

**Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Esther, a Jewish Queen - A Commitment
to Beauty 92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive October 29 1981**

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived a king and his queen. It would be impossible and perhaps improper to begin this story any other way. For we are dealing here with a marvelously simple yet awe-inspiring fairy tale which manages to reassure the child in each of us, for at the very end, following all the ups and downs, good does vanquish evil, and joy does succeed sadness. Everything in our story smacks of miracle. The quick changes in cast, the tumultuous sequence of events, [00:01:00] the happy end. For once, it isn't difficult to be Jewish. (laughter)

Well, once upon a time, in the land far away, there flourished a great Jewish community which because of a woman and her innate sense of dignity, and you don't know which one, and because of a man and his foolish need for vanity, and again, you don't know who he is, awoke one morning to find itself in danger. All its men and women, and children too, had been condemned to perish, a plan which would get a name centuries and centuries later, genocide. Luckily, there lived a man, a just man in their midst, and luckily he had a beautiful niece. She was so

beautiful. And together they managed to revoke the evil decree, and alter the course of history, and [00:02:00] thus save their people from certain massacre. And so we witnessed triumphs; triumph of faith and prayer over terror and cruelty.

Yesterday's victims emerge as today's victors. Power and glory have shifted from the haves to the have nots, from the notables to the people.

Everybody likes a happy ending. Which explains the universal popularity of Purim, a holiday we are told that will last as long as exile, and longer. Yes, Purim will be celebrated even after the coming of the messiah, even after the redemption of the Jewish people and all people, all nations, all men. Purim is something so rare, so special, so unique in the annals of our recorded history, that we shall never part with it. We need Purim as much as we need Yom Kippurim. [00:03:00] (laughter)

Why? Only because it is a joyous occasion? There are others. Because it singles out Jews, all kinds of Jews? I mean, not just children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, or even children of Israel, but simply, and explicitly Jews? The Book of Esther speaks of *Mordechai hayehudi*, Mordechai the Jew. And Esther telling him, *lech kenos et kol hayehudim*, go and gather all the Jews. In other words, the story deals not with Persians of

Jewish faith, not with members of the Jewish origin, or even of Jewish denomination, but with Jews who are, more than anything else, Jewish. Is that the reason for Purim's appeal and popularity? Is it that simple?

In contrast to other holidays, on Purim all we have to do [00:04:00] is to listen to a story. And get drunk. (laughter) And the more we listen, and the more we drink, the better. "*Ad d'lo yada*", we are instructed to drink to the point of not distinguishing between Mordechai the just, and the wicked Haman. What? This is a mitzvah? (laughter) Is it Jewish at all? Isn't Judaism based on the absolute imperative to see and emphasize the difference between light and darkness, day and twilight, exile and redemption, Israel and pagans, life and death? "*Hamavdil Bein Kodesh L'chol*" we are supposed to say, every Motza'ei Shabbat. Why must we even for a day, a night, a second, erase the differences and create confusion between friend and foe, danger and security, benediction and curse? [00:05:00]

Analyze the play, for it is a play, a play that unfolds on stage with mankind as audience, and you realize that its texture is less transparent than you may have thought. The story is anything but simplistic, anything but coherent. Study the

characters and you will discover that they do not speak the same language; what's more, that they seem to perform in different plays. They all end up sounding false; psychologically, sociologically, and artistically false. No one is convincing, with one exception: the anti-Semite, Haman. And yet even he will confuse us more often than not. Was he and he alone to blame for what was scheduled to happen, and almost did? In fact, this great event, the most important event in the light of *Y'hudi* in [00:06:00] Shushan, could very well not have taken place at all. An event willed by God? All events are. Except that in this case, he doesn't seem to participate in the story; he's not even mentioned.

What could be the reason for God's withdrawal? Nowhere is the word, the name, or any of His sacred and ineffable names mentioned in the entire book. Why such discrimination on His part, or ours? Is he ashamed of the book? Are we? Or isn't the story about miracles? Could miracles occur without God? In other words, isn't He central to the tale, as He should be to all tales? For Him to step out of history and become spectator, or [00:07:00] author, or ghostwriter, or whatever, there must have been a reason. That it was voluntary on His part, is clear. "*Minayin she-Esther min haTorah?*", ask the Talmud, what serves as proof that there is an allusion to Esther in

Scripture? The verse *va'anokhi haster astir panai*, "I shall hide my countenance, my face," comments Rashi: In Esther's time there will be a *hester panim*, an eclipse of God's countenance. That means, the absence has divine motivation, but human consequences.

And so, the Book of Esther is part of the canon, and to hear the tale is a command for all men, and all women, and all children. All Jews everywhere must listen to the deceptively [00:08:00] childish and naïve story, of an old king and his beautiful Jewish queen. Everybody must be present when the tale is told and retold; everybody except God.

Thus we realize that there are dimensions to this story that remain hidden. Instead of soothing our fears, the Book of Esther confuses us. While it enchants us with its simplicity, it awakens some unspeakable, unformulated anguish in us. We were together at Sinai. What about Shushan? Let us study the text in depth. It is the only way to measure and savor its literary quality and ethical content, which has been and remains our purpose for these collective learning sessions.

At this moment, perhaps we ought to stop briefly as usual and remind ourselves that this adventures of ours [00:09:00] began

here, 15 years ago, and a *Shehecheyanu* is in order. Yes, for 15 years, we have met in this very hall to explore together Jewish civilization through its colorful and mysterious characters to seek communion with them, and with ourselves, and to search for that which we have in common, in spite of, or perhaps because of, all the centuries that separate us from their destinies. I think I would not be truthful to you if I did not tell you, on this somewhat special occasion, how much I owe you. Some of you have been together here with me on these journeys from the very beginning. Together we have questioned Job's silence, Saul's melancholy, Jeremiah's vision, Jonah's solitude, [00:10:00] Joseph's glory and Isaac's fear and trembling. Together, we have peopled our private personal galleries with portraits that have enriched mankind's memory from beginning to beginning to beginning and yet to another beginning. Some of our faithful companions and friends are no longer with us. It hurts; it hurts terribly to remember that Lily Edelman is no longer here. Nathan Edelman. And children of friends who were massacred a few years ago, in Colombia, Heschel, Ronald, Rabbi Joseph Lookstein. How does one remember, friends, except through study? We are supposed, in our tradition, to study Mishnah when one remembers those who are no longer with us, and this is what we are trying to do, even tonight.

