

Purim: festival of love

By SYLVIA HART
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Members of Dauphin Street Synagogue this year will celebrate the festival of Purim by listening to 10 of their children read the biblical story of Esther in the Hebrew language.

The reading during a service Thursday at 7 p.m. will be from a handwritten scroll of Esther which is used only for Purim.

The reading by children is a departure from custom. Adults generally read the story each year, but for this festival the children have spent "many, many hours of preparation" in the religion school of the synagogue, according to Rabbi Stanley Gerstein, the synagogue's spiritual leader.

According to the rabbi, "The scroll of Esther is essentially an allegory about good winning over evil, justice over the forces of prejudice."

Events in the story "in all probability never took place because historians of the time who wrote about all the political movements never mentioned any of the names in this book," according to Gerstein.

Today's historians, said the rabbi, tend to consider the Esther story a morality play based on the Hanukkah story.

Hanukkah commemorates a Jewish victory over Syrians in 165 B.C.E. (The Jewish term B.C.E., or Before the Common Era, is equivalent to the Christian term B.C.) The Purim story of Esther is based in Persia (today's Iran) at an earlier date — in the 5th century B.C.E.

According to Gerstein, when the Jews in Palestine (today's Israel) came under Roman rule in 63 B.C.E., they were not allowed to commemorate their past victory over the

Syrians. "Therefore, we think Purim was a way of celebrating Hanukkah."

The Esther story, said Gerstein, not only is a celebration of good winning over evil, but it is "a praise of (Jewish) deliverance from the enemy, and it is for women's equal rights."

Presenting a brief summary, the rabbi said the evil Persian King Ahasuerus "decides to throw a party honoring his coronation. He asks his wife, Queen Vashti, to come out and dance so the party-goers can see her beauty.

"She refuses because she believes it is demeaning. This is the first instance of a woman standing up to the authority of her husband for the sake of principle in the Bible.

"The king divorces Vashti and holds a beauty contest to determine who his wife will be.

"Esther, who becomes the heroine of the story, is entered in the contest by her Uncle Mordecai, a Jew who is active outside the ghetto in politics of the time. Esther is Jewish, but her faith is not then revealed for fear of prejudice.

"Esther wins and is selected as queen and marries the king. She does not live happily ever after, however.

"Haman, a power-hungry pretender to the throne, is jealous of Mordecai because he refuses to bow to Haman. Mordecai should according to the rules of the kingdom because Haman is a respected officer of the government. Mordecai says he bows to no man, only to God.

"Many days later Mordecai overhears a plot by Haman to overthrow the kingdom. This is relayed to the king, who has it recorded in his

daily record book and promptly forgets about it.

"Months later Haman decides to round up Mordecai and the rest of the Jews to kill them for their disdain of governmental rules of politeness and non-respect to his person.

"Mordecai tells Esther only she can save her people.

"She tells the king about the plot against the Jewish people. The king spends a sleepless night and asks that the book of records be read to him so that he can fall asleep. Upon hearing again Haman's plot to overthrow him at a future time, the king decides to help Esther and her people and punish Haman at the same time.

Haman is hanged by the king. The Jewish people are saved.

"From this we have the happy festival of Purim, meaning 'lots' because Haman had cast lots to determine the day to kill the Jewish people."

Said Gerstein, "In this ecumenical story in Persia we see that the ex-queen stood up for her principles, and the Jewish queen stood for her principles. Both women stood four-square above the two men Ahasuerus and Haman."

By refusing to compromise, Esther "managed to prevent a great war between the Jews and the Persians."

Gerstein said the entire Jewish community of Mobile will celebrate Purim with a carnival March 22 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Jewish Community Center.



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