

Reflections on Purim

'The troubles of the past are forgotten...'



Purim will mark an anniversary. A year ago, in March 2020, there was an uneasy undertow to the festival; Rabbi Jeffrey Newman arrived wearing a mask and there was talk about a virus, but as we grouped together, chatting and sharing supper, we could not

begin to imagine what was about to unfold in the year ahead.

It is difficult to envisage what the next few months will bring. The news of a vaccine is promising; but how will we ever begin to repair the damage, not only to the economy, but especially to the lives and well-being of so many individuals and families who have lost loved ones, whose health has been compromised and whose livelihoods have disappeared?

Setting this year behind us will not be an easy task. Encouraging members and guests to return to the synagogue will take time, and we will need to find a way to build confidence and recreate those in-person connections that give us energy and meaning in our lives.

At the end of the section on the laws of Purim in his code of Jewish law, Maimonides, quoting the Palestinian Talmud (*jMegillah* 1:5) declares that all the books of the Prophets and the Writings will cease to be recited in public during the messianic era. The only book that will continue to exist, alongside the Five Books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral Torah, will be the Book of Esther.

'The troubles of the past are forgotten and hidden from my eyes' (Isaiah 65:16), but the days of Purim shall never be abolished, as it is written: 'These days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews

and the memory of them shall never perish among their descendants' (Esther 9:28).¹

What did the Sages mean by casting upon the Book of Esther this enduring status? At best an historical novella, with more farce and caricature than a work by Pirandello, Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not mention the divine name.

Nor can one credit Purim with forgetfulness of 'past troubles'. There is an irony in stamping out the name of Haman, while at the same time evoking the memories of all our oppressors, from Haman's forebear, Amalek, to Hitler.

Yet perhaps there is something in that verse from Isaiah that 'the troubles of the past are forgotten'. For the passage continues, 'Behold, I am creating a new heaven and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered, they shall never come to mind...' (*Isaiah* 65:17).

It is this belief in renewal and goodness that gives Judaism, in the words of Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck, its 'eternal optimism'.

If this past year has taught me anything, it is that faith is not something to be tipped away lightly. In our empty Sanctuary, in the intensity of our prayers and the sublime beauty of our music, I found different ways to seek consolation; I willingly suspended disbelief to create bonds with people whose faces I couldn't see and whose voices I couldn't hear.

May we return soon to our Sanctuary, with renewed faith in ourselves and in each other, in the common task of all humanity to realise goodness in the world, and with our faith restored and strengthened in the Source of that goodness.

¹Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillat Ester* 2:18.

Alexandra Wright

Purim 14 Adar 5781 / Erev Purim 25 February 2021