But there were good things too. [00:11:00] Some of you met here, and got married. And believe it or not, some of you even remained married. (laughter) We chose for tonight's topic "commitment to beauty," which is a mysterious, silly title perhaps, but it has its merit. "Commitment," what does it mean, and "beauty," what does it mean? Either a person is beautiful or not; there is no study about it. And then what is beauty? What makes a book beautiful? What makes a person beautiful? What makes a sentence beautiful? And how does one show one's commitment to beauty? I shall try to answer these questions not tonight, but in a month.

Tonight, we shall tell tales, and nothing is more gratifying for a teller of tales than to bring people together, people from distant generations and contemporaries, [00:12:00] Hasidim and philosophers, poets and dreamers, Jews and Christians, and Muslims, students and teachers, we are all prone to fall under the spell of certain words, and we are intrigued by the density of certain silences. We see sentences that went through the fantasies of scholars and commentators centuries ago, and examine them as one examines rare stones. We chisel and polish them so as to catch in their facets the singular light which to us will continue to reflect the light and the mood at Sinai.

Well this is what we intend to do once more tonight, as we are about to enter the royal palace in the old Persian capital of Shushan. There we shall watch a nice Jewish girl manipulate an old, silly king. (laughter) But one does not go into [00:13:00] a royal palace, or into a story about a royal palace, just like that. One needs an invitation, or a ticket. And even then, one must not come too late. And if one does, one must wait outside. Until we interrupt the tale as we do now. (applause)

As a child, I confess to you that I was in love with Esther. I was also in love with the Book of Esther. Everything seemed simple and [00:14:00] uplifting. The good are the best, the wicked the worst. The just are rewarded, the enemies punished. I read Esther and felt reassured about Jewish history. Later I resented the book. Everything in it seemed too simple, too uplifting, and I knew that Jewish history is not that simple, nor that uplifting. By then I realized that life is far from being a fairytale. In my time, the Jews of Shushan were not spared.

Then I understood that there is in the Book of Esther something that escaped me. I was wrong in relying on first impressions. All the characters are much more complex than I thought. The Midrash tells us that whenever Rabbi Akiva's disciple fell

asleep [00:15:00] during his lectures, he would abruptly change the subject and speak on Queen Esther. (laughter) And the effect was immediate; they all woke up, interested. Forget the superficiality of the story, and it will grasp you. Just go beyond the mask, and you will be dazzled by the possibilities offered to you. Example: for years and years and centuries, we lived under the impression that Purim is Purim and Passover Passover. We were wrong. In the Talmud, the events occur not in the months of Adar, but one month later, the 13th, the 14th, and the 15th days of Nisan, which means, Passover. In other words, Purim was Passover. You see, nothing is simple about the Book of Esther. Let us reread the story, [00:16:00] shall we?

Once upon a time in the capital of an empire that numbered 127 states, there lived an old, eternally bored and boring king, *Achashverosh*, who one day had the vulgar and not so very original idea of organizing the largest dinner in history, during which nothing but the best would be served to the most distinguished guests, the most delicious dishes, the best wines, plus the highest quality entertainment which was to be provided by Queen Vashti in person. And for that special occasion, she was asked by her husband to perform some striptease numbers. (laughter) Naturally, everybody was excited, except Vashti, who did not appreciate the role [00:17:00] assigned to her. In

fact, she turned it down. Outraged by her refusal, the king consulted his advisors on protocol, legislation, human rights, and marriage counseling. Never had anything like this happened to him before. The members of his court echoed his outrage; it was clear to them that Vashti's independence threatened not only her own husband but all other husbands in the empire. Because of her, they said, other wives might get ideas, and stand up for their so-called rights. Something had to be done to stop the process. Vashti's punishment had to be such as to serve as warning to all others. And so she was deprived of her title, her security, and ultimately of her life.

The text does not say so explicitly, but after she is banished, she disappears, and because she disappeared, [00:18:00] of course she is presumed dead. Her husband may or may not have missed her. What is certain is that his anger prevented him from forgetting her. And he needed someone else at his side. Consequently, a national beauty contest was arranged, in which the maidens of the empire took part. After all, the prize was nothing less than an imperial crown.

At this point, there is nothing yet in the story that would warrant us to ask ourselves the usual question: was all this royal wife trouble good or bad for the Jews? (laughter) Why

should we worry over Achashverosh's domestic problems if they are not linked to ours? The rub was, that they were. For all of a sudden, out of the blue, without any provocation [00:19:00] or logical reason, we are told in the text, "*Ish yehudi hayah beshushan habirah*," "There was a Jew who lived in the city," Shushan. His name of Mordechai, son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin. And this Mordechai, for some reason decided that his niece, some sources say she was really his wife, Hadassah, or Esther, should propose her candidacy. Sure enough, the old king chooses her, which as we shall see was good for him and good for the Jews and bad for their enemies, especially their leader, a wicked politician named Haman.

Haman, descendant of the Amalekite king Agag, whose life was saved by King Saul, also of the Benjamin tribe, had been appointed prime minister, and had immediately used his power to humiliate all [00:20:00] his subjects, and in particular to exterminate the Jews among them. Achashverosh couldn't have cared less, especially since Haman had pledged 10,000 silver coins taken from Jews for the royal permission to implement his final solution. Everything is now ready. Haman, like many of the arch-killers in the 20th century, consults a cult of seers and astrologists to decide on an appropriate date to start the operation. The decree has been issued, the killers is on alert,

the knives are sharpened, and the trees are ready to serve as gallows. If nothing sudden stops them, the massacre can begin.

Lucky for the Jews, Achashverosh is in love, and the object of his love is Esther. He doesn't know it, but she is Jewish. At that point, she [00:21:00] and her uncle are the only Jews aware of the danger threatening their people. They are alone against Haman and his official executioners. And yet, they will win, and the executioners will lose, and Haman will die. Surely you remember the sequence of events. Achashverosh cannot sleep, and instead of taking a tranquilizer, he decides to watch a thriller -- sorry, he decide to read a book, the Book of Chronicles.

