence, Mithra. The former are represented in our present version by Mordecai; the latter, by Haman, whom the Septuagint expressly styles “the Bugaite,” i.e., Bagian. Cuneiform inscriptions have shown that there was indeed a colony of Babylonians and a temple of their goddess Ishtar at Susa. In its original form, the story of Esther related how, when Artaxerxes II instituted the cult of the god Mithra and the goddess Anahita in that city, their devotees threatened those of Marduk with extermination. The latter, however, were saved from this fate by “Queen Ishtar,” the prototype of Esther.

The story had grown up as a fanciful interpretation of the Persian festival of Farwadigan, which was celebrated, at this period, from the eleventh to the fifteenth day of Adar and with which the Babylonian colony was familiar under the Aramaic name of Farwadaya (the Phurdaia of the Septuagint). This name they had connected with the Semitic word *farar*, meaning “exterminate,” and had therefore invented an appropriate tale of threatened extermination. An alternative tradition, however, had explained it by ref-

erence to a legend in which the casting of lots (Babylonian *purê*) played a prominent role, and this in turn had inspired the notion that the festival ought more properly to be called Purim. Our Biblical Story of Esther represents a confused blend and a Judaization of these two traditions. Moreover, the story of Vashti had originally reflected the same kind of religious conflict; for Vashti is simply the Elamite goddess Mashti, and the point of the story was to show how she had been eclipsed and supplanted by the Babylonian Ishtar, i.e., Esther!

No one will gainsay the ingenuity of this theory. Nevertheless, it is not without its difficulties. In the first place, the assumed virulence of the Mithra worshippers against the Babylonian minority is not supported by any historical evidence; moreover, it is not clear why the latter should have been called Mardukians rather than Ishtarites, since the Babylonian temple at Susa was dedicated to Ishtar, not to Marduk. Secondly, the alleged fanciful association of the name *Farwadaya* with the Semitic word *farar*, "exterminate," is really too fanciful to be credible. For one thing, the *d* remains unexplained; for another, it is scarcely plausible that a festival the name of which was taken to mean "extermination" should have been explained and validated by a legend about deliverance!



### 3

## THROUGH THE LABYRINTH

IT is difficult, in the labyrinth of theories, to find one's way to the real heart of Purim. A possible clue may lie, however, in the curious but significant fact that there is an almost perfect correspondence between the various incidents of the story of Esther and the various rites and ceremonies which are characteristic of seasonal and New Year festivals in many parts of the world.

The incidents in question are:

1. the selection of a queen and the celebration of her accession by a public holiday (2:17-18);
2. the parading of an ordinary citizen in the garb and guise of the king (6:1-11);
3. the observance of a fast (4:15-16);
4. the execution of a malefactor (7:10; 9:14, 25);
5. an armed combat between two parties (9:1-17);
6. the distribution of gifts (9:22);

∴

7. the celebration of a festival around the time of the vernal equinox (9:18-21).

*The selection of the queen* hangs together with the common ancient and primitive custom of appointing kings and queens at the beginning of the year, their nuptials being celebrated as part of the ceremonies of that occasion. The origin of the custom lies in the belief that the king and queen personify the life of the community, which comes to an end and must be renewed from year to year. Modern survivals of the practice may be recognized in the familiar Kings and Queens of the May of European usage. In Ireland, for example, the most beautiful girl in a community is chosen queen on May Day. In the Swedish province of Blekinge, a Midsummer Bride is similarly appointed on the appropriate date. Aristotle informs us that it was customary to celebrate the nuptials of a mock king and queen as part of the annual Dionysia festival at Athens. In Egypt, the marriage of the god Horus and the goddess Hathor (a projection into mythology of precisely the same custom) formed part of a summer festival at Edfu and that of Amon and the goddess Mut formed part of a winter festival at Luxor.

*The parade of Mordecai* in the raiment and trappings of the king may likewise reflect the common custom of appointing a temporary king to rule for the few days which intervene, in ancient calendars, between the end of one year and the beginning of the next. This temporary king is usually an ordinary citi-



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zen, since it is deemed essential to show that at this critical period, when one lease of life has ended and the other is not yet assured, all normal activity is topsy-turvy or in a state of abeyance. Such temporary kings are attested, for example, at Lhasa, in Tibet; among the Kwottos of northern Nigeria; among the Bakitura of Uganda; among the Bastar of the central provinces of India; and in several parts of the Sudan. Ancient authorities likewise inform us that at the Persian festival of Sacaea, held in July, one of the royal domestics was installed as temporary king and paraded in the king's attire. More significantly still, the Arabic writer Al-Biruni relates that it was customary in Persia to lead a thin-bearded man around on horseback, with full panoply and pomp, and under escort of the king's servants, just before the spring festival. The ceremony was known, in fact, as "The Ride of the Thin-beard."

*The observance of the fast* may reflect the custom of instituting a period of fasting and lenten abstinence before the New Year or the beginning of a new season. The Babylonians, for example, recognized the first seven or even sixteen days, of the year as a lenten period. Among the Hebrews, the autumnal Feast of Ingathering was preceded by a day of fasting and austerity (the so-called "Day of Atonement"). In Rome, the festival of Ceres, goddess of crops, which fell in April, was introduced by a fast. Similarly, in modern Cambodia, in Indo-China, the first three days of the year (in mid-March) are a period of solemn abstinence. Among the Cherokees and Choctaws, the New Year feast (in August) is called

"The Fast" and so observed. And in Morocco, the New Year month of Muḥarram constitutes a lenten period. The purpose of such fasts and lents is to express the state of suspended animation in which a community finds itself at the end of its annual or seasonal lease of life. It is, so to speak, at the end of its rope, and it must make a clean start.

*The execution of Haman* connects at once with the practice of executing a scapegoat at the beginning of the year in order to drive out all blight and noxiousness. At the Athenian festival of Thargelion, in May, for example, human scapegoats were expelled; and the same thing took place at Abdera. Descriptions of the Babylonian New Year festival include references to a condemned felon who was paraded and scourged; and the Hebrews observed a similar usage in the expulsion of a goat on the great Day of Purgation (or Atonement) before the autumnal harvest festival. Often, to be sure, the unfortunate wretch is definitely identified with Death, Disease, or the like, which is thereby expelled from the community; and sometimes, too, the rite is performed in purely symbolic form, the "devil" being hounded out of the city or village by men on horseback or by elaborate ceremonies of fumigation. In Cambodia, for example, such a rite is performed in March, and among the Eskimos of Point Barrow, Alaska, the evil spirit Tuña is hunted and driven out at the moment when the sun reappears.

*The combat between the Jews and the anti-Semites* is similarly explicable from the characteristic rites of New Year and seasonal festivals. These often feature

## PURIM

a mock conflict between two principals or teams, originally representing Summer and Winter, Life and Death, Rain and Drought, or the like. In course of time, however, these combats tend to take on a quasi-historical significance and to be explained as commemorations of historical encounters. Thus, in ancient Egypt, such a combat was staged annually during the festival of Sokar at Memphis, but it was regarded as commemorating a contest between rival factions in Buto, the predynastic capital. Similarly, among the Hittites, the ritual combat was taken to re-enact some early border clash between themselves and their neighbors, the Maeonians. In England, a mimetic battle fought at Hocketide (i.e., on the Tuesday following the second Sunday after Easter) is similarly interpreted as commemorating an encounter between the English and the invading Danes; in many parts of the same country, the ancient seasonal battle between the Lord of Life and the Dragon of Chaos or Evil is acted out in a mummers' play in which the battle is represented as a conflict between Saint George and the "Turkish knight," i.e., as a memorial of the struggle between Christians and Saracens during the time of the Crusades! Accordingly, the episode in the story of Esther relating the bloody combat between the Jews and their enemies may be nothing but a similar historicization of a time-honored seasonal performance.

*The distribution of gifts* still survives as a New Year custom, so that little need be said about it. It is worth noting, however, that the Romans used likewise to distribute presents, called *strenae*, on January 1, and that the French term *jour d'étrennes*, meaning

New Year's Day, is thence derived. Indeed, it has been suggested that Purim itself may have a similar meaning, being connected with an assumed Old Persian word, *purti*, and with our own *portion*. The distribution of such "portions," it should be added, may well have originated in something far more important than a mere expression of cordiality. It may have been the last lingering survival of the belief that, at New Year, members of a community must share their food or goods in order to recement their bonds of kinship.

*The date of Purim* falls, as a rule, within the week of the vernal equinox. This has been the case, for example, no less than twenty times during the past fifty years. Now, in ancient and primitive calendars, equinox and solstice, or the new moons nearest them, are often regarded as the beginnings of the year. It is for this reason that the Babylonians and the Jews reckoned their years from the months of Nisan (mid-March to mid-April) or Tishri (mid-September to mid-October). The original Roman year, in use before the Julian reform, likewise began on March 1; and it is significant that the vernal equinox was the regular beginning of the year in European countries until comparatively recent times. Under Charlemagne, the year began on March 25, and it was not until 1575 that Philip II of Spain instituted January 1 as the official date. In Holland, Protestant Germany, and Russia, the latter date was approved only in 1700; in Sweden, in 1753. In England, although the historical year begins on January 1, the civil year is reckoned from March 25. Moreover—and this is espe-

## PURIM

cially important—the ancient Iranian year began at the vernal equinox.

The upshot of this discussion is, then, that Purim may originally have been the Persian New Year festival held at the time of the vernal equinox and characterized by all the rites and ceremonies associated with that occasion in other parts of the ancient and modern worlds. When the Jews of Persia took it over, they did what people do everywhere in adapting borrowed institutions to their own needs and outlooks. They fell back upon a popular story which seemed to incorporate all the leading elements of the festival and proceeded to use it (with judicious alterations) as the explanation and justification of the festival's existence. It is in precisely the same way—as has been pointed out in this series of books—that Easter and Yuletide became Christian festivals; and it is this process also which turned a primitive agricultural rite into the Israelite feast of Passover.

As for the meaning of the name *Purim*, it is noteworthy—as several scholars have previously pointed out—that in modern Arabic the New Year is indeed called *phur*. The name has, apparently, no satisfactory etymology in the Arabic language. It must therefore have been borrowed; and a reasonable conjecture would associate it with the ancient Persian word for “first,” when it would have meant something like “first days of the year” or, indeed, “first season,” like the French *printemps* (literally, “first season”) or the Italian and Spanish *primavera*, meaning “spring.”



# 4

## THE MEGILLAH

HOWEVER it may have begun, what Purim became in the life and tradition of the Jews, and what it has remained ever since, is a memorial of the events related in the Book of Esther. A preoccupation with its origins should therefore not blind us to its developed significance; the bare skeleton of fact has long since been swathed in the vesture of fancy. The reading of the Megillah, or Scroll of Esther, is today the main feature of its religious observance, and most of the legend and folklore which has gathered round it derives from that source. The curious thing is, however, that, in all probability, the Book of Esther was not originally composed as the story of Purim, but only came to serve that purpose as the result of a later combination. To understand its true character, and to appreciate also how the festival came to acquire what is now its distinctive "myth," it is necessary to divorce

## PURIM

the book from this traditional association and to approach it from an independent angle.

Anyone who reads the Book of Esther attentively will see at once that it consists, in reality, of two distinct stories, now linked together by the purely artificial device of making one a prelude to the other. These are the stories of Vashti and of Esther. Both, however, revolve around the same central theme; for both relate how the charm and shrewdness of a beautiful woman was able to make fools out of princes and to outwit their best-laid plans. Both stories therefore belong to that well-known class of folk tales, best represented by *The Decameron* of Boccaccio, which deal with the wiles of women. Tales of this kind would, of course, have enjoyed especial popularity with the fair sex, and we can well imagine with what relish they would have been told and retold in the harems of Persia or wherever else women came together in purely feminine converse. Such stories soon spread, however, to wider circles and readily become adapted to new environments. This, it may be supposed, is what happened in the case of the Book of Esther. Originally, as we shall see, it was a pure Persian composition—perhaps even part of a harem repertoire. In course of time, however, it achieved wider popularity and was then adapted by the Jews of the Persian empire to their own needs and environment. What we now have before us, therefore, is a book of Persian tales retold with a Jewish coloration.

Unfortunately, the real point of the stories and much of their essential humor are apt to be ignored in conventional translations and interpretations, because they depend, in no small measure, upon

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subtle points of detail generally overlooked. We shall begin, therefore, by retelling the stories in their proper form.

We shall start with the story of Vashti.





5

THE STORY OF VASHTI

or

*How Wives Became Subject to Their Husbands*

Once upon a time there sat upon the throne of Persia a mighty king named Ahasuerus [Xerxes]. So mighty was he that his rule extended from one end of the known world to the other—from India in the east to Ethiopia in the west. In the third year of his reign, this monarch took it into his head to give a display of his pomp and glory to all the subjects of his empire. He therefore invited the governors of the provinces, the members of the diplomatic corps, and the chiefs of the armed forces, together with other nabobs and grandees, to a magnificent banquet in Susa, where the court was in residence over the summer months. The banquet lasted throughout the season—a full 180 days—the guests coming in relays. Everything was appointed on the most sumptuous and lavish scale. The gardens of the palace were decked with rich drapes, suspended from rods of solid silver. The pillars in the courtyard were of pure marble, and the guests reclined on couches of silver and gold, mounted on a mosaic pavement of onyx and mother-of-pearl. The drinking vessels

were of gold, no two alike; and everyone was left to drink as he pleased, without being urged or compelled. Moreover, as soon as the official banquet was over, the king gave a garden party to the general public, throwing open the palace grounds for a full seven days.

On the last day of the festivities, when he was well in his cups, the king decided to show off the richest and rarest of all his treasures—the beautiful Queen Vashti, who had meanwhile been entertaining the ladies in her own quarters. When she was summoned, however, she refused to come. The king, enraged at this rebuff, immediately called together the seven members of his privy council, to decide what should be done. Up spoke a certain Memuchan. “It is not only against the king,” said he, “that the queen has offended, but against the whole fabric of the state. For she has set an example to all wives everywhere to flout their husbands; and unless she is suitably punished, husbands everywhere will be held in contempt and their wives will start defying them.” The best thing, he added, would be for His Majesty to depose the recalcitrant queen and appoint the next harem favorite in her place. Even this, however, would have to be supplemented by a further measure: let the king issue a formal edict requiring all wives to pay respect to their husbands as a matter of law! The king approved this suggestion; Vashti was deposed, and a royal edict was issued, under due protocol, conferring upon husbands the same authority in their own homes as governors enjoyed in their several provinces.

WHEN it is read in its own right and not merely as a prelude to the tale of Esther, this story is seen to have a point all its own and to be full of delicious humor. The essence of the story is to show how the whim and caprice of a beautiful woman can make

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havoc of all the authority and pomposity of kings and princes. Here is the greatest monarch in all the world and here are all his governors and nabobs—each supreme lord in his own domain—suddenly put to sixes and sevens by the willfulness of a pretty woman! Here, too, is that same king sparing no expense to impress on his courtiers and subjects the full extent and degree of his power and riches, while his most prized treasure and the one which lies nearest to hand—namely, the fair queen—refuses to have herself put on view and, far from serving as an exemplar of his grandeur, serves only to point up his essential weakness and futility. The guests, who were summoned to witness the royal dignity, are given a free demonstration of his ridiculous ineptitude; and the ladies, who were supposed to be impressed with the high positions of their husbands, are taught instead how to hold their husbands in contempt.

This in itself is funny enough, but it is not all. The sequel is even more comic. The princes and nabobs, who wield undisputed sway in their provinces, can only exercise authority in their homes when fortified by a formal decree of their sovereign, issued under the most solemn protocol. A formal council of state has to be summoned; and the edict is couched in the very same terms as the "letters patent" whereby those princes have been endowed with authority in their official positions!

The story is thus seen to be a typical *novella*—an amusing tale of woman's caprice such as might readily have been told in the harem. It is the kind of story one finds in *The Decameron*.

That it really originated in Persia there can be no doubt, for it is full of authentic local color and of small, circumstantial details which would scarcely have found place in it had it been composed anywhere else.

When, for example, the writer wishes to emphasize the extent of the king's dominions, he describes him as having ruled "from India even unto Ethiopia" (1:1). Now, we happen to know from Herodotus, "the father of history," that just these two lands were regarded by the *Persians* as the extreme limits of the known world; and a similar expression actually occurs in one of the inscriptions of King Darius found at Hamadan.

