

Rabbi's Second Article on the Spiritual Themes of Purim

Laughing Away Our Fears at Purim

Or

"I'm Gonna Wash that (Ha)Man Right Outa My Hair"

By Rabbi Moshe Raphael Halfon

What if there were no Purim, no Megillah, no ancient tale of intrigue to re-enact every Spring? Well, we would have long ago had to make one up! Purim is bigger than Mardi Gras, New Year's and Halloween mashed together!

Purim is the time of year when we kick Old Man Winter in the "tuches" and say: No more depression! No more sadness! "Don't Worry, be Happy!"

After we find our hope during Hanukkah's Winter darkness, and plant our seeds in the crusty thaw of Tu B'shvat, Purim gives us the strength to finish the journey from Winter greys to Spring pinks and purples. In a month, we will face the Real Challenge of Freedom (and Responsibility) at our Pesach Seder. If we can't laugh at Haman - the Big Bad Wolf, the Blustering Bigot, the Freddy Krueger of our nightmares, how can we challenge Pharaoh, leave our Place of Enslavement, cross the Sea of our own Birth, enter the Great Desert and meet our Beloved Holy One at the Mountain?

Yes, Purim is our collective dream, a satire of mythic proportions. It is our Wizard of Oz, our Lord of the Rings, our Star Wars. Ding-dong, the Inner Haman is dead!

Purim's customs seem to be contradictory, but they are truly deep:

- We dress up like Haman, yet are commanded to "blot out his name" with noise, or even by writing his name on the bottoms of our shoes! This is because "Haman" represents that part of us that is prejudiced, negative, fearful, or self-deprecating - it is the *Yetzer HaRah* (Evil Impulse) within. As we increase our joy and revelry, we destroy its power over us. We laugh in the face of Evil, mocking it and removing it from our souls.

- We are commanded to become so ecstatic to the point that we feel no difference between "blessed is Mordechai" and "cursed is Haman." What, you say? One is supposed to be Evil and the Other Good! Aha! says, the Spirit of Purim, true Good is powered by Joy, which can raise up to a level beyond arbitrary labels, at which we can feel the Wholeness of All.

On Purim, I could blow my worst enemy a kiss...! When we are truly living in Bliss, we can momentarily rise above earthly bounds, even above Death itself. This is why rabbinic tradition holds that in the Messianic time all the other holidays will be abolished but Purim. Purim returns us to Eden. Wrote Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach:

"Purim and Yom Kippur are the same. On Yom Kippur we nullify the body with fasting and learn our lessons through prayer, pleading and understanding. On Purim, we nullify the soul with feasting and learning our lessons through joy....Purim changes us so that our inner voice says...I have the power; I have all the self-confidence; Torah, G-d, Purim, Love, everything is beautiful and forever...Esther gave us great strength when she wrote the Megillah. She reminds us that the joy and the energy of Purim can be forever..."

BE HAPPY! IT'S PURIM! A Review of Purim Customs, Symbols, and Practices

- The Fast of Esther - we fast during the daylight hours the day before Purim, to show our worthiness to be rescued, and our gratitude. (This year that is Wednesday March 16)
- Hearing the Megillah or Scroll of Esther: all ages and genders, and abilities must hear the story read, and blot out the name of Haman.
- *Mishloach Manot* - homemade gifts of food to friends. We give two different kinds of food (i.e. fruits and cookies) to two different friends.
- *Mattanot le-eyonim* (Charity or gifts to the poor) - to signify our contrition and thankfulness for having survived, and our awareness of other people's oppression.
- *Ad lo Yada* - becoming so crazy (not necessarily drunk!) that we know longer can tell the difference between "Blessed is Mordechai" and "Cursed is Haman."
- Purim Shpiel - a Popular Play or Parody of the Megillah
- *Hamantashen* – "Haman's pockets," cookies filled with fruit or poppy seeds, said to be Haman's hat or pockets, but which were probably based on popular foldover cookies in Europe.
- *Gragers* - Noisemakers, or anything that will drown out the Evil Name.

Themes and Issues in the Megillah (Part II, see Rabbi's previous article from two weeks ago)

A Megillah is not considered as holy as a Sefer Torah, because the actual Name of God is not found in it. For this reason, some Talmudic rabbis objected to canonizing the Book of Esther in the Bible. Yet this may be precisely the point of the story: it is one of the first experiences of a Jewish minority in Exile. With this period, a new idea entered Jewish consciousness: what if God works through human action and response to crisis? This is the message when Mordechai says to Esther: "who knows if it was just for such a time as this that you attained the royal office!" (chapter 4:14). Although presented as a satire, a dramatic building of tension occurs, with coincidences that seem to carry a message: sometimes human drama contains - and slowly reveals - a hidden Divine plan. Here a just a few of the coincidences and plot twists of the story:

1) According to a Midrash, Ahashverosh's Feast (Chapter 1) uses utensils sacked from the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians (whom the Persians later conquered). The implication: people who profit from the travails of those others will cause their ultimate downfall.

2) At this Feast, Vashti's act of defiance to the King's orders (1:12) leads to the elevation of Esther, putting her in a position to save her people. The counsel of his advisors to make an example of Vashti - lest other wives not bow to their husbands' authority - foreshadows Haman's decision to make an example of Mordechai and the Jews. The message: these are people who are fearful of change and challenges to their rule.

3) Mordechai overhears Bigtan and Teresh plotting to assassinate the King, and informs Esther, thus saving the King's life (2:21). This is inscribed in the royal chronicle, where it is

forgotten until one night King Ahashverosh has someone read to him from it so he can fall asleep. This sets the stage for set for Mordechai's elevation and Haman's downfall.

4) Haman sees Mordechai's refusal to bow as a threat by all Jews to his rise to power (3:6). He builds a spike (5:14) on which to impale Mordechai - but just as he has finished it, the King orders him to parade Mordechai through the capitol for saving his life (6:10). Haman will later be hung on that same spike, the symbol of his own hatred (7:10). "What goes around, comes around."

5) The King enters the Queen's bedroom just when Haman has thrown himself on her bed, appealing for his life (7:8). Thinking he means to ravish the Queen, Ahashverosh has him taken to be hung on the stake he had built to kill Mordechai. This is the final act that seals his fate.

6) The King cannot rescind the call to kill the Jews, but allows Mordechai and Esther to send out a call to the Jews to defend themselves against Haman's followers (8:11). This rids Persia of this pernicious group, and also raises the duo to the status of Haman at the start of the tale. Like other times in history, sometimes fortune shines on the Jews.

These and other events come together in a mysterious way that seem to show God "behind the scenes" helping the wicked fall and the downtrodden succeed.

Thus, whether the events depicted in the Scroll of Esther are completely factual, a satire based on facts, or a complete fabrication, they ring true to us, as to all peoples who have suffered under bigotry and oppression:

1. Today's demagogue may be tomorrow's Fuhrer - watch out!
2. Today's demagogue may be tomorrow's fool - or casualty.
3. Sometimes it's important to have friends in high places.
4. Don't be afraid to face authority when you know you're right.
5. Perhaps there is a Divine Will working behind the scenes after all.
6. Freedom is not free – it often needs defending!

Meanwhile, someone please pass me a glass of something and a homentash!