Something about an unsuccessful *putsch* that catches his attention. Yes, some people had planned to chase him from his throne, and he was saved by a Jew named, what was his name? Mordechai, Mordechai, Mordechai. Whatever became of him? The king wondered. From that moment on, Mordechai's star rises, and Haman's downfall becomes [00:22:00] inevitable. In the end, Haman and his sons are hanged, their accomplices slain, and the Jews of Shushan rejoice.

And so do we. Such was Esther's strong wish, as it is written in the text, we must rejoice, and who would dare say no to a

queen who is courageous and beautiful and Jewish to boot? After all, we Jews listen to our women.

Actually, she met some resistance from certain sages; they were against the idea of celebrating. "The world around us may get jealous," they said to her. "Is that what you want?" In other words, don't you know that the world cannot stand the sight of happy Jews? Sad Jews, maybe, all right. They even elicit expressions of sympathy among some gentiles, good gentiles. But happy Jews? But Esther [00:23:00] had an answer for her critics, and I quote the Midrash again, "Why should we hide our victory," she said, "when it has already been recorded in the history books of other people?" She won the argument, naturally. Esther won all her battles.

Today I must tell you that I miss her even more than ever. If only we could have her in the White House today. (laughter)
(applause)

May I open parentheses? Although we rarely deal with topicality, and surely not with politics, but how can I, the son of a good Jew and the grandson of a good Jew, how can I not express my sadness, my anger at what is happening? It is not only [00:24:00] the fact that we are selling AWACS to the

Saudis, who need AWACS as I need Chinese cooking. (laughter)
They need teachers, physicians. They need people to help them live, and not AWACS. But all right, I am not a politician; I don't understand anything in politics. But I'll tell you what bothered me. The Senate voted, we are a free country, and if the Senators vote, it's okay. But we were in Washington for the whole week, because we had a conference of liberators, and the imagination of Jewish history, that while we were relating and remembering the most tragic and the most important event in history of mankind, in the State Department a few steps away they were voting on AWACS, [00:25:00] in the way they did. And we were there, my wife and I and our friends, and it was an important conference. But then we heard on the news, maybe it was reported here too, that when the vote was over, they were celebrating in the White House. That is what bothered me. Why the celebration? What is the big thing to rejoice about? You had something, okay. You had to vote, have a vote. But to rejoice over it? If Esther had been there. (laughter)

Let's move closer and have a better look at Esther; she deserves it. In the cast of characters, she is the most famous. After all, hers is the title role. The book bears her name. She owns the copyright. She appears at the right moment, at the right place, and does [00:26:00] the right thing. She is the one who

inspires the king to change his mind, and thus changed destiny. She's the one who leads a clandestine existence on the ground, performing dangerous missions on behalf of our people. She is the one who at the most critical moment of the play decides on a scenario and distributes the tasks among Mordechai, the Jewish community, and the enemy himself. A keen psychologist, she seems able to predict everyone's gestures and impulses. She instinctively knows what Achashverosh will say, what Haman will do. Well, Achashverosh is not the only one to fall in love with her; we all do.

Of course she had a mentor, Mordechai, her uncle. He had taken her in as an orphan and cared for her as if she were his daughter. *Lakacha lebat*, says the text, and the Talmud adds, *al tikra lebat ki'im lebayit*, [00:27:00] which means that he married her. So when Mordechai asked her to work for their people, she couldn't refuse. She respected him too much, and so do we. His Jewish loyalty, his Jewish pride, his strength and determination, his sense of dignity when dealing with those in power, everything about him was quite impressive. Though he is "guardian of the royal gate," an important position in the ancient Persian administration, he had remained faithful to the Jewish people. His thoughts revolve around his people. When they are threatened, he makes the ultimate sacrifice of sending

his beloved Esther to attend the city royal beauty contest. He's determined to infiltrate the higher circles of the royal palace. And when Esther reacts somewhat timidly, or recalcitrantly, he lashes out at her with the poignant reminder which applies to all [00:28:00] Jewish men and women who attained positions in society or government, and I quote, *ki im hacharesh tacharishi ba'et hazzot*, "Should you remain silent now when we need you when our people are in mortal danger?" You don't know what you are doing, because we will get help from other quarters, but you, what will happen to you? What will your name evoke in our memory?

On the surface, nothing he said, nothing he did was objectionable. Clearly, he had a sense of history. Even old Achashverosh is not totally unappealing. If you save the first impressions of the man, the Vashti episode, he is infatuated with her. He's proud of her beauty and wants to show her off. What's really wrong with that? Furthermore, he doesn't seem to hate Jews; he hardly notices them. Also, don't forget, he could be bought by Haman [00:29:00] and consequently by Haman's enemies as well. And you know, a ruler that can be bought was viewed with sympathy by Jews in the diaspora. Study the text carefully, and you will see that King Achashverosh is in fact a comparatively benevolent monarch with few prejudices. Civil

rights had been granted to all the inhabitants, Jews included. Read Haman's report on them, and you will see how lucky they are to live in Shushan. They are permitted to speak their own tongue, cultivate their own culture, worship their own God, remain faithful to their own tradition and maintain living links of Jewish solidarity between communities and individuals, a true golden age, a golden diaspora, wouldn't you say? If Haman sees them everywhere, it's because they are everywhere. If he's disturbed by their power it's because they have power. They are free to seek and obtain [00:30:00] anything under the sun. Who wins the most rewarding of all beauty contests? A Jewish girl. Who is publicly and nationally honored by the king for services rendered to the nation? A Jew. But then if Achashverosh is so kind to the Jews, why did he allow Haman to talk him into massacring them? A moment of blindness, a lapse, a mistake which he quickly corrected; after all, not one Jew lost his life under Achashverosh. They were threatened, but that's all.

So who is the villain of the story? Haman. His hate towards Mordechai and the Jews is total, unbending, unyielding, almost visceral. He will not rest as long as Mordechai is alive. The text says so clearly, Haman is wicked, the wicked man in Jewish history, the symbol of enmity, ferocity, cruelty, [00:31:00] and murder. In this, he resembles Amalek, whose descendent he is.

Vashti too is treated as a semi-villain. Poor queen, the world is against her. And Scripture too, and the Talmud even more. Nobody comes to her rescue; nobody defends her honor. We accept the king's rage. Why didn't she submit to his whims? If only she had accepted his invitation, there would have been no Haman and no story.