Similarly, when the guests at the royal banquet are specified as "the princes and [civil] servants, the army of Persia and Media, and the nobles and governors of the provinces" (1:3), the author is clearly modeling his narrative upon established Persian practice. For the fact is that at the New Year (Nauroz) and Mihrajan festivals, it was customary for the king to entertain his ministers and servants in relays, according to order of precedence.

So, too, when he says that the regalement of the general public took place "in the court of the garden of the king's palace" (1:5), his words are supported by the statement of the Greek writer Xenophon that the palaces of Persian kings were surrounded by a garden in which banquets were held.

There are other, no less striking traits which betray the Persian source of the tale.

The queen is summoned to appear wearing "the crown royal" (1:11); but the Hebrew word so ren-

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dered—a word which occurs only in the Book of Esther—is the Persian technical term for the diadem of state.

When she refuses, Ahasuerus is said to call together seven “wise men . . . who saw the king’s face, who sat foremost in the kingdom” (1:13-14). Now, we know from both Herodotus and Xenophon that in ancient Persia the king was kept hidden from all his subjects except seven councillors who were permitted to see him without an intermediary and whose advice was sought in all matters affecting legal precedents.

Finally, the words in which authority is formally conferred on husbands reproduce what must have been the standard language of the “letters patent” issued to the governors of Persian provinces. Since the empire comprised a number of conquered states, its subjects spoke several different languages. Those letters must therefore have contained a provision licensing the use of the native tongue in the diplomatic circles of each province. It is this provision which our author parodies—with obvious comic effect: “Every man is to rank as a governor \* in his own house, with full permission to speak his own native tongue” (1:22).

\* This is the real meaning of the Hebrew word which the English Bible renders somewhat lamely “bear rule.”



6

THE STORY OF ESTHER

IN the form in which it has come down to us, the story of Esther is a sequel to that of Vashti, but this represents only a common device of ancient story-books, in which (as, for example, in *The Arabian Nights*) each tale is made to run into the next. That it was originally quite independent is plain on the surface. In the story of Vashti, the succession falls to the next harem favorite (1:19); Esther, however, is chosen only after a nation-wide beauty contest. Moreover, whereas the deposition of Vashti is said to have taken place in the *third* year of the king's reign (1:3), the appointment of Esther occurs in the *seventh* (2:16)—too long an interval if the events were originally supposed to be connected.

The story of Esther is, once again, the tale of how a beautiful woman managed to outwit the designs of princes. It may be summarized as follows:

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Once upon a time, King Ahasuerus [Xerxes] of Persia decided to take to himself a new wife. On the advice of his ministers, he therefore ordered all the beautiful maidens of the realm to be rounded up and brought to him, one by one, in his palace at Susa. One of these maidens was a Jewish orphan named Esther (*alias* Hadassah). So beautiful was she that she at once captured the king's heart and was duly appointed queen.

Esther had a cousin and guardian named Mordecai. He traced his descent to Kish, the father of Saul, first king of Israel, and was one of the Jews who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem when Judah fell to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. Later, when Babylon itself had been captured by the Persians, he was in turn deported to Susa. There he became a member of the court and happened, one day, to overhear two of the royal turnkeys plotting to assassinate their master. He reported the matter to Esther, who in turn relayed it, in his name, to the king. After due investigation, the conspirators were hanged, and the affair was recorded in the chronicles of the state.

Some years later, the king promoted a certain Haman, son of Hamdatha, an Agagite, to be dean of the diplomatic corps. In view of his position, all members of the court readily bowed and prostrated themselves whenever they encountered him. Mordecai, however, refused to do so, and remained deaf to all pleas to conform to custom. When this was pointed out to Haman, he became very angry and resolved to exterminate not only the offending courtier but the entire race to which he belonged. In consort with his wife, Zeresh, and certain of his boon companions, Haman therefore cast lots to determine the most auspicious date for carrying out this design. The

lot fell for the fourteenth day of the month of Adar [March].

Haman at once repaired to the king. "Scattered and dispersed throughout the realm," he said, "there is a certain people which insists on living by its own laws and refuses to carry out those of the king. It will do no good to leave them alone. If the king so please, let an edict be issued for their destruction. I am ready to pay ten thousand talents of silver into the royal coffers to cover whatever expenses are involved." On hearing this, the king assured him that he did not need the money, but would readily give him a free hand to do as he liked with the obnoxious people. On the thirteenth day of Nisan, therefore, formal orders were drawn up and despatched by post to all the provinces. The order said that the Jews were to be exterminated on the following fourteenth day of Adar and all their property plundered.

Three days later, Esther adorned herself in her royal apparel and took up a position in the inner courtyard of the palace, facing the throneroom and standing in the doorway in direct view of the throne. When the king saw her, he was entranced at her appearance and immediately stretched forth his golden scepter as a sign to her to come near. "What is your request?" he asked. "If it cost me the half of my kingdom, it shall be granted to you." Thereupon, Esther invited him to come with Haman to a private banquet which she had prepared for them. While they were in their cups, the king again asked her what she desired. But Esther replied only that she would like him to come with Haman to another banquet, the following day. Haman was overjoyed at this seeming evidence of royal favor, but his joy was perceptibly offset at the sight of Mordecai still refusing to budge or stir in his presence. Rushing home to his wife,



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Zeresh, and summoning his cronies, he related to them all that had happened. "Here am I," said he, "a man of influence and affluence, father of a large family and, by the king's grace, the foremost dignitary in the state. Only today Queen Esther herself invited me to a private dinner with herself and the king, and she has repeated the invitation for tomorrow! Yet all this means nothing to me so long as I see Mordecai still a member of the court." Then said Zeresh and Haman's cronies, "Have them erect a gibbet fifty cubits high, and tomorrow go to the king and ask permission to have Mordecai hanged on it."

That night Ahasuerus could not sleep and, to while away the time, he had extracts from the state chronicles read aloud to him. As it happened, one of the passages on which the reader lighted was that which recorded how Mordecai had once saved the king from assassination. The monarch thereupon inquired what honors had been conferred on his benefactor for this singular service and was informed, none. As chance would have it, however, at that very moment Haman was waiting outside in the courtyard to obtain the royal permission to hang Mordecai. The king summoned him for consultation. "What," said he, "should be done to a man whom the king wishes to honor?" Haman, thinking that such a man could be none other than himself, immediately replied: "Let him be clothed in the king's robe, and mounted on the king's horse, and crowned with the king's crown, and let one of the foremost ministers of state so parade him through the streets." "Very well," rejoined the monarch, "go and do so to Mordecai!"

When the parade was over, Haman rushed home crestfallen and related to his wife and friends what had

happened. They were not slow to realize and point out to him the full significance of the incident. "Mordecai," they said, "is Jewish. What has just happened is merely the beginning of your humiliation before that race. You will never get the better of it. On the contrary, from now on you will go sinking lower and lower before it." In the midst of this conversation, however, the royal chamberlains entered to speed Haman to the dinner prepared by Esther.

Over the wine, the king again asked his queen what she desired. Esther then declared that she and her kindred had been sold to extermination and added that, had they been committed only to slavery, she would have held her peace, because in that case the disaster would not have warranted troubling His Majesty about it. The king demanded to know who was responsible for the infamy. Thereupon, Esther denounced Haman.

The king, beside himself with rage, left the table; whereupon, seeing his life in danger, Haman began to importune Esther, even falling upon her couch. When the king returned and saw this, he thought that Haman was trying to violate the queen, and was even more incensed against him. At that moment, however, Harbonah, one of the palace chamberlains, broke in and informed his master of the gibbet which Haman had erected for Mordecai. The king came to an instant decision and ordered that the evil schemer should himself be hanged upon it. Only when this was done was the royal anger assuaged.

That same day, the king gave Haman's estate to Esther and promoted Mordecai to the office which his enemy had filled.

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But all was not yet well for the Jews. By the custom of the Medes and Persians, a royal decree could not be rescinded. The Jews were therefore still doomed to destruction. To meet the situation, Esther asked the king to issue a second decree, which, though it would not formally rescind the first, would nevertheless cancel out its effect. This decree was to provide that on that selfsame fourteenth day of Adar, on which the Jews were to be doomed to destruction, they were to be given full license to take vengeance on all anti-Semites throughout the empire by slaying them and seizing their property. The king agreed, and the order was posted in all parts of the realm. Many of the gentiles, fearful of the impending reprisals, became converts to Judaism or passed themselves off as Jews.

The fatal day arrived, and the Jews indeed rose up against their foes, although they scrupulously refrained from availing themselves of the royal permission to plunder the latter's possessions. When, however, the number of the slain was reported to the king, he was somewhat disappointed to find that the capital city had made a relatively poor showing. For, whereas the rest of the empire could claim a total of seventy-five thousand slain anti-Semites, enthusiasm had seemed to flag in Susa, where only five hundred had been despatched, including the ten sons of Haman. Voicing this disappointment to Esther, he found in her a ready response; for Esther immediately suggested that a further day of reprisals be granted the Jews of Susa and that they be permitted also to make a public spectacle of the slain sons of Haman by hanging their corpses upon the gallows. The requisite order being issued, a further carnage ensued, and three hundred more anti-Semites were put to death in the capital city. Both in the provinces and in Susa the Jews ob-

served the day following the slaughter—the day on which they first breathed freely from their foes—as a public holiday. (This, adds the author, explains why Purim is still celebrated in the provinces on the fourteenth of Adar, but in Susa only on the fifteenth.)

Thereupon, Mordecai made a record of the events and issued orders to all the Jews throughout the empire that both the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar should be kept thenceforth as an annual festival. The Jews readily complied; and the festival was called Purim.

Such, then, is the story of Esther as told in the Bible. That it is not historical we have already pointed out. But there is one particular feature of it to which special attention should be drawn. Although it purports to be a story of essentially Jewish interest, dealing with a situation affecting Jews and explaining the origin of a Jewish festival, every detail of its Jewish coloration involves something either anomalous or incredible. The Jewish hero and heroine—Mordecai and Esther—bear non-Jewish names. Mordecai is said to have been one of the persons originally deported from Jerusalem to Babylon—an identification which is chronologically grotesque, since the Babylonian Exile took place a full 112 years earlier. Esther is represented as the full consort of the Persian king; and this, in the light of known Persian usage, is no less bizarre. Finally, the name of the Jewish festival which the story is supposed to explain is fancifully derived from a word (*pur*, “lot”) which does not, in fact, exist in either Hebrew or Aramaic, the two languages spoken by the Jews.

Furthermore, the story contains within itself a num-

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ber of glaring incongruities, and all of these seem likewise to be bound up with its Jewish coloration. Esther, for example, is said (2:10,20) to conceal her Jewish origin from the king and his court until the dramatic denouement of the tale (7:4); yet Mordecai, her cousin and guardian (2:7), who is a familiar figure in the purlieus of the palace (2:11), makes no secret of being a Jew and even refuses to bow down before Haman for just that reason (3:2-4). Similarly, the king is said to authorize the massacre of the Jews on the grounds that they are a refractory people (3:11); yet at the same time he heaps honors on Mordecai, who openly admits being one (6:10). Moreover, when Esther discloses to the king the evil design of Haman, which he had himself approved, he expresses surprise and demands to know the villain's name (7:2-5). Lastly, although Esther makes a great fuss about the danger of interceding with the king on behalf of the Jews (4:10-11), when she finally musters the courage to do so and is assured explicitly that any request she might make will be granted, she fails to use the opportunity presented but resorts, instead, to the elaborate and quite unnecessary procedure of inviting the king and Haman to a couple of dinners! Indeed, as the story now stands, the point of this procedure remains obscure; it also remains unexplained why Haman had to be present in person in order to be denounced.

All of this suggests but one conclusion: the story has not come down to us in its original form but, like so many other folk tales, has suffered manipulation at somewhat unskilled hands. In the process, it has taken on a new complexion, and much of its original point

and motivation have been effaced or distorted. To be specific, *the story of Esther, as we now have it, is simply a Jewish adaptation of a popular Persian novella.* The hero and heroine, and likewise the central motivation of the tale, have been given a Jewish color, and the whole has been adapted to explain, in terms acceptable to the Jews, the origin of a *Persian* festival which they had come to adopt. It is this "naturalization" that is alone responsible for the historical anomalies and the incongruities.

When the later veneer is removed, however, the earlier pattern begins to emerge, even though some of its features remain but faintly limned. The original story is then seen to have had nothing whatever to do with the Jews, but to have been a simple Persian tale of court life, in a Persian setting and with Persian characters. Its central theme was the triumph of a beautiful woman's wit and resource over the machinations of an evil courtier; and it therefore found place in the same repertoire that contained the analogous story of Vashti.

It is, of course, impossible to be certain about all the details, but the main outlines of this earlier story may be reconstructed somewhat as follows:

Once upon a time, at the court of the Persian king Ahasuerus [Xerxes], a feud broke out between two courtiers, one named Haman and the other Mardaka. In consequence of this feud and of the intense hatred which he entertained against Mardaka, Haman represented to the king that his rival and all his rival's kinsfolk were disobedient and disloyal citizens, and thereby obtained the royal assent to have them put to death.

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What Haman did not know, however, was that one of those kinsfolk was the current royal favorite, the beautiful Esther [Persian, *Sitireh*, "star"; cf. our *Stella*]. He did not realize either that she was a girl of great courage, shrewdness, and resource. Esther found a way of foiling his evil designs. She invited him to dine privately with the king and herself and, when the two men were in their cups, she entertained them with a seemingly fictitious tale of how a wicked courtier had once plotted the destruction of the reigning favorite and her entire kinsfolk merely to pay off a score against one of his rivals. The king, intrigued by the tale and thoroughly befuddled with drink, thereupon broke in with the rhetorical question, "What kind of man could he have been to fill his heart with such designs?" Haman, however, equally befuddled, interpreted this as a direct and specific query and, his lips loosed by wine, clumsily blurted out, "Why, that's me, of course," thereby betraying himself. Esther's purpose was thus achieved, and the villain was exposed and put to death with all his family—an admirably satisfying illustration of the principle "measure for measure."

Interpreted in this way, all the incidents of the story fall into place and all the inconsistencies and anomalies vanish. Moreover, we now at last understand why, when the king is favorable to her petitions, Esther does not straightway denounce Haman, but stages the banquets and insists upon inviting the wicked vizier. In the present version of the tale, this whole incident hangs in the air and lacks real *raison d'être*. Now, however, it is seen to be the high point of the narrative and to involve a motif which is exceedingly common in folk tales throughout the world—namely, that of establishing guilt by maneuvering a culprit into an unwitting confession. The most fa-

miliar example of this occurs, of course, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but that example is by no means unique.

When Babylon was captured by Cyrus, in 538 B.C., and the Jews in that city fell under the sway of Persia, they came to take over these popular Persian tales and, by a familiar process, to adapt them to their own environment and outlook. This is what happened in the case of the story of Esther.

Mardaka the Persian became Mordecai (Mardukêa) the Jew, his name being assimilated to one actually borne by Jews in the Babylonian Exile (cf. Ezra 2:2; Nehemiah 7:7) and derived from that of the Babylonian god Marduk. Moreover, to bolster the transformation, it was promptly explained (2:6) that he was one of the Jews who had been deported to Babylon after the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar—an event which had actually taken place over a century before the time of Xerxes.

Haman, who belonged—as the ancient Greek (Septuagint) version of the Bible informs us—to the family or clan of the Bujites (whoever they may have been), was just as promptly transmogrified into Haman the Agagite, whereby he became a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites (cf. I Samuel 15:32) and hence a member of that accursed race against whom the God of the Jews had sworn warfare “from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:16). Moreover, in order to bring home more clearly the force of this identification, his rival was correspondingly represented (2:5) as a descendant of Kish, the father of Saul, who was Agag's historic opponent.



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The feud between them thus became a latter-day exemplification of the old, inveterate hostility.

As for Esther (Sitireh), the Persian harem favorite became a beautiful Jewish girl and—anomalously enough—the full-fledged consort of King Ahasuerus. It was felt, however, that for a Jewish heroine to bear a characteristically Persian name was not a little inappropriate; it was, so to speak, as if Miss America had been called Britannia or Brunhild. She was accordingly provided with a respectable Jewish designation and was therefore introduced, on her first appearance in the story, not simply as Esther but as “Hadassah, that is Esther” (2:7).

