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THE GLORIFICATION OF ESTHER AMONG OTTOMAN JEWS
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
AS REFLECTED IN THE ME'AM LO'EZ ON ESTHER

Judith Ellen Cohen-Rosenberg

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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Above all, it is my pleasure to thank the most wonderful and supportive people I know, my parents, Leo and Mildred Cohen, my in-laws, Haree and Arthur Rosenberg and my husband, Michael. They have always been my strength, joy and comfort.

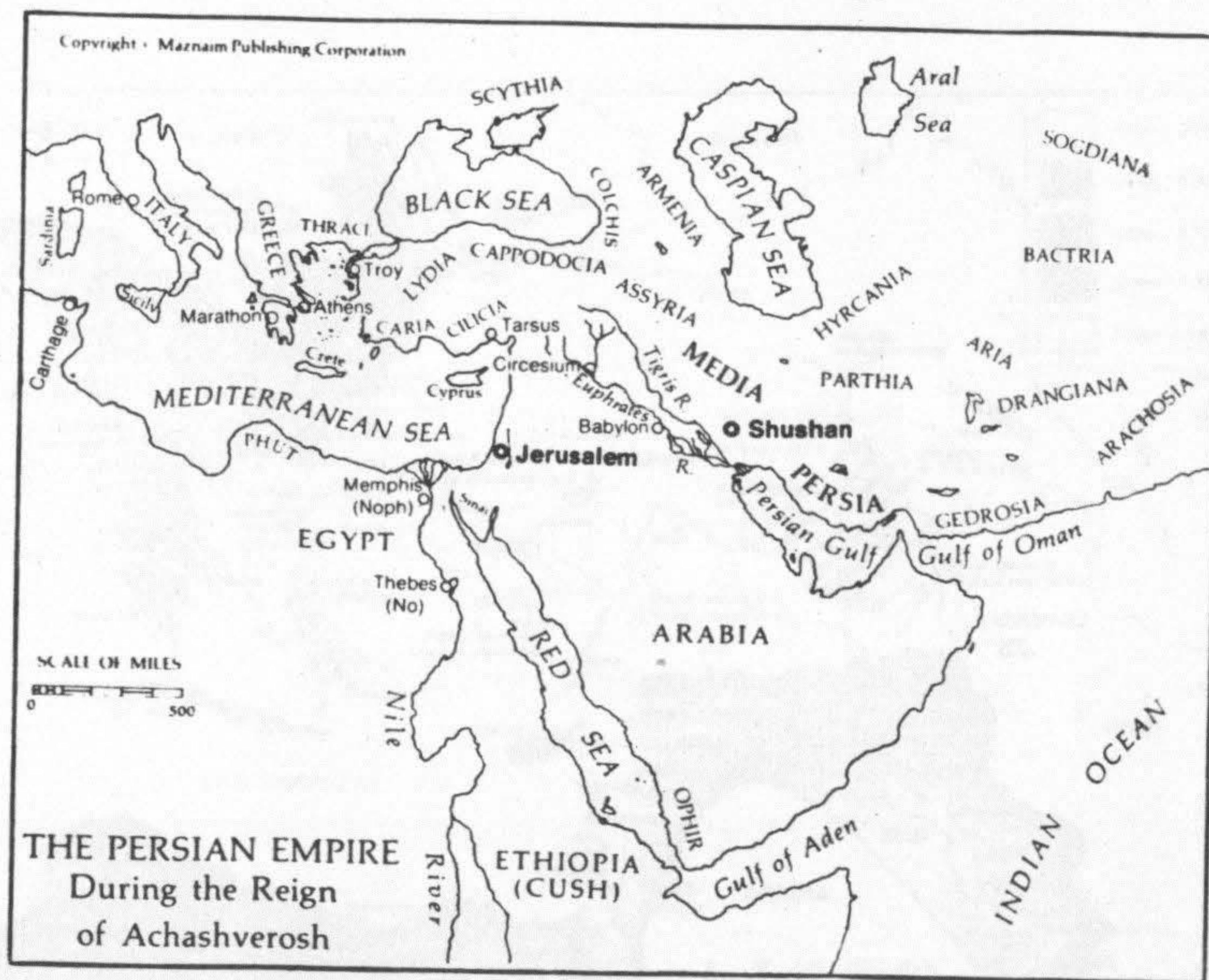
With tears of bittersweet emotions, I proudly dedicate this thesis to the past, present and future through the memories of my grandparents, Julius and Mae Goldberg and William and Fannie Cohen; and in honor of my parents, Mildred and Leo Cohen and my dear husband Michael.



Title page of the first edition of *MeAm Lo'ez* on Esther, Izmir, 1864. Courtesy of Mr. Louis N. Levy.

Chapter 1

Introduction





The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 1807-1924.

Adapted from R. Treharne and H. Fullard (eds.), *Muir's Historical Atlas: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 9th edition (1965); George Philip & Son Ltd., London

The history of the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century is one of decline and dissolution. The empire, once marked by expansion and progress, deteriorated rapidly due primarily to frequent warring and intellectual inactivity.

