

Book Reviews



Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence
by Elliot Horowitz. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press,
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I.

Judaism—due to its long history, active exploration of its meaning, plain curiosity, and Christian involvement—has produced an enormous amount of literature. It comprises basic texts, commentaries, polemics, philosophical comments, and scholarly studies. A modern academic approach may turn its attention to specific themes and critically present the endless material connected to a selected topic. Elliot Horowitz, associate professor of Jewish history at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, presents one such thorough and detailed study, dealing with the biblical book of Esther and the related holiday of Purim.

The story of *Megillat Esther* (the Scroll of Esther) is well known and very easy to be reminded of, as it is included in the Bible. It describes, in lavish colors, a sinister plot by Haman, a trusted dignitary of the Persian king, to eradicate the Jews in all the provinces of the kingdom. The menace is averted by the intervention of Esther, the Jewish wife of the Persian king, guided by her cousin Mordechai. Haman is executed, and the deliverance of the Jews is followed by a bloody retribution inflicted on their enemies. Danger, drama, salvation—all are vividly presented, with a soothing happy ending. Moreover, the story is presented as an actual historical event that is to be celebrated yearly by the festival of Purim. Thus the tale and event is transferred into the domain of religious tradition and observance.

Even so, the scroll is more complex. For it also suggests links to Jewish history—whether actual or imagined. It is not the *actual* connection which is of major importance, but the imagined one. Indeed,

some of it is suggested in the text itself, when Haman is described as “an Agagite—that is, descendant of the Amalekite king, Agag.” Moreover, the Amalekites are mentioned as Israel’s archenemy who attacked the children of Israel when they were wandering in the desert to the Promised Land. The Amalekites were defeated at Rephidim (Exodus 17:8–16) and generations later by Saul, while Agag was killed by Samuel (I Samuel 15). The latter event was enacted to fulfill the commandment of God, concerning the desert episode mentioned above, to “remember what Amalek did” and to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven” (Deuteronomy 25:17–19). All this is carefully recounted by our contemporary scholar (pp. 4–5).

Moreover, the story of Esther and the celebration of Purim, as well as the name of Amalek, reach beyond the biblical confines into rabbinical literature, religious observance, and Jewish folklore. Thus, Amalek progressed from being the name of an ancient desert people into an appellation for other notorious persecutors of the Jews, such as the Romans and later assorted enemies. Characteristic of this approach is Simon Dubnow’s reaction to the Nuremberg Laws: “We are at war with Amalek” (p. 140). The name of Amalek crossed the boundaries of Judaism, when the lord bishop of London celebrated Lord Nelson’s naval victory over the French (1798) in a sermon entitled “The Conduct of Moses, When Israel Fought with Amalek, Compared with That of Admiral Lord Nelson in the Battle of the Nile” (pp. 121–122). Some Jewish sages in the Middle Ages used the name Amalek as an allegory for the evil inclination in man (pp. 134–135). The same usage was displayed by the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, and his brother, one of whose hymns begins with the following lines: “Jesus, we dare believe in Thee / Against this Amalek within / He soon extirpated shall be” (p. 135).

Even more prominent, notably in Jewish folklore, has been the use of the name of Haman as the archenemy and symbol of other enemies and persecutors of the Jews. As there has been no dearth of Jew haters throughout history, the name of Haman fulfilled this function from the Middle Ages to modern times. Hamans included anti-Semitic clergy, a Russian czar, Hitler. As an individual can serve as the focus of emotional attitude and reaction much better than a nation can, Haman has appeared countless times on the stage in popular *Purim-Spiels*. Such folksy theatrical improvisations, arranged for adults and children—apparently the only distinctly Jewish theatrical intrusion into the popular culture of the Jews—offered cathartic relief for the chosen people in their varied abodes of suffering. On the stage they were threatened, but also redeemed and saved.

The book of Esther is not confined to the image of Haman, the personification of evil. There are other *dramatis personae*, such as the king Ahasuerus, a not too bright (to put it mildly) absolute monarch; his wife Vashti; her successor Esther; and her relation Mordecai, besides some minor characters. Naturally, Esther and Mordecai figure prominently in later commentaries, as does, to a lesser degree, Vashti. The judgment expressed about each varies with commentators and the age. The proud Vashti, censured in earlier times, is rehabilitated in our era because of her insistence on women's dignity. Mordecai's Jewish pride receives diverse evaluations as well. Comments and commentaries, and midrashic and other amplifications, get hold of the coattails of the story, producing a kaleidoscope of fantasy, opinion, and judgment.