But the adaptation of the tale was not confined merely to a Judaization of its leading characters. The whole point and direction of the narrative was also changed. The enmity of Haman against Mardaka was now explained on a basis of anti-Semitism. The “kinsfolk” of the latter, whom the jealous vizier plotted to destroy, became the race and people of the Jews; and the deliverance wrought by the courage and sagacity of Esther assumed national proportions. Most important of all, the events narrated in the tale were taken to provide a possible explanation for a popular festival called Purim (or the like); for although the name defied elucidation from Hebrew or Aramaic, Jews who had grown up in Babylon saw no difficulty in deriving it from the *Babylonian* word *puru*, meaning “lot,” and in referring it to the fact that Haman must have cast lots to determine the day for the proposed extermination of his enemies.



7

PURIM LEGENDS

THE Book of Esther is romantic and fanciful enough by itself, but, as it was read and reread in successive generations, imagination played lovingly on its every detail, amplifying and embellishing the bare outlines of the Biblical narrative. These legendary additions are contained in that vast branch of rabbinic literature known as the Midrash, or fanciful exposition of Scripture. They possess, of course, no sort of dogmatic authority, but are merely quaint tales and conceits.

The Scripture says, for example, that King Ahasuerus displayed "the riches of his glorious kingdom" when he entertained the grandees in Susa. For the rabbis, this statement tells but half. The riches, they aver, were not his own. On the contrary, they were the treasures which Nebuchadnezzar had carried from the Temple at Jerusalem to Babylon. On the eve of

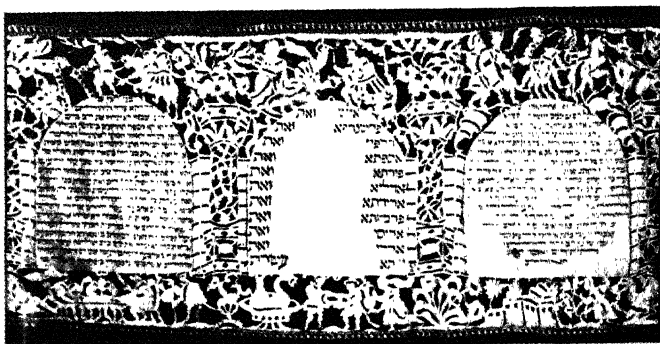
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his death, he had preferred to sink them in the River Euphrates rather than bequeathe them to his heirs. But Cyrus the Mede had eventually retrieved them, and they had become the property of the Persian kings. So vast were they that it took a full 180 days to show them off!

But it was not only on the king's inordinate vanity that fancy loved to dwell. An equally well-liked theme was his folly. The rabbis were not slow to appreciate the banal stupidity of the royal decree formally ordering wives to obey their husbands. But this, they explained, served a useful purpose; for it revealed to the people that their monarch's orders could not be taken seriously, and this prevented them from paying attention to his subsequent edict to destroy the Jews.

The episode of Vashti's disobedience was likewise tricked out by legend. No sense of modesty was it, but rather part of the divine plan, that had restrained the queen from exhibiting her charms to the public gaze. At the moment when she had been summoned before the king, the Holy One, blessed be He, had charged the angel Gabriel to smite her with leprous scabs and blotches; this had been done in order to pave the way for the accession of Esther.

It did not escape the eagle eye of the Jewish commentators that Memuchan, the councillor who had advised the deposition of the queen, was, in fact, the last named of the seven summoned by Ahasuerus. Memuchan, it was explained, was the lowest in rank, but it was the custom of the Persians, as of the Jews,



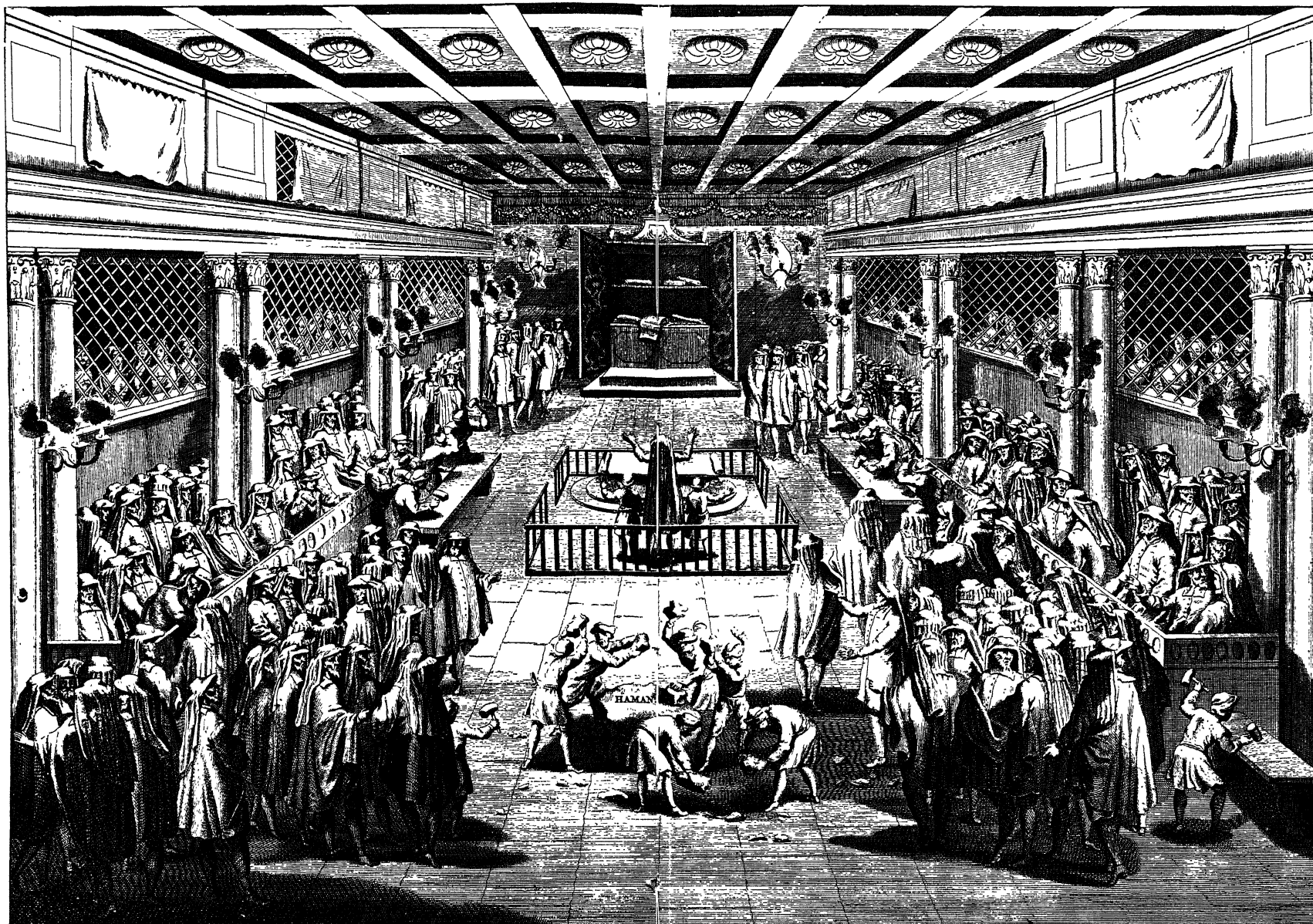
1. Scroll of Esther.

*Italian. XVIIth century. Jewish Museum, London.*



2. Haman in Disgrace.

*By Rembrandt.*



3. Purim Ceremonies in the Synagogue at Amsterdam.

*XVIIIth century.*

verderben Do empot Mester  
dem hardarico das all ju-  
den di da waren vasten solte  
und Gut für spitten und na-



4. Esther Sends a Message to Mordecai.

*From a XVth century German manuscript.*

*Vorau, Stiftsbibliothek.*

when capital offenses were tried, that the youngest of the judges rendered the first opinion, in order that the juniors might not be unduly influenced by the seniors.

It was, however, upon the characters of Esther and Mordecai that fancy lavished itself most freely.

The very name of the heroine proclaimed her virtues. Esther (which is really the Persian *Sitireh*, "star") was connected with the Hebrew word *seter*, "secret," because she made a secret of her race and descent and because in her was secreted a radiance destined to illumine Israel's night.

She was also called Hadassah, meaning "myrtle," and this name, too, was symbolic; for the myrtle is a modest shrub, yet its fragrance spreads afar and it is evergreen. Moreover, the myrtle is of but moderate size, and so was Esther—neither too tall nor too short. Also, it is not the most beauteous of plants, yet one of the most enchanting; and so, too, was Esther among women. As a matter of fact, when she was first presented to the king, she was seventy-five years old, and what captured his heart was a beauty riper than that of a young bride!

The rabbis were also particularly anxious to avoid the impression that, as the royal consort, Esther had been led to infringe the laws of her faith. Her marriage, they were prompt to explain, had been a marriage only in name; for God had prevented her from cohabiting with the king by substituting a female spirit who resembled her. And she had not tasted forbidden meat; for she had subsisted entirely on a vege-

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tarian diet. Moreover, one of the purposes of Mordecai's daily visits to the palace was to instruct her in ritual matters.

As for Mordecai, his name, it was averred, had been chosen with reason; for in Hebrew *mor decai* means "pure myrrh," and refinement and purity were his. He was the son of Jair (Esther 2:5), and the meaning of *jair* is "he will light up," signifying that he was destined to bring a gleam into the troubled eyes of Israel.

The reason Mordecai refused to bow down before Haman was that the latter wore the image of an idol pinned to his garments. Moreover, when the servants of the king pointed out to him that even Jacob and his sons had bowed down before Esau, Mordecai proudly retorted that his own ancestor was Benjamin (cf. Esther 2:5), who had not been born at the time and had therefore never paid obeisance to flesh and blood. It was, he added, for that very reason that the Temple of God had been located on Benjamin's soil.

Another reason also was given for Mordecai's refusal to "bend the knee" before Haman. On his knee-cap, it was related, was inscribed the record of a transaction once concluded between him and Haman. The two of them had been commissioned, in time past, to lead a contingent of troops against a rebellion in India, but Haman had appropriated the rations and the soldiers had risen against him. To extricate himself from trouble, he had tried to borrow from Mordecai's share of the provisions and had even promised to repay at an exorbitant rate of interest. Mordecai had declined this proposal, however, on the grounds



that usury is prohibited to Jews. Instead, he had imposed the condition that Haman sell himself into slavery to him. The record of the "deal" was what was inscribed on Mordecai's knee, and that was why he took care always to keep the knee exposed when he encountered the vizier.

Not only the characters of the story were thus embellished; the main incidents also came in for their share of elaboration.

It is related, for example, that when Haman cast lots to determine the day for the destruction of the Jews, all the days of the week objected, each showing that it was inappropriate by virtue of the role which it had played in the order of creation. The wicked man had therefore to fall back on a mere choice of months, but then the signs of the zodiac objected. The Lion said, "God is called a lion in the Holy Scriptures. Will he, then, allow a mere fox to eat up his children?" The Goat said: "Jacob offered a goat, and received a blessing which cannot be annulled." The Water-carrier said: "God promised Israel through Balaam that 'water shall flow from his buckets' (cf. Numbers 24:7); this is a promise which cannot be revoked." The Twins said: "Did not Tamar bear twins unto Judah?" The only sign which seemed appropriate was that of the Fishes, the sign of the month of Adar, because it had been said of Israel that he would be caught like a fish in the net (cf. Jeremiah 16:16). But God was mindful that big fish eat little fish, and the choice of that month therefore spelled Haman's own undoing!

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Again, it is written that, when the fatal edict was issued, "the city of Shushan [Susa] was perplexed" (Esther 3:15). Perplexed, said the rabbis, was not the right word; the city was *distraught*, because God immediately visited upon it the direst misfortunes. Women who were hanging up their wash on the rooftops (the usual practice in Near Eastern countries) fell off, and men who were drawing water fell into the wells.

When Esther finally mustered her courage to approach the king unbidden and to intercede for her people, the monarch was at first incensed at her boldness. But Esther turned to the Lord and indited that great psalm (Psalm 22) "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me"—which was later attributed to David and which is sung in the synagogue, even to this day, on the eve of Purim. God answered her prayer by sending three angels who rendered her exceptionally appealing to the king, so that she thereby assuaged his wrath.

The reason Esther did not present her petition at the first banquet but waited until the second was that she followed the example of Moses, who, before engaging Haman's ancestor Amalek in battle, had sought a preliminary day of preparation, even as it is written in that portion of the law (Exodus 17:8-16) which is today read in the synagogue as the scriptural lesson for Purim.

And why did Haman plot to hang Mordecai rather than destroy him in some other way? Once again, the rabbis were not at a loss for an answer. His wife, Ze-

resh, they explained, had pointed out to him that Jews had always escaped other fates. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had been thrown into a blazing furnace, but had emerged unscathed. Joseph had been cast into a pit, but had survived. Israel had journeyed through a wilderness, but had eventually reached the Promised Land. Samson had been blinded, yet had wreaked vengeance on his foes. All of these forms of tribulation, therefore, would not prove fatal; hanging was all that was left.

No incident of the story, however, provided a greater play for the imagination than the triumphal ride of Mordecai through the streets of Susa. Haman's daughter, it was related, had watched the parade from an upper window (or from a tower en route) and, as it passed, had hurled a pot of refuse at the head of the hated Jew. But it had landed, with all its contents, on her own father. Thereupon, in a fit of remorse, she had hurled herself after it, to be trampled to death beneath the feet of the marchers.

As the procession moved along and Haman kept exclaiming, "Thus shall be done unto the man whom the king delights to honor," the Jewish onlookers hurled the words back in his teeth by repeating them in such a tone of voice as to make it plain that to them "the king" was not the mortal Ahasuerus, but the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

All through the ride, the words of the Thirtieth Psalm were sung in snatches by participants and spectators. Mordecai began with the verses: "I will extol thee, O Lord, for Thou has raised me up, and hast not suffered my foes to rejoice over me. . . . Thou

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hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit." Whereupon his disciples (for he was necessarily the head of an academy!) had taken up with the succeeding words: "Sing praise unto the Lord, O ye his saints . . . for his anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a life-time; weeping may tarry for the night, but joy cometh in the morning." Then Haman had joined in: "As for me, I said, I am in my security: I shall never be moved. But Thou, O Lord, at Thy pleasure, didst raise up a strength which was a mountain unto me, didst hide Thy face, and I was sped away." Esther, too, had united her voice to those of the singers. "I cried unto Thee, Lord," she sang, "and unto the Lord I made my supplication: What profit is there in my blood, in my going down to the Pit? Shall the dust praise Thee? Shall it declare Thy truth?" And, finally, the Jews had intoned the great closing verses: "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, to the end that, restored to my glory, I may sing Thy praise."

The gallows on which Haman was hanged likewise afforded a theme around which fancy could weave its threads. All the trees of the forest vied for the honor of supplying the wood. The fig tree reminded God that its fruits were brought to the Temple as an offering. The vine recalled that Israel had been compared to a vine planted by God and that it yielded wine for the altar. The apple tree, the nut tree, and the cedar also pressed their claims, on the grounds that they were employed in the Sacred Text as symbols of Israel. But the lowly thornbush made no such claims.

"I am the most fitted to serve," it said, "because the ungodly are like thorns in the flesh." So God chose the thornbush.

In early times and in the Middle Ages, when there were no printed books and when fewer people were able to read than can today, the Bible came to the masses not so much in the plain form of the text as in the garnished elaborations of preachers and homilists. The whole cluster of legends and tales by which it was expounded thus came to form an integral part of the scriptural tradition and was necessarily included when Biblical themes were treated in popular literature or art. Anyone who is familiar with medieval illustrations of the Gospel narratives will know, for example, how often these add the fancies of later ages to the strict letter of the Biblical text. The same is true of Jewish art; and nowhere is this better exemplified than in the treatment of the Book of Esther, particularly in the illustrations with which Jewish miniaturists were accustomed to embellish the manuscript scrolls of that work:

The earliest portrayal of the story of Esther that has come down to us is a mural in the third-century synagogue recently excavated at Dura-Europos, on the Euphrates. Ahasuerus is there represented—in accordance with Jewish tradition—seated on the throne of King Solomon, while Mordecai submits to his approval the letter authorizing the execution of Haman and his sons (cf. Esther 9:25). Similarly, a Hebrew manuscript Bible of the year 1238 shows Haman's ten sons hanging from a tree, in accordance with the rab-

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binic legend about the thornbush and with the fact that the Hebrew word conventionally rendered "gallows" may also mean "tree." The influence of rabbinic legend is likewise apparent in a vignette, found in a fourteenth-century text, showing Haman stooping to serve as a mounting-block for Mordecai before the latter's triumphal ride on the king's horse; while an Ashkenazic prayer book of the same date depicts the incident of Haman's daughter unwittingly hurling a pot of offal on the head of her own father—an incident which is not related in the scriptural text but derives, as we have seen, from later legend.