From the end of the seventeenth century, the Ottoman Empire was forced to maintain a continuous position of defense. ¹ From 1683-1699, the Empire was at war with the Holy League. This conflict ended with the Treaty of Carlowitz in 1699. Following that, in 1710, they fought the Russians. This conflict was ended by the Treaty of the Pruth in 1711. The Ottomans were at war again in 1714, battling Venice and Austria. In 1718, they signed the Treaty of Passarowitz and ended the war. A period of peace followed, to be interrupted after eighteen years by war with Russia and Austria. In 1739, the belligerents agreed to the Treaty of Belgrade, ending this war. Peace reigned until 1768 when the Ottoman Empire again battled with Russia. After six years of battle, the Treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca ended the conflict, but The Empire was at war with Russia again from 1787 through 1792 when Jassy was lost. Throughout this period, the Ottomans lost Hungary, the Banat of Temisvar, Transylvania and Bukovina, as well as all possessions on the north coast of the Black Sea.

As well as a decline of power, the eighteenth century saw a decline in intellectual activity throughout

the Ottoman Empire. The sultans had little interest in literature. The misery of the times found expression in poems of lamentation and in social criticism. Few books on philosophy, history or mathematics were published. One shining exception to this dearth of prose was Euliyä Chelebi's *Traveler's Chronicle*, a work describing the author's adventures while travelling through the Empire.²

Science and industry, which were considered advanced during Suleiman the Magnificent's reign [1520-1566], made no progress in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Few changes were made in industry since medieval times. However, the textile industry, patronized by the sultan, did flourish, and the manufacture of war implements continued. Experts were brought to the Empire to supplement the production of arms by artisans who inherited this craft from their fathers.

Ignorance abounded during this epoch; most of the official class was illiterate and the cadis, or judges, were unlearned. The Turks refused to learn European languages, therefore Christians and Jews who were fluent in those languages served as interpreters.

The weakness of the central government contributed to the imperial decline during the eighteenth century. The imperial government yielded control to the notables, the local leaders. This form of government resembled feudalism. Local rulers appealed to their people's

nationalistic feelings for their area to gain popularity. The local population preferred to deal with these notables than with the corrupt and incompetent Ottoman officials. This enabled the notables to form private armies and maintain complete authority. They collected taxes for themselves, sending very little to the national treasury.

The imperial officials expected that help would be found in the existing Ottoman structure, but resistance to change allowed this system to continue. They were reluctant to make any significant changes modeled upon a western European system. Contacts with the west were minimal. Ottoman ambassadors went to Europe to engage in treaty negotiations; European merchants and travellers came to the Ottoman Empire. Several Ottoman scientists and philosophers corresponded with their western counterparts and minority groups members corresponded with Western relatives. These contacts had little effect on the majority culture, but during this time, the military underwent Western modernization, encompassing uniforms, weapons and tactics. Europeans taught the new corps the modern methods of weaponry and tactics. The Janissary (the standing imperial army) remained unaffected.

The years 1717-1730 were known as the "Tulip Period", named for the court's obsessive preference for growing tulips. During this time, the sultan, Selim III,

imitated European court pleasures such as garden parties and summer palaces. The court also adopted European dress.

Continuing his efforts at Westernization, the sultan enacted many changes, most notably regarding the treasury. In 1807 he was overthrown by a conservative coalition and an ensuing massacre eliminated the other reformers. However, the era of Ottoman isolationism had passed.

Jewish history of the Ottoman Empire begins with the absorption of the Marranos, the persecuted Spanish and Portuguese Jews, into Salonika. These Jews formed their own congregations and remained distinct from the community of Romaniot Jews already present in the Empire. As Spanish Jewish influence increased, the other groups adopted Sephardic ritual. By the middle of the sixteenth century, only the Spanish and the German ritual remained. ³

The sultans were impressed with the Jews devotion and reliability, enabling them to become the sultans' brilliant and trustworthy advisors. Jews were also useful to the sultans as physicians, linguists, tradesmen and weapon manufacturers. ⁴

With the rise of Sultan Mahmud I in 1730, the Jews' high station within the Ottoman Empire came to an end. At this point, the Jewish community, like the general community, was in decline. The decline was ethical as

well as economic. Education was poor and there was widespread illiteracy. Since the general community had declined, there was no opportunity for the Jews to re-establish themselves. There were few great rabbis or students in this period and it is said that the community did not know how to honor those few. The lack of knowledge became so grievous that the people could not even do simple things such as reading the Bible in Hebrew. 5

Rabbi Jacob Culi was born in either Jerusalem or Safed and was descended on both sides from illustrious rabbinical families. His father was the son of a Cretan rabbi of Spanish origin and his mother the daughter of Rabbi Moses ibn Habib. Culi left Safed for Constantinople in order to publish his grandfather's writings. He completed his studies under Rabbi Judah Rosanes, the chief rabbi of Constantinople who appointed him as *dayyan* and teacher of the community. Culi published his grandfather's works including with them two responsa of his own. After Rosanes' death, Culi was entrusted with the publication of the late chief rabbi's works. Adding an introduction and notes, he edited *Parashat Derakhim* and *Mishneh la-Melekh*. Culi's halakhic work, *Simanim li-Oraita*, was never published. 6

