

“Let’s Celebrate!”
Parashat Vayikra
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(one week before Purim)
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Which do you think people would rather do: celebrate or confess their sins?

Eat, drink, and be merry? Or fast?

Most people, you’d think, would choose the former; but maybe not Jews!

Vast numbers of Jews come out of the woodwork every year to observe Yom Kippur. Everybody knows when it is. Everyone knows what to do, namely, not eat.

But that’s not the case when it comes to the holiday that falls next Saturday night and Sunday, namely PURIM. For many people, it’s a holiday for *children*. Children dress up and have a good time. But adults may—and often do—ignore it.

In fact, Purim is a scary holiday. The story told in the Book of Esther, which we read on Purim, is frightening. There’s only one thing more frightening than a holocaust story, and that is a story about a holocaust that almost, but didn’t quite, happen; a holocaust that was avoided only, as it seems, by chance. (That’s what Purim refers to: a game of chance).

Purim is not just for children. In fact, it probably shouldn’t be for children at all.

On Purim we read, in a 2,500 year old book, a story that is remarkably contemporary. It’s the story about a Persian king, named Ahasuerus, who rules over an empire that stretches from India to Ethiopia.

There are many ethnic minorities in this empire, one of which is the Jews.



One day, the King holds a party and, well, most people know happened: his wife declines his invitation to appear. And so he banishes her – some say, he murders her. There’s a need for a new queen, and so, of course, a contest is held: who is the fairest in the land? The winner of the contest is none other than a Jewish girl named Esther or Hadassah. Why does she have two names? She has two names because, like us, she lives in two worlds: the world of the Jews and the world of everyone else.

And if that point isn’t made clear by this point in the story, it becomes clearer when Esther’s uncle (or cousin), Mordecai, tells her not to tell people in the palace that she’s Jewish. Now why would that be? Is it because if they knew she was Jewish everyone would want her autograph? No, it is because if they discover that she’s Jewish, something terrible may happen to her. And so Esther “passes” as a gentile.

This is the book in the Bible when we come face to face with the humiliation of Jewish powerlessness. It’s in this book that we realize that, until the United States came into being, at no time and at no place did Jews live as free members of their society. In every other place, in every other era, we were at best “tolerated.” We always lacked the rights of citizenship. And as such we were never at home.

Esther keeps her secret, which is fortunate, because outside of the palace, the plot thickens. The King appoints Haman as his chief assistant, and everyone bows down to him except for one person: Mordecai. So here we’re exposed to another quality of the Jews, a stubborn insistence that we don’t bow down to other human beings, only to God.

Haman becomes incredibly angry at Mordecai’s insolence. You might think that he would want to do away with Mordecai. But no, that wouldn’t be enough for him. He doesn’t just want to kill Mordecai: he wants to kill *all* of the Jews: men, women and children. It’s a horrifying prospect. What’s even more horrifying is that no one in the king’s entourage, much less the king, resists him. Haman offers to pay for the cost of killing the Jews in exchange for taking possession of their property. The deal is struck – and then, as it says, the entire city of Shushan was dumbfounded. What does that mean? It means that they didn’t know what to do. Perhaps they were opposed; perhaps they weren’t. But they did nothing about it.

I am always struck by that. Surely there were people in the city that found it offensive that the Jews were going to be killed. But no one said or did anything. What a horrifying thought. And yet it probably is not very far from the truth. After all, how often do people stick up for others, people of another ethnicity or race or national origin, when they are being mistreated? It's all too easy to dismiss the stranger from our minds and our hearts. After all, they are *different* from us, less deserving of our time and attention and caring.

And so, at this point, Mordecai realizes that if the Jews are not going to defend themselves, no one else will. He sits himself down outside the palace in sackcloth and ashes, mourning the impending doom. Esther, in the palace, learns of this, and is horrified. What horrifies her at this point is presumably that Mordecai is dressed in sackcloth and ashes. Why? Because it's *embarrassing* to her. It threatens to expose her.

This is yet a third thing we learn about Jews in this story: We Jews can be embarrassed when one of us acts "too Jewish." Esther sends clothes out to Mordecai, but he refuses to put them on. Although he had urged Esther to pass as a gentile in the palace, in the wake of the crisis, Mordecai does not want to pass. He wants to wear his Jewishness on his sleeve. He passes a message on to Esther: "*You must do something,*" he writes. "But I can't," she responds. "I can't initiate contact with the King. If I do, he might send me away or put me to death!"—which, we know from earlier in the story, he certainly knows how to do.

Mordecai responds by saying: You must help. You simply must. Don't think, he says, that you will escape the fate of the Jews by being in the palace. ***You will meet the same fate that all the rest of us will.*** And perhaps, indeed, it's for ***this very reason*** that you were selected to be queen.