5. Purim Jesters.

*From Leusden, Philologus Hebraeo-Mixtus (Utrecht 1657).*



6. Haman on the Gallows.

*From a XIIIth century Gothic manuscript.  
Bodleian Library, Oxford.*



7. Purim Players.

*From a Megillah in the Bersohn Museum, Warsaw.*





8

PURIM IN THE SYNAGOGUE

THE principal feature of the Purim service in the synagogue is the reading of the Book of Esther from a scroll (Megillah) in which the Hebrew text is written, without vowel points, in columns. This reading takes place both on the eve of the festival and in the morning. It is preceded by three blessings. The first praises God for commanding that the story be read. The second praises him for having performed miracles "for our fathers in days of old, at this season." The third is the customary benediction recited on all festivals and on the enjoyment of any new thing: *Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the world, who has kept us in life and preserved us and enabled us to reach this season.*

The scroll is usually read by the cantor, but sometimes the honor is awarded to the newest bridegroom in the congregation or sold by auction, the proceeds going to charity. It is chanted to a traditional melody,

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and certain portions, such as that in which Mordecai is first mentioned or that which describes the joy of the Jews at their deliverance, are sung by the entire congregation. Conversely, every mention of Haman's name is greeted with stamping and with the whirling of noisemakers (called *greggers* or *klappers*). In some places, it is even customary to chalk the name of the wicked vizier upon the soles of one's shoes so that it may be literally trodden underfoot and blotted out. Children are permitted special license on this occasion, and what would normally be regarded as an interference with the decorum of divine worship is on this day not only tolerated but actively encouraged. To be sure, Jewish congregations have not lacked their bluenoses and Mrs. Grundys. In 1783, for example, the sedate governors of the Spanish-and-Portuguese congregation in London went so far as to apply to the civil authorities to help quell these noisy demonstrations. (The diarist Pepys records a visit to their cathedral synagogue on Purim when the din was indeed deafening). Repressive measures of this kind, however, have been generally regarded as contrary to the spirit of the day, which is one of almost unbridled merriment.

After the reading of the scroll, further blessings are recited, praising God for his eternal vigilance and for avenging Israel upon her enemies and traducers at all times. These blessings are followed by a short, doggerel poem, which may be rendered as follows:

The lotus which is Israel  
bloomed with deeper hue  
When Mordecai was seen to ride  
likewise stol'd in blue.

PURIM IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Their refuge through the ages,  
their hope throughout the years,  
God gives to them who wait on Him  
release from all their fears,  
And all who put their trust in Him  
are free from scoffs and jeers.

Forever curs'd be Haman,  
who sought our bitter rue;  
Forever and forever bless'd  
be Mordecai the Jew.

Forever curs'd be Zeresh,  
the wife of him who sought  
To strike our heart with terror  
and render us distraught.

Forever bless'd be Esther,  
who was a shield to save;  
And gratefully remember'd  
be Harbonah, the slave!

Tradition has it that men should be so intoxicated with merriment at this season that they even fail to distinguish between the cursing of Haman and the blessing of Mordecai. The Hebrew expression for "fail to distinguish" is '*ad lô' yada'*', and for this reason *Ad-loyada* has become the popular name for Purim celebrations in modern Israel.

Sephardic Jews conclude the reading of the scroll with a shorter variant of the poem just cited:

Cursèd be Haman;  
Mordecai be bless'd;  
Cursèd be Zeresh;  
Esther be bless'd!

∴

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Curs'd be the wicked;  
    bless'd be Israël!  
And gratefully remembered  
    be Harbonah as well!

This they follow with the chanting of the One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Psalm, which is thus translated in the quaint but spirited rendering of Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate:

Had not the Lord (may Israel say)  
    been pleas'd to interpose,  
Had He not then espous'd our cause,  
    when men against us rose;  
Their wrath had swallow'd us alive,  
    and rag'd without control;  
Their spite and pride's united floods  
    had quite o'erwhelm'd our soul:

But prais'd be our eternal Lord,  
    Who rescued us that day,  
Nor to their savage jaws gave up  
    our threaten'd lives a prey.  
Our soul is like a bird escap'd  
    from out the fowler's net;  
The snare is broke, their hopes are cross'd,  
    and we at freedom set.

Secure in His Almighty name  
    my confidence remains,  
Who, as He made both heaven and earth,  
    of both sole monarch reigns.

As a counterpart to the reading of the Book of Esther in the morning service of Purim, the following pas-

sage (Exodus 17:8-16) is read from the Scroll of the Law:

Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim. And Moses said unto Joshua: "Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand."

So Joshua did as Moses had said unto him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands were heavy; so they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people at the edge of the sword.

Then said the Lord unto Moses: "Write this for a memorial in the book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven."

And Moses built an altar and called it Jehovah-Is-My-Banner. And he said: "[This is a reminder] that Jehovah hath taken a most solemn oath to wage war on Amalek from generation to generation."

The reason this passage is selected is that Haman is described in the Book of Esther as a descendant of Agag, who was the king of the Amalekites at the time

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of Saul and against whom that Israelite monarch did battle (cf. I Samuel 15:5 ff.). His plot against the Jews was therefore regarded as but another instance of the inveterate hatred which had begun in the days of Moses and from the effects of which the Lord had promised to deliver his people in every generation.

For the rest, the services for the feast of Purim are virtually the same as for every weekday in the year. The only major difference is that in the Standing Prayer (or Eighteen Benedictions), which forms a central element of all Jewish devotions, an extra paragraph, specifically commemorating the events of the Book of Esther, is inserted after the passage in which thanks are rendered to God for "Thy miracles which are daily with us, and for Thy wonders which are wrought at all times, evening, morn and noon." This paragraph is likewise inserted in the grace after meals.

The order of service evolved gradually. Originally, the Scroll of Esther was read only on the morning of the festival. In the third century, however, the famous Rabbi Joshua ben Levi gave formal authority to the custom of reading it also on the preceding evening, thereby fulfilling to the letter the words of the Psalmist (Psalm 22:2): "O my God, I call by day, but Thou answerest not; and at night, and there is no surcease for me." Moreover, there was originally a difference of opinion as to whether the whole of the Biblical book need be read. Some authorities contended that the preliminary story of Vashti was superfluous and that the reading might begin more appropriately with the words (2:5): "There was a certain Jew in Susa, the capital city, whose name was

Mordecai. . . .” Others maintained that the purposes of the celebration would be fulfilled if the recital began with the triumph of Mordecai and the downfall of Haman, and they therefore advocated that it should begin with the words (6:1): “That night, the king’s sleep was disturbed.” Later, however, it was laid down that the entire scroll should be read, inasmuch as the scroll was identified with the “letter” which Esther had submitted to the king and then despatched to the Jews ordaining the observance of the festival (Esther 9:25-26).

The conduct of the service is marked by certain rules which were originally born of tradition but later acquired more formal authority. Women, for example, although they are normally exempted from attendance at divine worship, are required to be present at the reading of the scroll, inasmuch as the miracle recorded therein was wrought mainly by a woman and benefited women as well as men. Before the reading, the scroll has to be rolled out to the end, since this is the way in which ancient letters were read, and tradition identifies the scroll with the letter which Mordecai sent to the Jews (Esther 9:20, 26) instituting the festival. Rabbinic prescription also lays down that the names of Haman’s ten sons (9:7-9) are to be read in one breath, to signify that they all drew their last breath on the gallows at the same moment. Moreover, in fulfillment of Mordecai’s order (9:22) that the celebration of Purim was to include a distribution of gifts to the poor, it is customary to make special collections for charity during the course

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of the service. A silver plate (called *kuppah*) is passed around, and each member of the congregation is expected to contribute the equivalent of a half shekel, this amount being chosen in commemoration of the annual assessment which, in ancient times, was made in the month of Adar for the maintenance of sanctuary and temple. Among the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of London, three such plates are carried round, by the *Haham* (Chief Rabbi), the president of the congregation, and another dignitary, respectively. On the first are placed contributions for alms to the poor; on the second, for the maintenance of communal institutions; on the third, for the purchase of sacred earth from Palestine, to be buried, in sachets, with the dead.





## H A M A N T A S H E N

THE observance of Purim is by no means confined to religious services and to the reading of the Megillah. The festival is, above all, an occasion of fun and merriment both in the home and in the community at large.

In the afternoon, after the statutory devotions are over, a Purim feast is spread in every Jewish household. Already described in the Talmud as one of the major celebrations of the day, this ranks, as a family reunion, second only to the Seder on Passover; it is the nearest thing to a Thanksgiving dinner in the Jewish calendar. A special feature of the repast is the consumption of *hamantashen*, or "Haman's pouches"—small tarts filled with honey and poppy seeds. The exact recipe is as follows:

To two cupfuls of flour add one tablespoon of sugar, two of oil, and four eggs. Knead into a paste. Roll out

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(not too thinly), and cut into squares. Fold over two sides of each such square. Put on tins and bake. Then boil one lb. of honey, dip the squares into it, and keep boiling. Finally, drop a quarter of a pound of black poppy seeds, and put back on fire. When brown, sprinkle with a little cold water, and serve.

Purim without *hamantashen* is today as unthinkable as Passover without *matzah*; and in cities such as New York, which have large Jewish populations, they are prepared on a commercial basis and may be purchased readily in any bakery. Originally, however, these confections had nothing whatever to do with either Haman or Purim. Their modern name is simply a popular corruption of the German *Mohntaschen*, or "poppy pouches."

Other kinds of pastry also are especially favored at the Purim feast. These include "Haman's ears"—triangular pouches of dough stuffed with chopped meat—and *krapfen*, otherwise known as "Berlin pancakes"—doughnuts filled with jam or preserves. Indeed, all kinds of confectionery are served, especially round or crescent-shaped cakes. In the Judæo-Spanish dialect still spoken in the Levant, the latter are called *roscas* or *burekas*. Salted beans boiled in their jackets also constitute a favorite dish; these are called *bab* or *bab-belech*.

The rule of the feast is that the utmost levity must prevail; and, while abstemiousness is encouraged among Jews on all other occasions, Purim is allowed to form an exception. One should become so light-headed, runs the tradition, that one can no longer distinguish between blessing Mordecai and cursing Haman!



## MASQUERADE AND MUMMERY

EATING and drinking, however, are not the only diversions on this merriest of days. Purim is characterized also by the performance of mummeries. These, to be sure, are a comparatively modern innovation—there is no mention of them before the early sixteenth century—and they appear to have been borrowed and adapted from gentile folk usage. Nevertheless, they are today an integral part of the festivities, and in Palestine, more particularly, there has been a marked revival of them in recent years. The mummeries take the form of what is elsewhere known as “guising.” Groups of boy and girls, grotesquely robed, masked, and bedaubed in the most garish and outlandish of colors, make the rounds of Jewish homes, somewhat in the manner of carol singers, chanting doggerel verses in Yiddish and soliciting small monetary rewards. The theme song of these performances is the well-known jingle:

. . .

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*Heint is Purim, morgen's aus;  
Gebt mir a groschen und werft mich hinaus!*

Today it is Purim,  
tomorrow no more;  
Give me a penny,  
I'll be gone from your door!

The mere singing of these words often suffices. Not infrequently, however, the young visitors present a more elaborate performance. An especially popular variety of the latter is a kind of masquerade involving the introduction into the house of a mock rabbi, attended by his train of faithful disciples. After some preliminary palaver, he is given a place of honor at the table and invited to "make kiddush," that is, to pronounce the traditional benediction over wine. This he does in burlesque fashion, reciting a quite irrelevant and bizarre string of Hebrew words (for example, the names of the ten plagues!) or intoning Biblical verses the last words of which are capped by his attendants with other, equally fantastic and pointless quotations. He then holds court, and various "ritual" problems are submitted to him for decision. "Rabbi," he is asked, in a not too subtle parody of Talmudic subtleties, "From what source does the law require one to procure the cat's whiskers?" "The law," he replies with becoming gravity, "requires that they be procured from the tail of Leviathan."

Another popular form of the Purim mummery is  
THE DEBATE BETWEEN THE WISE MAN AND THE FOOL.  
The former advocates wisdom without riches; the lat-

ter, riches without wisdom. In the end they reach a compromise: the wise man will share his wisdom with the fool, and the fool will share his riches with the wise man. In this way, each of them will be both wise and rich at the same time. The spirit of the dialogue is essentially modern, and there is more than a suggestion of ridicule at the expense of that common phenomenon the illiterate parvenu. The following extracts, translated with but little license, will best illustrate the general tone and tenor of the piece:

FOOL: What's the good of wisdom, when there's nothing in your purse?

When you cannot buy an overcoat, and sit and freeze,  
or worse?

What's the good of wisdom, with all its vaunted gain,  
When you have to spend the livelong year in agony  
and pain?

When you haven't got a place to sleep, your cup of  
woe's complete,

And you never can discover when next you're going  
to eat?

And if, by chance, you once lie down and think to  
take a nap,

The bed has long since gone to wreck, and all the  
springs go snap!

But the fool is in the money and in ritzy rooms sleeps  
tight.

So what's the use of wisdom, when folly does alright?

WISE MAN: But I've got something in my head, and that's  
worth more to me

Than all your fancy riches and all your luxury.

I'm richer in my poverty (and I'll admit it's great)

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Than you with all your flashy clothes and all your  
real estate!

A wise man ne'er lacks company; he always knows  
what's what;

Men like to listen to his views; he gets around a lot.  
But fools are e'er avoided, men leave them right  
alone

And pay no least regard to them, as if that they were  
stone.

The fool has nothing he can say, and so there are  
but few

Who ever stop to talk to him or e'en say how-d'-ye-do.  
A fool forever is cut off from all converse of men;  
Better be an invalid—I'll say it once again!

FOOL: But if God gives you wisdom, what good is it to  
you?

No man amounts to anything who hasn't got a *sou*.  
But money gives solidity, and makes life sweet, to  
boot;

At scholarship's pretensions the rich man cocks a snoot.  
All the world's his oyster; if he for pleasure thirsts,  
Why, it's his to have a-plenty, and he eats until he  
bursts.

He's got a corporation, though he may not have a  
mind;

And the worries of the brainy man he leaves right  
far behind!

WISE MAN: If you have a little business, and the trade  
is pretty nice,

Or if you've fancy clothes to wear, you think that's  
paradise.

But there I disagree with you; intelligence, I think,  
Looks better on a man or dame than diamond studs  
or mink.

MASQUERADE AND MUMMERY

For he's no better than a dog who lacks intelligence.  
How differs man from animals, except that he has  
sense?

Yes, how can man conduct himself, except he has a  
head?

A fool who lacks intelligence might just as well be  
dead!

FOOL: Well, well, my learned friend and true, I think  
that we can meet

Somewhere in the middle; and you'll be on Easy  
Street.

I'll set you up in riches, if you'll give me in exchange  
Intelligence on everything within the world's wide  
range.

Then each of us will wealthy be, and each of us be  
wise,

And both of us will profit from our new joint enter-  
prise.

We'll enter into partnership; for what you say is  
right:

Expansion is the thing one needs, if one is not too  
bright!

Of the same genre are dialogues between members  
of different professions—for example, the tailor and  
the cobbler—or between the pious Jew and the gen-  
tile scoffer. The purpose of such productions is not  
merely to provide entertainment but also to “let off  
steam” once a year. They are of the same order as the  
Press Club's annual satire in Washington, D. C.

A third type of Purim mummery is THE ROBBER  
PLAY. This requires but two actors—the robber and  
his victim—and runs as follows:

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- ROBBER: Fee, fo, fi, fum,  
Here with my sharp sword I come!
- VICTIM: Don't take away my last bit of bread!  
Don't come and beat me until I am dead!
- ROBBER: I don't give a hoot for your last bit of bread,  
But I'll certainly beat you until you are dead!
- VICTIM: My last bit of fish, I beg you, don't steal!  
Let me at least sit down to my meal!
- ROBBER: Your last bit of fish I don't care to steal,  
But I'm damned if I'll let you sit down to your meal!
- VICTIM: Don't take my last Sabbath loaf in your stride!  
Spare me to see my daughter a bride!
- ROBBER: I don't dream of taking your loaf in my stride,  
But you won't live to see your daughter a bride!
- VICTIM: Don't take my last bit of money away!  
I'm human; I want still to live out my day!
- ROBBER: Okay, but your money is all you need give.  
Once I have it, I don't give a hoot; you can live!