Let's recapitulate or review the cast of characters. Two heroes, Esther and Mordechai. Two villains: Haman and Vashti. One neutral, Achashverosh, and one absent, God. Unleashed upon one another, they act and react against or for [00:32:00] one another, and thus weaving a legend where all elements of ancient drama are bound to clash. Ambition and lust, vanity and treason, unquenchable thirst for power and fame on one hand, and total loyalty, faith, love, and beauty on the other. No wonder the book has been such a success.

But now, let us examine it within the context of our tradition. Is the story true? Was there a Persian king Achashverosh? Was his wife Jewish? Was her name Esther? To what extent to the episodes involving Mordechai and Haman reflect historical events? As far as the characters are concerned, the answer is yes, but a qualified yes. There was a king Achashverosh in

Persia. He ruled from 486 to 465 before our common era.

[00:33:00] Herodotus mentions him, but his wife's name was neither Esther or Vashti but Amestris. Also a tablet discovered in Borsippa refers to a royal advisor named Marduka. Jewish traditional sources take it for granted, naturally, that the book is based on facts. But then, how is one to explain Herodotus' statement that Persian kings could marry women from seven noble families only? That is his problem. (laughter)

There are other discrepancies in dates and names. Was Mordechai himself exiled in the time of Jehoiakim? Was his grandfather Kish? Also when exactly did the event occur? Most Talmudic sources date it back to the Babylonian exile, but it is difficult to pinpoint it exactly. Are we to conclude, therefore, that the story is pure fiction? Some scholars think so. They claim that the Jews of Shushan did not celebrate Purim to commemorate a miracle, but that they [00:34:00] invented the miracle to justify the celebration. (laughter) Their argument, in Persia, as in other lands, ancient tribes celebrated spring simply because it meant and means rebirth. As for the Jews, they conferred upon the festivity a religious meaning. That is why they invented the story of Purim, which on the surface is shockingly naïve and banal, with its harem intrigues on one hand, and power intrigues on the other, plus a good measure of

sheer fantasy. God's absence would thus be justified, or at least comprehensible; who would not prefer to stay away?

Fortunately, there exists another version of the events, and one that is more literary, more poetic, and perhaps more truthful, and I am referring to the one in the Midrash. First of all, the Midrash, without the slightest inhibition, does introduce God in this story. And it does so in a [00:35:00] charming, almost childish way. It makes the king, the term king, *hammelech* apply not only to Achashverosh, but also sometimes to the King of Kings of Kings of Kings, meaning to the King of the universe. And whenever the word "king" is mentioned, we mean God. The Midrash then goes further and uses the characters in a more complex and enigmatic, and consequently more intense way; they become more human and more profound. In other words, unlike Scripture, the Midrash plays with the characters, and moves them back and forth, up and down, on a chessboard. And thus, erasing the frontier separating good from evil. Nothing is irrevocable; no plot is definitive. The creative process goes on, and the reader as witness is invited to watch it unfold against the background of his own dreams and memories.

Take Achashverosh and his [00:36:00] metamorphosis. What the Midrash does to him is not overly generous. He is shown as

neither stupid nor wicked, but both. Some sources say, *Melech tipeish hayah*, he was a foolish king, an imbecile. And others say, *rasha hayah*, he was a bad king. At the same time, we find a third category of commentators who out of compassion, perhaps, depict him as a kind and charitable and just man. Remember the opening sentence, *Vayehi biymei Achashverosh; hu Achashverosh*. This repetition and emphasis occurs ten times in the Bible according to the Midrash. Five times, it is related to just men, and five times wicked men. And we are given a choice. Achashverosh may belong to either, or both. In one place, he is shown as a merciless tyrant; in another as a weak [00:37:00] and kind sovereign. What is virtue in Scripture becomes shortcoming in the Talmud. The text tells us of his decree to allow his guests to live freely, *la'asot kirtzon ish-va'ish*, to give freedom to all. Now is there a better philosophy of action? The Midrash disagrees; the order is too tall. And according to the Midrash, God says to Achashverosh, "You wish to please everybody? Can you? Tell me," says God to Achashverosh, "if two men wish to marry the same woman, is it in her power to marry both? If two ships travel in opposite directions, can both their prayers for the same wind be fulfilled? In life, men must choose, one way or [00:38:00] another, and you, mortal, think you can satisfy all men by offering them the same things?" Moreover, if we insist so much on his decision to allow his

guests to eat and drink freely, surely it must mean that this was not the rule in his palace, and the Talmud tells us that in the past, his guests were forced to drink from special cups. They went insane, but they drank. And the Talmud even says that some of them died, but they drank.

Of course, some sources ridicule him. Why was he called Achashverosh? Because who remembers him, says the Talmud, gets a headache. So ambiguous, so imprecise, so ambivalent is the man that everything about him is confusing. Some sages believe he was friend and protector of the Jews; others maintain that he was more hostile [00:39:00] to them than Haman. What a strange man, exclaims one master, "He killed his wife, Vashti, because of his friend Haman, and his friend Haman because of his wife, Esther." Well, let's take another look.

He no longer seems neutral but quick-tempered. He decides to do one thing today, another tomorrow. Because of Vashti, he makes all women suffer by reducing them to quasi-slavery. And because of Haman, he's ready to allow all Jews to be massacred, and because of Esther, he saves them. And look at the way he behaves with his Queen Vashti. He loves her desperately, yet he humbles her in public. He desires her, yet he kills her. He kills her, and then he misses her. When the text says,

vachamato ba'arah vo, that he was angry, it is not clear at whom the anger is directed, at Vashti, or at [00:40:00] himself for having executed her?

