

Laughing in the Face of Evil - March 11, 2022

A Holocaust survivor died and went to the gates of heaven. God asked him, "Why do you deserve to be here?" The man replied, "I cheered up my fellow Jews in the camp by telling them jokes." God said, "OK, tell Me a joke." So the man told him a joke. God said, "You know, I don't think Holocaust jokes are funny." The man replied, "Oh, I guess you had to be there."

This is, I think, a quintessential Jewish joke. It takes "gallows humor" to an extreme, using the ultimate tragedy of our history and finding humor in it. It suggests that the key to Jewish survival is to laugh in the face of evil. And it expresses more than a little anger at God, who has allowed such suffering to occur in our world. The joke acknowledges our powerlessness and turns it on its head, imagining that in this instance, at least, human beings, not God, get the last laugh.

The Book of Esther is an extended Jewish joke. It is silly and hyperbolic, vulgar, satirical, and ironic. Purim is often thought of as a children's holiday, but the story of Purim has dark, very adult undertones. Sex and violence are major themes in the story – this movie is not rated G.

Take, for example, the end of the story, the part we usually omit from our Purim shpiels. After Esther makes her plea to the king to save her

people and Haman is unmasked as the villain, the salvation of the Jews takes a curious form. We read, “Then King Ahashuerus said to Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew, ‘I have given Haman’s property to Esther, and he has been impaled on the stake for scheming against the Jews. And you may further write with regard to the Jews as you see fit. [Write it] in the king’s name and seal it with the king’s signet, for an edict that has been written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s signet may not be revoked’” (Esther 8:7-8). In other words, the original decree to kill all the Jews cannot be rescinded, even by the king himself. The best they can do is write a second decree, which says, “The king has permitted the Jews of every city to assemble and fight for their lives; if any people or province attacks them, they may destroy, massacre, and exterminate its armed force...” (8:11-12). Esther, Mordechai, even King Ahashuerus, none of them can save the Jews no matter how much they may want to. All they can do is empower the Jews to fight for their lives.

What follows is the part of the story that many of us find distasteful: the Jews fight back, kill 75,000 Persians, and then they throw a big party. The book gives a detailed description of how many Persians are killed on each day, and how Haman and his sons are impaled on the stake, interspersed with descriptions of the feasting and merrymaking that the

Jews engage in both before and after the fighting is over. It seems that the author of Esther, and presumably the ancient readers as well, are indulging in a revenge fantasy, gleefully imagining the Jews defeating and humiliating their enemies. The Sages enjoy the fantasy too, as we read in the midrash: “This is the miracle that the Holy One blessed be He performed, the like of which has never been performed. Was there ever in the world an event like this miracle, where Israel exacted vengeance against the nations of the world and did to their enemies as they wished?” (Esther Rabbah 10:10). In the rabbinic mind, the ability to take revenge on our enemies would be an unparalleled gift from God.

I used to cringe when I read this part of the story. I didn’t like reading about the Jews being the perpetrators of violence, and worse, enjoying taking their revenge on the Persians. I preferred to skip to the part about turning grief into joy and giving each other presents. But not this year. This year, when Mordechai issues the second decree, allowing the Jews to “assemble and fight for their lives, to destroy and kill and annihilate the enemy’s army,” I notice that the phrase in the Book of Esther for “fight for their lives” is “*la’amod al nafsham*,” literally to “stand upon,” “stand up for,” or even “stand because of” their *nefesh*. *Nefesh* often means “self” or “life,” but it can also mean “soul.” So Mordechai calls upon the Jews to gather

together and stand up for their souls, to stand up for the soul of their People. This year, when Mordechai issues that decree, I see thousands of Ukrainians fighting for the life and soul of their nation, refusing to surrender their home to a petty tyrant. I call to mind the interviews with Ukrainian brewery owners who, with angry determination but also a gleeful glint in their eyes, are now making Molotov cocktails instead of beer. I picture the people's protest signs that tell Putin exactly what they think of him, often in colorful language. And I hear President Volodymyr Zelensky, who refused to be evacuated to safety, quoting Winston Churchill to the British Parliament this week: "We will fight till the end at sea. In the air. We will continue fighting for our land whatever the cost. We will fight in the forests, in the fields, on the shores, in the streets."¹ We can't help but cheer for them and hope for their success. And if some of us were to indulge in a fantasy about Vladimir Putin getting exactly what he deserves, I think we'd be forgiven.

