

Don't Listen to Haman! (The alternative is inconceivable)

Shabbat Zachor 5783

March 4, 2023; 11 Adar 5783

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I hope that by now you have all heard the great news! This year's Sisterhood Mishloach Manot/Purim Basket project was the most successful ever. Not just the most successful *since Covid*. Not just the most successful *in recent years*...the most successful *ever!* By now, I'm sure that most of you have received your bags of goodies, and that pink paper scroll containing the Purim greetings of members of your Har Shalom community. Thank you to Sisterhood for helping us all perform one of the four mitzvot of the holiday of Purim. That's right, there are only four mitzvot: Hearing the Megillah, giving *matanot le'evyonim*—gifts or charity directly to the poor, having a special *se'udat Purim*, a festive Purim meal, and giving *mishloach manot*, packages of food to neighbors and friends.

But why is sending packages of food to others on Purim a mitzvah? This is not a program that Sisterhood or Women's League invented...It's actually in the Megillah, chapter 9 verse 22. Mordecai charges the Jewish people to keep these days of Purim *bechol shana ve'shana*, each and every year thereafter. And he includes in this list of observances *mishloach manot ish le're- eihu*, sending gifts of food to one another. What the megillah does not include is the reason...I mean, presumably anyone would be happy to receive a package of food on their doorstep, just ask any of our Har Shalom college students who have been so thrilled to get a box of *hamantashen* and other goodies sent to their dorms and off-campus apartments! But there is no recorded reason for this in the Book of Esther. The *Terumat Ha'Deshen*, a work written by the 15th Century Hungarian Rabbi Isaac Isserlin says that *mishloach manot* were given in order to make sure that every Jew had enough food for the festive Purim meal, the *se'udat Purim*. That's a lovely explanation and quite possibly accurate.

But I am drawn to a more provocative rationale. Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, a 16th Century Kabbalist who is much more famous for composing *Lecha Dodi*, which we sing on Friday nights to welcome Shabbat, also wrote a commentary the Book of Esther called *Manot Ha'Levi* published in 1585. In it he explains that *Mishloach Manot*, this sharing of food among neighbors, was actually meant as an antidote; a proof to counter an accusation made by Haman

earlier in the Megillah. You will recall, when Haman makes the case for eradicating the Jews of Persia to Ahashveirosh, he says “*yeshno am echad m’fuzar u’meforad ben ha’amim*...in Chapter 3 verse 8 he says threateningly ‘there is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among all the other peoples...’ “*M’fuzar u’meforad*,” scattered and dispersed. That;s a really low blow for the Jewish people. Remember the UJA slogan from back in the 90’s? “We are one!” Those were the heady days when non-religious Jews would run around quoting the Talmud: “All Jews are responsible for one another, *kol Yisrael areivin zeh ba’zeh*,” and when the phrase *K’lal Yisrael*, meaning ‘the Jewish collective’ was introduced into the lexicon. According to Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, we give *mishloach manot* to this day to refute Haman’s accusation that we are a scattered and dispersed people because deep down every Jew knows that being scattered and dispersed is the beginning of the end of the Jewish people. We can’t exist in a sea of other peoples in the world without the strength that is born of at least some sense of Jewish unity.

The overwhelming power and influence of Jewish unity has been on full display lately. Along with many of you, I have been worried sick about the implications of the current Israeli government’s proposed “judicial reform.” It seems more like a sinister political ploy that would substantially weaken Israel’s democratic character than a meaningful review of the balance of power. But look at the demonstrations! I have a friend in Israel who sends me pictures on WhatsApp almost every Saturday night from demonstrations that he attends along with tens of thousands of Israelis pouring into the streets demanding government accountability, all the while waving the blue and white *magen David* flag of the State of Israel. These are not anarchists; these are not rebels. These are devout Zionists, patriotic Israelis who are demanding more of their politicians, who are refusing to go along with a hijacking of Israel’s core democratic values. There has actually been nothing that has reassured me more of Israel’s future as a Jewish, democratic state than these *hafganot*, these massive, public rallies. The spirit of democracy is very much alive and well in Israel!

But in other moments of heartbreaking disunity, the eruptions of horrifying violence I hear Haman’s sniveling voice whispering in my ear. ‘You are but an *am m’fuzar u’meforad*...you only think you’re one people, but you’re fooling yourself. You have nothing in common with some of your fellow Jews.’