Sometimes the plays are interspersed with snatches of song, chanted either by one of the principal characters or by a jester (*badhan* or *marshalik*), who fills much the same role as the clown in Elizabethan comedy. These songs, like their Elizabethan counterparts, occasionally rise above the level of mere burlesque. In a Hasidic Purim play from Lwów, for example, the





8. The King of the Bean.



9. The Abbot of Misrule.

following quaint and fanciful lines are sung by the "rabbi" after one of his more irreverent pupils has returned his greeting with a contemptuous sneer:

When Messiah comes a-riding, comes a-riding through  
the air,  
He'll ride a little pony, on a pony he'll be there.  
With that tiny little pony, like an angel in the sky,  
All the stallions of Paris and Vienna cannot vie!  
The dead will then be waking; each will rise up from  
his tomb;  
But the scoffers will be quaking, as they hear the crack  
of doom.

As a rule, however, the mummeries are conceived in a spirit of ephemeral fun and can scarcely be regarded as literature. Like all such popular productions, they are not without their due seasoning of the ribald, the bawdy, and the obscene; and for this reason they have been tolerated rather than encouraged by the more strait-laced rabbinical authorities. Moreover, a common cause of objection to them was that they violated the Biblical commandment (Deuteronomy 22:5) which prohibits the interchange of garments between the sexes.



## THRONES AND GALLOWS

THE spirit of masquerade also finds expression, on Purim, in two other characteristic customs. The first is the election of a "Purim king"—usually a young boy—who enjoys authority for the length of the celebrations. This custom was especially prevalent in medieval Provence, where the monarch was elected a month before the festival and solemnly invested at a mock coronation.

The other custom is that of hanging or burning the wicked Haman in effigy. This custom is still observed, amid gaiety, by the Jews of Persia and in some of the remote mountain communities of Kurdistan. It also forms a prominent element of the Purim carnival in Tel Aviv, Israel. The custom is attested as early as the fifth century and was especially common in the ninth and tenth. Young men, we are told, used to fashion the image some days before the festival and hang it on a roof. On the day of Purim, it was

cast into a bonfire, while the spectators danced and clapped hands. Kalonymos ben Kalonymos, a famous Jewish philosopher who lived in Provence during the latter part of the thirteenth century, informs us that in his day it was customary to commemorate the fall of Haman by riding through the streets holding fir branches and by blowing trumpets around a puppet of Haman which was first raised aloft and subsequently burned.

There are also references, in early Hebrew sources, to a curious custom of "Purim leapings." It has been generally supposed that, in this context, "leapings" is simply a synonym for "cavortings," and that the reference is to the general gaiety of the day and perhaps especially to the masquerades. The fact is, however, that rites of leaping are extremely common all over the world in connection with the inauguration of new years or seasons and that such rites survive prominently in the popular festivities of Twelfth Night and Shrove Tuesday—festivities to which, as we shall see, Purim is very largely indebted. It is therefore eminently possible that the expression is to be taken in a literal sense and that it refers to a similar practice observed by the Jews.



## PURIM PLAYS

SIDE by side with the cruder mummeries went formal Purim plays. Also composed in Yiddish, these belong rather to the genre of the medieval English "interludes" and "miracle plays" and consist in dramatic representations of stories from the Bible. Their tone, however, is decidedly lighter and more frivolous, so that they stand in much the same relationship to their prototypes as does comic opera to opera proper. The earliest extant specimen of such a play is the anonymous *Ahashverosh Spil* ("Ahasuerus Play"), performed at Frankfort on the Main at the beginning of the eighteenth century and first published in that city in 1708. The play was a humorous adaptation of the scriptural narrative, but its tone was so frivolous and some of its incidental "patter" of so coarse a nature that it soon excited the Bostonian indignation of the Jewish authorities, who ordered the performance to be discontinued and all available

copies of the booklet to be seized and burned. Such stringent measures, however, in no way doused the enthusiasm of the public for this particular variety of production; the play continued to be staged in other centers of Jewish life, and several later editions and adaptations came off the presses. One of these, published as late as 1859 but undoubtedly based on earlier, traditional sources, presents the drama in what is perhaps its most elaborate form. It is concerned exclusively with the incident of Vashti and with the triumphal ride of Mordecai through the streets of Susa and the subsequent humiliation of Haman. Curiously enough, Esther does not appear. The play is based not only on the straight Biblical text but, to an even greater degree, on the rabbinic elaborations and embellishments of it. Vashti, for example, refuses the king's summons in the following terms, taken directly from the Midrash:

Chamberlain, run to your master so great,  
 Tell him he's had one over the eight;  
 Tell him he's sick and he ought to lie down,  
 Before this becomes the talk of the town.  
 Let him remember he owes his estate  
 To Nebuchadnezzar, my father (the late).  
 He was one of his equeries—that's what he was,  
 Till by marrying *me* he in time became boss.  
 He's just like the others—no better than they,  
 And I *won't* have him speaking to *me* in this way!

But—again in accordance with the legends—Vashti's fate is sealed because she has offended against God by compelling Jewish women to do needlework for her on the Sabbath!

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When Haman is forced to lead Mordecai around the city on the king's horse, Mordecai compels him to stoop and serve as a mounting-block, whereupon—once more in conformity with rabbinic exposition—the devil promptly proceeds to quote Scripture for his own purpose:

Mordecai, it seems to me you are a learned wight,  
So you must surely know the Good Book says it is not  
right  
That one should laugh at enemies when they are  
beaten down.  
Some day the tables may be turned; *my* fate may be  
your own!

A special feature of the play is the presence in it of a character called Monrish, or "Smart Alec," who speaks in prose and entertains the spectators with hilarious displays of somewhat academic wit. For example, when Ahasuerus is seeking a successor to Vashti, he comes in the role of a marriage broker and tells him that he has a wonderful bride in store for him:

Her complexion is a choice blend of yellow and green and black and white and blue. She's a gifted, talented girl—can pipe through her nose. She has the most becoming hump on her back, and her tongue protrudes delicately from her mouth. A really beautiful girl, with a head as finely shaped as the best dumplings.

The proposed marriage contract provides that the bride will furnish her husband with "perpetual tenure of an apartment—in the cemetery." The humor-



ous sallies are not confined, however, to this professional jester. Mordecai, the hero of the piece, likewise has his moments. Thus, when the curtain rises and King Ahasuerus thus introduces himself:

I'm the king Ahasuerus;  
I can do whate'er I please;  
No one can deny me;  
I can live a life of ease.

Mordecai promptly rejoins, in an aside:

You're the king Ahasuerus;  
Your word can none gainsay;  
But you still can come a cropper,  
As you go your merry way!

And when the king consults Haman as to what to do about Vashti, Mordecai is not slow to offer his two cents' worth of advice:

If I were the king Ahasuerus, I ween,  
I'd give a good box on the ears to that queen!

But the Purim play did not always revolve around the Book of Esther. An equally popular piece, written by one Baermann of Limburg at the beginning of the eighteenth century, dealt with the sale of Joseph by his brethren. This was a more literate production than the *Ahashverosh Spil* and adhered more closely to the Biblical text. Its purpose appears to have been edification rather than amusement, and its nearest counterpart may be found in the Chester pageant

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of *Abraham, Melchisedec and Isaac* and similar medieval interludes. It is recorded that when this play was first produced at Frankfort, it attracted even gentiles, and soldiers had to be posted to keep back the crowds. A third play, entitled *David and Goliath*, is of the same order. It, too, dates from the early eighteenth century. It was performed at Frankfort, alternately with the *Sale of Joseph*, throughout the month of Adar.

Sometimes the Purim plays were performed in a more formal manner. A piece called *The Deeds of Esther with Ahasuerus* is said to have been staged at Prague, in 1720, in a regular theater and to the accompaniment of orchestral or incidental music. On this occasion the rabbinic attitude seems to have been more favorable, for the performers were none other than the students of the famous Rabbi David Oppenheim (1664-1736).



# 13

## PURIM AND CARNIVAL

THE various forms of Purim festivity which we have described in the preceeding pages—the feast, with its special confections; the mummeries and interludes; the election of mock kings and rabbis; the burning of effigies; the carrying of fir branches; the whirring of rattles and the blowing of trumpets—all bear a remarkable resemblance to the customs which characterize the popular observance of Twelfth Night and Shrove Tuesday.

Twelfth Night (January 6) is celebrated in Christian countries as the feast of Epiphany, its special legend being that of the three kings (or Magi) who came to adore the infant Jesus. It goes back, however, to pre-Christian times, and was originally the end of the New Year period, which began on the day of the winter solstice (December 25). The rites by

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which it is signalized in folk custom are, for the most part, relics of this remoter antiquity.

The most striking of these rites is the "feast of the bean," a riotous and boisterous entertainment distinguished by the consumption of a special cake into which a bean has been inserted during the baking. The person who receives the portion containing the bean is at once recognized as king, and the expenses of the banquet usually devolve upon him. In France, the Twelfth Night cake is therefore known as the *gâteau* (or *galette*) *du roi*. The election of the king, however, is not always dependent upon this particular procedure; it is often accomplished by a simple casting of lots or by other means. It must therefore be recognized as a feature of the festival in its own right. It is a survival of the ancient and primitive custom of appointing a temporary monarch (or interrex) to personify the community during the period between the old year and the new, when normal life was thought to be in eclipse. This rite is attested among the ancient Persians and Romans, and some scholars are of the opinion that such an institution obtained even in Babylon. It was, indeed, in reference to this custom that Twelfth Night was anciently known as the Festival of Kings. What Christianity did was to take over this traditional usage and adapt it, the "kings" becoming identified (without any valid authority) with the three Magi who adored Jesus. In Christian countries, a boy bishop is often substituted for the king. He is known as the Abbot of Misrule, and, under his ephemeral authority, the utmost license is permitted even within the sacred precincts of the church.

It is not difficult to see in these Twelfth Night kings and bishops the counterpart of the Purim kings and rabbis, especially when it is borne in mind that Purim falls around the time which was generally recognized in Europe, until the sixteenth century, as the beginning of the year. Similarly, it is not a far cry from the feast of the bean to the Purim banquet. Both were traditionally presided over by the king; and the French custom of compelling all the guests to drink upon the cry "*Le roi boit!*" is, in fact, echoed to the last detail in Jewish sources. Moreover, the prominence of the bean (*bab*, *babbelech*) as a favored dish in the Jewish repast is thereby explained; and the consumption of special confections (*hamantashen*, *ros-cas*) finds a striking parallel in the fact that Twelfth Night was considered the occasion par excellence for the pastry cook to ply his art.

Twelfth Night—as Shakespeare's comedy of that name bears witness—was also marked by the performance of masques and mummeries. These often enacted the story of the three kings; but more secular forms were by no means uncommon, and the themes of these—a point hitherto unnoticed—bear a remarkable similarity to those of the Purim masquerades. In Switzerland, for example, a favorite theme is the "dialogue of fools," each reviling and trying to outwit his fellow. Similarly, debates between members of different professions, each boasting his superiority, are frequently staged in pantomimic form. In these we have, of course, the direct counterpart of the Purim plays about the wise man and the fool, the cobbler and the tailor, and so forth. Again, it is (or was) common in the Eifel district of Germany to put on a play

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representing judgment upon thieves; and it is perhaps not too fanciful to see in the Purim *Robbers' Play* a truncated version of such productions—a version, that is to say, in which the final element of retribution has been omitted. It may be added that these folk plays excited the same sort of reaction in the sterner ecclesiastics of the day as did their Jewish counterparts among the communal and rabbinical authorities. The English antiquary Bourne, who lived at the same period, even goes so far as to condemn them on the same grounds:

It were to be wish'd this Custom, which is still so common among us at this season of the year, was laid aside; as it is the occasion of much uncleanness and debauchery, and directly opposite to the word of God: *The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord your God.*

The burning of effigies—originally representing the old year or the power of evil—was likewise a prominent feature of the day. In Germany, the image was usually identified with Frau Holle, the proverbial witch; in Switzerland, the dummy of Ketel Knud was hung from a tree. The popular English custom of hanging or burning effigies of Guy Fawkes on November 9 is really a survival of the same custom, for it is attested even before the time of the Gunpowder Plot and represented the burning of the old year, the new year beginning, according to an old, established system, on November 1. There can be little doubt that the hanging and burning of Haman is a direct counterpart of such usages.

No less remarkable is the close similarity between the popular observance of Purim and that of Shrove Tuesday, the eve of Lent. The *hamantashen* and *roskas* of the former find their counterparts in the special pastries traditionally associated with the latter. In England, for example, the occasion is known as Pancake Day and is characterized by the frying of pancakes and ceremonial tossing of them in the pan. In Shropshire and Herefordshire, "simmels" are the prescribed fare. These are raised cakes the crust of which is made of fine flour (Latin, *simila*) and water, tinged with saffron, and the inside of which is filled with very rich plum cake, candied lemon peel, and similar delicacies. In Scotland, it is considered *de rigueur* to eat bannock cakes (made of beaten eggs, milk, and oatmeal) on Shrove Tuesday; and in Germany, it used to be the custom to mark the date by sending cakes to neighbors, the following day (Ash Wednesday) being popularly styled *Kucheltag*, or "Cookie Day." Moreover, as on Purim, it was common practice on Shrove Tuesday for children to make the rounds singing doggerel verses and soliciting presents of pancakes, sweetmeats, or money. The pancake song of England, in fact, affords a perfect parallel to the *Heint is Purim* of Jewish children:

Knick, knock, the pan's hot,  
 And we be come a-shroving:  
 A bit of bread, a bit of cheese,  
 A bit of barley dumpling.  
 That's better than nothing.  
 Open the door and let us in,  
 For we be come a-pancaking.

∴

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The day is also distinguished by the performance of mummeries, in many of which the judgment of fools, or a debate between members of different professions, form the central theme. Further, it is customary on this occasion to parade effigies and even to solicit funds for their eventual interment. In Kent, England, the girls of the village burn a dummy which is called the Holly Boy, while the boys retaliate by consigning to the flames a grotesque puppet called the Ivy Girl. It is also not unusual to carry about the equivalent of a Maypole. Lastly, it may be added that all of the ceremonies are characterized, like the processions on Purim, by the most appalling din and racket, set off by the whirring of rattles and noisemakers and the blowing of trumpets—measures originally designed to scare off demons.

Thus, there can be little doubt that the Purim celebrations are simply a Jewish version of folk customs traditionally observed at this or similar times of year. We come back again to the central truth that festivals and festival customs do not grow up in isolation, but are everywhere a mere reflex of the surrounding cultures. What gives them their seeming variety is the fact that each group which adopts them accommodates them to its own peculiar tradition, sees them through the prism of its own experience, clothes them in its own native costume, and molds them nearer to its own heart's desire.





## 14

### THE SABBATH OF REMEMBRANCE

THE Sabbath preceding Purim is also distinguished by special features of the liturgy. It is known as Sabbath Zachor. The Hebrew word *zachor* means "remember," and the Sabbath is so named because an extra portion of the Law, beginning "Remember what Amalek did," is then read in the synagogue. The passage is to be found in Deuteronomy 25:17-19; it runs, in full, as follows:

Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt; how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that were enfeebled in thy rear, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God. Therefore it shall be, when the Lord thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out

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the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget.

The accompanying lesson from the prophets relates the story of Saul's encounter with Agag, king of the Amalekites (I Samuel 15:2-34). The reason for these selections is, of course, that Haman is specifically described in the Book of Esther as an Agagite; he was therefore regarded as a later embodiment of the spirit of Amalek.

The Sephardic Jews also distinguish this Sabbath by inserting into the morning service a long poetic paraphrase of the Book of Esther written by the most celebrated of post-Biblical Hebrew poets, Judah Halevi (1085-1145). The poem, each verse of which begins with a succeeding letter of the alphabet, was written during the troublous times of the Crusades; it seeks to derive from the ancient tale a message of comfort for contemporary Israel. Its opening lines may be rendered as follows:

**A**lmighty God, unending is Thy grace;  
Thy truth a bastion and a stronghold is,  
A refuge for the needy, and a place  
For troubled souls in their adversities.

**B**efore my sins had put me far away,  
In halcyon days, in days long overpast,  
Thy spirit spake with me; and still today,  
In Thine embrace my soul is holden fast.

**C**ome grief, and sorrow come; come all distress;  
Happy are they who put their hope in Thee;  
For there's no heart but knows the blessedness  
Which thou of old didst lavish upon me.

