# Purim and the Shoah

DEATH SENTENCE

Purim took place in the year 474 BCE, which corresponds to the 12th year of the Persian Emperor Ahasuerus or Xerxes. At that time, all the Jews of the world lived under the same political roof: the Persian Empire. They were scattered throughout the empire and were very successful in international trade. But now, all the Jews of the empire had been sentenced to death, and the world would be Judenrein, “free of Jews.” This was Haman’s “final solution,” and it was the goal of the Nazis during World War II. Haman’s method of killing Jews was much more effective than the Nazis. Haman did not have to recruit any army or spend a bullet from the empire. His malevolent method was summarized in two words included in the edict: USHLALAM LA-BOZ, which means “on the 13th of Adar, every citizen of the Persian Empire can kill a Jew and keep all their possessions: their properties, their money, their businesses.” Thus, Haman encouraged neighbors to kill their Jewish acquaintances by offering them the guarantee that everything would be legal and the executioners would not suffer any consequences for their crimes. On the contrary, they could keep the belongings of the Jews they killed. The imperial army, it seems, would be on the side of the oppressors, preventing the Jews from defending themselves. All of this is expressed directly or indirectly in the edict Haman signed and sent in the name of King Ahasuerus. The decree established that the genocide of the Jews, the mega-execution of hundreds of thousands of Jews, including the approximately 50,000 Jews living in Israel – which also belonged to the Persian Empire – would take place on the 13th of Adar that year. The letters containing the royal edict were sent 11 months earlier, on the 13th of Nisan. After Esther and Mordecai thwarted Haman’s sinister plan and the evil Persian minister was executed, new official letters were sent

announcing that the Jews could defend themselves against their enemies and the law would be on their side. These letters were dispatched on the 23rd of Sivan, 70 days after the first letters were sent.

COULD THE JEWS ESCAPE?

One of the themes that is most difficult to visualize in the history of Purim is what the Jews must have gone through once they heard the death sentence and during the next 70 days until the new decision of the king arrived. Midrashim tells that many gentile neighbors delighted in showing their sharp knives to poor Jewish mothers, warning them that they would use those weapons to kill their little children. The Midrash also explains that the oppressors celebrated the massacre in advance and distributed the property and possessions of the Jews in advance. Rabbi Yom Tob Tsahalon (1559-1619) in his book Leqaj Tob says – when referring to Mordecai's urgency to cancel Haman's decree, even though there were 9 months left for its implementation – that the Jews had been "detained" or "enslaved" with the collaboration of the imperial army to prevent them from escaping the empire or liquidating their property, or saving their lives before the 13th of Adar. Thinking about Europe from 1940-1945, it is not difficult to imagine the "concentration camps" where thousands of Jews were concentrated, waiting for the day of their execution. The Yehudim could do nothing more than pray and wait for a miracle, which in the end,  B"H happened. Rabbi Tsahalon also mentions an opinion that the enemies of the Jews had begun to kill the Jews as soon as they received the decree, interpreting the words "velo ya'abor" as authorizing them to kill Jews "until" the 13th of Adar. Hence the urgency of Mordecai and Esther.

HAMAN'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS

Who were the enemies of the Jews? Rabbi Abraham Saba (1440-1508) in his book Eshkol HaKofer suggests another

theory: to kill the Jews, Haman recruited his own people, the Agagites, who were ethnic descendants of Amalek. These ancient "anti-Semites" believed, like the Nazis, that their existential mission was to destroy the Jewish people. The Agagites thus became the executing arm, like the SS, of their maximum representative: Haman. Rabbi Saba explains that once Haman was executed for treason, for hiding the details of his diabolical plan from the king, all those who collaborated with Haman would suffer the same fate as Haman: execution by order of the king, as they were considered accomplices in the crime of "treason against the state" committed by Haman. It is possible that the enemies of the Jews were "opportunists," ordinary people who responded to Haman's irresistible invitation to "kill a Jew and take his possessions." During World War II, thousands of ordinary citizens of Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, etc. betrayed their Jewish neighbors to the Nazis to seize their homes and possessions. Once again, what happened in the Holocaust allows us to imagine with more realism what probably happened in Persia 2,500 years ago (for more information, read Daniel J Goldhagen: Hitler's Willing Executioners).

On Purim, we celebrate that in the end, everything "turned upside down." That is, not only were we miraculously saved from certain death, but we were also able to liberate ourselves from those who sought our destruction. The high number of oppressors who died – 75,800 – offers us an approximate idea of the magnitude of the Jewish genocide that, thanks to God, was avoided.