Recognizing the need to re-educate the Jewish community of the Ottoman Empire, Rabbi Jacob Culi

undertook a major project in the year 1730. He began a compilation of Biblical commentary in simple, unpretentious language using Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish vernacular of Ottoman Jews. This monumental work of Ladino prose was called the Me'am Lo'ez, (From a Foreign Tongue). The title is taken from the first verse of Psalm 114. Culi managed to write the commentary to Genesis and half of Exodus before his death. Other scholars continued his work and realized his dream. A compilation of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic, classical and modern comments on the Bible in Ladino exists due to Rabbi Culi. ⁷

The Me'am Lo'ez on the book of Esther was published in 1864 in Izmir. Its purpose was to allow every Jew the opportunity to learn about the great miracle and the story of Esther in the vernacular, in clear, simple language. The commentaries that comprise this book are interwoven so it reads like a novel. ⁸

After 1492 Izmir developed into a major Jewish community with the influx of Jews driven from Spain. Izmir reached its zenith under the leadership of Rabbi Chayim Palaggi, who tried to improve the status of Judaism. He recognized that the Jewish community of Izmir needed help to strengthen its dedication to Torah. That help came in the form of the Me'am Lo'ez. Rabbi Palaggi encouraged people to continue work on the Me'am Lo'ez beyond the Five Books of Moses. Palaggi chose

Rabbi Raphael Chiya Pontremoli to write on the Book of Esther.

Rabbi Raphael Chiya Pontremoli lived from 1825-1885. He was a member of the Beth Din and a brilliant Torah scholar. He came from a family of scholars and writers originally from Italy. Part of the family remained in Northern Italy and another branch migrated to Turkey. The author's great grandfather was in Salonika in 1824. ⁹

My purpose in writing this thesis is to discover any hints of Marrano influence on the Ottoman Jewish community exhibited in the their interpretation of the book of Esther. Scholarly comments regarding Esther's observance of the commandments while living in Ahasuerus' palace, led me to the study of Esther's role in the lives of the Judaizers' descendants in the Ottoman Empire. Esther was a particularly favorite heroine of the Judaizers, especially the women. They were able to identify with the Jews of Esther's time who were also living in a foreign environment under constant threat. They saw Esther as a symbol of God's miraculous intervention. In fact, heroines of their own time, such as Dona Gracia Nasi, ¹⁰ were compared to Esther. The honor bestowed upon Esther may have been, in part, a reaction to the Catholic environment in which the Judaizers lived. Esther was exalted in much the same way as the Christians exalted the Virgin Mary. ¹¹

The Judaizers did not celebrate Purim, but they did observe the Fast of Esther which rivaled the Day of Atonement for importance. The fast was observed on the full moon of February, one month before Passover. Some people observed a three day fast as Esther herself did. 12

Along with the Fast of Esther, the Judaizers managed to observe the Jewish Sabbath. They were able to commemorate the Sabbath by wearing clean, festive clothing on Friday night and Saturday, by cleaning the house on Friday afternoon, and preparing all of Saturday's meals on Friday. 13

NOTES

- 1 Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Islamic Peoples* (Munich and Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1943) p.343
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Morris S. Goodblatt, *Jewish Life in Turkey in the XVIth Century* as reflected in the legal writings of Samuel de Medina (New York: JTS 1952) p.101
- 4 *Ibid.* p.111
- 5 Solomon Abraham Rosanes, *קורות היהודים בתורכיה*
vol 6 p.5 (ירושלים: מוסד הרב קוק תש"ה)
- 6 Encyclopedia Judaica s.v. Culi
- 7 Martin A. Cohen, *The Martyr* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1973) pp.118-119
- 8 Raphael Chiya Pontremoli, *מקור משה עולם: אלזר האצרה*
הפירוש וההצבה על חומה נביאים וכתובים -
מגילת אסתר (ירושלים: תשל"ד) p.7
- 9 Aryeh Kaplan, *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez: The Book of Esther* (New York: Maznaim Publ. Co. 1978) p.ix
- 10 Martin A. Cohen, *Samuel's Usque's Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (Philadelphia: JPS 1977) p.190
- 11 Cohen, pp.97-98, 114
- 12 Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1932) pp.186-188
- 13 *Ibid.* p.100

Chapter 2

Vashti

To study Esther, it is necessary to begin with a full description of Vashti, her predecessor as queen of Persia and Medes. Many of the qualities which Vashti lacked are those for which Esther is praised.

We are introduced to Vashti as Ahasuerus' queen, a woman willing to defy her husband and king. The king commanded Vashti to appear naked at his party to display her natural beauty to all the invited guests. Had she appeared fully clothed, resplendent with jewels, there might have been a doubt as to whether the jewels enhanced her beauty or lent beauty to her where there was none. Vashti's refusal to attend the king's all male banquet was based on a plea of modesty proven that was superficial since she finally did attend. ¹ The true reasons for Vashti's refusal were her fear of being embarrassed by the guests, her sense that appearing nude was insulting and her overwhelming belief that she was more important than Ahasuerus and did not have to obey him. It was apparent from her actions that she was not truly modest, she feigned modesty for public consumption.

„ואלע שווער היתה פרוצה, אנה
 2 בפני הבריות הכתה פנים של צניעות.“

Vashti married Ahasuerus when she was eighteen years old. She was brought to him six years earlier after Darius and Cyrus attacked her father, Belshazar's palace. Vashti awoke during the attack and mistook Darius for her father. Darius spared her life and brought her home as a

wife for his grandson, Ahasuerus. ³ Prior to her marriage, Vashti spent her years at the palace as an outsider; however, she refused to accept this status. She believed that as a daughter of Belshazar, she deserved to rule. After her marriage, in support of this belief, Vashti hosted a banquet for the wives of the ministers attending Ahasuerus' party.

