

Purim Paradoxes

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On Sunday, and again on Tuesday night, we shall gather to celebrate Purim, the happiest of Jewish holidays. The holiday is a favorite for children, replete with costumes and carnival. Joy has told me that her favorite part is screaming as loud as she can to drown out the name of the wicked Haman, whose unsuccessful plot to slaughter the entire Jewish people gives rise to the holiday. Adults often celebrate Purim with even greater abandon than the kids. Alcohol is served – and in some Jewish communities, over served, to the point that those hearing the Purim story can't tell the difference between the wicked Haman and the righteous Mordechai. We send *mishloach manot*, baskets of food, to our friends and family; and we are commanded to make gifts to the poor.

Upon examination, though, one could wonder about why this particular story would give rise to such a joyous holiday. After all, plots to annihilate the Jewish people are all too familiar. Why would we celebrate one, even a thwarted attempt? Pharaoh and Hitler also sought to destroy our people, yet we do not celebrate their defeats with frivolity. Even in our American civil society, the victory over tyranny in World War II is recalled with solemnity, not drunkenness or carnivals.

So that's a paradox: We celebrate a most frightening and threatening moment in the history of our people, one that reflects all too many other occasions when our continued existence has been in question. Perhaps that paradox is easily solved. Unlike Pharaoh and Hitler, the Book of Esther does not suggest that Haman succeeds to kill even a single Jew. Moreover, at the end of the Megillah itself, Mordechai decrees that, for all time, the Children of Israel should observe the anniversary of our attempted annihilation with "days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor."

Still, Purim is rife with Paradoxes.

The observance of Purim begins solemnly, tomorrow morning, on the Shabbat before Purim. This Shabbat is known as *Shabbat Zachor*, the Sabbath of Remembrance. We shall take two Torah scrolls from the Holy Ark: one rolled to Leviticus, the weekly reading for this season; and the other rolled to Deuteronomy. Joy will read from both, with the Deuteronomy portion beginning with the word *zachor*, "remember." Joy will read that we must recall Amalek, the king who would not permit the Israelites to cross his land peacefully on their way to the Promised Land. Instead, Amalek cruelly attacked the Israelites from the rear, slaughtering the weakest among them.

We are particularly commanded to remember Amalek in advance of Purim, because Haman is said to be his descendant. Still, the portion includes a striking paradox. As Joy will read, we are commanded: "You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" How can we both blot out all memory of a wicked person, and at the same time remember him?

That challenge faces us whenever we focus on the difficult aspects of our Jewish history. On the one hand, we are drawn to the commandment, *Zachor!* Remember! Never forget! These words have been particularly etched on our Jewish souls since the days of the Holocaust. We embrace a religious obligation to remember those who perished, to say Kaddish for all who were wiped out together with their entire families, leaving nobody to say Kaddish for them. We must not forget that we have been marked for mass murder for no reason other than being Jews, and we must be vigilant as we stand up to anti-Semitism, doing everything in our power to assure that no such tragedy could again befall us. Still, we must blot out, which is perhaps to say that we should not overly remember, Amalek and all his

villainous descendants, whether Haman or Hitler. We preserve our sacred heritage, not in their names, or even in spite of them, but because we are heirs to a beautiful, sacred, and positive legacy. In the words of the Torah portion that Emily read for us tonight, we are enjoined to keep the light of Judaism burning, perpetually.

Another paradox involves Esther herself. Esther is the hero of the Purim story. At her own possible peril, she exposes Haman's evil plot to the king and saves the Jewish people. Esther is an unlikely Jewish hero. When the king, Achashverosh, is seeking a new queen, Esther and her cousin Mordechai, the other hero of our Purim story, decide that she should try out for the post. In the process, Mordechai counsels Esther to conceal her Jewish identity.

To be sure, there have been times in Jewish history – the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust come to mind, for example – when pretending not to be Jewish was required for survival. Even in strictly interpreted Jewish law, one may deny our people in order to avoid being killed. However, there is no suggestion that Esther is hiding her Jewishness in order to survive. Instead, she conceals her identity so that she may become Queen. We do not think highly of those who convert away from Judaism, or who similarly hide the fact that they are Jewish, to join a club or to get ahead in business or professional life. Admittedly, Esther's case is different: By hiding her religious affiliation, Esther attains a unique position, enabling her to save her people. And so, paradoxically, we gain not one but two Jewish heroes, Esther and Mordechai, who decline to be recognized as Jews.

Indeed, Esther isn't the only hidden one in the book that bears her name. God, too, is hidden. The events of the Purim story unfold without divine intervention, or so one would think from reading the Megillah. The rabbis suggest that God is "behind the veil," working through others, to achieve the salvation of the Jewish people.

Esther's mask, concealing her true identity, and God's hiding behind the curtain, as it were, give rise to our wearing costumes on Purim, pretending to be who we are not. Often, these costumes create their own Purim paradox – the rabbi dressing as the Pope, the serious individual wearing Mickey Mouse ears – as we hide our true selves in Esther's honor.

Other Purim paradoxes are explicit. The word "Purim" literally means "lots," referring to the lottery by which the day for the Jews' planned destruction is chosen. The paradox is described by Mordechai in the Book of Esther as the very day "which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy." Some related paradoxes are more grisly: The gallows, which Haman had built for Mordechai, fifty cubits high – that's about 75 feet, to you and me – end up being the very place where Haman is executed. More troubling, on the very day when the Jews are slated for slaughter, they arm themselves and kill 75,000 of their enemies instead. Yes, that's right in the Book of Esther, even if it wasn't in the Purim story that most of us learned in Religious School.

Acknowledging the paradoxes of Purim, our ancient rabbis noted that the Hebrew name of our holiest and most solemn holiday, Yom Kippur – *Yom Kippurim* – could be rendered *yom k'Purim*, a day like Purim. Now, that's a Paradox. We don't feast on Yom Kippur; we fast. As Rabbi Sharon Brous has observed: Both Purim and Yom Kippur call on us to recognize "the unavoidable uncertainty of life." The person who has hidden from Judaism can become the righteous, heroic Jewish leader. God can be seemingly absent and yet powerfully present at one and the same time.

Let us revel in all the paradoxes of Purim, those that are visible and others that are more deeply hidden. For the good of our people and all humanity, let us remember our enemies and forget them, at one and the same time. May all of us, however hidden our tendency to heroism, find ourselves ready to

stand up for our people and for righteousness, whenever circumstances demand. And may God, seen or unseen, ever be our Partner.

Amen.