

Ki Tisa 5781 - Passover or Purim Jews

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Are you a Purim Jew or a Passover Jew? In the Jewish calendar, we find ourselves having just celebrated Purim, starting to look towards Passover, just a few weeks away, so it seems like a fair question. I'm not asking if you prefer hamantashen to gefilte fish, masks over matzah, Mordechai over Moses, or even about which holiday you might prefer. This question is really about how you view yourself in relation to the world around you. Jewish scholar Yossi Klein Halevi of the Hartman Institute describes these two types this way:

Jewish history speaks to our generation in the voice of two biblical commands to remember. The first voice commands us to remember that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and the message of that command is: Don't be brutal. The second voice commands us to remember how the tribe of Amalek attacked us without provocation while we were wandering in the desert, and the message of that command is: Don't be naive.

The first command is the voice of Passover, of liberation; the second is the voice of Purim, commemorating our victory over the genocidal threat of Haman, a descendant of Amalek. "Passover Jews" are motivated by empathy with the oppressed; "Purim Jews" are motivated by alertness to threat. Both are essential; one without the other creates an unbalanced Jewish personality, a distortion of Jewish history and values.¹

On this Shabbat, on which we recognize the experience and vulnerability of the immigrant and the refugee with HIAS, we lift up the biblical call for empathy; the repetition, over and over again throughout the Torah to "love the stranger," rooted in our own experience of slavery, of otherness, we certainly aspire to be "Passover Jews." And as "Purim Jews," we also recognize the uncertainty and fragility that exists in our world today -- we acknowledge the rising gap between the haves and have-nots, we acknowledge the systemic racism that exists in our society, we know the rising concerns of anti-Semitism. But even Purim Jews cannot always give in to fear and uncertainty.

As we approach the one-year-mark of sheltering in place, wearing masks, social distancing - one full year of pandemic living, which has so often felt like wandering with trepidation through a scary and unknown wilderness, perhaps the narrative of the Exodus rings true for us this year in new and powerful ways. This week's Torah portion, Ki Tisa, offers a cautionary tale about giving in to our darkest fears and uncertainties. It is a warning of what *not* to do when we face uncertainty. I'm talking about the story of the Golden Calf, in which the Israelites implore Aaron to construct a Golden Calf for them to worship, when they fear that Moses has either deserted them or perished. The text reads, "When the people saw that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do

¹ <https://www.hartman.org.il/pesach-jews-v-purim-jews-the-agony-of-our-dilemma/>

not know what has happened to him.”² Their actions are born out of a fear for the worst paired with a dangerous sense of impatience for moving forward, perhaps returning to their journey (which at this point may have started to feel like some sort of “normal”). There have certainly been many moments where we have dealt with our own fears and uncertainties throughout this past year. Moments when we felt alone or isolated, or unsure of what we could do to rectify a situation, felt uncertainty around our own health and safety.

Psychologist Brene Brown, in talking about grappling with uncertainty, explains,

Uncertainty makes us feel vulnerable, so we try to escape it any way we can. Sometimes we even settle for misinformation or bad news over not knowing. Have you ever ended up in an Internet rabbit hole of terror while waiting for test results? Yet it really is possible to thrive amid uncertainty. It’s not [only] about getting advice you can trust; it’s about faith and self-trust — believing that whatever happens, you’ll find a way through it. Without uncertainty, we’d never start a business or risk loving someone new. There are no guarantees when we step into the unknown. But these periods of discomfort can give rise to life’s most important adventures.³

The desire to escape their predicament in some way and a lack of self-trust were indeed two significant challenges facing the Israelites. While they knew Moses was not God, for much of their journey, he was the physical manifestation of their relationship with God. It was only through this incident with the Golden Calf that the Israelites started to realize that their relationship with God was *not* contingent upon Moses, or some physical thing, but that it could and should be something deeply personal, unique to every individual. So too, we have learned over the past year to find a balance between panic and understanding, as the science and best practices for safety have continued to evolve.

This past Wednesday night, as we marked this one year anniversary with our teens, we read this powerful prayer penned by our own past President and current URJ VP for Strengthening Congregations, Amy Asin, a “Nisim B’chol Yom (Prayer for Daily Miracles) for Coronavirus,” which was published just about a year ago as we were stepping into this year of uncertainty - here’s just a bit of it:

Praised be the Eternal God, Source of the Universe...

...who has implanted mind and instinct within every living being. Who has given us a new day where we are alive and we too can see the difference between day and night, between light and darkness, between true and false, and between appropriate concern and panic.

...who has made me a Jew or connected to the Jewish community. Who has given me the obligation, the tools and the resources to strive to act like a human being when others may be driven by fear, homophobia, racism.

² Exodus 32:1

³ From Brene Brown’s article “How to Live With Uncertainty” in the Huffington Post. Read more at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/17/brene-brown-uncertainty-power-of-vulnerability_n_4440233.html

...who has made be to be free. While my ability to be in physical community may be limited, help me see that I am still free to make choices every minute, every day.⁴

So consider tonight, if you are a Passover Jew or a Purim Jew. Or, perhaps, what is your blend between Passover -- looking at the world and our fellow humans with a deep sense of empathy and a desire to help the stranger -- and Purim -- looking for threats around every corner? May we continue to be able to find the delicate balance between empathy and caution, between compassion and uncertainty. May we carry with us a little Purim and a little more Passover.

⁴ <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/nisim-bchol-yom-prayer-daily-miracles-coronavirus>