„וכך כה עשה ואת' מתיק
 אאות' שהיתה רוצה להתגאות על אחשורוש בלענה שכל
 המלכות לא הניחה לו אלא בזכותה שהיתה בתו של
 המלך והיתה סבורה שלא רבה למלכות אלא
 מפני שהיה חתנו של המלך... ולכן היתה סבורה
 שהמלכות מגיעה לה והיא עיקר המלכות...
 ואת' היתה בתחילה כמו נכריה ואח"כ
 נעשית מלכה בעל אחשורוש... אלא ואת'
 לא רצתה להבין טאט שיקרה להראות שהיא
 עיקר המלכות ולכן נאמר „ואת'... עשה משנה
 לשלם“⁴

Although this affair was held in separate quarters, all the activities, the drinking and carousing, rivaled the men's. According to the commentary of the Me'am Lo'ez, Vashti's greatest fault lay not in her character, but in her actions. Under her supervision, Jewish women were forced to work on the Sabbath and moreover, she forced them to perform all tasks in the nude. Vashti's expectation was that these women's husbands would follow in their wives' paths and desecrate the Sabbath as well. Vashti knew that the Sabbath was considered Israel's salvation and that if the Jews observed it faithfully,

God would reward them by rebuilding the Temple in

Jerusalem. "שהיתה ואת עוקרת בנות ישראל

ופושטת האדמה ומצות עליהן לעשות בשבילה

מלאכה היום השבת והלעם שהקדשה

ואת שחללו את השבת ששחיתו השבת

ממנה אבדה ישראל, שכיב מקדשים

גאולתם. לביבך השתדלה בכל עוז

לשם את השבת מישראל שלא

תהיה להם תקוה לגאולה

ולא לחנ'ן בית המקדש."

5

If the Temple was rebuilt, the Jews would

return to their land and no longer be under Persian

domination. Ahasuerus and Vashti's Kingdom would be

diminished, and the work of her ancestors, Nebuchadnezzar

and Belshazar, the destruction of the Temple, would be for

naught.

Vashti invited many Jews to her banquet under the

pretext of a celebration of her reign, although she was

actually extending an invitation to sin. She knew that

at this party her Jewish guests would be compelled to

partake of forbidden food and drink and to perform

immodest sex acts. "כמה שהתעורר להחליש

את ישראל שיהיו מן הסכנה ויפלו בצרות, כך
הזמנה ואת אל בנות ישראל שיהיו בצרות
אלו" 6 She maintained her goal of sabotage:

if Israel sins, the Temple cannot be rebuilt.

Queen Vashti was sentenced to death for rebelling against the king, despite her espousal relationship with him. Ahasuerus protested that the charge of rebellion was inapplicable to his family but because the offense was public he was overruled. ⁷ Some commentators say that Vashti was hanged and some say she was burned. Those who say she was burned may have been influenced by the punishments of the Spanish Inquisition where many people were burned during autos de fe'. All commentators agree that the day of her death was the Jewish Sabbath.

Haman participated in Vashti's sentencing, too. Astrologers had informed him that he would attempt to destroy the Jews, but the queen would prevent this. Haman assumed that the queen was Vashti, and so to render her incapable of foiling his plan, he recommended the death sentence. (Of course, the queen mentioned by the astrologers was Esther.) ⁸

The Jews were also consulted regarding Vashti's sentence. Members of the tribe of Issachar had the ability to judge swiftly, considering both the climate of the times and astrological forecasts. They were considered unbiased judges since Vashti was not a member of their nation nor was it likely that the next queen would come from their nation.

וְאִתָּהּ הָיָה הַמֶּלֶךְ תַּחַת מְחֻכָּה וְשָׂרָה
שֶׁהָיָה יְבוֹנָה אֶת וְשָׂרָה שֶׁהָיָה מְחֻכָּה אֶת

יוצאי העציות של שלט ישר שהיו יוצאים
 להשיב תשובה מייד על כל השאלות הקשות
 והעמוקות שאיש לא היה יוצא להשיב עליהן
 והשיבו בו הרגע... וכו' מעשה יתירה
 כשייבאים לנהוג עלי צורק השם ואם
 יבאו החכמים האלו סביר מחדש המעלות...
 ולכן קראו המלך לחכמים האלה... ויש
 טעם למה בחר בחכמי ישראל שאלו הם
 מעמד שופטים מאומות אחרות היה
 חשש שאלו הם יהיו נוגעים בדבר... שיבאו
 להמליך ומליך בת אומותם תחת ושת'
 וא"כ יוציאו עליה משפט מות אפילו אם
 תהיה פטורה, ולכן ביקש להעמיד שופטים
 מ'ישראל' שאינם נוגעים בדבר שהרי בובאו לא ירבו
 "The Jews, however, feared

delivering the sentence, for if they sentenced Vashti to
 death and Ahasuerus relented, they would be accused of
 making the wrong decision. They also did not want to
 appear vindictive, punishing Vashti for her treatment of
 Jewish women.

