

Writing a sermon without knowing whether I will actually deliver it is something I have never done – until this week. Over the past week, we have all been thrust into unprecedented territory. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus here in New York City has transformed what had been an overseas abstraction into an immediate and imminent concern. First and foremost, our thoughts and prayers go out to all those individuals and families who are ill, as we pray for their comfort, healing, and recovery. We have all been impacted – in our workplaces, in our schools, and in our homes. We are sorting fact from fiction and healthcare expertise from hysteria as our world has been turned upside down in ways I have never experienced in my lifetime. We are checking in with our elderly parents; we are concerned for the well-being of our children away at college or on travel education programs; and we are calculating risk vs. reward for the simple act of dropping off our children at school.

The Hebrew word for a synagogue is *Beit Knesset* – “a house of gathering” – a place for people to come together at set times on the Jewish calendar and in the lifecycle. How exactly should a *Beit Knesset* respond in a moment of social distancing, where people are giving elbow bumps, not handshakes, hellos but no hugs, where people can’t come to minyan to say kaddish? In the next two days we will have our Purim celebration, an annual communal happening complete with a long-rehearsed Purim spiel, children’s costume parades and carb-rich hamentashen. Do we still have the carnival? Some say yes, others no. Some say yes, but no bouncy castle and no face painter and no ring toss. And then someone asks: “At what point does a carnival stop being a carnival?” These are real conversations, in real meetings, which I have been part of this week. And beneath it all lurks the very real anxiety that nobody knows what is to come in the days or even hours ahead. Every conversation is shot through with contingency, every meeting with an implicit “in the event of.” We are in a haphazard and happenstance world whose only operating principle seems to be chance, a world where rabbis don’t even know if the sermons they write will be delivered in shul on Shabbat.

As with a royal diadem that shines brightly in every direction, there is no shortage of ways to appreciate the scroll of Esther we will read on Monday night. We can read it as a feminist story about its namesake, Esther – a twice marginalized Jewish woman who negotiates her way through a patriarchy to lead her people in their hour of need. Alternatively, Esther is a political tale describing a vulnerable Jewish people, an account of how the Jews of Shushan negotiate power as a minority diaspora community. Or you can read Esther as a treatise on the dynamics of antisemitism, how in every generation there arises a Haman-like figure filled with maniacal hatred against our people. Another reading, of course, is that Esther is a Disneyesque or even burlesque satire, with kings and beauty queens, heroes and villains, royal feasts and quiet courage. The Hebrew Bible, after all, is not a single book but a library, and every library should contain at least one fairy tale.

There are many ways to appreciate the story of Esther, but this year I want to choose an obvious one suggested by the very name Purim, and that is “chance.” The story is one twist after the other, a

series of coincidences, unplanned encounters, and reversals of fortune. Let's start at the very beginning. What if King Ahasuerus had not called on Vashti to appear? What if Vashti had not refused thus leaving the throne open for a new queen? What if Mordechai, Esther's cousin, had not been in the right place at the right time to overhear the plot to assassinate the King? What are the odds that when the sleepless king asked that the book of records be brought to him, his servants would read just the passage about Mordechai's loyalty? And what is the likelihood that just that night, Haman would happen to be waiting in the courtyard? The list goes on. Again and again the driver of this story will be serendipity. No question, all these reversals serve the literary purpose of keeping readers young and old engaged in the story. But the message runs deeper. After all, the name of the holiday is not Esther Day, Diaspora Day, or Jewish V-Day. The name of the holiday is "Purim" – from the word *pur*, meaning "lot" – the process by which Haman chose the date of our destruction. It was a lottery, the very symbol of a world governed by chance. According to tradition, the guiding principle of the story is the upending of expectations: *v'nahafokh hu*. (Esther 9:1) The story of Esther is many things, but at its core, it reminds us that none of us are as in control of our lives as we would like to believe. Unlike the book of Deuteronomy, which teaches that good is rewarded with good and bad with bad, or Ecclesiastes, which teaches that there is a right time, *eit*, for everything, for this one day of the year, there is one book of the Bible that says maybe, just maybe, it ain't so. Despite what we may wish and perhaps even believe about providential design, maybe it is chance, luck, or in Hebrew, *mazal* that has the first and final word in the tale of our lives.

