



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

PURIM 2024

Queen Esther, a Hero for Our Time

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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A perplexing paradox lies at the heart of Purim, the holiday celebrated this week by Jews around the world. No day is more associated with Jewish joy; yet rightly understood the scriptural source of our celebration—the biblical book of Esther—proclaims a terrifying teaching.

Let us briefly review the plot. The Persian king Ahasuerus—the character in the Bible most akin to Henry VIII—is overcome by drunken rage and rids himself of his wife. In a contest eerily akin to reality shows today, he conducts a search for a new queen, ultimately choosing a beautiful Jewish woman named Esther, who is advised by her cousin Mordecai not to disclose her religious identity. Haman, the high-ranking minister to Ahasuerus, convinces the king to decree a genocide of the Jews. Urged into action by her cousin, Esther plays on the king's paranoia, engaging in court intrigue to turn him against Haman, who is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. At Esther's initiative, and with Ahasuerus' encouragement, Jews across the empire wage war against Haman's allies, and Mordecai is given the political position once held by Haman. The central ritual of Purim is the reading of this biblical book aloud in synagogue as a celebration of Jewish salvation and the defeat of anti-Semitism.

Yet as the final words are read, and joyous song erupts in the sanctuary, the careful reader realizes that the security of Persian Jewry, and of Mordecai and Esther, is anything other than assured, and that even the swift nature of Haman's fall is a reflection of terrifying political instability. In such a society, with such an unbalanced and capricious king, could not another Haman easily arise?

The disquieting conclusion of Esther's tale was eloquently described by my great-uncle, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. "If a

prime minister who just yesterday enjoyed the full confidence and trust of the king was suddenly convicted and executed," he reflected, "then who is wise and clairvoyant enough to assure us that the same unreasonable, absurd, neurotic change of mood and mind will not repeat itself?" The Purim tale reminds us that a government, and the society it oversees, can turn against its most vulnerable in a matter of moments. This is why, he argued, Esther's story is no triumphal tale; on the contrary, it is "the book of the vulnerability of man in general and specifically of the vulnerability of the Jew."

That it was Rabbi Soloveitchik who understood this isn't a coincidence. As a young man in the 1920s, he had traveled from Eastern Europe to study philosophy in the University of Berlin. The city was then a center of Jewish intellectual and cultural achievement; Rabbi Soloveitchik would have met coreligionists who saw themselves as both German and Jewish, who had served the kaiser in the First World War and were patriotically committed to their country's future. They would have spoken of the Enlightenment, and progress, and religious acceptance in their society. Then that very same society embraced a Haman-figure, and the lives Jews knew in Europe disappeared forever. Small wonder, then, that a rabbi who escaped this inferno would recognize the frightening implications of Jewish vulnerability inherent in Esther's tale.

Why, then, is Purim marked as a holiday? If the conclusion of Esther is more nerve-racking than is often thought, what is the source of our joy? The answer, in part, is that it is this very vulnerability that makes Jewish heroism possible, and that is why, on Purim, we focus on the woman that gave this biblical book her name: it is Esther whom we celebrate. Precisely because of the constancy of Jewish vulnerability, we glorify Esther's initiative, courage, and wisdom to inculcate these same virtues in our posterity.

Here we must understand how different the Book of Esther is from every other book in the Hebrew Bible. In this tale no mention is made of the divine; the Jews inhabit a world devoid of revelation. Whereas in every other scriptural tale political engagements are under prophetic instruction, in the Persian court God gives no guidance to the Jews facing a terrible danger. Esther, Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, faced an unprecedented question: “How can the Jew triumph over his adversaries and enemies if God has stopped speaking to him, if the cryptic messages he receives remain unintelligible and incomprehensible?”