Let's look at Vashti. Princess by birth, her father is supposed to have been Belshazzar. She fares poorly in the Midrash, and we do not understand why. It's really unfair. How is one to explain her bad reputation? I, for one, would rise to her defense, as any righteous citizen and gentleman should. I happen to like Vashti. In the immortal legion of liberated women, she occupies a place of distinction. She knows the price of her temerity, and she's ready to pay it. She will not submit to the capricious impulses of her senile husband. He wants to entertain them? *Bevakasha*, perfect. (laughter) But not at her expense. Her argument, as recorded in the Midrash, is admirable, dignified, so noble, I quote, [00:41:00] "Why do you wish me to appear naked before your guests, sire?" she asked. "If they find me beautiful, they will kill you to possess me. If they think me ugly, my ugliness will blemish you." Comments the Midrash, I quote again, "She talked to him in hints and he understood nothing. She scratched him and he felt nothing." Then in outburst of cold rage, she continues, and I quote again, "Who and what were you when you worked in the house of my father? You worked in his stable. You are used to mingling

with prostitutes, but now you are king. Yet your manners have not changed." Again the Midrash comments, "She spoke in hints and he understood nothing. She scratched him, and he felt nothing." And then she sends him the last [00:42:00] message, "Remember, in the house of my father, people were condemned to die, but not naked."

You cannot but admire her for her logic, for her grace, and for her strength of character. In fact, she's so impressive, the Talmud inevitably asks the question, since she is so great, why did she deserve to die? Not from her husband's viewpoint, but from ours. What can we reproach her? And the Midrash has imagination, comes up with several possible but implausible answers. She tried, says the Midrash, to incite Jewish women to give up Judaism by making them work on the Sabbath. Also, says the Midrash, she dissuaded her husband from rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, saying "My grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed Jerusalem and you want to [00:43:00] rebuild it?" That is why she deserved punishment, and received it. And finally, says the Midrash, when Achashverosh gave dinners for men, stag dinners, she organized parties for women, and that was wrong. While they were having a good time, we are told, angels came to God complaining, "Look, your people are suffering, and they don't care." And this last argument is the worst. Tell

me, why should Vashti be blamed for also giving dinners? But wait. Vashti was condemned to death because of whom? Haman, acting under the assumed name of Memuchan, advisor to the king, and he is the one who told the king to get rid of her. Why?

[00:44:00] The Midrash states three reasons. One, Vashti made the mistake of not inviting his wife to the dinner. (laughter) Two, occasionally, she would slap his face with her sandals. (laughter) And the third reason is the most charming of all: he had a daughter who needed a husband. So he thought, if she would die, Achashverosh would take his daughter as a queen.

In truth, says the Midrash, Achashverosh first sought the advice of Jewish sages. She disobeyed the king, he told them, I shall bring her to you for judgement. The sages were in a predicament. If they told him to execute her, tomorrow he might regret his decisions and might make us regret ours. If they told him to leave her in peace, they might be accused of tolerating [00:45:00] crimes of *lèse majesté*. They found a way out. They told the king, sorry, sire, but we can be of no assistance to you. You see, once upon in time in Jerusalem, we knew how to pass judgment in capital cases. Now, in exile, we no longer have access to that knowledge. (laughter)

Only then did Achashverosh turn to Memuchan, Haman. Haman, well, Haman himself emerges less monolithic in the Midrash. Anti-Semitic, yes. But who isn't? (laughter) Try to understand him, how could he help not being anti-Semitic? I understand Haman, all the anti-Semites, who sees a superficial image of Jewish history, in other words, an image both true yet incorrect. Like all the others, he [00:46:00] is convinced that Jews are forever involved in everything that happens in the world. They are forever involved in plots to take over the world and dominate it. Look, Haman is chosen and loved by the king, applauded by the nation, and cherished by his family. He has everything a man wants and desires. He could be happy; he could be so happy were it not for the Jews who appears wherever he goes, only to challenge him, to provoke him, to remind him that all this is silly and temporary.

Read the text. Haman is prime minister. And yet, who is at the imperial palace gate? A Jew, Mordechai. Inside the palace, a Jewish woman, Esther. In the official chronicles, again a Jew. How could he help but feel hostility and suspicion towards them? Whenever he [00:47:00] would cross the gate, he would see a Jew. And wherever he would enter the palace, again he would see a Jew. How could he help not being anti-Semitic? Don't the Jews do everything to fan his hatred? He's at the height of his

career; the king orders all citizens to bow before him, the gods are on his side, and yet there is one Jew who decides to be different and refuses to bow. Of course, Haman should not pay attention to him; if he is truly great, he should treat his lonely rebel with disdain and sarcasm. But he cannot. He cannot avoid him, for he is, all the time, there. He cannot ignore him; what should he do, use the side door? (laughter) He, the viceroy, the prime minister, Haman hates Mordechai, and through him, therefore, all the Jews. Haman would not be human if he [00:48:00] didn't hate him. Mordechai's presence is a constant reminder of the fleeting nature of his power, of the futility of glory and triumph. Why does Mordechai do that to him? Why doesn't he go away? Why can't he be like everybody else?

Naturally, the Talmud also emphasizes Haman's evil substance. He's a descendant of Israel's and mankind's archenemy, Amalek. And so, deserving death. His ancestor Agag was spared by Saul; in other words, if King Saul had been less charitable, the Jews of Shushan would not have been in danger. And so it was Saul's fault, or rather, it was not entirely Haman's fault. Some sages feel such sympathy for Haman that they are unable to accept the tragic fate that befell his children. They claimed that they were not all hanged, that some survived, and that one of his

descendants, believe it or not, even became an illustrious
[00:49:00] Talmudic scholar at a yeshiva in Bnei Brak.

(laughter) Haman's death is described in shocking detail: after having been defeated, he becomes Mordechai's servant and valet. He bows to him and attends to all his needs. He has fallen, and lost all he had. And now he pleads with Mordechai for just one thing: to spare him the indignity of death by hanging. He accepts death, but not the indignity. He reminds Mordechai of the injunction, *binfol oyvecha al tismach*, one must not rejoice of the downfall of the enemy, and this, I cannot not tell you, that this is something that makes me proud of belonging to a tradition such as this. When we have seen months ago, the rejoicing in some capitals, with Gaddafi rejoicing over Sadat's death, [00:50:00] it's unthinkable in our terms; it's simply unthinkable in our vocabulary.