The vitality of the Esther scroll and of the Purim festival is further testified to by local Purim stories, invented in response to deliverance from a menace in various Jewish communities through the ages. Thus, the author recounts the instances of the Purim of Saragossa, which may have actually been the Purim of Syracuse, as well as the Purims of Cairo, Crete, Narbonne, Granada, Verona, and Frankfurt (pp. 279–315). The viability of the biblical story has been enhanced by the recurrence of the menace in one form or another in the expanse of the Diaspora.

All this is absorbed by the author with avid curiosity and treated with scholarly erudition and academic competence. Whatever has been mentioned so far offers only a minimal sampling of the breadth and wealth of material reflected in the present book. The author has explored endless sources, Jewish and other, related to the biblical story and to its interpretation and use through many centuries and in various lands. Thus, his work offers a road map to a treasury of material.

Yet the author did not confine himself to the study of the Esther scroll and of Purim in the conventional scholarly manner. He also relates the story and the traditions associated with the holiday to the Jewish condition and to Jewish sentiment by exploring the attitude of the Jews to the Scroll of Esther and to Purim. The sentiments and responses may well indicate what transpires in the nation's soul. Is it all joy at deliverance from mortal threat, or is it also a cry for vengeance? Is it merely a sigh of relief, or is it also a fanfare of triumph?

The biblical story itself speaks not only of the royal edict, instigated by Haman, "to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women" throughout the kingdom (Esther 3:13); it also describes the Jews' retribution, which resulted in the killing of five hundred men in Shushan, the capital (9:6), and seventy-five thousand in the provinces of the kingdom (9:16). A feeling of satisfied

glee emanates from the biblical account, although it indicates that the Jews “lay their hands on such as sought their hurt” (9:2), that is to say, on those who had intended to kill them.

Professor Horowitz does not adduce this aspect of the story merely as part of a detached research. He does not remain a purely descriptive historian, but retains his normative principles, and thus becomes involved in the problem of whether the vindictive part of the Scroll of Esther and the Purim festival does not reveal a sinister aspect of the book and the holiday. Indeed, as they have become a foundation of an ever expanding creative tradition, are these not symptoms of a national vice?

This reviewer does not point this out as a criticism. It is doubtful whether a historian can remain purely descriptive. History is not physics; it concerns human conduct, and moral judgment is inseparable from human affairs. History may be expected, in the words of Ranke, to describe events as they actually were, but this does not mean that manslaughter can be depicted the way colliding meteors are presented. A historian without a sense of judgment is merely a chronicler.

Yet, while the historian’s moral involvement in the subject of his inquiry is indispensable and laudable, his judgment is not necessarily right. Indeed, if the moral judgments of two historians on the same events are opposed to each other, at least one of them must be wrong.

II.

Professor Horowitz, in his evaluation of the story and tradition of Purim, is disturbed by the manifestations of hatred and vindictiveness that are recorded in the Scroll of Esther and perpetuated in the celebration, especially as he sees the story as representative of a stain on Jewish history, largely ignored or covered up by historians and the established perception of Judaism, up to and including the recent history of Israel. His reservations and concern are openly—even ostentatiously—proclaimed in the title and subtitle of the book: *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*.

The revenge of the Jews as described in the Scroll of Esther has been mentioned above. Professor Horowitz adduces various examples from Jewish history—often reported by hostile writers—of Jewish misdeeds against professed or assumed enemies. He particularly stresses the participation of the Jews in the massacre of Christians during the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614. He cites various accounts—some clearly anti-Semitic, some Jewish and apologetic—and quotes the number of the slain as between 66,509 and 90,000. Some accounts allege that the Jews redeemed Christian prisoners for the sole purpose of executing

them—a highly unlikely action. The numbers, relying on a single source, have often been repeated by later historians, sometimes referring to earlier historical accounts, which makes them look trustworthy. Professor Horowitz tends to reject modern Israeli historians (such as Michael Avi-Yonah) who are apologetic and stress the persecution of the Jews by the Byzantine Christians, which led to the retribution (pp. 236–238), a stance which was taken earlier by Simon Dubnow (pp. 233–234). Horowitz graciously quotes James Parker, whom he describes as a philo-Semitic English scholar, who asserted that the Jews “had every reason to hate the Christians and to exult in the destruction of the Christian buildings of the city” (p. 234).

This reviewer does not ignore the iniquities in the long history of the Jews for which they carry blame and responsibility. Nor are the sacred books blameless. The commandment to destroy utterly the nations of Canaan, so as to prevent the children of Israel from following in their sinful ways (Deuteronomy 20:16–18)—even if apparently not followed—makes one feel uncomfortable, to put it mildly. That Yohanan Hyrcanus, the Hasmonaean ruler and successor of Judah Maccabaeus, the fighter for religious freedom, forced the Idumaeans to convert to Judaism is a historical irony from which one would wish to have been spared. Nor has the history of modern Israel been free of blemish.

