The Purim story (to be read in the synagogue on March 11 and 12) is full of fascinating and unusual characters who each have their resonances in our contemporary world. King Achashverosh reminds us of the various world leaders or other powerful people who are ineffectual and yet somehow ascend to their level of incompetence. Esther reminds us both of people who are driven and ambitious to succeed, and those who are willing to hide important elements of themselves to do so.

But I think the most fascinating person in the story, believe it or not, is Haman. Sometimes I even imagine that if someone could have hooked him up with the right therapist, 2500 years ago in Persia, things could have turned out differently.

We first meet Haman in Chapter 3 of the book of Esther. He has become an advisor to the king. We know nothing about his policies whatsoever except that he demands that all the people in the king’s courtyard bow down to him. Right there in Chapter 3, Haman meets Mordechai for the first time. The one and only thing that we know about Haman’s interactions with Jews is that Mordechai the Jew refuses to bow down to Haman. This is enough to send Haman into a genocidal rage, and he secures permission from the king to arrange for the extermination of every Jew, young and old, men, women and children.

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This program, as explained to parents, kids and staff by Grace, is designed to be a bonding experience for the current Bar/Bat Mitzvah class (of 20), separate from the intense study and practice they will experience this year. Having after-hours access to virtually the entire Museum, as well as several opportunities to talk about Jewish values, ethics and practices, with a spirited, well-behaved group of 18 of the classmates, and their remarkably talented teachers, Grace and Eytan, was something I’ll never forget.

They debated on topics such as, “How old is the Earth?”, “Is a fetus a life?”, “Do people have souls?” and “Is there an afterlife?” from a Jewish vs. a scientific perspective. The assignment allowed, no it REQUIRED, them to use their cellphones, and every one of the students presented their argument with confidence and supported by facts. They each spoke about how being Jewish feels to them, having had a chance to review a list of statements provided to them, and selecting the one(s) that resonated for them. They spoke articulately from their hearts.

On the flip side, we had great fun! We explored the Dinosaur exhibits by flashlight, with nothing but a few red spotlights to light our way. We toured the streets of Havana together in the “Cuba” exhibit, saw a live animal presentation with a golden eagle, a 12 foot python, and an adorable opossum, among other animals, birds and reptiles. We watched an incredibly beautiful and poignant IMAX movie about life in the Arctic Circle, witnessing for ourselves the effects of global warming. Most memorably, we slept in the North American Mammals exhibit, between the fighting Alaskan Moose and a herd of Bison. Quite a sight to wake up to!

I was thrilled to see that my former students, many of whom I’ve known since they were 2-3 or even younger, have matured into thoughtful, intelligent, respectful and proud Jewish (almost) adults, with strong opinions, cool temperaments and silly streaks...they are the total package.

When we departed early Sunday afternoon, I watched as they all thanked Grace and Eytan, and the 3 other chaperones, for this wonderful experience. I am proud to have had a chance to get to know this group of our future leaders just a little bit better. I can’t wait to see what they do next! 🌟
Later on, in Esther chapter 5, King Achashverosh recalls that his life has been saved by Mordechai, and he wants to honor Mordechai in some way - but he doesn't know how. (No surprise. Achashverosh is, after all, among the most incompetent rulers in human history.) So he consults with his advisor, Haman, and asks: "What should I do for someone that I would like to honor?"

Haman presumes, of course, that the king is planning to honor HIM. We get a rare peek into Haman's psyche: what are Haman's real dreams? And he answers: "For the person the king wants to honor: bring the royal clothing that the king has worn, and bring the horse that the king has ridden on... give these to a minister of the king, and have them dress the man to be honored in this royal garb, and lead him on horseback throughout the city, and have that minister announce before him: 'This is what shall be done to the man whom the king wants to honor!'"

How interesting that in Haman's fantasy, he doesn't ask for wealth, or physical or sensual pleasures. What he wants is -- honor. This is what Haman salivates for. (Bear in mind that already, everyone in the king's palace is bowing down to him, indicating that everyone already KNOWS that the king thinks Haman is deserving of honor. But for Haman, that's not enough.)

Later, in chapter 5 (v.12), Haman announces to his wife and family: Queen Esther is having a party, and guess what ONE OTHER PERSON she invited besides the king? she invited ME! And she invited me to come again with the king tomorrow! (That in and of itself is sadly peculiar. If Haman is the chief advisor, why is he getting so excited about this? Imagine Reince Priebus bragging to his family about getting invited to the White House for dinner.)

But next, Haman says (v. 13): "But all that doesn't matter to me, every moment I see Mordechai the Jew sitting by the king's gate!" Haman can be the most exalted leader in the empire, second only to the king, but every time he sees the one person who won't bow down to him, seeds of self-doubt appear to be sown in his mind, and he cannot bear the apparent disrespect he is being shown.

Usually the villains in the Bible are not particularly complex characters; they are pure personifications of evil. Often Haman is presented as a pure personification of evil, but I have never seen him that way. To me, he seems disturbed, in a pathetic sort of way, and that disturbance is the root of his evil behavior.