SABBATH OF REMEMBRANCE

**Did** ever seer divine, nor prophesy  
That all mine enemies would bite the dust,  
While I, with banners flying, yet would cry:  
"This is my God, in Whom I put my trust?"

**Even** today, as I the tale unfold  
Of things which happened in antiquity,  
We may perhaps discern in deeds of old  
Foregleams of that which yet may come to be.

**For** through those deeds there unmistakable rings  
The voice of God, Who everything foresees—  
The hidden implications of all things,  
And unborn children's future destinies.

At the conclusion of the narrative, the poet, identifying himself with his people, draws a parallel between the deliverance from Haman and that wrought at the Red Sea. The verses form an acrostic upon his own name:

**I** bid you drink, kind friends, yea, freely drink,  
And keep with joy this Purim festival;  
But while that you rejoice, I bid you think  
To send to them who have no wherewithal!

**Always** God's wonders helped me in the past,  
Caus'd me to pass dryshod through raging seas;  
Therefore my heart has taught me: Hold thou fast  
To Him, and wait upon His clemencies.

**Mad** was the chase which Pharaoh gave to me,  
A lion ready to devour the sheep;  
But God was wroth; the billows of the sea  
Storm'd, and he fell like stone within the deep.

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**J**ourneying through the waste, the foe I spied  
Upon my heels; but suddenly was seen  
God's mist and cloud between us, to divide  
Our armies, and to be to me a screen.

**U**nder His guidance passed I through the deep;  
My foes were sunk, but I passed o'er dryshod;  
Over my foes there did a panic sweep,  
But I rode onward to the Mount of God.

**D**eep in the waters sank proud Pharaoh's host,  
His chariots weighted down by tow'ring waves;  
And when the waters ebbed, lo! all were lost  
Who vainly had defied the God Who saves!

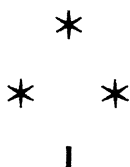
**A**ll the proud stalwarts sunken were as lead,  
While they that sought the Lord were filled with song;  
The waters swirl'd about proud Pharaoh's head,  
But Israel's psalmody rang loud and long.

**H**is might God showed us there beside the sea;  
His might God showed us and His wondrous ways;  
"I sing to Him Who triumphed mightily,"  
Come, let us raise to Him our loudest praise!

# HANUKKAH

FEAST OF LIGHTS





## THE MEANING OF HANUKKAH

MANY of the religious festivals of the world which come to us as commemorations of historical events are really expressions of basic human emotions which those events happen to have evoked and focused. Passover, for example, is said by Jewish tradition to commemorate the liberation of Israel from Egypt, but what it really celebrates is the underlying idea of freedom itself. Easter, which in the Christian religion commemorates the resurrection of Jesus, is really a festival of revival in general, and it was so observed in earlier times. Christmas was an occasion for hailing the emergent sun before it became the birthday of Him Who was regarded as the Light of the World.

Hanukkah, the Jewish Feast of Dedication, is of the same order. Ostensibly, it commemorates a historical event—the rededication of the Temple at Jerusalem in the year 165 B.C. The particular story which is associated with the festival is therefore the story of

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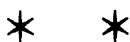
how that triumph was accomplished—the tale of the heroic resistance offered by Judah the Maccabee and his followers to the oppressive legislation of the Syrian king Antiochus IV. Back of that narrative, however, and back of the annual festival lies the recognition of something deeper—something which was indeed expressed in that particular event but which itself transcends it. What Hanukkah celebrates is the inalienable right of human beings to their own character and identity; and, in commemorating the way in which that right was once defended, the festival reasserts it from year to year. For that reason, Hanukkah is no mere antiquarian relic, but an occasion of ever-living, contemporary significance.

It is important, however, that the message of Hanukkah be understood correctly. Hanukkah is *not*—as is so often supposed—a festival of independence; it is a festival of dedication. And the difference is crucial. What it asserts is not the right of every man to “be himself” and do as he pleases but to be a servant of God and in that service to defy princes. Moreover, so the message continues, the only God whom a man is required to serve is the God revealed to him in the history and experience of his people, not the idol imposed from without. The condition of independence is consecration, and its hallmark is devotion.

Another thing that the festival teaches is the value of the few against the many, of the weak against the strong, of passion against indifference, of the single unpopular voice against the thunder of public opin-



ion. The struggle which it commemorates was the struggle of a small band, not of a whole people; and it was a struggle not only against oppression from without but equally against corruption and complacency within. It was a struggle fought in the wilderness and in the hills; and its symbol is appropriately a small light kindled when the shadows fall.



## 2

### J E W   A N D   G R E E K

THE basic facts about Hanukkah may be recited in a few words. The festival is observed by Jews for eight days in December, beginning on the twenty-fifth day of the lunar month of Kislev. It is regarded as a secular holiday, all normal work being permitted (except, of course, on the Sabbath). Although in the home and in the community at large it is an occasion of considerable merriment, the religious observance of it is confined to modifications of the daily liturgy and to the lighting of candles at sundown—one on the first evening and one more on each succeeding evening. In reference to this latter practice—the dominant feature of the celebration—Hanukkah is popularly known as the Feast of Lights, and it is by this name that it is designated by the historian Josephus.

According to tradition, the festival was instituted in 165 B.C. by Judah the Maccabee and his followers (with the consent of the elders of Israel) to commem-

orate the rededication of the Temple of Jehovah in Jerusalem, which had been desecrated upon orders of the Syrian monarch Antiochus IV. The event is said, in fact, to have taken place on the third anniversary of the day when that desecration occurred, a pagan altar having been erected and sacrifices offered to the Greek god Zeus. In order, however, to appreciate the full implications of the festival, it is necessary to review briefly the events of the period and to consider the true nature of the struggle in which Judah and his associates engaged.

The separation of church and state is an axiom of modern democracy, and we have become so accustomed to it that it is difficult for us to appreciate the other side of the picture. We think of religion as something concerned with the destiny of man and with his relation to God, and we think of the state as the political organism of society. The province of one, we hold, in no way impinges on that of the other, except insofar as religious doctrines may influence social conduct; and it is accordingly quite intelligible for a man to say that he is a citizen of his country *and* a Christian or Jew.

In ancient times, however, such a dichotomy would have had no meaning; for religion was not a personal faith or individual persuasion but rather, in a very real sense, the total organization of society. The god was not a theological abstraction or a mere metaphysical concept; he was the actual spirit of the community personified—a symbolic being like Uncle Sam or John Bull. His house was not merely an abode of divinity or a place of worship; it was also a city hall, a center

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of the social administration. His ministers were not merely priests or hierophants; they were also civil servants—magistrates, physicians, and sanitary inspectors. The animals presented to him in expiation of “sin” were the counterpart of fines which might to-day be paid into court as penalties for breaches of the law; and the seasonal festivals which were held in his honor were primarily functional procedures designed to replenish the communal vitality at regular intervals. There was no distinction between community and congregation; a nation was the people of its god, and its territory was his estate. When it was attacked, it was its god that was being attacked; and when it went to war, it was as the army of its god, under his banner and command, that it sallied forth to battle.

It was on this basis that the ancient people of Israel founded its existence. The nation, it was said, had come into being solely as the congregation of Jehovah; its birth certificate was a covenant, or contract of mutual obligation, voluntarily concluded between it and Him at Mount Sinai. Its social regimen was the law of Jehovah; its social authority, His will. Any offense against the social order was an offense against Jehovah; any appreciable deviation from the indigenous mores or culture pattern was an abomination in His eyes; any breach of the national security was an act of treason or of warfare against Him. Conversely, any assault upon Jehovah’s cult, or any deliberate abrogation of His commandments, was an assault upon the very identity of Israel, an impairment of that which gave it at once its character and validity. If the whole of the cult were ever to cease, or if all of the statutes of Jehovah were to be discarded, Israel automatically

would be at an end, inasmuch as it would have lost its distinctiveness and its *raison d'être*.

For many centuries the little nation managed successfully to withstand such a fate. If its character indeed suffered attrition through excessive exposure to alien ways, this was always counterbalanced by the sheer weight of accumulated tradition and the authority of accepted, normative institutions. And if at times it passed beneath the yoke of foreign conquerors, it was always saved from extinction by the fact that these had concentrated rather on curbing its autonomy than on effacing its identity. The Assyrian and Babylonian kings, in pursuing their imperialistic adventures, had thought far less in terms of annihilating their neighbors than of exacting tribute from them or using them as military outposts of defense; the Persian Empire had been conceived essentially as a union of vassal states politically subservient to a central government but culturally independent. Even the destruction of the Temple had not entailed the ultimate end of Israel; for, although there were pessimists aplenty ready to confuse calamity with collapse, the plain fact was that the forced suspension of the sacred services was due only to the havoc of war and not to any formal prohibition or ban; to use modern terms, the cathedral had been bombed, but the profession of Christianity had not been proscribed.

This situation, however, was not to endure without challenge. In 330 B.C., when Alexander the Great had completed his conquest of the East, the whole picture was suddenly changed. Now, for the first time, the East came face to face with the West—with its rich,

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exciting culture which looked upon human experience from novel points of view, interpreted it in fresh modes of expression, gave new outlets to the human spirit and new vistas to the human imagination, and preferred to meet the problems of existence by the free, unfettered philosophies of men rather than by the codified revelations of God. This time, the invasion was one of ideas even more than of arms; for side by side with the surrender of political autonomy went an ever-increasing transformation of traditional modes and patterns. *Mutatis mutandis*, much the same sort of thing took place as followed the American occupation of Japan or the landing of Western troops in Morocco during the Second World War.

Alexander himself was no blustering military adventurer, but a man of shrewd and astute genius. He knew very well that the process of Westernization would take care of itself, and he therefore did not attempt to impose it by act of force or executive decree. And his vision was not disappointed. Within a few generations, the "immovable" East was culturally, as well as politically, a colony of Greece.

For Israel, this meant the beginning of a momentous struggle between Hebraism and Hellenism. And Hebraism did not always win. Assimilation proceeded apace. As the environment became charged with Greek influences, and as Greek voices began to fill the air, the traditional pattern of Jewish life tended to recede more and more into the background and—by a process familiar in our own day—to the children of a later generation, the ancestral Hebraic heritage came to be regarded as something more or less remote and academic, a stubborn and obstinate religious survival.

Jews adopted Greek names, followed Greek fashions, wrote and spoke in Greek, and attended Greek sports events and entertainments. On a higher level, even some of the priesthood were infected by the new "emancipation." A modernist, latitudinarian party developed and eventually maneuvered itself (by the time-honored political technique of bribery) into control of the Temple and sacred offices. Those who clung to the ancient modes could no longer regard themselves as normative, representative Jews; they assumed more and more the complexion of orthodox sectarians, of fundamentalists fighting a brave but losing battle against the onrushing tide of modernism.

But Judaism itself was not proscribed. The modernists could claim, for their part, that it was undergoing a normal process of transformation and transvaluation; and the traditionalists could reply, with equal validity, that, so long as a faithful remnant remained, be their numbers few and their opportunities of worship greatly curtailed, mere widespread apostasy and defection did not spell extinction.

At last, however, even this situation was challenged; and the challenge came not from within but from without. Rome began to flex her muscles and to indulge in a policy of imperialistic expansion. In 168 B.C., she had managed successfully to block the plans of the Syrian king, Antiochus IV, who was seeking desperately to annex the land of Egypt to the Seleucid empire. To meet the threat, the king needed desperately to rally all of his subjects. But this was an exceptionally difficult task, because those subjects were of disparate races and cultures, and many of them had been mutual

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enemies before being bowed beneath the common yoke. The danger of disunity on one hand and of a possible switch to Rome on the other was accordingly ever present; and Antiochus was consequently obliged to accomplish by coercion what he could scarcely hope to do by persuasion or by reliance on any intrinsic loyalty: all of the peoples of his empire were to be welded together *by executive decree* into a solid cultural front.

On a winter's day in 167 B.C., the full force of this policy fell upon the Jews. The king issued a formal edict requiring that the Temple of Jehovah in Jerusalem be turned over to the worship of his own national god and ordering the Jews, on pain of death, to abrogate their own laws and ceremonies and to participate in the national cult. This was not—as is too often supposed—a mere act of anti-Semitism, and it was not motivated by any doctrinal opposition to the Jewish religion. Rather was it part and parcel of a political program the purpose of which was to break down the divisiveness of separate religious communions by forcing them all into a single national “church.” The god of this “church” was to be the Greek Zeus; all local shrines were henceforth to be dedicated to him and to serve exclusively as centers of his cult. Moreover, in order to emphasize the fact that the “church” was an organ and expression of the state, Antiochus himself assumed the role of god incarnate, arrogating to himself the title of *Epiphanes*, or “[God] Manifest.” The Temple of the Jews in Jerusalem was by no means the only house of worship to be forcibly accommodated to the new order; the sanctuary of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim was likewise trans-



formed into a shrine of Zeus, and at Daphne even the Greek Apollo was obliged to yield place to the national god.

For the Jews, the new edict was the bitter end; for what was now threatened was not merely their political autonomy but their very identity. Yet Hellenization had by this time penetrated so deeply and made such inroads upon their traditional loyalties that few indeed were alive to the peril or even recognized it as such. The upper classes were "Hellenes of the Mosaic persuasion" and had long since surrendered any claims to cultural distinctiveness or national independence. The authorities were quislings almost to a man. The resistance (was it ever different?) came from a small, unofficial minority; and it was touched off by a purely local incident.

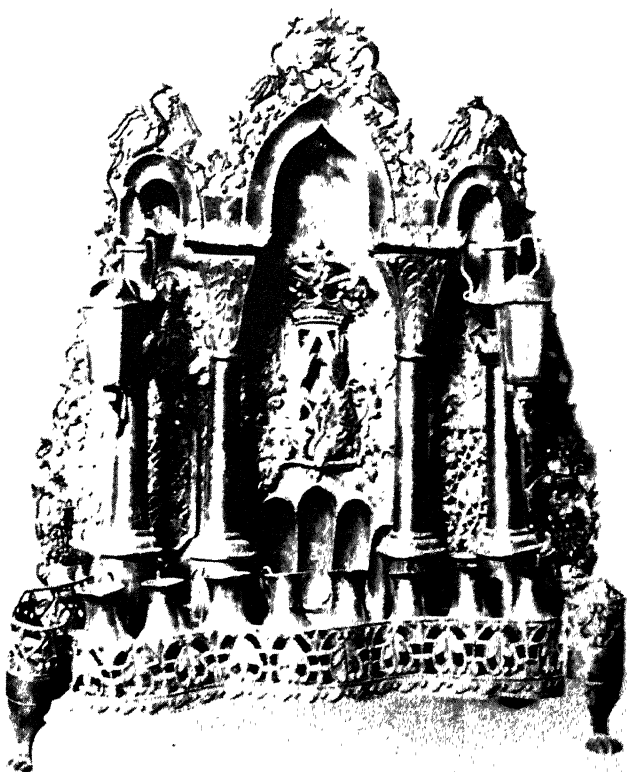
In order to enforce his edict, Antiochus had appointed special commissioners to tour the country and determine whether the new regulations were being observed in acts of worship. One day, these inspectors appeared at the little town of Modin (modern, el Arba'in), on the road between Jerusalem and Jaffa. Modin was the home of an aged Jewish priest named Mattathias, of the family of the Hasmonaeans, and of his five sons. Thinking to make an impressive demonstration of the "new order," the inspectors suggested to Mattathias that he officiate at a public ceremony at which—in pointed defiance of Jewish teaching—a pig would be sacrificed. Despite promise of political emoluments, Mattathias bravely and contemptuously refused. "No matter," said he, "whether all of the peoples within the bounds of the royal domain listen

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to the king and abandon each his ancestral form of worship, and willingly comply with his commands, I and my sons will go on walking in the covenant of our fathers." Moreover, when a Jew of the congregation stepped forward to perform the office, the aged priest promptly struck him down.

Mattathias and his followers had now openly proclaimed themselves an opposition party. They were few in number, however, and it was plain to them that no success could attend their rebellion unless and until the movement could enlist larger segments of the Jewish population. From the metropolitan community little could be expected; by and large, these people were rank assimilationists, respectable bourgeoisie whose highest ambition was to be "accepted" as Greeks and to keep up with the Hellenic equivalent of the Joneses. But there was one element upon whom hopes might indeed be placed. For some time, Jews who had wished to evade the royal decree but who had shrunk from open rebellion had tried to save both their consciences and their skins by the easier method of retiring into the wilderness and there organizing clandestine conventicles. If, thought Mattathias and his followers, this element could be recruited, if he could but prove himself their champion, something like a real opposition movement might be brought into being.

