

"HAMAN'S ACCUSATION --
ARE WE GUILTY OR ABSOLVED?"

We Jews have, for the past few years, been the subject of profound deliberations. These inner debates by a major church of our times may or may not have major consequences for our future and that of the entire world. I refer, of course, to the deliberations concerning the "Jewish Chapter" in the Ecumenical Council at the Vatican in Rome, where the princes of the Catholic Church consulted about whether or not the Jewish people today is guilty of deicide, the killing of their god. The possible ramifications of this Council are such that many Jews were overwhelmed by its significance.

Yet, now that it is all over, in the perspective of history, we can see clearly that all these debates were **absurd**! they would be comical had they not been so tragic for so long. To think that in the latter half of the twentieth century, adults, mature minds, can actually consult as to whether Jews are guilty, partly guilty, or **totally** absolved of the charge of crucifixion! It would be funny were it not so demonic! It is a matter of regret that so many Jews took the issue itself, as divorced from its possible consequences, so seriously. It is pathetic to think of the numbers of Jews who every morning, during the Council sessions, opened their newspapers at their breakfast tables not to learn, out of curiosity, how the Church was acquitting itself in the eyes of history, but how they were judging our "trial" and how we were faring!

Today, however, permit me to discuss with you another anti-Semitic accusation against the Jewish people: a bill of indictment, that is far older than the Christian libel, and which gives more credit to human intelligence, for it is not anywhere nearly as absurd, as preposterous, and as nonsensical as the ridiculous crucifixion charge.

This indictment was drawn up by a descendant of Amalek, who held power and a position of considerable influence in the lands of the ancient Persians and Medes. I refer, of course, to Haman. According to the Megillah, this was his series of charges:

וְלֹא עַם אֶחָד מְבוּרָה וְנִבְרָרָה בְּכָל הָאֲרָצוֹת
וְלֹא עַם אֶחָד, וְזֶה הָאֶחָד אֵינוֹ שׁוֹה פְּנֵיהֶם

"There is one people, spread about and diverse amongst the nations of this realm; their laws are different from those of any other people, and they do not observe the laws of the king. It is not worth for the king to let them exist."

What, in effect, is Haman saying?

His accusation is that Jews only appear to be diverse, not to be able to agree upon anything; actually, they consider themselves אֶחָד, one people. Hence, they are subversive in their dogged and haughty loyalty to their own group.

Haman blamed us for having different laws. According to the Talmud, he implied that אֵין אֵין מִתְעַבְּרִין we do not eat the foods of other peoples, and אֵין מִתְעַבְּרִין we do not intermarry with them. He was furious with us because our many holidays, which do not coincide with the holidays of other people, מִכּוֹנֵי הַבַּיִת זִמְמִין לְדוּלִיס - cause an economic drain upon the larger community. Furthermore, "they

do not perform the laws of the king"; Jews refuse to celebrate those national holidays which are religious in character and which are pagan in essence.

Behind this forensic facade lay what Haman regarded as the fatal flaw of the faithful Jew: "וְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה" and Mordecai would not kneel and would not bow down." Mordecai, symbol of the Jew, will not deify a mere mortal even if he be as powerful as Haman. The Jew will not idolize a mere human being.

How do we plead to this ancient accusation, so much older and so much more serious because less silly than the crucifixion libel? Are we guilty -- or shall we seek to be "absolved?"

Of course, the first human tendency is to plead: not guilty, We feel that we ought to deny the calumny of the anti-Semite and to call it false. But -- not in this case. On the contrary, we are guilty! It is the pride of our people to plead: guilty as charged. The wretched Haman's conclusions may be vile exaggerations and misleading, but in essence what he says is right. And woe to the Jew who seeks to be "absolved" of Haman's indictment!

The Yalkut puts the matter this way:

א"ר לוי דא משה שיהיה האל
מקסיים מלחם האל יאכל היה מיכאל מלחם מלחם סניאויא מלחמה

"Rabbi Levi said, concerning what Haman prosecuted Israel here below, the angel Michael defended us up above." What he meant is not that some spiritual being appeared before the divine tribunal and offered a point-by-point rebuttal of Haman's charges before King Ahaseurus. Rather, he implied that up above, before God, the angel presented these very anti-Semitic charges as proof that Israel had retained its spiritual independence and its moral integrity!

The very charges of Haman are the demonstrations of Israel's loyalty to its spiritual vocations. What to the King of Persia seems a criminal charge, to the King of the Universe is a lofty compliment -- not heinous, but holy; not sinister but sublime.

It is of the utmost importance that we understand these charges and so order our lives that we become guilty of them if we are not already so. Let us, then, examine them in somewhat greater detail -- for our success as Jews depends upon how "guilty" we are.

The first fault that Haman found with us is that we consider ourselves **אֶחָד**, one people. There are two groups amongst the Jews today who deny this. They are, in the United States, the American Council for Judaism, which maintains that American Jews are merely Americans of Jewish persuasion, and that we have no relationship, other than confessional, with Jews elsewhere in the world. The second group calls itself the "Canannites," a far-out leftist group in Israel that considers Israelis "Hebrews," and Jews of the Diaspora merely "Jews," and that the two have nothing in common other than an ancient historical origin. According to both these groups, the story of the people of Israel as **אֶחָד** has come to an end.