Before Vashti's death she was forbidden to see the
 king lest she beg forgiveness and appeal for her life.
 As her final royal duty she was commanded by Ahasuerus to
 choose the queen who would succeed her.

The commentators believed that Divine intervention
 was evident in Vashti's sentence. All of Vashti's
 punishments were of the type called *middah k'neged*

middah, measure for measure. For her crime of forced Jewish prostitution, she was punished with leprosy which would prohibit her from any intimate relations. For enforcing Sabbath labor among the Jews, she was killed on the Sabbath and then her soul transmigrated to the soul of Rabbi Hanina ben Torta's cow, which was known to abstain from work on the Sabbath. The most powerful of these divine punishments was that Esther replaced Vashti as queen and bore Ahasuerus a son who gave the Jews permission to rebuild the Temple.¹⁰

"וְלִבְנֵי סוּרָה הָיָה לְעֵתָהּ הַמֵּלֶכֶת הָיָה
הַמֵּלֶכֶת נִכְחַת הָאֲנָשִׁים כִּי לְתַחֲמוֹת וְשֵׁת'
וְתַחֲמוֹק אִסְתֵּר הַמִּקְוִיָּה" ¹⁰

NOTES

1 Pontremoli, p.40

2 *Ibid.* p.39

3 *Ibid.* p.5

4 *Ibid.* p.39

5 *Ibid.* p.42

6 *Ibid.* p.39

7 *Ibid.* p.58

8 *Ibid.* p.56

9 *Ibid.* p.48

10 *Ibid.* p.40

Chapter 3

Esther

3 Esther's faith enabled her
 to remain at the palace without resorting to any schemes
 to force Ahasuerus to marry her. She trusted that God
 prevent her defilement just as Sarah, our mother, was
 left unharmed in Egypt. 4 Esther again is compared to
 Sarah, who lived one hundred and twenty seven years, when
 the rabbis tell us that Esther ruled over one hundred and
 twenty seven nations because of her connection with
 Sarah. Further proof of Esther's righteousness is found
 by the commentators who say that Esther is one of the
 subjects of Proverbs 29:2, "When the righteous become
 great, the people rejoice ...". 5

Another trait that made Esther the beloved heroine
 was her humanity. Her love of people extended to Jews
 and non-Jews alike. Esther exhibited this love when she
 revealed Bigtan and Teresh's plot to kill the king. It
 was Mordecai who discovered this plot and Esther reported
 it in his name ensuring his recognition. The rabbis tell
 us that one who gives credit where it is due exhibits an
 extra measure of kindness.

„מנה שהיה צורך למרדכי
 עומד לאסתר... אל קובאל אמרה לאסתר כבי
 שפאר הדבר בשמו... ואל אמר אמר דבר בשם
 אומרו, כבי מחבדו על שומעיו, כנו ששפה אסתר
 מראק בזה מה יתירה ש

"אהבת הקריות" ⁶ Esther proved her love for
 her people when Mordecai was honored. When he was to be
 led through the streets on horseback, Esther ordered all
 the shops closed and commanded everyone to line the
 streets and watch Mordecai be honored. Esther's purpose
 was to aggrandize her beloved people. ⁷ She also
 loved those outside of her religion and treated them as
 if they were members of her nation whom she had known for
 years.

Esther always behaved with humility. She spoke to
 everyone as if she were a commoner and not the queen of
 one hundred and twenty seven nations. Upon her arrival
 at the palace, she refused all gifts as she was not vain,
 and did not require gratuities to confirm her beauty.
 When compared with Vashti, Esther's fine character
 obviously is genuine and completely unrelated to her
 status.

"ו'י' עשה לה מעלות יהיו בה עצמה
 ולא באמותיה ובהו שמה, ערצותיה
 הטובה ממנה: כעומה שטובתה באה
 ממנה, ותר'יה לה מצות טובות ולא
 תשתבח המשפחתה אלא בעצמה
 ובה תהיה תמיץ יותר טובה
 מושת'." ⁸

This is certainly proven by her behavior in the palace; she continued to act as Mordecai had taught her. She maintained her childhood faith, she never denied God or the practice of Judaism, and remained heartbroken because she was orphaned.

Because she was so devout in her belief, Esther was the perfect vehicle for God's miracles. These miracles also occurred through Esther because of her worthy ancestry. We learn this from her identity as Esther bat Avihayil, Esther, the daughter of Avihayil. The merit of her righteous father Avihayil, and cousin Mordecai, served her well. She also had to rely upon her family for her identity as a Jew because Esther is not a "Jewish name".⁹ Esther was of royal lineage; she was considered to have inherited her modesty from her ancestors Rachel, and Saul, the first king of Israel. Esther was a worthy vehicle for miracles because of her meticulous observance of the commandment to honor one's parents. Since Haman was of Esau's lineage, and he was meticulous in his observance of *kibud av*, Israel had to be redeemed by someone who was equally careful in observing this mitzvah. No one is more observant of *kibud av* than an orphan who mourns her parents' death.¹⁰ If Esther brought about God's miracles, the Jews would know that her intentions were completely altruistic. She would not act solely to rescue her own

family; she acted on behalf of all Jews who had to repent

to be saved. ובה כפי שיצאו ישראל תשובה ואל יסמכו.