And if it is indeed the case that the whole point of the Esther story is that life is a lottery and that none of us knows what will happen from one moment to the next, then that realization is also the lens that snaps the redemptive message of the holiday into focus. We know the scene well: The fate of the Jews has been sealed by wicked Haman, and Mordechai makes a last-ditch effort to contact his cousin Esther, who is comfortably ensconced in her royal surroundings. As did Moses, as did other leaders before her, when called on to lead, Esther demurs, fearing the risks, filled by self-doubt. "You've got the wrong princess, Mordechai. I am only allowed to approach the King at certain times, in certain circumstances." It is at this point that Mordechai implores her: "Do not imagine to yourself that in the King's house you will escape from among all your people. *U-mi yodea im l'eit ka-zot higa-at la-malkhut?* Who knows whether for a moment just like this you arose to power?" (4:14). The Hebrew is important. It was not until this year that I realized that the key phrase *l'eit ka-zot*, "a moment just like this" contains the same word that Ecclesiastes uses when speaking of the moments of our lives: *eit la-ledet, v'eit la-mut*, "a time to be born, a time to die." It is almost as if, if not exactly as if, Mordechai is saying to his cousin: "Look Esther, none of us really know how we got here and none of us are in control of what tomorrow brings. The only thing we can control in this world turned upside-down is whether and how we choose to respond to the unplanned. We can respond with courage, with wisdom, with the well-being of our people in mind, or we can abdicate human agency. Who knows what will happen one moment, one *eit* to the next? What we do know, what is in your power is our response to moments just like this. Nobody has a crystal ball, but we

can turn anxiety into confidence, fear into poise, and inattention to responsibility.” It is at this point that Esther herself is transformed, literally coming out from hiding (which is what “Esther” actually means in Hebrew) emboldened and empowered. The story does not end there. There are challenges and reversals yet to come; we are only in chapter four of a ten-chapter tale. But it is here that Esther takes on heroic stature, leaning in to shape her people’s destiny.

To this day, the four mitzvot associated with Purim speak to this very ethic of Esther.

- *First: to hear the megillah read.* No different than the Passover Seder, as Mordechai told Esther that fateful night, one must see oneself as a participant in the story of our people. You have to hear the megillah read.
- *Second: Matanot la’evyonim, gifts to the poor.* According to Jewish law, you must give to at least two people at least enough for a minimal meal, even if you yourself have limited resources. Why? No doubt because giving gifts to the poor reminds us of human agency. It reminds us that if we are sitting in this room, as Esther did in hers, whatever our worries may be, our worries are the kind most people would love to have. We are all very, very lucky, we should never forget our good fortune, and we should always give to those to whom fate has not been as kind.
- *Third, and this is my favorite: Mishloach Manot, or in Yiddish, Shaloch Manos.* Everyone is obligated to send a gift of food – usually a tasty, high-calorie treat – to another person, a gesture of kindness, friendship, and community building.
- *Fourth and finally, the seudah, the festive meal.* Like the *mishloach manot*, the festive meal is a reminder of the importance of fellowship, community, and maybe, too, of keeping good humor in times of uncertainty.

Practically speaking, I do hope to fulfill all four mitzvot this week, and I hope you do as well. But for all I know, we may be hearing the megillah read via livestream. Find a way to observe the mitzvot of Purim in some way because they remind us that even, if not especially, during those moments when the ground is shifting beneath us, we are not powerless. We are part of a bigger story and we can all move the needle ever so slightly in our own lives and the lives of those around us. We can all go online and bring a smile to someone’s face by sending them an unexpected treat. We can reach into our pocket and help someone perform the most basic act of feeding themselves. If Purim is the day of the year meant to remind us that we are in less control than we think we are, the mitzvot of Purim are the prompts meant to stir us to action, so that like Esther, with wisdom and quiet courage, we try our best to shape the world around us.

I began writing this sermon not knowing if it would be delivered. And now that it has (almost) been delivered, I can’t tell you what will happen between now and the end of Shabbat. I do know that when Shabbat ends, this week and every week, when I make Havdalah, I will recite the words from

the book Esther, *La-y'hudim hayitah orah v'simhah v'sasson vikar*, that we “should enjoy light and gladness, joy and honor.” (8:16) In other words, the tradition is teaching that if we stop and think about it, if we really stop to think about it, the uncertainty of this week isn't limited to just this week. Life can always be turned on its head; none of us really knows what any one moment will bring. And yet we can respond to those moments, as Esther did in her time of darkness, by taking agency, leaning in, keeping our wits and sense of humor, and most of all, by writing ourselves into the story, giving of our humanity and our blessings, turning anxiety to confidence, grief to joy, and darkness to light, gladness, joy and honor.