

Parshat Tezaveh-Erev Purim
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Tonight, is Purim!

Tonight, we begin our celebration of Purim, we will dress in costumes, parade around the sanctuary, read the *Megillah* as Jews have done for thousands of years. And because we read *Megilat Esther* and the story of the Jews of Shushan over and over, year after year, I suspect it is safe to say that most of us are familiar with the details of this relatively simple story – no?

So, I would like to begin this morning with some very easy questions – and perhaps demonstrate that this “simple” story may in fact not be so simple after all.

Easy question #1 – Who is the hero of the Purim story? Mordechai or Esther

Easy question #2 – arguably even easier than question #1: Who is the villain of the Purim story? Haman?

Well, I would like to argue that maybe – just maybe the real villain of this story is not Haman, but King Ahashverosh.

Don't get me wrong - -Haman is a pretty bad guy. After all he wanted to kill all the Jews. We have known plenty of Haman types in our long history as a people. And make no doubt about it – Haman is alive and well in 2017. Today he may boast a shaved head and have a swastika on his arm, he may carry a membership card in the Aryan Nation, he may be a member of Hamas, or call himself a skinhead, or Ku Klux Klan - -but Hamans today, like long ago, are easy to spot. They give themselves away by their hateful language and destructive deeds. Haman calls in bomb threats to JCC's and Jewish Day Schools. Haman turns over headstones at Jewish cemeteries. Haman is not afraid to be known as a Jew hater – in fact he is proud of it and wears his hatred as a badge of honor.

And if there is anything we Jews have learned in our long and sometimes challenging history – it is how to deal with the Haman's of the world. You can't reason with Haman. You can't negotiate with Haman – the only thing you can do with a Haman is defeat him, destroy him before he destroys you. Sadly, there is such a thing as hatred. And hatred is like a cancer – and the only thing you can do with a cancer is to destroy it before it destroys you.

There was a wonderful movie this year called “Denial” which told the story of Professor Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University and her confrontation with holocaust denier David Irving. It is a forceful example of who we are as Jews today – strong and proud, not afraid to face those who hate us and defeat them by any means required. The truth being our best weapon.

No I am not afraid of Haman. We Jews are proud and strong and we can handle the Hamans who are out to destroy us. Make no mistake – it requires vigilance and determination but it is not hard to recognize our enemies and not difficult to know how to defeat them.

No, the real villain of the Purim story, the guy who really frightens me is Ahashverosh - - that happy go lucky king who we are more likely to laugh at than fear. He is the one who worries me. He is the one we should all be afraid of because he is the most dangerous villain in the *Megillah* precisely because he doesn't hate us or anyone else. In fact, in his defense Ahashverosh could proudly proclaim that some of his best friends are Jews – after all didn't he welcome Mordechai into the palace and even honor him for his heroic deeds? Ahashverosh would tell us that he married a Jewish woman and therefore his children were actually Jews! So how could he be an anti-Semite?

So why do I consider Ahashverosh the true villain of the Purim story? Because he was willing to sell us down the river, we Jews who were a significant segment of his own Persian people, and he did it for an extra ten thousand talents in his bank account. Ahashverosh is dangerous *because* he does not hate anyone – nor does he *love* anyone – he has only one guiding principle in life – his own welfare. Everything is measured by what is good or bad for him. He values money above life and he is willing to sell his allegiance to the highest bidder. And because the Ahashverosh's of the world do not in fact hate us – they are much harder to detect than the Hamans – but without them the Hamans would not stand a chance. It is the Ahashverosh's of the world who make the Haman's of the world possible.

I would humbly suggest to you today that we Jews, the Jews of 2017 have two problems that threaten our welfare and our well-being, and both are illuminated by this ancient and not so simple story we will read tonight in *Megilat Esther*. I will call these two problems the Ahashverosh Challenge and the Haman/Mordechai Challenge. And unless and until we recognize and confront them – we are in for a long and difficult few years.

First the Haman/Mordechai Challenge.

One of the most fascinating customs surrounding Purim is the expectation that at some point in our celebration we will reach a state where we can no longer distinguish between *Baruch Mordechai v'arur Haman* - between Blessed Mordechai and Cursed Haman. In our tradition, Mordechai and Haman came to represent the opposite ends of the spectrum. Haman comes to represent evil personified and Mordechai the source of all blessing and goodness. And Purim comes to represent the battleground between the two - between good and evil and how best to deal with them. Purim demands a clear distinction between good and evil - it demands that we curse Haman and bless Mordechai. Purim demands a clear and unequivocal distinction between good and evil. The inability to distinguish between them is considered the ultimate failure for a Jew.