You know when I felt that? This past week, we endured the tragedy of three young Jewish men who were murdered by terrorists. A 27 year old from West Hartford, CT, a recent graduate of Columbia University who was traveling on a road in the West Bank near Jericho, on his way to attend a friend's wedding was shot by a drive-up Palestinian gunman who attacked his car. The day before, two Israeli brothers in their 20's, Hillel and Yagel Yaniv were shot and killed when they drove through Huwara, an Arab town in the West Bank. None of these kids were there to do harm to anyone. They were not there to instigate anything. They were truly 'just passing through.' And now, they are gone. This violence is horrifying, disgusting, and heart wrenching.

And so is what happened next. A horde of extremist Jewish settlers attacked the town of Huwara, setting hundreds of homes and cars and trees on fire. And in the midst of the terror and destruction, the vigilantes stopped to daven *Ma'ariv*! Wearing *kippot*, *tzitit*, *peyos* dangling behind their ears, they paused to recite the evening prayer service! It was such a distortion to see those Jews reciting the words *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah*, Magnified and sanctified is Your great name, while the town they set ablaze was burning around them. God's name was not magnified or sanctified, it was diminished and profaned by an act that is increasingly being called *within Israel* as a pogrom! A pogrom *by* Jews, not against them. A pogrom of revenge and retaliation against civilians. Jews aren't supposed to perpetrate pogroms. This was truly a low point in the nearly 75 year history of the State of Israel...a nation of laws; a civil society a highly evolved justice system, police, and military. Haman entered my consciousness: 'Look how divided and scattered you are. You only think you're united...but you couldn't be farther apart.'

On Thursday night I was invited along with a handful of other rabbis to dinner at the home of the Deputy Ambassador of Israel, an Orthodox Jew who lives right here in Potomac. He did not deny that this was pogrom, but he also claimed that mainstream Israeli society was deeply shocked, truly horrified by what happened in Huwara. "No matter how much we grieve the innocent loss of lives, we do not go on rampages of killing and destroying property," he told me. "It won't happen again. It's not the Jewish way, and it's not the Israeli way," he said earnestly. But I asked him point-blank how he could be so sure that it won't happen again. There is a growing faction within the settler movement that is willing to take the law into their own hands; who are inspired by government ministers like Betzael Smotrich who said that Huwara should

be completely leveled...only the Army should do it, not the settlers. Or Knesset members like Tzvika Foighel and Limor Son Har Melech who showed up that night in Huwara to support the vigilantes. His answer was that the IDF will be much more on top of containing the extremists. I hope he's right...but I'm not convinced.

My daughter Mia sent me this birthday gift. It's a graphic novel version of the Book of Esther. It's like a comic book, and it was created by her college roommate's father, who also did a Haggadah for Pesach in similar form. Flipping through, I noticed a picture of a fat, buffoonish looking King Ahashveirosh sitting on his throne in Shushan. Around his neck he is wearing the very same ephod, the breastplate worn by the High Priest in this morning's Torah portion. Behind him is a pile of gold on top of which is the golden menorah of the Holy Temple. Indeed the Midrash says that these holy implements were carried off into exile when the Temple was destroyed. The Midrash Esther Rabbah says "*mah zeh bevigdei kehunah gedolah af zo bevigdei kahuna gedola*," both King Achashverosh and Queen Vashti wore the sacred garments of the High Priest--a tremendous offence to Jewish sensibilities. What happens when we are not united is that we lose what is most precious to us. Whether that is actual treasure or the the sense of connection and unity among the Jewish people. Just as Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz thought that sharing gifts of food brought people together and cancelled Haman's cruel accusation, we need something today, now, to reestablish our bonds as a people. I will never cut myself off from other Jews, and I certainly will never stop supporting Israel, no matter what regime is in power. But I will join the choruses of those who repudiate extremist, ultra-nationalist behavior. I refuse to succumb to hating or demonizing an entire group of people because of the misdirected, harmful actions of some of them. And I will continue to pray that we will see the day that the megillah describes in Esther 9:22 when we will celebrate a transformation *miyagon lesimcha, u'mei-evel le'yom tov*...from grief and mourning to festive joy. That would be a true sanctification of God's great name, as well as of the memories of Elan Ganales, Hillel, and Yagel Yaniv.