על אסתר, שאילו היו עלסתר אלה ואל היו אומרים,

בדבאי לא תרוח ולא תקוץ עב שכל הגזירה

כפי שהצוים אביה ואמה. ואלה הצערים יושלו

כענו. ולא היו עושים תשובה. אלה עכ"ל

שהיתה אסתר יתומה... היו ישראל שרונים

בא"מ גבושה שאל לא תשתבש אסתר שכל

אתהגזירה שהר' אין לה אלה ואל...

והראותם שאין תקוה מאסתר ע"ל

תשובה עתה הגזירה 11

When Ahasuerus decided to remarry, he decreed that all eligible women must be brought to the palace so he could choose a wife. Mordecai hid Esther and refused to bring her to the palace. However, the palace officers' wives knew Esther and mentioned her beauty to their husbands. They did not know her nationality and therefore could not locate her. When Esther failed to join all the other young women at the palace, the king decreed that any women who were hiding would be executed. Esther resurfaced, and Mordecai escorted her to the street where she joined the flow of women enroute to the palace. In this way, Esther's nationality remained a mystery. 12

Mordecai's concern for Esther's welfare was so great that he left Jerusalem with the exile for her benefit.

He preferred to be able to raise Esther than to live in Israel.¹³ In turn, Esther cared for Mordecai so much that she recommended him for Ahasuerus' Jewish advisor. When Mordecai appeared at the palace gate in sackcloth, Esther sent clothes for him because she feared for his life, and she was distressed terribly when she heard that he refused the clothes. She was sure he would be killed for flouting the laws of court dress.¹⁴ Esther honored Mordecai's request that she not reveal her familial or national identity. She told Ahasuerus only that Mordecai raised her, and not that they were cousins. Their true relationship was uncovered only after Haman's death.

Esther's given name was Hadassah, the Hebrew word for myrtle. Esther, as a righteous person, was likened to the myrtle which stays fresh through sun and rain. Righteous people steadfastly maintain their ways, regardless of their circumstances. Also, myrtle is reputedly bitter to the taste but has a sweet scent; Esther, Hadassah, was bitter to Haman but sweet to Mordecai. Myrtle has no scent until it is rubbed and so Esther seemingly transgressed by marrying Ahasuerus, but upon further examination one realizes her marriage fulfilled an urgent need (she was pressed like the myrtle).¹⁵ In Aramaic, the word *hadas* translates to *Ista* and in Greek to *Istahar*, both close approximations of Esther. While the name Esther is not an

inherently Jewish or Hebrew name, it is, however, close in sound to the Hebrew word *hester*, which means hidden. This name is particularly apt since Esther hid her identity and nationality. The Jews also called her Esther, since her ways were always hidden from them as well. They did not know if she was behaving as a proper Jew while she was married to the king.¹⁶ According to the Zohar, God replaced Esther with a demon and all her actions were performed by it. Since this information was hidden from the people, they called her Esther.

„וואס פאר א פראגע! און וואס פאר א פראגע!
און וואס פאר א פראגע! און וואס פאר א פראגע!
און וואס פאר א פראגע! און וואס פאר א פראגע!
און וואס פאר א פראגע! און וואס פאר א פראגע!“

17 The scroll is called

the Scroll of Esther, not the Scroll of Hadassah, because it reflected a period of *hester panim*, a time when God's presence is hidden.¹⁸

Esther had much influence establishing the customs surrounding the Festival of Purim. She declared a fast before going into battle on the thirteenth of Adar. After the victory, she asked the sages to change the date of the festival's observance. Purim was to be celebrated on the sixteenth of Nisan, but Esther felt that on that date, the miracle of Purim would be overshadowed by the celebration of Passover.¹⁹ She also wanted a permanent record of the events leading to Israel's salvation and appealed to the sages to write the story on

a parchment scroll. Esther was determined that the Jews always would remember the consequences of straying from God and fraternizing with Gentiles.²⁰ The sages were reluctant to write the scroll, until they found a biblical rationale in the verse referring to Amalek in Exodus 17, "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder...",²¹ after which they agreed. The celebration of Purim can never be annuled, not even by a great and wise court, because it was upheld originally by the righteous Esther.²² Esther used her authority as queen to reinforce what Mordecai had decreed about Purim. Esther reiterated that Purim must be observed yearly and made the people swear to do so, even in times of persecution. The commentators credit Esther for the manner in which Purim is celebrated today. Pontremoli can then list these observances and inform his readers of all they should do when they observe Purim. It is in this manner that the Ottoman Jews received the Jewish education they so desperately needed.

NOTES

- 1 Pontremoli, p.173
- 2 *Ibid.* p.300
- 3 *Ibid.* p.85
- 4 Genesis 13:11-20
- 5 NJV
- 6 Pontremoli, p.99
- 7 *Ibid.* p.189
- 8 *Ibid.* p.60
- 9 *Ibid.* p.300
- 10 *Ibid.* p.74
- 11 *Ibid.* p.74
- 12 *Ibid.* pp.75-76
- 13 *Ibid.* p.309
- 14 *Ibid.* p.143
- 15 *Ibid.* p.72
- 16 *Ibid.* p.72
- 17 *Ibid.* p.73
- 18 *Ibid.* p.304
- 19 *Ibid.* p.303
- 20 *Ibid.* p.300
- 21 NJV
- 22 Pontremoli, p.302

Chapter 4

Esther as Anusa

The powerful connection that the Ottoman Jews felt with Esther stems from her hidden identity. Although the Ottoman Jews, who originally fled the Inquisition, were relatively free from persecution in the Ottoman Empire, they never forgot that their correligionists had to practice their religion in secret. The author of the *Me'am Lo'ez* on Esther devotes much time explaining and justifying Esther's behavior. Esther's actions are justified not only because she saved her people, but because against great odds and under adverse circumstances, she lived as an observant Jew.