But Mordechai, strangely insensitive, remains deaf to Haman's pleas. At this point, one wonders why there was no room for pity in the hearts of our Talmudic legend-makers. Pity for Haman, who had been a tool of destiny, in a story that went beyond him and that crushed him. Actually, I think that Haman's problem was that he was a poor psychologist, blind and stubborn, as are most men obsessed with power. At times I wonder, why do our sources speak of the king's stupidity and Haman's

wickedness? Haman was not particularly intelligent. He not only paid too much attention to Mordechai's resistance, he didn't know how to cope with it, how to disarm it. Just imagine Haman telling Mordechai, "Ah, my [00:51:00] dear friend, I am so happy to see you every day at the same spot. I do admire your courage, you know. I am fed up with those flatterers who kneel before me. Your audacity, your integrity please me very much, really Mordechai, I mean it. You know what, I am going to appoint you to a high official position. You will be my Jewish advisor. You will be my Jewish minister, my Jewish friend, and the whole world will be informed, trust my public relations people, they will see to it that all the media report the nomination, and the swearing-in ceremony. You, Mordechai will not have to bow to me. You will serve in my administration." What do you think Mordechai's response would have been? But he didn't do it.

Well I believe of course, but then I am prejudiced when it comes to Jews, I believe that Mordechai would have resisted temptations of power, because he was Mordechai. [00:52:00] Because Mordechai resisted threats and persecutions from people in power. His portrait in Scripture is unambiguous; Mordechai was Jewish, *ish yehudi*, in the capital city of Shushan, which means, everybody knew that he was Jewish. People knew that he

considered himself a fugitive Judean in exile, and that he worked on behalf of Jews. That was his passion, his *raison d'être*, his purpose in life. Whether beaten or celebrated, he proudly affirms his Jewishness, and when danger looms for his brethren, he gives up his comforts, so as to devote his entire energy to rescue work. That is the sublime picture the Bible offers of the man and his mission.

But once again, the Midrash prefers to make him too more ambiguous. Not everybody is happy with him all the time. We deduct this from the end of the text, remember? [00:53:00] After the torment, after the story is done, after the enemy's defeat, after the miracles obtained by Mordechai, the text says the Mordechai, *hayah veratzui lerov echav*, Mordechai was accepted or elected by most of his people. What? Most? Not all? But he saved them. Talmud says, not all. Some members of the Sanhedrin oppose his leadership, and we are not given the reason, only the fact. Mordechai ruled by majority, and not by unanimity, and perhaps because we believe in democracy, and we are afraid that if there is unanimity, it may lead towards totalitarianism. There was a minority against Mordechai after Mordechai obtained the miracles. How come? [00:54:00] Just because Jews want to be notorious for their ideological pluralism and diversity, are they also notorious for their

ingratitude towards their leaders. Moses before him had had to face similar problems. What he endured on the part of his people whom he saved from slavery and death constitute the most tragic and depressing part of Scripture. Perhaps he wasn't perfect; neither was Mordechai. After all, it was because of his lack of understanding for Haman and those who bowed to him that Jews found themselves threatened. Is such individual salvation at the expense of collective reprisals justifiable? Was Mordechai's stubbornness something to be encouraged, or condescendingly explained away? Of course, Mordechai is mostly covered with praise. He was as important to his generation as Moses had been to his, says the Midrash. He belonged to the Sanhedrin; he spoke 70 languages, and knew all the [00:55:00] secrets of Torah. He had good manners, we are told. He possessed rare virtues, and was worthy of redemption.

But, let's not forget, it was he who sent Esther to the beauty contest. Worse, he who told her to hide her Jewishness, and that was before the crisis, that was before the danger. Why did he tell a Jewish girl to hide her Jewishness? He sent his wife, or his niece, no matter, a poor orphan to the imperial palace, fully aware of the risks he exposed her to? Really, how could he? How could a man such as Mordechai hide behind a woman? All right, he knew the king's weaknesses. Was that sufficient

reason to use Esther? Furthermore, having persuaded Esther to go there, he then becomes critical of her behavior. He accuses her of being too [00:56:00] timid. Is it her fault that the king receives his wives only once a month? He accuses her of being silent, and yet there is no word in the text to justify his accusations. Quite the contrary, she is at the front, not he. She exposes herself to punishment, not he. She tells him what to do, what strategy to adopt, not he. He advocates courage, but it is she who will endure the consequences. Worse, listen to the Midrash: "When Esther asks him to proclaim a three-day fast, he suddenly remembers that he is a pious, religious, orthodox Jew, and he goes to the Jewish calendar and he checks the dates, and he answers, indignantly, 'You want us to fast? Impossible. It falls on Passover. It interferes with our holidays. One is not supposed to fast on a holiday.'" Really, Esther is on a dangerous [00:57:00] mission and needs help, encouragement, support. And Mordechai quotes the *Shulchan Arukh*? (laughter) The Jewish code of behavior? But then, Esther is not at all at loss for words. She puts him in his place, and I quote the Midrash, she's beautiful: "Listen, old man," she tells him, "Of course my request interferes with Passover. It is true that Jewish laws forbid fasting on a holiday. But tell me, what would happen to Passover if there were no Jews left to observe it?" And Mordechai, faced with such a human logical

interpretation of halakha, admits his mistake; she is right. She's always right. Except when she's not. (laughter)

First of all, she's innocent, but surely not naïve. She's clever, even shrewd, a perfect diplomat. Jewish, and proud to be Jewish, yes. But not [00:58:00] during the first part of the story. For a while, she does conceal her Jewishness. True, Mordechai told her to do so. Still, she must have been an accomplished actress. Read the text, and you will admire her sense of drama. She knew how to build suspense, how to manipulate events and people. She appears before her royal husband, concealing her true motivation. Instead of telling him straightforwardly, "My wish is to save my brethren," she says, "All I desire, sire, is to have your majesty and Haman over to my place for dinner." Naturally, they both accept the invitation. Achashverosh then asks her, "What is your wish now?" Again she says, "My most fervent desire is to have you come back a second time." Really now? The Jews were fasting, and Esther was dining and wining the king and his minister? The Midrash feels the need to explain and justify her behavior. [00:59:00] The dinners, says the Midrash, are difficult to comprehend at first. How could Esther indulge in socializing while her people were trembling with fear? She had to, answers the Midrash. Even more than before, she had to hide her

Jewishness. Had she not arranged the dinners, she might have given herself away, not only to the king and his prime minister, but also to the Jews of Shushan. They all had to be left in the dark. If they had learned of her Jewishness, says the Midrash, they would have felt unduly reassured. Why worry, why fast, why pray? We have one of ours inside the palace. The argument is sound, and yet I find it disturbing, for it proves that for quite some time, Esther performed so well that she fooled even her own people. And that I don't accept. Of course she already knew then, she must have known then, that sometimes the end justifies the [01:00:00] means.