With these words, he brings in a spiritual, religious dimension to their conversation. "Don't think," Mordecai is saying to her, "that things are what they seem to be. There's a dimension of reality beyond the visible." Esther must be thinking to herself: I was chosen because I was the most beautiful maiden in the kingdom. Mordecai is telling her, "No. There's *another* reason you were chosen: to save the Jewish people."

And so Esther proceeds, shrewdly, to do just that. She invites the King and Haman to a party in her chambers, and even after the king says to her that

he's so pleased with her he is willing to give her anything—even up to half his kingdom—all she requests is that he and Haman come again to another party.

And so they do. And it's at this party that, after the king invites her to tell him what she would want, Esther says to him: All I want is my life. For there is someone who has plotted to do away with me, and with my people, and it is none other than this man, Haman!

Now you'd think that at that moment Haman's fate would be sealed, that simply revealing his dastardly plot would seal his fate, but no, that isn't the case. We might think the king would act swiftly. But he doesn't. Instead, the king is dumbfounded. He doesn't know what to do. Like the city of Shushan earlier in the story, he is perplexed. He walks out of the room.

At this point, the fate of the Jews is very much up in the air. What will the king do? Will he support his prime minister, or his queen? After all, Esther is only one of the many, many women whom the king considers his consorts—but there's only one prime minister. It isn't at all clear what will occur, but then something happens to seal the deal.

While Ahasuerus is out of the room, Haman pleads with Esther to save him, and at that moment, when he is prostrating himself before her, pleading with her, the king enters the room. He thinks that Haman is trying to “ravish” Esther. His male pride kicks in, and he condemns Haman to be hanged on the gallows.

Notice how lucky we are! Esther went to such lengths to find just the right time to put her request before the king—and yet that request comes very, very close to being denied. All of her charm, all of her wiles, weren't enough to persuade the king. Had it not been for Haman's false move and exaggerated posturing, the Jews might indeed have been destroyed. (No wonder it is a custom to drink on Purim night!)

In short order, Haman and his ten sons are put to death, Mordecai is given Haman's job, and the Jews are saved from their fate. Instead of the 13th of Adar being the date on which the Jewish community of Persia comes to an end, the Jews celebrate on the 14th of Adar. And we're told how they celebrate: they feast, they bring treats to one another, and they distribute charity to the poor.

The *megillah* (the scroll of Esther), which gets a bit lengthy at this point, goes on to tell us that that's what *we* are supposed to do each year: read the *megillah*, feast, bring treats to one another and distribute charity to the poor.

Just think: We're not talking here about the 613 commandments, or even the Ten Commandments.

We're talking about only *four* commandments.

The first is reading the *megillah*, word for word. Maimonides says that even if the Temple were to be rebuilt and priests would be serving in it, they should drop what they're doing and come to hear the public reading of the *megillah*. Even scholars studying Talmud should leave their books. I think the reason for that is that this story doesn't concern *some* of us; it concerns *all* of us. Only if we read it, word for word, can we absorb the full impact of the story, and appreciate how close we came to tragedy.

The second is to feast on Purim. We're not talking about fasting; we're talking about feasting. This is traditionally done on the afternoon of Purim, but the entire day of Purim is suitable for eating and drinking. Why do we do this? It's obvious. It's an expression of relief. It is a concrete way for us to connect with the events depicted in the *megillah*.

The third is to send treats to one another. Maimonides asks: What if you have limited means? The answer, which is found in the Talmud, is that *you* send *your* treats (whatever you happen to have) to one person, and *that* person sends *you* whatever he or she has—again, emphasizing that this holiday is about *all* of us.

Finally, there's the *mitzvah* of *matanot la-eyyonim*—gifts to the poor. Maimonides teaches us that it is exceedingly praiseworthy to give to the poor on Purim. “There is no greater joy than bringing joy to the hearts of the poor and the unfortunate.” One who does so emulates the Divine Presence. (He quotes Isaiah 57:15.)

I invite you to join us next Saturday evening. We'll have a chance to perform each one of these *mitzvot*. We'll listen to the reading of the *megillah*, we'll eat and drink, we'll get the chance to watch a really fine Purim *shpiel*, and we'll get the chance to give *tsedakah*.

Most of all, we'll be together; we'll have the chance to relive the terrible tale of Purim.

Purim is about the Jewish people as a whole. It's easy to imagine, especially living in this wonderful country, that life is about our own personal happiness. Purim reminds us that we can't ever forget that we are part of a *people*; a people that has been threatened before, and may yet be threatened again. Purim reminds us that we should never forget what the Amalekites did to us, and we should always be on guard against that happening again.

Purim reminds us that our safety, our security, and our influence may one day be of value, and not only to us; they may one day be necessary to help our fellow Jews elsewhere in the world. For perhaps, the *megillah* teaches us, it's for just such a reason that we've attained our favored status.

Let's celebrate!

Happy Purim and Shabbat Shalom!