This analysis of the roots of Haman's pathology in no way gets him off the hook for his efforts at genocide. But perhaps it serves as a reminder to us that when deep within ourselves we have great needs and hungers that go unmet, we ought to bring them to the level of conscious thought so that we don't give them an opportunity to fester. Perhaps it's for this reason that Jewish tradition encourages every person to develop a self-regard that does not need to be validated by others. A person with an unquenchable thirst for approval can be terrifying indeed.
Razel Solow is a charming paradox. She’s intense, intelligent and accomplished. Raised on Long Island, she attended Brandeis on a scholarship and through hard work, was awarded Phi Beta Kappa, graduated magna cum laude and was elected class valedictorian. She was then a teaching fellow at Cornell, obtained a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in Educational Psychology, Gifted and Talented, published a scholarly treatise on gifted children, served as the Director of the Center for Gifted Studies and Education at Hunter College, and received a host of other impressive awards and positions.

So when I asked her, “Razel, what are you most proud of?” I assumed that her answer would focus on her professional and career accomplishments.

But I was wrong! Instead of all that, she spoke lovingly – and at length! - about her marriage of 36 years to her dear husband Joel Trugman, and of his amazing accomplishments and remarkable character (Joel is a highly respected neurologist whose extensive research includes innovative work on Parkinson’s disease). And then she talked of their children, Noah and Dena, and of her grandchildren. Noah is married and lives in San Francisco with his wife Anjana and their two young twins, Arik and Seika, whom Razel totally adores. Noah and Anjana both work for well-known tech companies. Dena is a rabbinical student at the “very liberal” Hebrew College in Boston and a chaplain-in-training.

Only after discussing these relationships, did Razel broaden to discuss other family members and then to talk about her work.

Again, it wasn’t her career accomplishments that she wanted to discuss but the voluntary work that she has done wherever she has lived, and her passion for Judaism that has guided her for all of her life.

As a youngster, Razel attended an Orthodox synagogue, was absorbed in learning about Judaism, Gemara, and absolutely relished everything about Shabbat. She remembers, even as a 9-year old, telling a friend that, “keeping Shabbos helps me not take things for granted.”

While at college, her interest in feminism, gay rights and other social causes made her question the status quo and so she moved away from Jewish Orthodoxy. But when she stopped observing Shabbat she realized she had gone too far, and how much she missed it. Judaism for Razel teaches us “how to live in the world,” and, most especially, to focus on social justice.

While she once wanted to change the world she came to see that it is often in one-on-one relationships that one can make a real difference. She savor the quote in the Talmud that, “whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”

After she met Joel, she followed his professional postings. She had been teaching English in Chappaqua but moved with him to Phoenix, where she worked as a student coordinator for Hillel; then to Minneapolis, where she studied architecture and had her first child; and then to Charlottesville, Virginia, where Joel had a fellowship. They lived in Charlottesville for 23 years, raised their family there and were active members of Congregation Beth Israel, a Reform synagogue with a conservative morning minyan.

As she was raising her children, each of whom was identified as gifted, she confronted the special issues that arise for such kids. “I was told my kids were gifted, but I didn’t know what to do with them.” Determined to find out, and be a good mother she obtained a Ph.D in that very topic, while raising the kids and working part-time. Aware of the difficulties that other parents of gifted children faced, she then created a volunteer organization called “Guiding Gifted Children.” It was a free program that she ran for 6 ½ years for about 150 families to assist them in dealing with the social, emotional and intellectual needs of their children.

Several years ago, when Joel took a position with a pharmaceutical company in Jersey City, he and Razel relocated to Jersey City. They then promptly moved next door to Hoboken “because of Rabbi Scheinberg.” They had looked for a “down-to-earth, warm, conservative, nonjudgmental” synagogue and

Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”
Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a.

(continued on page 5)
having found that at USH they moved to Hoboken so as to be near the shul. Razel took a position at Hunter College as head of the graduate program for teaching gifted children. Also, at the Hunter College Campus Schools, she advised teachers on how to work with gifted children and to deal with their special social and emotional needs.

In 2013 Razel published College at 13: Young, Gifted, and Purposeful, in collaboration with Dr. Celeste Rhodes. The book is based on a longitudinal study of fourteen highly gifted young women who had entered college early, having skipped all or most of high school. In the book, the women and their parents share the stories of their challenges and experiences.

A reviewer praised the authors who “do us all a favor by shining light on a subject that can arouse passions without understanding. We talk often about supporting the whole gifted child. What exactly does radical acceleration offer the whole gifted adult? Not every gifted child is a good candidate for radical acceleration. Not every gifted child is a good candidate for high school. College at 13 contributes to understanding the differences.”

Most recently Razel worked as Education Curator at the Hoboken Historical Museum, as a way to work locally and “give back” to the community, by creating and teaching the educational programming for children ages 3-18, by organizing and hosting Family Fun Days, and by leading three history camp sessions each summer.

Thank you, Razel! You reminded me that our Jewish heritage teaches us to be a force for good in the world, one soul at a time. You explained to me that the Talmudic teaching about the importance of making a contribution to even one soul has been a forceful guide for you. That’s a lot more important than a fancy resume.
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CONGRATULATIONS TO:

Sam Calmas on his bar mitzvah and to his parents, Steve and Lauren and to his sister, Alyssa
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Elizabeth Lee in honor of her bat mitzvah and to her parents, Andrew and Shana, and her siblings, Alexandra and Jared Jennifer and Daniel Peykar (KPS parents) on the birth of their daughter Layla Hayden Peykar and her brother Jacob

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Aaron Weitman on the loss of his grandfather, Paul Weitman and to Aaron’s wife Rebecca and children, Joshua and Gabriel
Joshua Youdovin on the loss of his grandfather, Rabbi Herman Schaalman and to his wife Sheri and Josh’s mother Susan