But does it? Look at what she did to poor old Achashverosh. She turned him into a farcical character. And Haman? She trapped him into a cheap 19th century melodrama. Listen to what Scripture says: "It happened during the second dinner. The king had too much wine and went for a walk in the garden. Haman is left alone with Esther. He stumbles and falls on her. It is his misfortune that Achashverosh returns precisely at that moment. Esther, cool, tells the king, "See, he wanted to seduce me behind your back." And that is the end of Haman. But wait a second, the accusation is false. Haman never dreamt of seducing Esther. He was a devoted husband, and a good father. We know it from [01:01:00] the text. He was happily married. Zeresh,

his wife, was also his confidante, his ally, his advisor. He did nothing without consulting her. And Esther must have known that, so why did she compromise him? Tell me, if she was such a just person, why did she lie? That Haman would never have thought of attempting to seduce her is a point certain Midrashic texts make in commenting on her age. In Scripture, she is described as beautiful and young. Not so in the Midrash. Rav says that she was 40, not so bad. (laughter) And his opponent, Shmuel, who always wants to outdo him, claims she was 80. Well, (laughter) *rabbanan amru*, the consensus was, that she was 75. (laughter) Which means that her impact on the king had nothing to do with [01:02:00] her youth. She must have had other qualities. The Midrash mentions her prophetic powers, her gracefulness, her piety. She ate *kasher*. She had never looked at another man besides Mordechai. While Haman plotted to exterminate the Jews, she was busy preparing her home for Passover. In short, she was a good Jewish housewife. Her marriage with Achashverosh, pure self-sacrifice. The Zohar offers a more extraordinary, if outlandish hypothesis. It wasn't Esther who lived with the old king, but a demon who looked like her. (laughter).

Well it's clear. The Midrash exaggerates because its masters felt the need to exaggerate. They felt the need to explain

Esther's ambiguous behavior, and thus resolve certain tensions, certain conflicts, and perhaps certain reservations resulting from it. That is equally true of another, though invisible and anonymous [01:03:00] participant, one whose presence is felt throughout the play: the Jewish community. After all, the Jews of Shushan are the real protagonists of this drama. It is their fate that is at stake. Their lives are in danger. Their children are being singled out to be handed over to the executioner, and yet they stay in the background, objects rather than subjects of their own history. Nobody asks for their opinion. Nobody inquires about their desires. Nobody presents them with choices and options. They are told what to do and when. They are instructed when to fast, when to celebrate, when to fight, when to defend themselves, when to take vengeance, and when to triumph. That is the impression one gets from Scripture: they are passive participants whose task is to obey and follow orders. In the Midrash, one feels a tension between them and their two leaders, [01:04:00] Mordechai and Esther, who were more Jewish, more devoted than others. The others, for instance, attended the gigantic dinner I spoke about earlier, the dinner given by Achashverosh, and the Midrash blames them for that. Says the Midrash, and I quote, "Who were the guests at that festivity? Jewish dignitaries, who sought to establish good relations with the administration." Rabbi Hanina, son of

Pappa, goes further and specifies that *gadol hador*, the masters, the leaders of the generation were there at that dinner, except that at one point, they ran away. This imperial state dinner is harshly judged in the Midrash. To have attended it was considered sinful. Why did Haman almost [01:05:00] succeed in his criminal plot, asks the Midrash? Because Jews went to the party. And one source quotes a figure: 18,500 Jews were present at the dinner. They ate and drank and allowed themselves to be seduced by the luxury and limelight of the palace, and so Satan could easily denounce them to God, who couldn't help but listen to his arguments. And from all this, we learn that there existed a large and flourishing Jewish community in Persia's diaspora, with its sages and their disciple, its merchants and their customers, its sons and their brides, its schools, its hospitals, its factories, its rich, its poor. Yet one minor incident, one capricious desire, one prostration on the part of a king or his queen, were enough to disturb the balance and threaten the security and the very existence of all the [01:06:00] Jews throughout the entire empire, one impulse. Remember, in the beginning of the story, the Jews were not involved. The king and his queen had one of their usual family quarrels, some politicians engaged in their customary intrigues, and that was all. There was no Jewish part in the story. And then all of a sudden, all we hear about is Jews. Achashverosh

is angry with Vashti, and Jews are persecuted. Haman seeks power, and Jews are in danger. What are we looking for in the story of Achashverosh? Did Haman alone push us into it? That he knew the Jews is clear; he knew many things about them. To Achashverosh he said, "They have no respect for you, sire. Observe them, will you please?" according to the Midrash. "If a fly falls into their cup, they remove it and drink the wine. But were you [01:07:00] to touch the cup, they would consider the wine impure." What does it tell us? Firstly, that the Jews of Shushan were pious, and also that Haman had gone to the trouble of learning many Jewish laws, including the one about which wine is kosher and which isn't. There is even a point of humor in the Midrash about it. The Midrash says that Haman became jealous of the Jews, and that's why he hated them; he became jealous, and why was he jealous? Because the Jews had too many holidays. (laughter) So God told Haman, aha, if that's the case, I will punish you by giving them another holiday. (laughter)

In general, Haman seems to have known Jewish laws and Jewish history as well, or better, than many Jews. His opinion of us was higher than that of many Jews. He attributed to us an international power of infinite magnitude; [01:08:00] it is as though he had read *The Protocols of the Sages of Zion*, the

Völkischer Beobachter, or the *Pravda*. He was convinced that we were everywhere, and that we were fully committed to help one another and the Jewish people; if only he were right. But then, that is how it was understood and interpreted in heaven.

Whatever negative points Haman made on earth were transformed into positive ones up there. Example: when Haman said to King Achashverosh, "Look at these people which is faithful only to its own traditions, to its own tongue, to its own laws, to its own customs, to its own memory," the angel Michael repeated after him and said to God, "See master of the universe, see your people. It observes only your laws, and the way it affirms its faith in you is through observing your law, your Torah, your customs." So whatever Haman said, the angel said, except he turned around, and at the end, Michael added, "Admit it, [01:09:00] Master of the universe. Your people is not accused of theft, or rape, or idolatry, but only of wanting to remain Jewish. How can you not save it from massacre?"