Esther's observance of Jewish law remained steadfast while she lived at the palace. She, like the secret Jews of fifteenth century Spain, found creative ways to follow ancestral law without being discovered. Esther told her servant, Haggai, that she was a vegetarian and he served her accordingly. She was never questioned regarding her and so maintained Kashruth.¹ She also followed the laws of family purity; during menstruation, she would concoct excuses to prevent having relations with Ahasuerus. She could say almost anything except that it was due to her religion. Esther had seven maids, each working on a different day. She named them according to the days of the week, so when the maid named for the Jewish Sabbath came on duty, Esther would know it was Shabbat. Furthermore, she forbade the Sabbath maid to do any work, to avoid arousing the other

time she could not see the king for three reasons: she would be caught and killed for appearing uninvited, she had no guarantee that if she was admitted to see Ahasuerus, she would get a favorable response, and there was still plenty of time before Haman's decree was fulfilled. Esther did not fear for her life, and believed that the king would summon her soon. She did want Israel to repent and to rely upon their own merit for salvation. She also had a plan and wanted Haman to remain unaware of it.⁵ Esther waited another two months and then appealed to Ahasuerus to repeal Haman's decree. During this time, she urged the Jews to continue fasting and repenting.

... ולא ניהיה לבקש עוד בקשה
והנתיבה עד ששכרו כחצילים ויותר. ובאותו זמן צוה
עשרה ליוספו לעסוק בתשובה ובתעניות ובקדושה
ויבקשו מאת השם שיתן להם המלך להחזיר
האגרות ויעשה רצונה של אסתר.

6

Esther's defense of the repeal was based on negating Haman's decree to kill the Jews, by clarifying that the nation to destroy is any people who hates the people of Israel. A second defense was that the second letter sent to all the kingdoms was not signed by the king. Esther told Ahasuerus that he could repeal the decree on the grounds that Haman's information was false; God commands that Jews be loyal to their rulers.

„ועלן בקשה הרבה מעלני המלך שלל ימים
 על עבדתי המן שגבר על ישראל. ואברהם,
 נצטוו ישראל עבדו בשלומה של מעלות,
 ובכל שבת ויום טוב מברכים המלך ושלטונו
 להקדש ושמרהו מכל צרה וציקה
 ויארז ימיו. וכך אנו מצווים לעשות
 טוב לכל העולם ועל כל האומות.“

Esther begged Ahasuerus to repeal the decree as a way to prove his love for her. In this manner, by hiding her identity until the proper moment, Esther saved the Jewish people.⁷

Within the text of the Me'am Lo'ez, there are a number of references to the Hebrew word *Ones*, force. This is also the word used to describe Jews who were forced into Catholicism and secretly observed Judaism. They were called *Anusim*. It is clear that Esther acted as an *Anusah* throughout the story. She hid her nationality for nine years, protected Mordecai, and yet continued to obey Jewish law by practicing family purity, observing the dietary laws and keeping the Sabbath.

Ahasuerus tried very hard to make Esther reveal her identity as a Jew, but she did not. He implored her and then resorted to trickery. He hosted a party in Esther's honor, hoping that during the festivities Esther would let down her guard and mention her national origin. If

she did not, he hoped that she would invite some relatives as her guests and he could deduce her origins from their customs and dress. Of course, his plan failed; Esther would not partake of the feast as it was contrary to dietary law and she really had no family that Ahasuerus might meet.⁸ Ahasuerus pressed on. He repealed all taxes on the various nations of the Empire, hoping that representatives of Esther's people would come to thank her for bringing them tax relief. Once again, his plan failed.

Esther, too, used many ruses to conceal her identity. When Ahasuerus would implore, she answered obliquely. One way was to turn the question of nationality back to Ahasuerus and inquire about his background. Another was to beg that he not ask on the grounds that the answer might be one for which she, like Vashti before her, would be killed. She might have said that as an orphan, she didn't know her parents and their ancestry, or that she had good reason for keeping her origins secret and if he really loved her, he would not ask again. In that vein, she could also use the excuse that if he had known her identity, he would have chosen another woman as a mate. Her best response was based on Ahasuerus' words. He decreed that men should rule their households, that the husband's language and culture would dominate and the wife's was irrelevant. Finally, Esther would say that no other king behaves in

this manner. Any of these responses produced the appropriate result; Ahasuerus would stop the inquiry.⁹

The people of the one hundred and twenty seven nations under Ahasuerus' rule thought Esther's modesty prevented her from revealing her nationality. Each nation claimed her as its own, since her name was common enough to belong among a number of peoples. They thought it might be a variation on the name Istahar, Persian for Venus.¹⁰

In a number of places throughout her story, Esther is forced to act against her will. She was a reluctant participant in the search for Ahasuerus' new queen. She was taken by force and put in Hagai's charge. She refused to participate in this affair, since she feared God and observed the laws of personal modesty. Her refusal to participate was obvious when she appeared before the king. She was frowning and uncooperative while all the other women were eager. She refused all gifts and did not ask for anything.

