

“The contemporary messages of Purim”

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The festival of Purim celebrates what the biblical chronicle of the history refers to as *revach v'hatzalah*, 'release and deliverance.' The reference is to the escape of the Jews of 4th cent. BCE Persia from the genocide planned by the arch Prime Minister and anti-Semite, Haman. Through the intercession of Queen Esther, and the behind-the-scenes efforts of Mordechai, the King Achashverosh (Xerxes) granted the Jews permission to defend themselves against Haman's forces. The festival of Purim celebrates the Jewish victory against overwhelming odds, and the downfall of the evil Haman and his cohorts.

In the typically Jewish way, we are given precise rabbinical guidance as to how to celebrate the anniversary of that victory in order that it might not descend into a mere bacchanalia. The inevitable banquet is referred to as the Purim 'Seudah'. This is the same term used for the three statutory Sabbath meals, and has the connotation of a religious celebratory ritual, accompanied by Grace, hymns and words of Torah. Applied to Purim, it connotes moderation amid celebration, notwithstanding that our sages encouraged us to drink, 'until one is unable to distinguish between "Blessed be Mordechai" and "Cursed be Haman".' One may imagine that this provides quite a bit of leeway, but the fact that Jews are not habitual drunkards suggests that it does not take too much drink for the details of that story to become a little hazy!

Given that state of inebriation, one can hardly expect the 'words of Torah' at the Purim Seudah to be particularly edifying, for which reason a special concessionary genre of 'Purim Torah' evolved. This took the form of a type of parody of the traditional forms of exposition, whereby the most unexpected and absurd conclusions about the main characters and events of the Purim story, as well as the festival's prescribed rituals, are humorously inferred by means of either textual or (il)logical reasoning.

Taken together with the traditional Purim play, which has the same quirky objective, our Purim traditions may be regarded as the forerunner of the mid-20th century, "Theatre of the Absurd." This genre is rooted in the philosophy of Albert Camus who defined the human condition as basically meaningless, with the consequence that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach, and, therefore, ultimately, as absurd. The notion of 'being unable to distinguish between "Blessed be Mordechai" and "Cursed be Haman" 'falls squarely within that tradition.

The name of God is, unaccountably, absent from the biblical book of Esther; yet, given the miraculous nature of the deliverance of an unarmed and untrained Jewish militia against the might of the Persian army, His guiding presence was palpable. 'Now you see Him; now you don't!' This also conforms to the basic principle of that literary genre, wherein logic is suspended and the world is ultimately viewed as absurd.

Thus, the book of Esther, which reads like an Oriental fable, as well as the light-hearted and playful manner of celebrating this festival, may in fact be perceived as concealing some profound ideas regarding the uncertainty of what we perceive as reality. Perhaps, at one level, all that religiously prescribed revelry is an attempt to demonstrate a flight from reality as humans perceive it.

The relevance of the setting of the Purim story - in ancient Persia, modern-day Iran - is also not lost on present-day Jewry. Once again that country has thrown up a tyrannical leader whose dream is to destroy the millions of Jews who constitute the State of Israel. Given the tide of people-power that is currently sweeping away a number of Middle Eastern tyrants, we can only pray that Ahmadinejad will suffer a similar fate.

May victory, peace and prosperity soon come to all the persecuted people of the region, and may that majestic vision of Isaiah soon become a reality, when, 'God shall judge between nations and settle the quarrels of many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks—nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Happy Purim,

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