We now seem to occupy a time and place where determining good and evil and distinguishing between them has become nearly impossible. What Purim described as a

state only achieved by total intoxication – seems to be our reality every day. Recent surveys reveal an America that is split on almost every major issue. What Blue America thinks is good and necessary, Red America thinks is evil and needs to be eliminated. What Red America thinks is good and necessary, Blue America thinks is evil and needs to be eliminated. Are the news media good or evil? Half of our country thinks one thing, the other half another. Is our President doing a good job? Half think he is our salvation, half think he is our destruction. And on and on it goes. We have reached the point where we can no longer distinguish between blessed Mordechai and Cursed Haman.

In our celebration of Purim, one reaches a state of intoxication where you are so inebriated you can no longer distinguish between blessed Mordechai and cursed Haman. Today we seem to have managed that feat while we are stone cold sober. OK – so a Jew, once a year would get so drunk he could not even distinguish between cursed Haman and blessed Mordechai. But no worry, in a few hours the poor celebrant would sober up and while no doubt struggling with a headache, once again know right from wrong – what are we to do? We are already sober – and yet, we cannot agree on the most basic features of what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. And it is precisely our Haman/Mordechai problem – our inability to determine right from wrong, that makes the Ahasverosh's of the world possible. But good news, I believe that *Megilat Esther* and the Purim story not only contains an amazing picture of our dilemma today, but holds within it the solution to that dilemma as well.

What do Haman and Ahasversoh have in common? They do not care about the welfare of others – they are certainly not concerned for the welfare of their own people. Haman actively seeks to annihilate a portion of the citizenry of Shushan – the Jews and Ahasverosh is willing to go along if he gets paid and personally benefits from it. But neither of them care a whit about those who will pay the price of their machinations.

What do Mordechai and Esther have in common? What Mordechai and Esther have in common is precisely the opposite from Haman and Ahashverosh. They do care about others and they are willing to make incredible sacrifices for the welfare of their people. As it says in the Megillah: *Mordechai doreysh tov l'amo* – Mordechai fought for the welfare, sought the good, of his people.

What is the climax of the Purim story? Interestingly it is not when Haman is exposed and the Jews are saved. No it actually comes before that. It is that moment when Esther has to decide if she will go and plead for her people before the king. She understands the gravity of what she is about to do. She is living the good life – she is in the palace – whatever will happen to her people will not touch her – she is safe, should she jeopardize her own safety for the welfare of others? Mordechai understands the drama of the moment and underscores it with his famous statement to Esther: *Mi yodea im l'yet k'zot higata l'malchut* – who knows, maybe it was precisely for this moment that you were destined to be where you are... Silence. The whole story hinges on this one decision. The tension is palpable. What will Esther choose? Is she one of *them*? Only concerned about her own happiness her own welfare, her own pleasure – or is she one of us – a Jew, concerned with the welfare of her fellow Jews; concerned with their

security and their safety? And then she speaks – “I will go to the king, I will plead for my people – and if I perish, then I will perish!”

The central question of the Purim story is: what kind of a person are you? What kind of a people are we? Are you someone who cares only for your own welfare and your own success? Or are you someone who cares for the welfare and security of others who are not as secure as you? What kind of a people are we? Are we concerned only with our own kind – or can we feel the needs of those less fortunate?

Isn't it interesting what the rabbis made the key *mitzvot* of Purim. On the one hand they seem to have nothing to do with the holiday or with the Purim story – but if you think about it they have everything to do with what I have been speaking about today. What are the two key *mitzvot* of Purim – in addition to reading the Megillah?

Mishloach manot and *Matanot L'evyonim*. We send food gifts to our neighbors and we give money to the poor. What on earth has that got to do with anything in the Purim story? That was the way the Jews of Shushan celebrated their salvation and I believe the rabbis of old were trying to teach us precisely what I have been trying to teach this morning. The thing that made them Jews, that made Mordechai and Esther Jews, the thing that makes us Jews is that we care, we care for others. Those food gifts and donations to the poor – they are a real-time demonstration of the essential message of this remarkable holiday – to be a Jew means to care.

The Jews of Shushan knew how to curse evil – and thus they survived. They survived because they were willing to confront the evil of their day – I hope we will do the same. But the Jews of Shushan ultimately survived not only because they knew how to curse – but they knew how to bless as well – they knew how to be a blessing in an evil world. Have we learned their lessons?

Tonight we celebrate Purim. We will joyously read the Megillah – we will curse Haman and cheer for Mordechai and Esther. And tomorrow when you deliver your *Mishloach Manot* and make your contributions for the poor – remember that what you are really doing is showing that you are a Jew who cares – that you are demonstrating that you remember what it means to be a Jew.