

My Birthday Wish on Ta'anit Esther

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Rabbi Adam Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

Purim may be the scariest holiday on the Jewish calendar. I am not talking about frightening costumes or creepy masks that some people wear to Purim balls or parties. Although I always say that the best day to buy your costume for Purim is the day after Halloween, Purim is not simply the Jewish version of that secular dress-up holiday. Now I suppose you could say that Rosh Hashanah is a day of dread; we call it a *Yom Nora*, a day of awe, *Yom Ha'Din* the day when we all pass before God in judgment. That can certainly be pretty scary! But we enter into Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur for that matter, with the promise that if we are sincere in our prayers and our efforts at repentance then we will indeed be forgiven. So maybe it's not so scary after all. You might say, that Tisha B'Av is the scariest holiday. But Tisha B'Av seems to me to be more jarring than scary. The decision was already made, the Temple was destroyed, the Jewish people were driven out of Jerusalem. The description of what happened in those final moments prior to the razing of the Temple is gut wrenching, but I don't know if I'd say "scary." The question of Tisha B'Av is "What now?" How do we learn from this cataclysm, and rebuild Jewish life.

What strikes me as scary about Purim is just how close Haman came to being successful. What is unsettling about Purim is that but for the shrewdness and courage of Esther and Mordecai, the Jewish people in Persia would have indeed been annihilated. What is scary about Purim is that for the first time in a series of Biblical holidays, God does not come to the rescue...there are no overt miracles, no explicit salvation, no otherworldly rescue of the Jews. God is hidden at best, behind the scenes, but nowhere to be found in the megillah itself. Finally, what is scary about Purim is that the Jews at the end of the story are still in *galut*, still in exile, still literally fighting for their very existence, still subservient to a foreign king who may be positively predisposed to us at that moment, but has proven fickle enough, and susceptible enough to bribes and other forms of persuasion that he could turn against us again at any moment. You may recall that when Haman argues to King Ahashveirosh that the Jewish people had their own strange rituals, and customs, and don't obey the king's laws back in chapter 3 verse 8, the king couldn't care less! What persuades him to allow Haman to do with this people *ka'tov b'eineicha*, whatever he wants; what causes the king to remove the signet ring from his hand and give it to Haman is when Haman promises to deposit 10,000 talents of silver into the royal treasury! That's when the king starts paying attention! He is not motivated by justice, or morality, or even basic concern for his subjects. But if you are willing to make a sizeable enough deposit into his bank account, then you might be able to persuade him. So Haman offered 10,000; who's to say someone else might not come along and offer 20? The Book of Esther is a story about the uncertainty and unpredictable nature of being a minority in exile. It is existentially disturbing.

So how do we go from that to Purim carnivals, costume parades, hamentaschen, schpiels, and for some, getting schikered? This question reminds me of the Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning Jewish author Saul Bellow's observation that "laughter and trembling are so curiously intermingled that it is not so easy to determine the relation between the two." But still I wonder how a holiday that contains so much visceral anxiety become a holiday that too many modern Jews stop celebrating once their kids grow up, as if it solely exists for the entertainment of

children? At least part of the reason can be attributed to the Megillah itself. In the ninth chapter of the Megillah, Mordecai sends *sefarim*, missives all over the kingdom, instructing Jews on the 14th and 15th of Adar *la'asot otam y'mei mishteh v'simcha u'mishloach manot ish le're'eihu u'matanot l'evryonim*, to literally make these days, the days when the Jews had respite from defending themselves from Haman's mercenaries, "make them into days of feasting and merrymaking, an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor." And then the text says, "*Ve'kibbeil ha'Yehudim*," and the Jews agreed to this, and adopted this holiday and its newfound rituals. The Jewish people and Mordecai transformed these days in Adar *miyagon le'simcha*, from grief to joy, *mei'evel le'yom tov* from mourning to festivity.

But as if to suggest that a complete-180 on Purim from the brink of extermination to unbridled celebration was just a bit too jolting, another layer of this holiday was added later on, and that is Ta'anit Esther, the Fast of Esther. This fast, a daylight-only fast, is to take place on the day before Purim. It is not part of Mordecai's instructions to the Jewish people for how to commemorate these events, and the fast is not mentioned even once in the Talmud. The Shulchan Aruch says: *Ha'ta-anit zo eino chova*, this fast is not obligatory (OC 686:2), and though we are encouraged to fast, it is possible to be quite lenient about its observance. The common explanation for this fast is that it is a commemoration of the fast that Esther asked the Jewish people of Persia to undertake, as she prepared to go to the king and plead for her people. (Indeed that is the view of several of the *Rishonim*, the leading sages who lived prior to the writing of the Shulchan Aruch.) But a close look at the megillah reveals that the Jewish people were already fasting when Esther made her request. In 4:3 we read that following the dissemination of Haman's decree to exterminate the Jewish people:

Bechol medina u'medina...in every province of the kingdom there was evel gadol, great mourning among the Jews, v'tzom, fasting, u'vchi, weeping, u'mispeid, wailing, sak v'eifer yutzar la'rabbim, and everyone sat in sackcloth and ashes! That's 13 verses BEFORE Esther asks the Jews of Persia to fast with her. So what did Esther really want from them if they were already fasting? Again a close look at the language of the megillah reveals a powerful detail:

Esther's instruction to Mordecai is: *Lekh k'nos et kol ha'Yehudim...Go and assemble all the Jews in Shushan and fast on my behalf. (4:16)* What she really needs at that moment is solidarity with her community. She wants to feel the presence, the closeness of her fellow Jews at that moment of fear and uncertainty. I believe that Ta'anit Esther is as much about the reassurance and comfort we get from being part of a community as it is about remembering that Esther fasted before going to see the King. To tell you the truth I didn't feel a tremendous connection to Ta'anit Esther before I came across an article by Sara Rudolph, a Jewish educator from my hometown of Cleveland directed me to these texts and interpretations.^[1] This year, in particular, Ta'anit Esther has taken on a whole new meaning. It was last year at this time, just a few days before Purim when a reporter from the Washington Post called me to ask how our congregation was celebrating Purim. It was the very beginning of the pandemic, and we didn't know very much about it yet. I answered that we were going ahead with all of our planned celebrations, megillah readings, and carnival. By the time that story was published in the newspaper just 48 hours later, everything changed. We did have the live megillah reading, but we cancelled the Purim carnival.^[2] In my mind, Purim was the turning point in the life of our community. And we are nearing the one year anniversary of a world we could have never imagined last year at this

time. More than ever before I am drawn to Esther's plea for solidarity...*k'nos et kol ha'Yehudim*, how I wish I could gather together all of my fellow Jews. How acutely I feel the absence of community and the incredible power of physical proximity. This year Ta'anit Esther falls on Thursday, which also happens to be my birthday! What a way to celebrate, huh? I can assure you that more than reflecting on Esther's fast, I will be thinking about empowering gifts of community. And how the hope and vision of all of us being together again is the very source of strength and hope that will get me through this time of separation. And God willing, when we do come back together, we will never again take for granted the blessings of community, of assembly, of gathering, and togetherness. That, more than anything, is my birthday wish for this year...even if I can't blow out the candles on my birthday cake!

Shabbat shalom and Chag Purim sameach!