Heretofore, only Gentiles who despised our people tried to bring that about. Napoleon who sought to make of French Jews, true Frenchmen with only a tenuous relation to Judaism, endeavored to disrupt the unity of our people by emancipating us. The Czar of Russia tried the opposite technique. Both failed. The failure to rend us apart and disunite us caused frustration amongst the anti-Semites, who then issued the infamous "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which interpreted our unity as a sinister and subversive

plot against the Gentile world. When the enemies of Jewish unity became more sophisticated, they labeled it as ethnic particularism, as narrow-minded exclusivism, as undemocratic and unAmerican tribalism.

Of course, these are vile interpretations of our cohesiveness. There is nothing undemocratic or unAmerican about the Jewish people maintaining its integrity. But essentially -- we are guilty of the charge of trying to retain this unity. Despite our tendency to disagree with each other on almost all issues -- we are **אנחנו אחד**. Despite the American Council for Judaism and the Canaanites, Jews of America and Israel are -- one people. Despite the Communist dogma of the Russian government, Jews of the United States and the Soviet Union are -- **אנחנו אחד**, and we shall continue to interest and concern ourselves in our mutual fate. Despite the so-called Jewish intellectuals who are deeply troubled by our refusal to give up the ghost, we shall remain an **אנחנו אחד**. The Talmud put it in a beautifully succinct fashion: as long as Israel proclaims the unity of God, God will proclaim the unity of Israel; as long as Jews wear the Tefillin in which we say, "Hear Israel, the Lord is our God -, **אנחנו אחד**, the Lord is One," God, too, as it were, wears Tefillin in which he proclaims, "**אנחנו אחד** -- Who is like Thy people Israel, one nation upon the earth."

The second source of Haman's hostility was that **אֵין אֱלֹהִים כְּאֵלֵינוּ**, our laws and customs are different from those of other people. Here lies the crux of the matter. It is indeed so! We are different, we desire to remain different, and we shall not give up our differentness merely to satisfy the desire for uniformity by others. When we say that we shall remain different, it is another way of saying that we refuse to assimilate and commit collective spiritual suicide.

The late Ludwig Lewishon, in a remarkable little book published a few years ago, pointed out that "segregation" is a fundamentally human act. To attempt to coerce others into being segregated is a vile and undemocratic act. It is tyrannical to force any one else to be segregated against his will. However, voluntary, segregation, when a person or a community pulls itself out of the ~~clouds~~ ^{crowd} for its own purposes, not to lock others out but to preserve and practice its own principles, is one of the finest acts of humanity. The very word "segregation," comes from the roots se and greg, that is, to take oneself out of the greg or flock. A sheep is afraid to be by himself, and must join the larger flock. A human being or a human community expresses its non-animal and human nature by daring to keep to itself and live according to its own pattern of behaviour.

When a Jew keeps Kashruth or fights for She'itah, he is gloriously guilty of daring to be different. By not submitting to Haman, he succeeds in being human.

Loyal Jews are opposed to intermarriage - not because we are narrow-minded, and not, most certainly, because of contempt for the non-Jew. We want to marry within our own group because of our desire to remain different, to preserve our different identity, to survive and flourish with our own character intact.

Sometimes our fellow Jews do not appreciate how difficult and how glorious is the burden of differentness. It is not easy to keep to your own way of life, your own ideas and principles and convictions, while the rest of the world mocks you. I recently lectured about the ideals of Jewish marriage and morality, when one Jewish member of the audience forthwith raised his hand and accused me of

preaching mere "puritanism"-- as if any one who takes exception to the current fad of libertinism, is hopelessly outmoded and so "different" as to be an object of pity. Yet, if it is shameful to stress purity and taharah, then we must and are proud to plead guilty!

Haman accused us of observing an awkward Sabbath and system of holidays which are troublesome and uneconomic and annoying to the general community. Is this not completely contemporary? Many a young man or woman can testify to it from his or her own experience. It happens with disgusting regularity in colleges and universities and many branches of the armed services. More than one school principal or dean or professor, or Sargeant or Lieutenant, or Captain, has confronted an observant Jew or Jewess with disdain for daring to request that he or she not be~~ing~~ⁱⁿ required to take an exam or perform an essential duty on Shabbat or holidays. More than one observant Jew or Jewess has been the victim of a cold glare and icy glance of one who contemptuously spits out the words, "malingering, shirking!" Of course, this interpretation is disgracefully false. But the fact is that we do have different holidays, that they do prove costly to us, that they may be inconvenient -- and that we shall not and will never give them up. It is true then; we are guilty! We are different -- and that is our democratic right, our spiritual obligation, and a badge of our humanity.

Above all, we plead guilty to the real reason for Haman's animosity. About every Jew must it be said what was said about Mordecai: וְאֵלֹהִים יִכְבֹּד וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה. We shall never kneel and bow before any but God. The Jew must never idolize a mere human, he must never declare as absolute what is merely mortal or finite.

greater spiritual insight. This spiritual insight will tell him that, indeed, there is no difference at all between "accursed ^{is} Haman" and "blessed is Mordecai." The nefarious incriminations of Haman, in and of and by themselves, are the tokens of Mordecai's blessing! It is the accusations which come from Haman's accursed hatred that are the testimony of Mordecai's blessed virtues. It is when the anti-Semite accuses us of fostering the unity of Israel, the differentness of Judaism, and the resistance to idol^atry that is part of our national character, that we can rise to our fullest stature as being loyal to our spiritual destiny and vocation. There is, and there should ~~not~~ ^{no} be, ~~any~~ ^a difference between Haman's curse and Mordecais's blessing. Haman's indictment is a "true bill," it points to the source of our strength and our blessing.

May this Purim, which we welcome tonight, provide for us the precious and priceless opportunity to prove ourselves worthy of Haman's indictment; for that is our blessing.

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