

Towards the Construction of a Compassionate Society: A Contemporary Message for Purim

If I was to ask most people to identify the villain of the story of Purim, they would exclaim “Haman”, and of course, they would be correct. Who else tried to destroy every Jewish man, woman and child? Who else was driven by a single-minded purpose- to see Mordechai hang from the gallows?

However, I would submit that in between the lines of the *megilah*, the Book of Esther, we find another troubling figure. Achashverosh, the king of our story, while often perceived as a drunkard and a fool, is far more threatening. Achashverosh’s values are in fact absolutely inimical to the values of the True King that seems absent throughout this book. With the eclipse of the Kingdom of God, we are presented with the Kingdom of Achashverosh.

Achashversoh- A Man of Appetites

The opening chapter, which is often seen as a prologue, plays a critical role in the story. The book opens with an elaborate feast lasting for an entire 180 days throughout the kingdom, with an additional seven days of celebration in the city of Shushan. Throughout these celebrations, nothing was to be withheld; there was to be eating and drinking without end. The palace was decorated with tapestries of gold, blue wool, even couches of gold and silver on pavement of marble. The *megilah* explicitly tells us the reason for all this fanfare- to display his wealth and power. The entire feast had one intention only, to secure his power through indulging the masses in public displays of conspicuous consumption. In fact, the rabbis compare King Achashverosh to a ravenous bear whose desires cannot be fulfilled. It is therefore no surprise that on the last day the king calls for his queen, Vashti, to parade before the masses with her crown to display her beauty. According to Jewish tradition, she was commanded to parade with *only* her crown! The appetite for consumption knows no boundaries, and readily flows from the gastronomic to the erotic.

Nothing could be more antithetical to a Jewish society than a community that glorifies itself not through what it does, but through what it consumes. Unlike our society, the kingdom of Achashverosh is not maintained through values, mores, or laws, but simply through displays of power and wealth. Saddest of all, the rabbis tell us that the Jewish people were active participants in this orgy, even drinking from golden vessels once used in the Temple of Jerusalem (BT Megilah 12.).

Haman: the Thirst for Power

Yet, despite the display of wealth and power, in actuality his kingdom teeters on the brink of collapse. His claims to power becomes challenged by people within his own court who try to assassinate him (*Bigtan* and *Teresh*), and far from secure, the king suffers from night terrors (ch.6) and is even afraid of unannounced guests in his court- including his own wife Esther! His lavish parties are in fact a pathetic attempt to ‘buy’ loyalty, because without law, order or justice there is only the law of strong and the weak. It is the

king's insecurity which Haman manipulates to wage his war against the Jews, a people whose 'ways are different and do not accept the laws of the king'. In other words, Haman accuses them of insurrection. In reality however, Haman has his own not-so-subconscious ambitions to absolute power. Just consider Haman's advice to the king. Achashverosh asks Haman how to honor "one who the king desires to honor" (6:6). Haman assumes that the king wants to honor him, and advises that he should be paraded through the street wearing royal garb, the king's crown, and the royal horse. Only one who desires to be king himself would give such advice. When a society is built upon a lust for wealth and power as opposed to ethics and justice, there will always be a competition for power and the control of human, political and material resources; there will always be a Haman.

Haman's fury at the Jewish people was rooted in Mordechai's refusal to bow down to him. But what does this refusal mean? Ultimately, Mordechai refused to submit to an absolute human authority and subject himself to tyranny. Haman understood the political significance of this act. For Haman there were two classes of people- the rulers and the ruled, the strong and the weak, and the powerful and the powerless. The Jewish people, on the other hand, see all of society as servants of God in the pursuit of the Right and the Good. Mordechai only bows before God.

The Purim Festival: the Jewish Response to Achashverosh and Haman

In the end of the story, we are saved from certain destruction. It is only natural to celebrate. Ironically however, the rabbis chose the medium of a lavish feast to celebrate the salvation. Consumption, including the imbibing of wine, is the rule of the day. Frivolity and levity dominate. The holiday culminates with a large feast. *This very much looks like the grand feast of Achashverosh!* Why would the rabbis model the holiday upon the very thing they were rejecting?

On a deeper level however, the Purim feast is a *tikkun* ('a fixing') for the feast of Achashverosh. It is not a feast of conspicuous consumption, but quite the opposite. It is a feast of sharing and community.

Besides the festive meal and the reading of the *megilah*, there are two other rabbinic *mitzvot* of the day- *mishloach manot* (food gifts to friends) and *matanot la'evyonim* (gifts to the poor). In both of these *mitzvot* we are commanded to give rather than consume. But the teaching goes deeper than this.

We generally give hamentashen and candies for *mishloach manot*, but the real purpose of this gift-giving was to provide food for our friend's Purim feast. If so, *each of our meals are interconnected*, as we are eating the food of another; it is as if we all eat together from the same *communal* table. Far from celebrating our own wealth, we are partaking in the generosity of another. In turn we share what we have with another in an endless cycle of giving and receiving.

Even more important are *Matanot La'Evyonim*, gifts to the poor. In giving to those who are the most vulnerable, we recognize our connection. We realize that we cannot

celebrate until our brethren can celebrate as well. Maimonides tells us that one should spend more money in giving to the poor than on the festive meal and the *mishloach manot* (food gifts), because “there is no greater happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. One who gladdens the heart of the unfortunate walks in the way of the Divine, who ‘revives the spirit of the lowly and oppressed’ “(Isaiah 57:15. *Hilkhos Megilah V’Chanukah*, 2:17). Giving to the poor, the weakest part of our community is a response to **Haman’s** idolatrous values **that** glorified the strong and the powerful. We, as servants of God, are enjoined to build a community in which no one is neglected, no one is ignored. This was- and continues to be- the secret of our strength, and the key to Jewish survival.

We all know that we are living through very difficult times. While we might be tempted to turn inward, this is not the Jewish way. Our celebrations must remember the weakest and those who lack, and to exhibit the spirit of giving and sharing. As we celebrate today, I urge all of us to consider these messages of Purim, and the Jewish response thousands of years ago. If we do this, we will truly deserve to be called a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Freiliche Purim- Happy Purim