

Shabbat Shalom.

This week, I'm going to share words of Torah that Rabbi Rose and I prepared together, as we both wrestled with what it looks like to celebrate Purim this year.

I was listening this week to a podcast conversation between Rabbi Donniel Hartman and Dov Elbaum, and they began by talking about the resonance of celebrating Purim this year for them. They talked about the significance of having a story of our people where God doesn't swoop in to save us, but rather where we need to figure out how to navigate this world ourselves. They talked about Haman's hatred of the Jewish people as paradigmatic for generations of anti-Semites to come; about the ways that his careful plotting and planning were echoed in Hamas' attack on October 7. They talked about the resonance of things being entirely upside down.

I don't disagree with any of those things, but I also wanted to shake them both a little bit.

Because while all of those echos are certainly there, for me the big question of Purim this year is about how we make sense of the megillah, about what lessons we might learn about the costs of our powerlessness, and also about the dangers inherent in holding power; about self-defense, and revenge, and violence, and responsibility.

Now I don't actually want to throw Dov and Donniel under the bus-- they did eventually discuss some of those issues later in the episode.

But for me, right now, those questions, and with them, the question of how we celebrate Purim this year-- in a time when many Jews feel existentially threatened as in the megillah, but in a time when Jews do have sovereignty and a largely Jewish army is actively engaged in a

violent military campaign-- are the things consuming my mental and emotional energy as we approach Purim tonight.

We often gloss over this part of the megillah, but this year especially, I think it's important to name some of the more troubling parts of this story, of our story. In Chapter 8, the megillah tells us that even though Haman has already been put to death, the king's original decree that called upon the residents of the kingdom to murder the Jews, is impossible to annul. And so King Achashverosh gives Mordechai and Esther the authority to make up their own, new decree. They do, and messages are dispatched throughout the kingdom giving the Jews permission "to assemble and fight for their lives," "לְהִקָּהֵל וְלָעֲמֹד" "עַל-נַפְשָׁם", but also to "destroy, massacre, and exterminate the armed force of any people or province who attacks them, together with women and children, and plunder their possessions,"

"לְהַשְׁמִיד וְלַהֲרֹג וְלֹאבֹד אֶת-כָּל-חַיִּל עַם וּמְדִינָה הַצָּרִים אֲתֶם טַף וְנָשִׁים וְשָׁלָלָם

לְבוֹז:¹"

And then in Chapter 9, we read of the fulfillment of that decree. Not only that, but Esther actually then asks for a second day for the violence to continue. And then the megillah goes on to tell us, very explicitly and with precise numbers, that the Jews killed 800 people in Shushan, and another 75,000 throughout the Persian empire.

What do we do with this part of the Purim story?

An apologetic reading would have us say that this is all in self-defense, that this is what happens when the king's decree cannot be annulled. It's tempting to read it that way, because the megillah itself doesn't seem to find this violence problematic, and because imagining our ancestors on a violent rampage probably doesn't make any of us feel

¹ Esther 8:11

good. Reading this story as entirely one of self-defense is comfortable, and allows us to slide Purim back into the standard “they tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat” model of Jewish holidays.

There are also historical readings that maybe help us avoid the challenging parts of this story. There are scholars who assert that the entire book of Esther is a fantasy about power written by a people, living precariously in exile, who are imagining what it might be like to actually destroy their enemies rather than living in fear of them. They note that there are no historical records from the time, outside of the megillah, that mention Esther or Mordechai or even Haman. Rabbi Reuven Hammer asserts that the megillah “is more likely a historical novel than a work of history.”² And so, maybe, we should not worry too much about the violence and death toll-- after all, there are no actual victims if the megillah is historical fiction-- so we can just take it as satire and as a kind of far-fetched imagination, detached from reality.

² <https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/esther-fact-or-fantasy-583477>

Or on the flipside, we can read the megillah in the larger historical context of warfare during the late Biblical period, and say that killing thousands of people, including women and children, is just how war worked. As Meylekh Viswanath articulates: “it is unfair to judge ancient Jewish texts by today’s standards...In a world in which invading armies destroyed cities, slaughtering and/or enslaving enemies, man, woman, and child, the Jews did the same. Even if the war was justified, war was war, and the conventions of war for Jews were more or less the same as they were for other cultures: total defeat and total destruction.”³

Any of those readings might be factually correct. But I don’t think that any of them is spiritually helpful. None of them really gives us guidance for how we might make meaning and be religiously guided by the megillah-- as Jews living in the 21st century, and especially this year as we watch the war between Israel and Hamas continue to unfold.

³ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-megillat-esther-massacre>

And so what might help us find religious guidance as we approach Purim tonight?

First of all, I draw strength and comfort from the fact that we are not the first generation of Jews to find these parts of the 8th and 9th chapters of Megillat Esther to be deeply troubling.

Rabbi Rose always reminds b'nai mitzvah students that one of the great gifts of the fact that Jews have been studying Torah for a really long time is that when we have questions about the Torah, we're rarely the first people to have those questions. We are not alone in our discomfort; rather our discomfort is itself traditional. Ibn Ezra, writing about 900 years ago, asks explicitly: "Why did Mordechai write (in the decree) that the Jews should kill their enemies? Wouldn't it have been enough for him and for them that they (the Jews) should escape?"⁴

⁴ Ibn Ezra on Esther 8:8

And he's not alone. Several of the classical commentators struggle to make moral sense of these chapters. But while I appreciate that this discomfort has been part of our tradition for centuries, I don't find any of their answers particularly helpful. Which I suppose shouldn't be surprising.

After all, Ibn Ezra probably could not have imagined the situation we find ourselves in this year: reading the megillah in a world in which there is a sovereign State of Israel. A world in which the Jewish State holds real life-and-death power over not only Jews, but millions of Palestinian citizens, and also millions of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. A world in which Jews can, and have, violently responded to being attacked. A world in which the first Jewish state in 2000 years is still reeling and traumatized in the aftermath of an unexpected and horrific attack from its enemies. A world in which Jews have to really grapple with questions of what it means to hold power,

what responsibilities come with sovereignty, how we balance the need to protect ourselves with our obligation to care for the other.

For Ibn Ezra, these questions were in some way hypothetical. For us, they are all too real, even as we are not the ones sitting in the war rooms, perhaps frustrated that it feels like we have no influence over the decisions being made.

So what do we do with the end of the megillah?

We must hold, and read, and own all of the complexities of the Purim story. As Rabbi Deena Cowans wrote last year (very presciently):

“Because we cannot erase the end of the megillah, we have to confront the fact that there are, actually, two narratives of the Jewish people in the Purim story: in one, we’re just one evil man, one corrupt power system, away from being annihilated. In the other, we’re so powerful we can slaughter our enemies and make them cower with fear. But here’s

the really important part: It's not either or." She continues: "Both of these narratives hold truth across Jewish history, and especially today. We have been slaves and conquerors, strangers in a foreign land and rulers of our own nation, victims and warriors. The Purim story reminds us of these dualities, to think about where and when we are powerful, and when we are weak."

It's hard to hold complex stories, even as it is far more interesting and far more honest than the alternative. And so there's a temptation to try to simplify. To pick one story: we are the oppressor, or we are the oppressed. We are vulnerable, or we are powerful. We desperately need the help of our allies, or we are strong and confident enough to act alone.

If we're honest with ourselves, we each probably have one of those stories that comes more naturally to us than the other.

But we owe it to ourselves, and to the megillah, to stretch ourselves to hold the narrative that is less obvious to us. To take seriously our fellow Jews' concerns and sense of vulnerability, to not minimize the trauma that many are holding. And to take seriously the power that we, as Jews in the 21st century, do have; to recognize that that power is intrinsically bound up with an obligation to use it responsibly, to call on our leaders to exercise it with morality and integrity.

Holding both of these stories, and the many truths contained in them, all at the same time, demands asking hard questions about our reality, just as it does about the megillah:

What are the boundaries between self-defense and revenge, or just the attempt to exert power when we feel powerless? Who decides? What actually makes us safer? When violence is pursued, to what end is it pursued? At what cost? When future generations read about us, will they be proud of our behavior, or will they be as uncomfortable as I feel

about Chapters 8 and 9 of the megillah? What do I hope they will read about my role in this story?

We are commanded to increase our joy as Purim gets closer, and many have noted the additional difficulty in actualizing that this year. I think that, perhaps ironically, the way I am finding joy as we approach Purim this year is not so much in the story of the megillah itself, nor even in the costumes and shtick and general frivolity (of which there will nonetheless be plenty tonight and tomorrow). But I am finding joy, in the deeper sense of comfort and satisfaction, in knowing that we are part of an ancient tradition that prides itself on unraveling our stories and asking hard questions, so that we might better understand who we are and what God asks of us. May we be worthy of that task, and may that work lead us, one day, to a durable and lasting peace-- one that ends the cycles of violence that go back to Esther and beyond.

Shabbat Shalom, and Chag Purim Sameach.