

My friends, it's time to party. "But, Rabbi, I'm too tired to party!" you say. I know you're tired -- tired of working from home or staying home, tired of not being able to see or hug loved ones or tired of seeing the family members you live with, tired of worrying, tired of it all. But Purim is coming and so we have no choice: we are obligated to party. In a safe, socially responsible way, of course.

Since we missed Purim last year, here's just a little refresher: Our celebrations generally focus on the reading of the Megillah, the Book of Esther, and the acting out of the story. I won't tell you the whole megillah here, but suffice it to say that the story is about good triumphing over evil. Also, there are lots of parties. Esther is probably one of the strangest books to be included in the Tanakh. There is no mention of God, no mention of Jewish practices like prayer or keeping kosher, no reference to mitzvot or Torah, and no real historical facts. The people are barely developed character types: the buffoonish king, the arrogant villain, the beautiful queen, the wise uncle. The end of the story, when the Jews go out and kill thousands of Persians, is a morally questionable revenge fantasy. But most of all, the book is funny, funnier than any other story in the Bible. As Adele Berlin explains, "The raucous Persian court, with its lavish display of luxury and its pervasive drinking parties, is not the setting we expect for the

impending annihilation of the Jewish people. The plot glories in revelry and bawdiness.... The frivolity of the book's style--with its hyperbole, mockery, and comic misunderstandings and reversals--undercuts the gravity of its theme.... The tone of the book fits its purpose: a comic story for a carnivalesque holiday."<sup>1</sup> As Berlin argues, the reason the Book of Esther was written and the reason it was included in the biblical canon was to explain and legitimize the celebration of Purim.<sup>2</sup> In this case, the play (or the story) is not the thing -- the party is the thing. That is why even when the rabbis of the Talmud questioned whether Esther belonged in the Bible, whether it should be considered sacred scripture, they had to conclude, albeit begrudgingly, that it must remain in the canon. The end of the Book of Esther declares, "These days of Purim shall never be repealed among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never cease from their descendants" (Esther 9:28). The story must be read because the celebration must go on. Maimonides, the great medieval philosopher and scholar, goes one step further, declaring, "All Prophetic Books and the Sacred Writings will cease [to be recited in public] during the messianic era except the Book of Esther... Although ancient troubles will be remembered

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<sup>1</sup> *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, xvi

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, xv

no longer... the days of Purim will not be abolished.”<sup>3</sup> So Purim must go on, not only in this age, but even when the Messiah comes!

The question, of course, is why. Why is it so important for Purim, a festival that isn't commanded in the Torah, a holiday that celebrates frivolity and irreverence, to continue to be celebrated?

One answer comes from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory. In reflecting on why we are commanded to increase our joy through the whole month of Adar, the month we're in right now, he writes:

“It seems to me ...that the *simcha* we celebrate throughout the month of Adar is different from the normal joy we feel when something good and positive has happened to us or our people. That is *expressive* joy. The *simcha* of Adar, by contrast, is *therapeutic* joy. Imagine what it is to be part of a people that had once heard the command issued against them: “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day” ([Est. 3:13](#)). We who live after the Holocaust... know the answer to that question. On Purim the Final Solution was averted. But it had been pronounced. Ever afterward, Jews knew their vulnerability. The very existence of Purim in our historical memory is traumatic.

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<sup>3</sup> Mishneh Torah, Megillat Esther and Chanukah 2:18

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 was 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.<sup>4</sup>

We need some therapeutic joy right now. Yes, there is a light at the end of this tunnel, as virus cases decrease and vaccinations are administered, but we are still dealing with the emotional toll this pandemic has taken on all of us. Many of us have been working on ways to experience happiness, or at least contentment, during this challenging time. Yoga, meditation, exercise, being in nature, calling friends and family regularly, baking, tuning in to Beth Am services, giving to those who are in need, the list goes on and on.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/therapeutic-joy-purim-purim-5775/>

There are lots of ways to find happiness and meaning right now. But Purim recommends to us a specific kind of joy: the joy of humor, the joy of silliness, and especially the joy of making fun of ourselves.

Most of the time we want to present ourselves in the best possible light -- we want to seem dignified or cool or put together. So there is certainly something a little scary about making fools of ourselves, of exposing or even highlighting our imperfections, inviting others to laugh with us and, we hope, not just at us. Purim gives us tools to develop our silliness muscles. So we're told to wear masks and costumes, to help us try on another identity, to shed some of our self-regard. We're commanded to drink more than usual, for we know that alcohol can lower inhibitions and increase feelings of happiness. We're encouraged to be loud and boisterous during the reading of the Megillah rather than quietly and respectfully listening, as we would when someone was chanting Torah. And we're supposed to make fun of everything we usually hold in high esteem: our Jewish tradition and especially here at Beth Am, our beloved and normally extremely dignified rabbis and cantor. The truth is, by laughing at ourselves and the things we hold dear, we test our sturdiness. By exposing our vulnerability and our humility, we reveal our strength.

So I invite you to lean in to Purim this year, even if, or especially if, it's normally not your thing. We desperately need some fun and laughter, and we can increase our joy even more when we share it with one another. So hand out out those *mishloach manot* (goodie bags), give tzedakah to the poor, have a delicious meal even if it's dinner for one, put on a costume even if it's just to parade around your living room, and join us for Beth Am's adult Purim celebration on Thursday at 7:30 PM, via Zoom, of course. As the Book of Esther says, "Lay'hudim hayita orah v'simcha v'sasson vikar. And the Jews enjoyed light and joy, happiness and honor" (8:16). May we too enjoy light and joy, happiness and honor on this Purim. Chag Purim Sameach and Shabbat Shalom.