The opportunity came in an unexpected manner. The king's officers somehow got wind of the secret gatherings and determined to smoke out the recalcitrants. A police expedition was despatched from Jerusalem and managed to close in on one such gathering on the Sabbath day. The pietists were now faced with



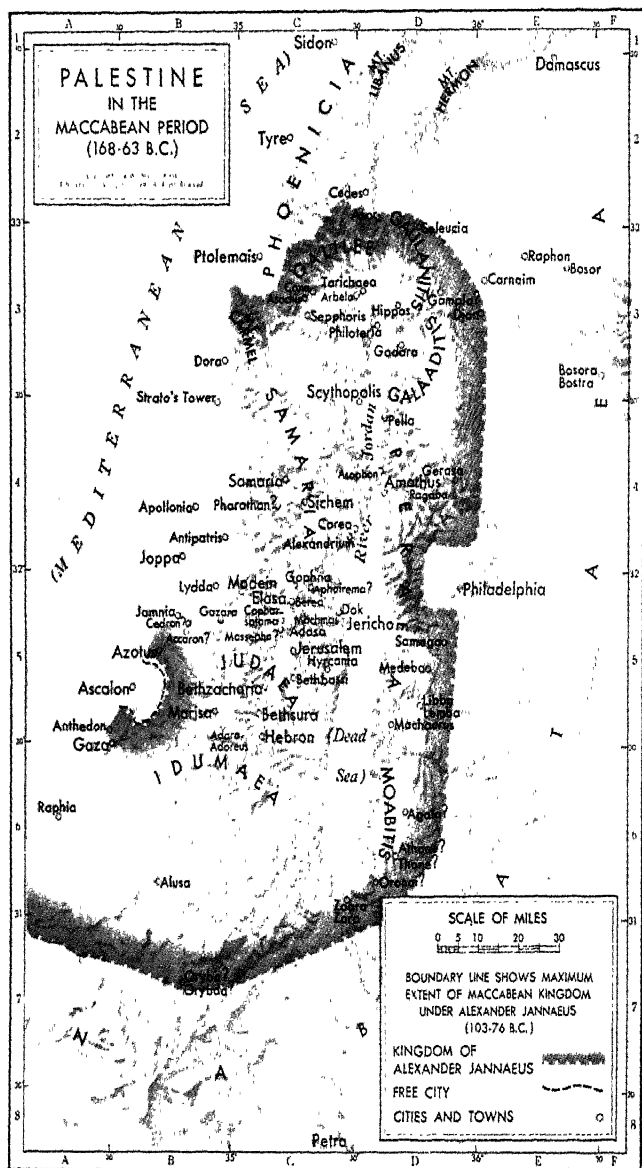
10. Hanukkah Lamp.

*S. M. Salomon Collection, London.*



11. Coin of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

(On the reverse is a representation of Zeus.)



12. Palestine in the Maccabean Period.

a dilemma. If they refused to give themselves up, they would certainly be slain; if, on the other hand, they offered battle, they would certainly be desecrating the Sabbath. Loyal ever to the tradition of their fathers, they chose the former alternative, "and they died, they and their wives and their children and their cattle, to the number of a thousand souls" (I Maccabees 2:38).

It was at this juncture that Mattathias and his followers resolved to make their strategic move. They, too, were living in the wilderness, like the pietists, and they too were the objects of unremitting police hunts. They therefore decided to make a demonstration to their fellow sufferers by openly offering battle on the Sabbath, realizing full well that, if this were done under the authority of an orthodox priest, the scruples of the pietists might well be satisfied and they might be induced to join in a common front. The policy was successful, and in a short while the forces of Mattathias were augmented by considerable numbers.

If, however, the advent of the new adherents strengthened the hands of the revolutionaries, it also gave to their movement a new complexion. For the pietists were rebels not only against the state authorities but also against their own more complacent brethren. Mattathias' movement therefore turned into a crusade against apostate Jews; his followers, into a band of vigilantes bent upon restoring the traditional pattern, if need be by main force. Posses were organized to carry out the new aim: "Mattathias and his associates went the rounds, tearing down the heathen altars and forcibly circumcising children upon

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whom the operation had not been performed. . . . And they pursued after the sons of pride . . . and they rescued the law out of the hand of the gentiles and out of the hand of the kings, neither suffered they the sinner to triumph." \*

Shortly afterwards, the aged Mattathias died, and leadership of the revolutionaries was assumed by his third son, Judah, surnamed the Maccabee.† The authorities now grew alarmed at the increase and influence of the resistance movement. Two military expeditions were sent against it, led respectively by Apollonius, the military commander of Samaria, and Seron, the military commander of Syria; but both were spectacularly defeated. The king, however, was too busy elsewhere to concern himself with what was, after all, a minor police matter. He was anxious to raise money for a campaign against the Romans and to this end had organized an expedition into Persia, where, so he was informed, lay rich treasures originally seized by Alexander. Affairs in Syria were therefore left in the hands of Antiochus' general, Lysias. Lysias decided to impress his royal master, during the latter's absence, by settling the rebellion of the Jews once and for all. He accordingly sent a further mission against them to Emmaus, but this, too, was defeated. Now thoroughly exasperated, and anxious not

\* I Maccabees 2:45-48.

† Nobody knows what the name *Maccabee* really means. One explanation is that it is simply the Hebrew word *maqgebeth*, "hammer," used as a proud sobriquet (i.e. the Bludgeoner), rather like Charles Martel. Another refers the nickname to the shape of Judah's head, i.e., "the Hammer-headed." A third sees in *Maccabee* the initials (*m, c, b, y*) of the Hebrew words making up the verse "Who is like thee among the gods, O Lord" (Exodus 15:11).

to fall from favor, Lysias himself took command of the Syrian troops and encountered the followers of Judah at Bethsura. But once again the royal army was routed.

The rebels were now in virtual command of Judaea and they had satisfied themselves that they had little to fear from governmental intervention. From a guerilla band they had become the foremost party among the Jews. The Hellenizers and assimilationists had shown themselves but broken reeds. Judah therefore decided that the moment had come to consolidate his triumphs and realize his ultimate objective. Assembling a picked band of commandos, he ascended Mount Zion, cleared out the remaining pockets of the enemy, and proceeded to a ceremonial cleansing and rededication of the altar. By a peculiar chance, the purification happened to take place on the anniversary of the very day whereon, three years before, the shrine had been profaned by order of Antiochus. For eight days ceremonies of rejoicing were held. The sacred vessels were restored; the drapes were rehung; the candelabrum was relit; the priests' quarters were refurnished and renovated. Sacrifices were offered, and psalms of thanksgiving were sung. When the celebration was over, Judah and his followers decreed that it should be perpetuated throughout Jewry.

Thus began the Feast of Dedication.



### 3

## THE FIRST HANUKKAH

So [Judah] the Maccabee and they that were with him, the Lord leading them on, recovered the temple and the city; and they pulled down the altars which the gentiles had erected around the market place, and likewise the shrines. And having purified the sanctuary, they made a new altar and, striking flints and obtaining fire therefrom, they offered sacrifice once more, after a two-year intermission, and burned incense and lighted lamps, and set forth the shew-bread. . . . And it so happened that the purification of the sanctuary took place on the very same day that it had been profaned by the gentiles, on the same day of the same month, namely, the twenty-fifth of Kislev. And they kept eight days with rejoicing in the manner of the Feast of Booths, recalling how, but a short while ago, at the time of the Feast of Booths, they had been dwelling at large in the hills and in the caves, after the fashion of wild beasts. Wherefore, carrying wands wreathed with green [*thyrsoi*] and seasonable branches and palms, they offered up hymns unto Him Who had



prospered the purification of His own place. And they ordained by public proclamation and decree that these days should be kept every year in all Jewry.\*

THE Festival which Judah and his followers observed on those memorable December days was not, as is so often supposed, a festival of victory and liberation; for they were not so naïve as to imagine that a few successes in guerrilla warfare, however sensational and spectacular they may have been, had automatically restored the independence of the Jews or finally decided the political issues at stake. The purpose of their celebration was simply and solely to rededicate the House of God; and, in order to dramatize the occasion and to invest it with a becoming measure of dignity, they made a point of repeating exactly the same ceremonies as had marked its original dedication in the time of Nehemiah. That event had taken place at the Feast of Booths (Nehemiah 8:13-18). Accordingly, although the latter festival actually fell nearly three months earlier, its traditional ritual was adopted as a precedent. The ceremonies were made to last eight days, corresponding to the seven days of Booths and the succeeding Day of Solemn Assembly; and, inappropriate though it was to the season of the year, throughout that period a steady stream of "pilgrims" wound its way to the shrine, bearing the wreathed wands and palm branches (*lulabs*) characteristic of Booths and intoning psalms customarily recited on that occasion. So effectively, indeed, was the parallel drawn that, almost half a century later, when the Jews of Jerusalem exhorted their brethren in Egypt

\* II Maccabees 10:1-9.

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to adopt the annual celebration of Hanukkah, they could find no more suitable way of describing it than as "the December version of Booths" (II Maccabees 1:9).

As a matter of fact, the association of the ceremony with the ritual of Booths could invoke an even higher and more venerable authority; for Solomon's Temple, too, had been dedicated at that very same season (cf. I Kings 8:2, 65). Moreover, this itself had been but a survival of yet more ancient usage. The Feast of Booths (or Ingathering), held at the time of the autumnal equinox, had been, in origin, nothing but the concluding stage of the old Canaanite New Year festival, and a major feature of such festivals, throughout the Near East, was the scouring and cleansing of the local temple and the subsequent reinduction of the god into a purified and renovated shrine. Ceremonies of this kind took place, for example, among the Babylonians and Egyptians, and something very like them is attested also among the Hittites. A Canaanite poem of the fourteenth century B.C., seemingly composed for recitation at an autumn festival, has as its central theme the installation of the god Baal in a newly constructed mansion. Judah and his followers were therefore unconsciously reviving a time-honored practice. Though its timbre was weak and its echo faint, the voice of Custom was crying down the years.

To the Jews who took part in them, the colorful and picturesque ceremonies were at once a reminder and a revival of past glories. It was as if a new leader and redeemer had arisen, like Zerubbabel of old, to

render the latter glory of God's House greater than the former, as if the Holy Presence had suddenly returned to its forsaken abode; as if all the outcast and all the lost had been gathered once more beneath the shelter of its wings.

But there was also a lesson for the gentiles and for those of the Chosen People who had so willingly walked the ways of Hellas—a lesson so subtly imparted that the modern reader of the record is apt to overlook it altogether.

December was the time of year in which the great festival of Dionysus—the so-called “Rural Dionysia”—was celebrated in the countryside; and the ancient chronicler informs us expressly that, by decree of the king, the Jews were compelled to take part in it, “wearing the fillets of ivy and joining the sacred processions” (II Maccabees 6:7). The festival, which in many parts was celebrated only in alternate years, took the form of an orgiastic revel. After a preliminary period of “purification,” the participants, now regarded as in a state of holy enthusiasm, clothed themselves in the skins of fawns or foxes, crowned their heads with ivy leaves, carried in their hands wands wreathed with green leaves and topped with pine cones, and repaired to the hills and mountains, where, in the light of torches, they spent the night in wild dances, rending the air with piercing shrieks of excitement and the equivalent of ecstatic hallelujahs to their god:

There

Through the appointed hour, they made their prayer  
And worship of the Wand, with one accord  
Of heart and cry “Iacchos, Bromios, Lord,

## HANUKKAH

God of God born!" And all the mountain felt  
And worshipped with them; and the wild things knelt  
And ramped and gloried, and the wilderness  
Was filled with moving voices and dim stress.\*

Moreover, as part of the ceremonies, the torches were dipped again and again into water or wine so that they might sizzle for a moment and flare with a brighter blaze, thus symbolizing the fiery nature of Dionysus and the "new light" which was thought to burst upon the world whenever he made his appearance among men.

When this picture is kept in mind, the full significance of Judah's ceremony becomes apparent. Although designed first and foremost as a ritual for the rededication of the Temple, it served at the same time as a pointed and stinging satire upon the contemporaneous pagan festivities. Every detail of the Dionysian ritual was therein parodied and ridiculed. The preliminary purifications found their counterpart in the cleansing and purifying of the House of God from the contamination of the pagans themselves; the festal parade, in the procession of pilgrims around the altar; the carrying of wreathed wands, in the bearing of the lulab; the wild shouts, in the chanting of psalms; the blazing torches, in the relumed candelabrum.

And the point of the satire was not lost upon a later generation. The first-century writer whose account we have quoted at the beginning of this chapter takes pains to drive it home with a number of

\* Euripides, *Bacchae* 723-27 (Gilbert Murray's translation).

extra touches. The services of God, he says, were now resumed *after a lapse of two years*—a statement which combines fidelity to fact with a sly dig at the biennial revels of Dionysus. The participants, he observes, felt a distinct sense of relief at being obliged no more to live in the hills like wild beasts—again a sly allusion to the votaries of Dionysus, who were perfectly content to abide there clad in the likeness of foxes and fawns. The hymns, he adds, were songs of praise to God for having prospered the purification of His place—words in which we may detect a caustic reference to the preliminary “purifications” of the worshippers of Dionysus. Jehovah—runs the implication—earned the thanks of His people for helping them to clear away from His shrine the filth of the “purified” pagans. Lastly, with a sidelong glance at the “new light” kindled in so bizarre a fashion by the ecstatic followers of the heathen god, our author dryly but wryly throws out the observation that the fire needed for the service of Jehovah was obtained by the purely natural process of striking flints!

Thus, the first Hanukkah stands out in a clear light; it was at once a proud reassertion of the Jewish faith and a ringing protest against the ways of the heathen.



# 4

## THE HANUKKAH LIGHTS

UNLIKE Purim, Hanukkah is not the occasion of any especial folk ceremonies. The most prominent feature of its observance is the kindling of lamps in the home at sundown every evening. The traditional explanation of this custom is that it commemorates the relighting of the Temple candelabrum by Judah and his associates; and legend asserts that the reason eight lamps are lit is that, although the Maccabees found only enough oil for one night's illumination, the supply lasted, through a miracle, for the entire eight days of the celebration.

The lamps may be in the form of candles or of wicks dipped in oil. In the former case, they are usually set in an eight-branched candlestick resembling in shape the traditional portrayals of the Temple candelabrum. In the latter case, the wicks are inserted into seven small vessels mounted on a frame and usually embellished with artistic designs. A favorite among

such designs is a rampant lion, symbolizing the Lion of Judah. Both in the candlestick and in the oil lamp, an extra receptacle is provided for the candle or wick used for the actual lighting. This is called the *shammas*, or "servant light."

The lights are kindled from right to left, after the direction of Hebrew writing. The usual practice is to light one lamp the first night and to increase the number by one on each successive night. Early rabbinic authorities disputed this matter, however, and one important school of thought held that the full complement should be kindled the first night and then *diminished* by one on each successive night. In some places, all eight lamps are lit each night.

The lighting is preceded by the recitation of blessings. The first of these praises God for enjoining the ceremony. To the objection that the latter is not, in fact, prescribed in Holy Writ, it is rejoined by Jewish tradition that the law of God is revealed continuously and that the ordinances of the sages are an expression of it. The revelation on Sinai was given, it is said, not only to Moses and the men of his time but to all generations forever, and its full interpretation is therefore the task of the men of learning of all those subsequent ages. Their rulings and decisions, however, must be considered, in this sense, as issuing from God.

The second blessing thanks God for vouchsafing miracles at this season. It is the same benediction as is recited on Purim when the Scroll of Esther is used.

On the first night of the festival, a third blessing is added, praising God for "keeping us alive and sustain-

## HANUKKAH

ing us and enabling us to reach this season." This blessing is customary among Jews on all festivals and on enjoying new things.

The actual kindling of the lights is accompanied by a short recitation in Hebrew, reviewing briefly the circumstances of Hanukkah and pointing out that the lights may not be used for utilitarian purposes. To fulfill this rule, no reading or manual labor is permitted while they are burning.

In order to pass the time while the lamps are burning, it is customary to indulge in games of chance. A particularly favored example of these is a variety of "put-and-take," played with a spinning top (called *trendel*) on the separate faces of which are inscribed the Hebrew letters *n*, *g*, *h*, *s*. These were really the initials of the Judaeo-German words *nehmen* ("take"), *ganz* ("all"), *halb* ("half"), and *stellen* ("put"). They were interpreted, however, as a mnemonic for the Hebrew phrase *nes gadol hayah sham*, meaning "a great miracle was wrought there." (It is of interest that at the time of the Second Zionist Congress, tops of this character were distributed, bearing on their several faces the portraits of Jewish Nationalist leaders having the same initials, viz., Max Nordau (1848-1923), Moses Gaster (1856-1939), Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), and Nahum Sokolow (1860-1936).