הכתוב מלפניו מהרה
ההבדל בין אסתר המלכה ובין שאר הנערות שכל הנערות
המתוונות מתי' ימים תורן ליכנס לבית המלך של ימלאותן
בעצין וימלכו. אלא אסתר היתה אלוסה בעל ענינה
ולא הוקרה בהר, ולא היה לה שום חפץ להיות מלכה וכל
הרהו לשם בעתה בתכשיטים ותמרוקים
ובנערות משרתות ובכסס וזהב, והיו מכתים
אותה הרהה בהר' פיתוי ערבים שתיאור

11 עמא אלא המלך הרצון לא הצליח בכך.

During Passover, it became time for the Jews to defend themselves, and Esther asked that the Jews fast before battle. Like the *Anusim*, she decided that it was better to forego some mitzvot than for the nation to be destroyed.

„הכתוב מלמדנו שהסכים מרדכי לאסתר
אסתר עקביו צום בחג הפסח. וחזר בו מסבתו
הקודמת אסור להתענות תענית לה
פסח שלא היה צורך לזה כיון שבי הככות
של אסתר ופטר שהיתה עסוקה בהצלת
12 נפשות.

It is clear that Esther was forced into this situation and like the *Anusim* of Spain, used the opportunity to save as many Jews as she could.

The midrashic interpretations of the Me'am Lo'ez reflect some Christian influences that must have entered Jewish belief through the teachings of Jews descended from those who judaized during the Inquisition. During that time, and surely by the end of the sixteenth century, an atrophy of rabbinic learning, a hypertrophy of biblical ideas and forms and a syncretism with Catholic practice and belief developed.¹³ One such influence is found in Esther's three day fast. She fasted for three days in order to repent for three sins:

for eating food served by Ahasuerus, for voluntarily visiting her husband the king and for Hatach's death. She also fasted because she thought she had abandoned her plan by acting voluntarily instead of under duress. Prayer is the more common Jewish method of atonement; Esther preferred fasting. Inquisitorial records repeatedly mention that even lukewarm Judaizers observed fasts. These fasts were observed "for the living and the dead", for the welfare of those in the clutches of the Inquisition and in atonement for departed kinsmen.¹⁴ This practice seems to fit the practices and beliefs stated in the Me'am Lo'ez.

Another of these influences is reflected through the use of the Hebrew word *mityahadim*, to judaize. The commentators point to non-Jews who helped Esther by joining in the fast because they too feared the king, but other comments, also included in the Me'am Lo'ez, say those who also fasted were actually Jews, although they appeared to be non-Jews because they were forced to work on the Sabbath. The use of *mityahadim* then, is the same as it was historically, referring to Jews returning to Judaism after having practiced another religion.

Other vignettes portray Esther as a martyr where she appeals to Ahasuerus to save the Jews. Though her death is inconsequential, she tells Ahasuerus, she would die many deaths if the Jews were not spared. This is certainly reflective of Christian martyrdom and is

supported by another verse from the text of Esther and the Me'am Lo'ez comment upon it. Chapter eight, verse sixteen states, "The Jews enjoyed light and gladness...",¹⁵ and the commentary on it states that Esther caused a light to shine for Israel. This too is reflective of medieval Christian iconography where Esther is associated with the cult of the Virgin Mary. Esther's intercession with Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jews is interpreted as a prefiguration of the Virgin's mediation on behalf of humankind.¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 Pontremoli p.72
- 2 *Ibid.* p.77
- 3 *Ibid.* p.204
- 4 *Ibid.* p.299
- 5 *Ibid.* p.152
- 6 *Ibid.* p.215
- 7 *Ibid.* p.216
- 8 *Ibid.* p.87
- 9 *Ibid.* p.89
- 10 *Ibid.* p.84
- 11 *Ibid.* p.81
- 12 *Ibid.* p.153
- 13 Cohen, "The Religion of Luis Rodriguez Carvajal",
(Cincinnati: AJA vol.20:1 1968) p.40
- 14 Roth, pp.188-189
- 15 NJV
- 16 Encyclopedia Judaica s.v. Esther

CONCLUSION

Esther is a popular and beloved Biblical figure. Her story is one of faith that has guided Jews throughout the ages. Her hidden nationality is a factor that allowed Jews to relate to her predicament throughout much of Jewish history. By glorifying Esther, Jews of the Ottoman Empire, like their predecessors in Spain and Portugal, garnered hope that salvation was soon at hand.

The Book of Esther and the Me'am Lo'ez commentary on it serve us well today. The publication of the *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez* in Hebrew has made Sephardic wisdom available to many more readers. Its midrashim are delightful and its lessons are eternally important.

Above all, from Esther we can learn an historical lesson about the contribution of women in the destiny of their people. For centuries, she has been hailed as a "saint" for saving her people and never denigrated for being a women.

May we learn that all people, men and women, have potential as catalysts for salvation so that soon we may say, "the Jews (and all the world) enjoy light and gladness, happiness and honor". May this be God's will.

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