It was then that Haman had the idea of inspiring Achashverosh to organize a festive dinner. He had recognized the weakness of some Jews when it comes to honors, when it comes to the invitations to the White House -- I mean, the palace. (laughter) He knew that they would go there dressed in all their finery. Thus Satan had the perfect opportunity later to say to God, "Now

look at your Jews. They are having a good time and have forgotten that their Temple and yours is in ruins. They don't deserve your grace." And God simply had to submit to Satan's logic, and so he asked for a parchment, says the Midrash, "to inscribe the terrifying verdict that was to doom the eternal people to banishment [01:10:00] from eternity."

Haman's plan, helped or written by Satan, was perfect. The timing was excellent. But then something went wrong: Achashverosh changed his mind. He refused to play the part assigned to him by Haman. He decided that it would be unwise for him to quarrel with Israel and the God of Israel. His argument to Haman was, "I am afraid," he said. "Whoever had provoked the Jews in the past ended in defeat and tragedy." He even quoted examples; he too knew Jewish history. Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Amalek. But Haman tried to reassure him. Yes, that was true once upon a time, when He and His people were young. Now God is old, and tired. You want proof? The Temple has been destroyed, Jerusalem is in ruins, and the Jews are dispersed. You see, there is no need to worry about Him; He is tired. And King Achashverosh finally [01:11:00] gave his consent. The law was promulgated, the plan prepared, the watches synchronized, the date chosen. And now, all the killers and victims could do was wait.

And while they were waiting, the Midrash imagines some breathtaking scenes up in heaven, where the Torah of Israel, followed by angels and seraphims dressed in mourning began to weep, "How shall we live without the children of Israel?" "Too late," was the answer, "the decree has been signed, impossible to revoke it." And so the prophet Elijah hurried to wake up the three Patriarchs from their sleep. "How can you rest in peace when our people is doomed?" They asked him for details, and specific points. Was the decree signed with clay, or with blood? [01:12:00] If it's with blood, there is nothing to be done, they said. "No," says the prophet, "it was only signed with clay." "Good!" exclaimed the Patriarchs, "Let us pray." In the meantime, down below, 22,000 children gathered around their teachers to fast and study together. And again, the scene in the Midrash is so descriptive. Their mothers brought them food, but they rejected it. They wanted to share in the collective prayers of their people. Yet suddenly, they closed their books, and gave them back to their teachers, saying, "You promised us in the name of Mordechai that thanks to Torah, we shall be spared, that the Torah of Israel protects the people of Israel. And now we realize it isn't so." For they, the children had been selected as the first to be slain, [01:13:00] just as centuries later, the Jewish children, one million of

them, were the first to go not so gently into the night. Only unlike centuries later, the Jewish children of Shushan did move God to compassion. The catastrophe was averted; a miracle occurred. God did not accept a massacre of 22,000 Jewish children in Shushan. And that is why we celebrate Purim with such joy and fervor: to commemorate God's pity for His children. There seems to be a limit even to His patience; even to His silence.

In conclusion, if indeed there was a miracle, if indeed it was willed by God, why doesn't His name figure in the tale? That He chose to hide His face [01:14:00] before and during the catastrophe is conceivable, and is reconciled with a traditional explanation of *hester panim*, of the hiding of the countenance. But why did he keep his name from the book after the event? And I believe that is related to the end, rather than to the beginning of the story. What is the end? The Jews are safe, Haman is humiliated and finally hanged, and so are his ten sons. And if that is not enough, the Jews obtained permission drafted by Mordechai to take vengeance and kill their enemies.

Well, I never did understand this part of the Book of Esther. After all, the catastrophe was averted. The massacre did not take place. Why then this bloodshed on such a scale?

[01:15:00] Five hundred men were slain in Shushan in one day, and 300 the next, and elsewhere 75,000 persons lost their lives. Of course there is an explanation in the text, that they received permission *l'hagin al-nafsham*, they received permission to defend themselves, and in their defense, they killed. Still, too many people died. And just as we know during the passage of the Red Sea, when people die, there is no celebration. The question remains, why boast? Why invent episodes of killing? What does killing have to do with Purim? How can we celebrate? How could they, our ancestors, celebrate in the midst of such killing? Is this why we are told to get drunk and forget?

[01:16:00] To erase the boundaries between reality and fantasy and think that it all happened only in a dream? Or is it a way of coping with our hidden frustrations? One day a year, we imagine acts of violence during Purim, when it's but a game, a play, so as to impress upon us the important and vital lesson that it is prohibited all other days.

I believe that that is the reason why God chose not to give his name to the Book of Esther. He refused to be associated with the *denouement*, with the bloodshed. His way of saying, don't ascribe this to me. I had nothing to do with it. You wanted to avenge history, all right. But don't make me responsible for it. For to be Jewish, for God, and for the Jewish tradition, is

to have all the reasons in the world to seek vengeance, to respond to [01:17:00] the enemy blow for blow, and more, but to choose not to, and as one has to. To be Jewish means to have earned the right to punish our enemies who inevitably turn out to be the enemies of mankind, he or she who hates Jews hates other people as well. But still, it is up to us not to punish unless one has to in self-defense.

And so what are we left with after having read this beautiful, disturbing story? An impression that it is neither myth nor fiction but everyday reality. Unlike most novels, one cannot, one must not, according to the halakha, to law, read the Megillah backwards, starting from the miracle. No, one must proceed in order. One must look around and wonder whether a gratuitous act somewhere does not somehow implicate [01:18:00] our lives and those of our children. The Talmud teaches us to begin the story of Esther at the beginning. One is not allowed to read the Megillah in reverse, starting with the danger, and the Baal Shem Tov comments: "What is the meaning of this strange injunction? What's wrong with flashbacks?" And the meaning, he says, the Baal Shem Tov, not to view the story as an event of the past alone. It will forever be projected into the present and the future. The tale relates to all times, and to all men, and to all women. The enemies are using Haman's arguments, the

situation remains precarious, and one must never rely on kings and rulers; their mood is too volatile.

What is Purim? A story about a conflict between good and evil? About fantasies [01:19:00] of violence, vanquished by prayer and commitment to truth and beauty? Ultimately, Purim is not so much a tale about persecution, as it is a celebration of memory.
(applause)

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