In this sense, Esther is the first biblical figure, male or female, to engage in *statesmanship*. Previous heroes—Moses and Elijah, Samuel and Deborah—are prophets who are guided and guarded by the Divine, but Esther operates on instinct, reflecting a mastery of *realpolitik*. As Isaiah Berlin wrote in his essay “On Political Judgment,” great leaders practice affairs of state not as a science but an art; they are, more akin to orchestra conductors

than chemists. Facing a crisis, they “grasp the unique combination of characteristics that constitute this particular situation—this and no other.” Esther is the first scriptural figure to embody this description, emerging as a woman for all seasons, a hero celebrated year after year.

Purim thus marks the fragility of Jewish security, but also the possibility of heroism in the face of this vulnerability. It is therefore a holiday for our time. Around the world, and especially in a Europe that should know better, anti-Semitism has made itself manifest once again. As Esther’s example is celebrated, and Jews gather in synagogue to study her terrifying tale, we are reminded why, in the face of hate, we remain vigilant—and why we continue to joyously celebrate all the same.

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The Joy of Purim—Alcohol Not Included

BY RABBI DR. STUART HALPERN

This article was first published in Tablet on March 2nd, 2023.

I’m a grape-juice-at-the-Seder kind of guy. It’s because alcohol—the taste, the temptation of shedding inhibitions, and the loosening of logic—is just not my thing. I’m not moved by Manischewitz, I sipped my first (and last) beer in my late 20s, and never felt the siren song of schnapps beckoning me from the white disposable tablecloth-bedecked kiddush in shul. Relying on modern-day rabbinic opinions that the four cups of redemption can be brought to you by Kedem, I’ve been able to picture myself as if I left Egypt without being enslaved by the choice of red or white.

So I’ve always had a particularly hard time imbibing on Purim.

“One must drink on Purim until that person cannot distinguish between cursing Haman and blessing Mordechai,” the Talmud instructs in Tractate Megillah. Alas, the years of experience I’ve accrued downing the same drinks as my three young children have led me to believe the road to joyfully confused inebriation on the 14th of Adar is ruefully closed to me, even if I topped things off with a glass of *sparkling* grape juice. Some years I’ve tried to sneak in a nap relying on the rabbinic suggestion of this lie-down-for-a-few-minutes loophole, since while you’re dozing, you can’t differentiate between the Purim story’s hero and villain. Other years, I’ve comforted myself with the thought (hope?) that the intention behind the rabbinic edict can be found by finding unabashed bliss amid the holiday’s carnivalesque climate, bouncing between homes after Megillah reading with little Luke, Leia, and Boba Fett in tow, handing out *mishloach manot*, giving charity to the poor, and chowing down on the festive meal with family and friends.

The concoction of intoxication and elation, spirits and scrolls, delirium and danger and ultimately delight is, after all, the maze through which the ancient Jews of Shushan navigated. “When Adar enters, joy increases,” the rabbis stated in another part of the Talmud, an adage about which one could not distinguish whether they were being prescriptive or descriptive. That is because the story of Esther offers—amid its poured glasses, politics of power, beauty contests, and military clashes—a perspective on joy that predates today’s pundits by millennia.

The actual word for joy, *simcha*, appears eight times in the Megillah’s 10 chapters. Its first occurrence is hardly an auspicious one and is rather unexpected. In a tale in which to this point numerous parties have been proffered, a new queen has been found, an assassination attempt foiled, and a plot hatched by Haman to dispose not only of his enemy Mordechai and all his fellow Jews, no one is yet described as being happy. It is only in the book’s fifth chapter, after Esther works up the courage to enter Ahasuerus’ throne room and invites Haman and the king to a feast, and then to a second feast, that the reader even catches the possibility of joy, but even then, only aspirationally. Zeresh, Haman’s wife, offers a suggestion to her bummed-out husband, whose hyperexclusive series of invitations into the king and queen’s private dining room is not enough of an ego boost as long as that pesky Mordechai is refusing to bow down to him. “Build gallows 50 cubits high,” she suggests. “And tomorrow morning, recommend to the king that Mordechai be hung on them.” This way, she says, “you will go to the next feast with the king *joyfully*.”

Offering the possibility of peace of mind, victory, and even joy through the murder of his personal foil, Haman and his family undoubtedly spent the evening celebrating like any good



Shushanite, offering toasts as they hammered the gallows up high.

