

## Thoughts from the Rabbi's Desk Feb 2013

Purim is possibly the hardest Jewish festival to explain, to Jews and non Jews alike. A festival whose roots are not in Torah, whose story is found in the only biblical book not to mention God, Megillat Esther is also notable for its lack of references to the Land of Israel, or to Temple rite, or any recognisably Jewish expression. Instead we know this festival for noise making, drinking to excess, the celebration of violence, and some distinctly “unreligious” behaviour and clothing.

Set in Persia in the third year of the King Ahasuerus (said to be Xerxes, King of Persia in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE), a Jewish man named Mordechai allows his niece Esther to go forward in the beauty contest to be queen after Vashti has been expelled for insubordination. Esther duly becomes that mythical creature, a Jewish princess, but does not reveal her Jewish identity to anyone until plans for genocide against the Jews are unveiled by Haman, the King's senior minister, and Esther finds herself in a position of potential influence of the King. Esther persuades the King that Haman must be removed from power but tragically the decree, once made, cannot be retracted and so the only remedy is to command the Jews to defend themselves against the attacking Persians. So on the date chosen by casting lots (Purim), the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, five hundred attackers are killed in Shushan, the capital city and seventy five thousand are killed in the rest of the empire. No material possessions are taken – this was simply an act of self defence. The next day, (14<sup>th</sup> Adar) was designated a day of celebration of the survival, and Esther sends a letter throughout the Empire commanding an annual commemoration of the event.

There is no evidence of Esther or of this particular event outside of the megillah, but the genre of the story of course is one we know well – that Jews living on sufferance in a land that is not their own find that they become disliked or scapegoated or simply political pawns in someone else's power game. It could be because they are successful in the land and become the victims of jealousy, or else that they are not successful and seen as parasites. Whatever the pretext, the historical Jewish experience has been of differing levels of insecurity and an apprehensive reliance on the goodwill of a host community; usually the apprehension has had a good basis as in difficult times the Jewish community have traditionally been vulnerable. This festival then does not mark an agricultural milestone nor a theological event, but it does speak to the lived experience of a people in Diaspora.

The Havdalah service with which we mark at the end of the Sabbath on a Saturday night is a bittersweet event – we are leaving behind the solace of the Shabbat, and entering a working week once more, with its concomitant expectation that we are facing all the problems of the outside world once more. The service begins with a number of verses taken primarily from the book of Psalms and from the prophet Isaiah, which refer to the protection of God and the hope for divine salvation. One verse stands out for me in this collection of verses that hope for relief from a worrying world – that from the book of Esther “*La'yehudim ha'yetah orah ve'simcha ve'sasson viykar* The Jews had light, happiness, joy and honour”. (Esther 8:16) which is followed by a heartfelt addition – the response: “*Cayn tihyeh lanu - May it be the same for us*”. The use of this verse here in the service marking the end of shabbat and the start of the working week, and the response which is added to it liturgically, speaks to me of the clear and frequent anxiety of the Jewish community who, having taken time out from the world to create the Shabbat experience of security, peacefulness and warmth within their homes now know that this time out of time is over for the week and they have

to get through another six days in a hostile world before having the possibility of experiencing this peace again.

Purim is unusual because it is a fantasy which we act out for one day each year and for this small amount of time all the usual rules are relaxed. Drinking is encouraged, there is a carnival atmosphere as people wear fancy dress and may even abandon the prohibition of cross dressing (*OH 696:8*). We joyously and noisily blot out the name of Haman as the Megillah is being read aloud in the synagogue. We celebrate the reversal of our usual story – for once we are the victors not the victims. For once we get to stand up and fight back. In the short space of this festival we act out a revenge fantasy against all those who blindly want to destroy or humiliate us.

But this is not without a degree of conflicted anxiety. While the need to imagine winning against one's enemies for at least one day a year was clearly understood, at the same time the effect of this fantasy being enacted in a public show was not ignored. Right back Talmudic times (*Megillah 7a*) we read that Rav Shmuel bar Yehudah taught that Esther had to plead for her story to be told. This is something quite unique in tradition where remembering is the essence of our activity.

*“Rav Shmuel Bar Yehudah said: “Esther sent a message to the Sages: “Place me in Jewish memory for all generations!” But the sages replied “Your story would incite the nations against us.”. However Esther replied: [It's too late for that.] My story is already recorded in the chronicles of Medean and Persian kings.”*

– In other words, while the celebration of the story of Purim might damage interfaith relationships, and even potentially contribute a pretext for a pogrom, it could not be hidden away and therefore might as well be told.

There remain a large number of apologetics in our tradition to mitigate the effect of the festival – for example one comment on *Esther 9:5* *“And the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, slaughtering and exterminating; and they did to their enemies as they wished.”* Is that the words *“vaya'asu besone'eihem kiretzonam”* – “they did to their enemies as they wished” is understood to mean that the Jews acted the way their enemies had wished to do to them – in other words this is simply a reversal of the active and passive objects of the verbs, not a new activity.

In the early life of Reform Judaism there was a question whether Purim should continue to be marked – it seemed to the fastidious European reformers to be distasteful, noisy, cruel, uncivilized - all the things we had moved on from, or so we thought. But any idea of removing it from our calendar has long gone – it has become clear that Purim is a necessary festival, allowing us to explore our darker side in safety and with clear and certain boundaries for a very short time each year. Even though we are now not a people who are entirely dependent on a host community but have a land of our own, the story of Purim retains its importance and its meaning for us and we have to express our pain and frustration at having been the scapegoat in so many places over so many generations. The question now is of course, how we engage with our dark side outside of Purim, how the pain which some say our history has bred into our DNA can be dealt with so that it is not suppressed but is acknowledged while not being allowed to colour our judgements today. This is a priority for our generation and those who follow us. As we rightly celebrate our survival through centuries of persecution, and our ability and right to fight for that survival keeping our values and responsibilities intact we should remember the importance of keeping perspective and limits that the festival also highlights, and remember too that our identity is based on the how we behave **all** the days of the year.