Yet there is a difference between admitting moral faults and transgressions in the conduct of policy and warfare, and a self-accusation that presents the Jews and their persecutors in an “evenhanded” manner, and which implicitly equates some deplorable but marginal outrages of the Israelis with systematic Arab or Palestinian terror. The much-lauded “evenhandedness” can be outright iniquitous. All nations may bear some collective guilt, but the guilt may not be equal, and must not be assumed a priori to be equal. Should we have been evenhanded in presenting the cases of Hitler and Churchill during World War II? The conflict of nations may not be between devils and angels, yet it may be a confrontation of the outright evil with the somewhat morally flawed.

Professor Horowitz takes no explicit stance on this issue, but some of the quotations on the opening page of his book, which serve as mottoes, as well as his introduction, make one conclude that his national self-blame is excessive. The title and subtitle support such an inference, and the picture on the cover, reproduced and explained right before the introduction, reinforces this impression with all the power at the command of a pictorial image.

It is a photograph taken on Purim of 1993 in Jerusalem’s Mea She’arim district, showing an Orthodox young man using a gun as a pointer to follow a Hebrew text, allegedly for the Torah reading of Purim. The gun

is apparently a toy reproduction of an AK-47. The picture is taken from Alex Levac, *Photographs* (1994). That much is explained. However, this reviewer has some queries and speculative commentaries to add.

The photograph is reproduced with the obvious intent of pointing to the dangers of terrorist activities perpetrated by the ultra-Orthodox fringe. Yet Mea She'arim in Jerusalem used to be the bastion of an Orthodox fringe of a different orientation, namely, the Neturei Karta, who were anti-Zionist to the point of not recognizing the State of Israel. Conceivably, the inhabitants of that quarter also include the nationalistic Orthodox these days, who miraculously coexist with their diametrically opposite neighbors.

Another doubt is awakened by the use of a gun—albeit a toy gun—as a pointer for a Torah text. As a matter of fact, pointers are used for reading the Torah scrolls in the synagogue, but hardly for a printed text. Moreover, the text, although difficult to decipher, is not the Torah passage indicated in the explanation, which enhanced our suspicions and led to further scrutiny.

An examination of the picture reveals some interesting details. The man with the gun, although seemingly tall, must be still in his teens, for there is no trace of hair on his face. In contrast, he has a very long and thick side lock on the right side of his face (the left is not visible), which reaches four to five inches below his chin. The black hat he wears seems somewhat small for his head. While he is standing, on his left, apparently seated, is another man, his face partially revealed, with the kind of large, fur hat worn by Hasidic men. On the youth's right there is an enigmatic fragment of a khaki hat, possibly worn by a human being, as below it there is a fringe that might belong to a woman's dress, which would indicate that a woman is wearing the hat. The entire combination is strange, and the possibility that the whole scene is an artificial setting, or even a photomontage, with a young man of twenty or so disguised as an Orthodox boy with side lock attached, cannot be excluded. If this is the case, it may have been either a Purim disguise or a deliberate arrangement for the photography book. One way or another, it may have fooled Professor Horowitz.

Although the author seeks out the “legacy of Jewish violence” and finds accusations against Jews made by historians throughout the ages, he also presents an opposite school of thought that regards the Jew as, in the words of the Victorian William Lecky, “naturally a pacific being, hating violence and recoiling with a peculiar horror from blood” (p. 212). Such a sensibility has been attributed by some to the allegedly feminine nature of Jews, which has often been regarded as a deficiency, notably by

such peculiar writers as Otto Weininger, a Viennese Jew who converted to Christianity and who disliked both women and Jews. This, however, leads us into the shady and shaky world of speculative nation psychology and gender psychology, which are better left alone.

III.

The present study belongs in the domain of Jewish history—primarily the cultural history of the Jews. While focusing on a small fragment of Jewish history, namely, the book of Esther and the related festival of Purim, it reaches beyond these confines by analyzing the roots of the story and the celebration, and foremost by exploring their ramifications. Yet this theme can also be presented from another perspective that looks at the Scroll of Esther in the setting of the Bible and explains Purim in its relationship to some other Jewish holy days—that is to say, it looks at the subject in the framework of Judaism as a solid body of religion-cum-tradition. Such an approach may be called theological, anthropological, or philosophical, or a blend of them all. The present reviewer will try to present such a picture of the subject as he sees it.

The Scroll of Esther is a unique text in the biblical collection of books. It is a self-contained story, not related to other books, and with very few if any clearly Jewish religious connections. It is very well constructed as a story, a novella, and thus appears virtually modern. It evolves in the distinctive setting of ancient Persia, which is described in a vivid manner. Yet, paradoxically, it is told in Hebrew—a lively Hebrew, with several new words and expressions, as pointed out by S.D. Goitein in a Hebrew essay on *Megillat Esther*. Thus, it is a curious testimony of Jewish life in the Diaspora that displays the characteristics of an almost secular national civilization.