After the lights have been kindled, the Thirtieth Psalm is chanted. This psalm is entitled "A Psalm and Song for the Dedication of the House" and therefore serves as the "theme song" of the festival. In the quaint version of Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate, it runs as follows:



THE HANUKKAH LIGHTS

I'll celebrate Thy praises, Lord,  
who didst Thy power employ  
To raise my drooping head, and check  
my foes' insulting joy.

In my distress I cried to Thee,  
who truly didst relieve,  
And from the grave's expecting jaws  
my hopeless life retrieve.

Thus to His courts, ye saints of His,  
with songs of praise repair;  
With me commemorate His truth  
and providential care.

His wrath has but a moment's reign,  
His favor no decay;  
Your night of grief is recompensed  
with joy's returning day.

But I, in prosp'rous days, presum'd,  
no sudden change I fear'd,  
Whilst in my sunshine of success  
no loursing cloud appear'd:

But soon I found Thy favor, Lord,  
my empire's only trust;  
When Thou didst hide Thy face, I saw  
my honor laid in dust.

Then, as I vainly had presum'd,  
my error I confessed;  
And thus, with supplicating voice,  
Thy mercy's throne addressed:

∴

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“What profit is there in my blood,  
congeal’d by death’s cold night?  
Can silent ashes speak Thy praise,  
Thy wondrous truths recite?

Hear me, O Lord, in mercy hear!  
Thy wonted aid extend;  
Do Thou send help, on Whom alone  
I can for help depend.”

’Tis done! Thou hast my mournful scene  
to songs and dances turn’d,  
Invested me with robes of state,  
who late in sackcloth mourned.

Exalted thus, I’ll gladly sing  
Thy praise in grateful verse;  
And, as Thy favours endless are,  
Thy endless praise rehearse.



## 5

### LIGHT ON THE LIGHTS

ALTHOUGH the Hanukkah lights are today the most prominent feature of the festival, the curious fact is that the oldest accounts of Hanukkah which we possess—the descriptions of its foundation contained in the apocryphal Books of the Maccabees—have absolutely no mention of this practice. The historian Josephus (c. 37-95 A.D.), who himself claimed to be a descendant of the Maccabees, says only that the Feast of Dedication was popularly known as “Lights,” but the only explanation which he ventures to offer is that lights might be regarded as a symbol of liberation. The Mishnah also makes a casual reference to the lamps, but all that we learn from it is that Hanukkah lamps used to be exhibited at the entrances of houses.

In view of this curious silence of the older sources, modern scholars have been led to believe that the

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Hanukkah lights might really have originated in the adoption of some contemporaneous pagan custom, the development being paralleled in the process which converted the Yule log into the Christmas tree.

The starting point of this theory is the assumed coincidence of the date of Hanukkah with that of the winter solstice (December 25). On the latter occasion, it is customary, in many parts of the world, to light candles and bonfires as a magical procedure designed to rekindle the dying sun. A survival of these illuminations may be recognized, for example, in the Christmas candles.

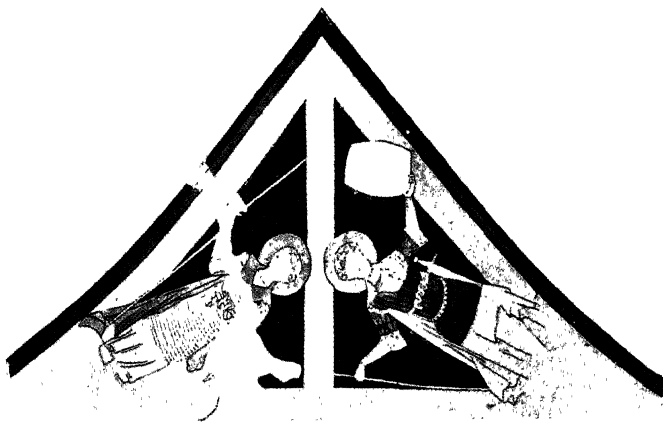
The objection has been made to this theory that the date of Hanukkah is determined by the lunar character whereas that of the solstice is determined, of course, by the solar; and the two do not necessarily coincide. During the past fifty years, for example, Hanukkah has only once begun on December 25—in 1902. In 1913 and 1932, the first day coincided with December 24, as it will again in 1951, and in 1910 and 1921 it fell on December 26; but in all the other years since the beginning of the century the date has varied from November 29 onward. Accordingly, it is argued, if the lights had primary reference to an event specifically intended for December 25, they could scarcely have become an integral part of a festival observed on so many variant dates.

The objection is not well taken, however, for it overlooks the extremely important fact that the features of one festival are often carried over into another without identity of date. Many of the things done on Twelfth Night, for example, are also done on Shrove Tuesday; and the performance of mummers'



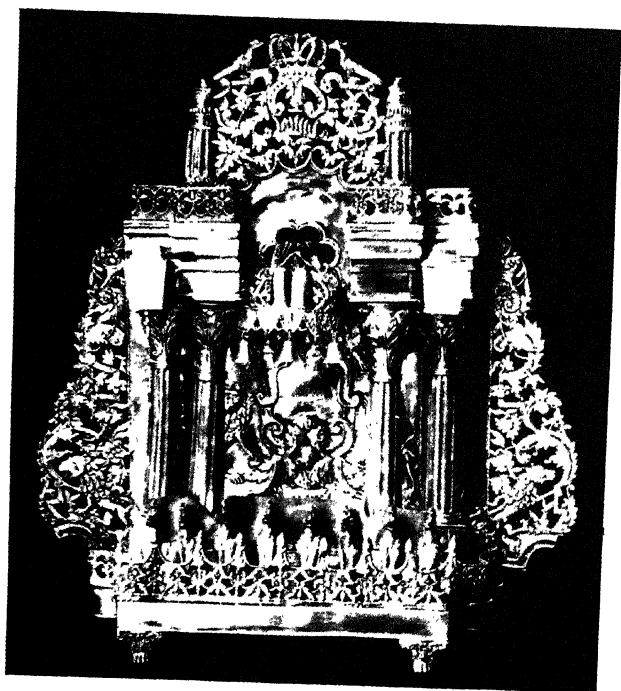
13. Judah the Maccabee.

*Pencil drawing by Philipp Veit (1793-1877).*



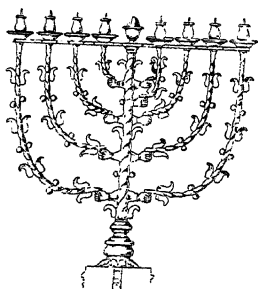
14. Judah the Maccabee and Gideon.

*XIIth century wall-painting from the Chapter Room  
of the former Benedictine Monastery at Brauweiler.*



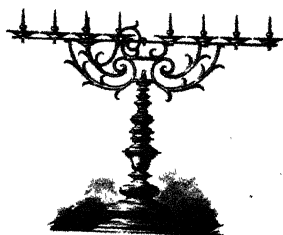
15. Silver Hanukkah Lamp from Dresden (1737).

*Jewish Museum, London.*



16. Bronze Hanukkah Lamp.

*From the synagogue at  
Cleve, Germany.*



17. Bronze Hanukkah Lamp.

*Nationalmuseum, Munich.*

plays representing St. George's defeat of the dragon are by no means confined to the particular day assigned to that patron saint of England. Once a custom has gained hold, and once it has appealed to the artistic sense of the masses, it is apt to be introduced into celebrations to which it is not truly appropriate. And this is especially the case when the custom was originally part of a festival which happens to be observed, in the normal course of events, within a matter of days or weeks of the new celebration. The lights of Hanukkah could, therefore, very well be an imitation of the solstitial lights, even though the dates are not in accord.

Another theory lays stress on the fact that Hanukkah is first described as an imitation of the Feast of Booths. This theory proceeds to observe that Booths was, in any case, fixed originally by the occurrence of the autumnal equinox, and it goes on to point out that candles and fires are indeed lit at the equinox all over the world. Accordingly, even if it were impossible to square the date of Hanukkah with that of the winter solstice and to account for the lights as derived from the latter occasion, it might still be permissible to regard them as a carry-over from the early form of the Feast of Booths, which, as we are told expressly, Hanukkah was designed to imitate. This theory can adduce in its support the fact that huge bonfires, visible all over Jerusalem, were, in fact, a prominent feature of the celebration of Booths in Temple times.

We reserve to the last what is perhaps the most plausible theory, and that is that the Hanukkah lamps

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were borrowed from the carrying of torches at the contemporaneous Greek festival of the Rural Dionysia. We have already had occasion to observe that when Judah first instituted the festival he may very well have been attempting at the same time to parody and ridicule the heathen celebration; and we know that the carrying of torches was so prominent a feature of the Rural Dionysia that the celebration was indeed sometimes known as "The Torch-bearing Feast." The lighting of the Hanukkah lamps, reminiscent of the candelabrum in the Temple, would thus have been a conscious and subtle protest against the pagan ceremony.

This last explanation would fit the traditional view perfectly. Jewish tradition maintains that the Hanukkah light is a reminiscence of the kindling of the sacred lamp at the rededication of the temple; and it is for this reason that the light is often fashioned in the style of the Menorah, or Temple lamp. Now, this may well be true, but we may add to it the suggestion that the reason this particular detail of the service was thus commemorated is that it afforded a means of protesting, at the same time, against current heathen practices.





6

M A ' O Z   Z U R

THE Hanukkah service in the home usually concludes with the singing of a hymn known, from its opening words, as *Ma'oz Zur* ("Fortress Rock"). This hymn is written in the form of an acrostic spelling the name Mordecai, but the identity of the author is altogether unknown. Its theme is the triumph of Israel over its successive oppressors—first Pharaoh, then Nebuchadnezzar, then Haman, and, finally, Antiochus. The style is indifferent, if not banal; and there is nothing to indicate that the poem was first composed for Hanukkah.

The following rendering attempts to convey the general form and spirit of the chant:

Meet it is to sing Thy praise,  
Fortress of my sheltering;  
Once again Thy temple raise;  
We shall then thankoffering bring.

. .

## HANUKKAH

When the hounds that snarl and prate  
At the end do meet their fate,  
    Psalm and song  
    Loud and long  
Shall Thy temple dedicate!

Once our soul with grief was rent;  
    Bitter were our days as gall;  
Once our spirit was forespent;  
    Pharaoh held us in his thrall.

Yet Thy hand brought liberty,  
Set Thy chosen people free;  
    Pharaoh's boast  
    And all his host  
Sank together in the sea!

Rescued were we and we came  
    To Thy shrine, yet found no rest;  
For once more the men of shame  
    Rose and held us sore oppress'd,

Made us bow to gods profane,  
Made us cups of woe to drain;  
    All ended well;  
    Zerubbabel  
Rose and set us free again!

Dread Haman sought to cut him low  
    Who was the loftiest tree of all;  
Yet all his plottings turned out so  
    That they brought his own downfall!

Pride was humbled; Mordecai  
Elevated, raised on high;

Haman's name  
Was put to shame;  
**C**rushed was all his company!

**A**ntiochus the Mad arose,  
Strove to hold us in his toils;  
Entered in Thy sacred close,  
Defiled Thy candle's holy oils.

Yet from one last flask there came  
Oil enough to feed the flame.  
In joy untold  
Thy warriors bold  
Did a seven-day feast proclaim.

Of more interest than the words is the tune, which, with the possible exception of the tune of *Hatikvah*, the Jewish national anthem, is probably the best known melody among Jews the world over. The tune was borrowed from that of an involved and recondite lucubration which used to be recited in the synagogue on the first of the intermediate Sabbaths of the festival. The chanting of that learned composition (mercifully) fell into the discard, and the tune was adapted to *Ma'oz Zur*. It has been traced to a German lyric (*So weiss ich eins dass mich erfreut das Plümlein auf preiter heide*) popular around 1450, and it was adopted by Martin Luther for his hymn *Nun freut euch lieben Christen gmein*. To English-speaking peoples it is especially familiar as the tune of the so-called "Erik"—a translation by F. E. Cox of a hymn originally written by the German liturgist J. J. Schulz (1640-1730) beginning *Sei lob und ehr dem höchsten Gut*. This hymn is included in *Hymns Ancient and*

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*Modern.* The music was first recorded by the Jewish poetaster Isaac Nathan (1813), who set it to the words of Byron's "On Jordan's Banks," one of the latter's somewhat colorless *Hebrew Melodies*.

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### *Purim*

THE standard English work on Purim is N. S. Doniach's *Purim, or The Feast of Esther* (Philadelphia, 1933), which is especially valuable for its extensive coverage of medieval and later literary sources, many of them rare and out of the way. Useful also is *The Purim Anthology*, edited by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia, 1949), which includes a series of popular essays by well-known specialists on such topics as Purim in music, the Esther story in art, Purim plays, and Purim parodies. In both books, however, the emphasis is upon Purim as a traditional Jewish observance, and but scant attention is paid to its comparative aspects or to the real literary background of the Esther story. Moreover, although each discusses the Purim mummies and plays, neither gives any translations of them.¶

#### ORIGINS OF PURIM

The various theories concerning the origins of Purim are summarized and reviewed in Lewis B. Paton's

## PURIM

*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* ("The International Critical Commentary," New York, 1908), pages 77-94. The more recent theory of Professor Julius Lewy is presented in his article "The Feast of the 14th Adar," in *The Hebrew Union College Annual*, Volume XIV (1909), pages 127-151. A completely iconoclastic view, dismissing Purim as an invention out of thin air, is offered by Robert H. Pfeiffer in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York, 1941), pages 744-747. The word *Purim*, he says, is a pure concoction, like the word *Kodak* in our own time.

### THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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We sorely need a treatment of the Book of Esther from the viewpoint of comparative literature. E. E. Cosquin's essay in *Revue Biblique*, N. S., Volume IV (1909), pages 7-49, 161-197, is a preliminary study in this field by one of the great masters of folklore.

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### MUMMERIES AND MASQUERADES

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by J. L. Cahan, published by the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Wilno, 1938). It is from this valuable collection, which is enhanced with notes by I. Schipper and S. Pipe, that our translations have been made. See also J. L. Fishman, "The Masquerade on Purim," in *Sinai* (Hebrew language), Volume II (1938), pages 403-417.

### PURIM AND CARNIVAL

Many of the parallels between Purim and carnival customs—with especial reference to such as are said to have characterized the old Persian festival of Sacaea—have been noted and discussed by the late Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, second edition (London, 1903), Volume III, pages 138-200. For the general background, reference may also be made to the present writer's *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York, 1950), pages 6-33. The customs of Twelfth Night and Shrove Tuesday are conveniently presented in John Brand's famous *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, edited by H. Ellis (London, 1902), Volume I, pages 21-34, 63-94; P. Sartori's *Sitte und Brauch* (Leipzig, 1910-1914), Volume III, pages 72-81, 91-127; see also A. R. Wright and T. E. Lones, *British Calendar Customs: England*, Volume II (London, Folk-Lore Society, 1938), pages 50-91.



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### *Hanukkah*

HANUKKAH, despite its popularity, has not inspired anything like the literature which has arisen around Purim. There are no good Hanukkah plays or masquerades, and those that have been put out in recent years are, for the most part, didactic material designed for Sunday schools and, from the artistic point of view, of markedly inferior quality.

For the traditional history of Hanukkah, the best source remains the apocryphal Books of the Maccabees. A new translation of these, with noteworthy introductions and useful notes, is now appearing in the series "Jewish Apocryphal Literature," published by the Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning. The first book, translated by S. Tedesche and furnished with an introduction and commentary by S. Zeitlin, was published in 1950.

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### *Jacket design by Ilya Schor*

#### ABOUT THE JACKET DESIGN

On the left is the *grogger*, or noise-maker, used (especially by children) to drown out the name of Haman when the Book of Esther is read publicly in the synagogue. On the right is the *trendel*, or top. Since no work may be done by the light of the Hanukkah lamp, it is customary, while it is burning, to spend the time asking riddles or playing games of chance. A favorite game is "Put and Take," the spinning of the *trendel* determining the score. Each facet bears a Hebrew letter meaning respectively, "Half," "All," "Put," "Take," etc., and together these letters spell out a Hebrew motto reading: "A great miracle took place there."

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