Like the joke I began with, the Book of Esther has an undercurrent of anger. The Jews who wrote it and the Jews who read it know that in the end, it is only a fantasy. In real life, goodness doesn't always prevail; often, the bad guy wins. And that fact is sometimes just unbearable. However the

¹<https://www.nationalworld.com/news/world/volodymyr-zelensky-speech-to-house-of-commons-full-transcript-of-ukrainian-leaders-address-to-british-mps-3602710>

war ends in Ukraine, this needless and cruel invasion has already brought unfathomable devastation and destruction to millions of innocent people. Anger and grief are entirely reasonable responses to such evil. The key is to find ways to express our anger and grief that will bring about transformation and repair, rather than more destruction.

In the book *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice*, a group of Black activist pastors describe their work this way: “Anger sits precariously between two dangerous extremes. One extreme is hatred, the breeding ground of violence. The other extreme is passivity and apathy, the breeding ground of despair and living death. Anger that is focused and deep and rooted in grief is a key element in the organizing of black churches.”² Our anger, focused and deep and rooted in grief, can energize us and motivate us to act.

I don't think I need to tell you how we can act in support of Ukraine, but just in case, here it is: pray for peace for Ukraine, as we have done tonight and will continue to do; donate to this month's tzedakah, which will provide Ukrainians with lifesaving food, medicine, and shelter; learn more about our sister congregations in Poltava and Odessa and hear reports from their leadership about what they're currently going through; participate

² *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action and Justice*, Edward T. Chambers, p. 108

in Beth Am Women and Beth Am's Poltava/Odessa Committee's solidarity project by sending in photos and messages of support for Ukraine; and be in touch with your congresspeople to encourage them to do everything they can to support Ukraine and its refugees. You can find information on all of these actions on the Beth Am website.

There's one more thing we can do to channel our anger and grief during these dark days: we can celebrate Purim. We can read the Book of Esther without shying away from the angry or troubling parts, but maybe even revel in them. Instead of denying the tragedy that is currently unfolding, we can face it, and do what our tradition teaches us to do: we can mourn and we can protest, we can act in solidarity and support. And we can also laugh. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us, "The Jewish response to trauma is counterintuitive and extraordinary. You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration. You prepare a festive meal, invite guests, give gifts to friends. While the story is being told, you make a rumbustious noise... to make a joke out of the whole episode. You wear masks. You drink a little too much. You make a Purim spiel. Precisely because the threat [is] so serious, you refuse to be serious – and in that refusal you are doing something very serious indeed. You are denying your enemies a victory. You are declaring that *you will not be intimidated*. As the

date of the scheduled destruction approaches, you surround yourself with the single most effective antidote to fear: joy in life itself.³ Let the people of Ukraine, who are facing actual mortal danger, and doing so with grace and courage and maybe even some humor, be our models on this Purim.

My favorite verse from the Book of Esther is when Mordechai is trying to convince Esther to risk her life and plead for her people before the king. He says,

”וַיְמִי יוֹדַע אֶם-לֵעֵת כִּזְאֵת הִגַּעַתְּ לַמְּלָכוֹת:

Who knows if you attained your royal position for a moment just like this?” (4:14). In a biblical story that famously doesn’t mention God, Mordechai suggests just a hint of divine providence: what if it has always been this beautiful, brave, smart, Jewish woman’s destiny to become queen of Shushan and save her people because she is exactly the right person to do the job? I don’t know about divine providence, but I’ll just say this: Who knows? Maybe President Zelensky, a Jewish comedian, has attained his position for just this moment, because he is exactly the right person to do the job. We can only hope.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach.

³ <https://rabbisacks.org/therapeutic-joy-purim-purim-5775/>