One royally disturbed night of sleep later, and Mordechai ends up ceremoniously paraded through the streets instead of pulverized by Haman. And when Esther reveals both her hidden Jewish identity and Haman's plot to destroy her people to an enraged King Ahasuerus, Haman and his lot end up being the ones hanging from the gallows.

And it is then that joy in the book is made manifest—and multiplies, appearing seven times in the book's closing three chapters.

“And Mordechai went from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan shouted and was *joyful*.”

Letting loose not because of libations but because their very lives had been liberated, the Jews of Shushan, and in fact all the city's inhabitants, are unabashedly happy. Celebrating their salvation, the Jews enjoy “light and joy, happiness, and honor.” Through a series of proclamations ensuring the commemoration of the salvation that had been achieved, the 14th of Adar is declared a “day of feasting and joy.” So is the 15th of the month for the Jews of Shushan.

The joy enshrined in Purim's practices, the call to cultivate that original outpouring of happiness, couldn't be more different from that which Zeresh attempted to offer her pouting husband. It is a joy emerging not out of the need to destroy difference but rather of the possibility of delighting in diversity. “Observe the 14th day of the month of Adar,” the Megillah instructs, “and make it a day of joy and feasting, and as a holiday and an occasion for sending gifts to one another.” The same month during which the Jews had faced destruction at Haman's hands “turned from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy.”

Sending gifts to one another, and charity to the poor, were the ways to observe these “days of feasting and merrymaking.” Sure, drinking will make an appearance at the feasts, but the ethos is less bartending than brotherhood.

In 2020, a team of international scholars set out to uncover the formula for joy. Distilling the findings of these “distinguished and prolific academic experts on the science of happiness” in a 2022 article for *The Atlantic*, former think-tank president turned Harvard social scientist Arthur Brooks listed ways to get happier that “work and are workable.” And they will come as little surprise to those who have ever felt even a little bit sloshed in celebration of Shushan's salvation.

“Invest in friends and family” was the first recommendation—say, by hosting them for a *seudah*, for example.

“Join a club”—because it fosters a sense of belonging and protects against loneliness. You can't do much better than delivering *mishloach manot* to welcome new neighbors, reconnect with old friends, and foster a sense of communal solidarity.

“Be physically active.” Anyone who's ever climbed in and out of a minivan with young kids in tow for half a day while balancing cardboard boxes stacked with *mishloach manot* can most definitely skip “leg day” at the gym.

“Practice your religion.” As spiritual experiences go, it's kind of hard to top a wall-rattling, grogger-spinning Megillah reading.

“Act nicely” and “be generous”—say, by giving funds and food to those less fortunate.

“Don't leave your happiness up to chance,” Brooks concludes. Make sure you proactively cultivate it and “share it with others.”

Mordechai and Esther and our wise ancient rabbis understood what today's credentialed elite only now discovered.

“The Jewish response to trauma is counterintuitive and extraordinary,” wrote Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in an essay titled “The Therapeutic Joy of Purim.” “You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration. You prepare a festive meal, invite guests, give gifts to friends.”

What was true in ancient Shushan remains timeless. True joy can be found not in elite invitations to exclusive soirees but in the “my roommate's best friend is visiting for the day—can she pop by ... and also bring a friend ... and can that friend bring a friend?” *balagan* that is de rigueur at Purim *seudahs*. Deeply felt smiles emerge not from accumulating power but from spotting Spider Man praying at the Western Wall and clown cars blasting “*mi she, mi she, mi she, mi she nichnas Adar*” down Broadway. Serenity is achieved not through dunking on, let alone hanging, our enemies, but through delivering smiles, sustenance, and sure, some spirits, to both those less fortunate and those more familiar—all while carrying your 5-year-old's plastic light saber. Adar's monthlong merrymaking, and Purim's mix of generosity, spirituality, community, and connection offer a cocktail of joy ... even to Purim prudes like me.

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