

# Some Thoughts on Purim 2021

**Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor**

As we find ourselves almost a year since the initial shut-down precipitated by Covid-19, it is interesting that we have lived a full Jewish year in that time. I wrote last year's thoughts on Purim just days before the actual shut-down of our country. Many of the things that I wrote last year bear repeating, and I have done so (a traditional pedagogic tool is repetition). But, based upon new understandings of Purim that arise due to this life altering experience of a pandemic, I have also updated and added new insights, as life itself is a master teacher.

Purim is usually celebrated with great frivolity – in fact, one of the commandments of the day is that when celebrating, liquor should be enjoyed in copious quantities – so much so, one drinks “ad lo yodayah” (‘until you don't know'..., the difference between Mordecai and Haman). It is a known fact that the use of alcohol has grown precipitously since we began the shut-down. One of the few ‘industries’ that have thrived are liquor and wine stores. And while it has been fun to learn more about wines, and to discover new drink mixtures and participate in virtual wine tastings, a holiday that commands consumption of alcohol ought to serve more as a cautionary note. The opening scenes of our Megillah take place during a celebration in which too much wine is imbibed – setting the stage for the King to call upon his wife to display herself in unseemly ways – and thus, one of the first great acts of a woman's defiance against a man who would objectify her physical attributes and deny her ownership of her body. And the attempt to justify one's heinous actions by the excuse of consuming too much alcohol should fall on deaf ears. Purim 2021 (or 5781, for those counting Jewish) should teach us that “ad lo yodayah” should not be considered a mitzvah – rather we should reflect on what we do when we give up executive agency by consuming too much (of anything).

Often, Purim is deemed “a children's holiday” as the custom is to dress up as characters from the Book of Esther. I remember when I was living in Israel (way back in 1980) a group of rabbinical students from the US decided to celebrate Halloween. As a number of us were walking to our destination, Israelis shouted at us “Zeh lo Purim” (This isn't Purim). Purim is not quite the Jewish Halloween, but dressing up as the characters of the story is meant to do

what we are also expected to do on Passover – to experience the story viscerally. The goal of reading the Haggadah on Passover over and over – year after year—is so that we know the story so intimately that we can feel the burning sands of the desert under our feet. Likewise, inhabiting a character in the Esther/Mordechai saga is meant to teach us that each of us can change the world if we are willing to stand up against evil – even if evil is the status quo.

The story seems simple: King Ahashuerus is in need of a new Queen after banishing Vashti for refusing his orders to dance provocatively in front of his guests (and as noted above, Vashti has become a symbol of women’s power). Mordecai, a leader of the Jewish community in Shushan convinces his cousin Esther to compete for the title of Queen. Mordecai does this as he learns of the machinations of the newly appointed King’s representative, Haman, to rid Shushan of its Jewish population. Esther becomes the Queen and thwarts the evil Haman’s plot. Haman suffers the death that he hoped for the Jews, by hanging on the very gallows he built. Esther is the hero and much revelry ensues.

But the story is devastating when looked at with sober eyes. It is made even more serious when we look at the assigned Torah reading for that festival day. It is from the book of Exodus and it is the shortest Torah reading for any holiday or Shabbat – it is only 9 sentences long. It tells the story of the war Amalek waged against the Israelites. Amalek came from behind to try to vanquish the Israelites through stealth. Moses held his arm up and the Israelites would prevail but when Moses tired, and his arm dropped, Amalek would prevail. So, Aaron and Hur made a seat for Moses and propped up his arms with stones so the Israelites, under Joshua’s leadership, overwhelmed the people of Amalek. Further, God commands Moses, “Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!” And Moses further said, “The Eternal will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages!” (Exodus 17:8-16)

What is the connection between Amalek and the Book of Esther? Amalek became the embodiment of evil poised against Israel. In fact, the rabbis tell us that every evil person that tries to wipe out Israel is a manifestation of Amalek – thus, Haman is Amalek. And every other foe throughout history that seeks our annihilation is Amalek (including Hitler).

Amalek is always around the corner – even in our day, there are those who seek our destruction whether it comes from marchers who chant, “Jews will not replace us” or Wahabists who populate countries that surround the State of Israel. And yet, we continue to thrive – which should be a continual source of pride and jubilation.

As Jews, we demonstrate our joy in a particular way – by sharing with others. The Shulhan Aruch (Orach Hayyim 694:1-4) teaches us that it is our obligation to give at least two gifts to two poor persons. These gifts are called Matnot L'evyonim. And we should give to anyone who stretches out their hands. If there is no one in need, you should save your gifts for the next time you see someone in need. But we should also give gifts of food (often hamantashen) to our neighbors and friends. These are called Mishloach Manot – and they are our way of transforming our community from one of comfort to one of generosity. We do this as we remember Mordecai celebrating the victory over Haman by sending gifts to the community.

Purim is a day of joy, and fun, and playfulness. But Purim is also a day for sober reflection and acts of kindness. Let us remember both aspects of this day (which begins Thursday, February 25th at sunset).

Hag Purim Samayach! Happy Purim to you all.

B'yedidiut (In friendship),

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