Yet, again paradoxically, the Hebrew heritage is mixed with manifestations of assimilation. For the names of the two protagonists of the story are Mordecai and Esther, not merely foreign names, but related respectively to Marduk and Ishtar, both Babylonian deities. To be sure, Mordecai's connection with Israel is pointed out by stating his genealogy, which links him to the tribe of Benjamin (Esther 2:5). Esther's connection to her Jewish ancestry is indicated as well, by the mention of her Hebrew name, Hadassah (Esther 2:7). All this brings to mind Jews in future dispersions, where Hebrew names were replaced by foreign ones during periods of assimilation. Indeed, this had happened already during the Hasmonaean rulership in Judaea under the influence of Hellenism. Curiously enough, as the tale of the Scroll of Esther became linked to Purim and a part of

the religious tradition, the names Mordechai and Esther turned “*glatt kosher*” and became widely used by the most Orthodox Jews, with the names’ heathen origins ignored or forgotten.

If all this suggests cultural confusion, or at least great complexity, the tale of the scroll, though fairly complicated, emerges as an organic whole, with the various elements—Persian and Jewish, the villains and the righteous, the foolish and the wise—falling into place and forming a coherent story. It starts with a royal banquet lasting seven days, which turns into a confrontation between the king and his wife, followed by a more ominous confrontation between Mordecai and Haman, and the threat of annihilation hanging over all the Jews in the Persian kingdom. A reversal of fortunes, with Esther playing a crucial role, turns Haman into the victim of his plot, while the Jews escape the calamity. Indeed, the story has all the ingredients of a Hollywood blockbuster, and it is surprising that, with the script virtually ready, the film hasn’t been made.

In the religious tradition, Purim is one of the minor holidays, as it is not prescribed in the Torah. No limitation on work or other prohibitions are associated with it. In the liturgy it is a sort of twin to Hanuka, in that a short prayer of thanks is inserted into the daily “Eighteen Blessings” on the occasion, although a suitably different addition is inserted in the prayer on each of the holy days. Actually, the distinction between the two holy days is profound.

Hanuka celebrates the liberation from foreign oppression and religious persecution, and implicitly the establishment of national independence. It is a commemoration of national and religious liberation, which led to the establishment of a Jewish kingdom. No wonder the holiday has acquired renewed status in modern Israel. Purim also celebrates deliverance, but it is deliverance in the Diaspora. It is salvation from the menace of annihilation, but it does not bring about a new political and communal order. It is an escape from death and calamity, but it does not offer a solution to the basic Jewish condition of a minority living in a foreign land. It is a time for a feast and for the exchanging of food packages among friends and neighbors, but no solemn lighting of candles is required for the occasion, as is the custom during the eight days of Hanuka. Although the two festivals are twins in the celebration of deliverance, the salvation is of two kinds.

The distinction is inherent in the two stories. Freedom from the rule of the Hellenistic kingdom is achieved through an open revolt, followed by a prolonged military struggle. The salvation in Persia is gained by intrigue and by lobbying; indeed, it is due to the charm of the Jewish queen. The results are beneficial and the cost minimal, but there is little national dignity in the achievement.

Curiously enough, Purim can also be paired with another, major holy day, namely, Passover. For, as is well known, this festival commemorates the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. During the Passover Seder, at one point the glass of wine is raised and a solemn statement made. It opens with the words *Vehi she'ameda*, and asserts that we and our fathers have been threatened with annihilation not once, but in every generation, and the Holy One Blessed Be He delivers us from our persecutors. Just as Purim is celebrated not merely as a historical event, but as a pattern of the Jewish lot, so Passover is explicitly accorded this perennial significance.

That there were occasions when the designs of the Hamans through the ages were not thwarted, and when the Holy One did not rescue his innocent people, is quietly passed over by the observance and the observants on both holidays—apparently in order to save the belief in the just and compassionate God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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Spinoza and Spinozism

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I.

As one might gather from his title, Sir Stuart Hampshire (1914–2004)—he was knighted in 1979—was no ordinary intellectual. Hampshire spent the war hunting the Gestapo for British intelligence. After the war, he embarked on a noble intellectual adventure, the fruits of which include five books and dozens of articles on philosophical, political, and literary topics. Hampshire's best-known work was perhaps a brief introduction to the philosophy of Spinoza first published in 1951 and subsequently reprinted in 1987.

That book, entitled simply *Spinoza*, is an appropriate place to begin an assessment of Hampshire's *oeuvre*, for several reasons. One reason is that Hampshire seems to have considered the Spinoza book an important part of his legacy. Not only did he continue to write about Spinoza's