

SEX, LIES AND EXECUTIONS – Purim's Transition from What it was to What It Is

Reader discretion advised

The Book of Esther, also known as *Megilat Esther*, is the story we recount on Purim. I am certain that this story, presented as written, would NOT earn a PG rating. It begins with a drunken party, authorized and enjoyed by the king, who demands his wife to dance before his drunk friends...and banishes her when she refuses. The heroine of the story, Esther, lies about her identity to win the king's favor in order to entice him into marrying her. The original text doesn't suggest that the selection process for a new bride was anything as tame as the "beauty contests" we talk about in the children's version. Because King Ahasuerus did not know his wife was Jewish, he allows his counselor Haman to convince him to permit a decree executing the Jews. When Esther reveals her identity as a Jew, Haman is hanged on the very gallows that was intended for Esther's cousin Mordecai.

The actual text then describes a systematic series of killing that some might call self-defense and others might call revenge murders. From Chapter 9:

1 Now on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month – Adar - when the king's commandment drew near to be put in execution, on the very day in which the enemies of the Jews hoped to get them in their power; the opposite happened, and the Jews had power over those that hated them; **2** the Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to attack on those who sought to hurt them; and no one could withstand them; for the fear of them was fallen upon all the peoples. ... because the fear of Mordecai was fallen upon them. **4** For Mordecai was powerful in the king's house, and his fame went forth throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai grew greater and more powerful. **5** And the Jews smote their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will on their enemies. **6** And in Shushan the castle the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men.

Five hundred were killed for Haman's plot, plus Haman's ten sons. The king says to Esther, "The Jews have killed a total of five hundred men, plus the ten sons of Haman...What is your wish now? It shall be granted." Esther says to her royal husband, "If it please your Majesty, let the Jews in Shushan be permitted as they did today, and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on the stake." So phase 2 includes the public display of Haman's sons and the Jews going through the provinces killing *seventy-five thousand* more. And it became a day to celebrate.

Purim is the only time of the year when Jewish people actually celebrate the misfortune of others. Even on Passover, we spill out part of wine out of respect for the suffering of the Egyptians during the plagues. Even if it were necessary to kill 75,510 people, would that be a cause for celebration?

The Book of Esther is the only book of the Hebrew Bible that does not include G-d's name, and was also the very last book that was chosen to be included in our sacred scriptures. For these reasons, some scholars wonder how accurate the telling is. There are several historical references that match up with ancient Persia, and some that don't. Regardless of how true this story is, its celebration has taken on a dramatic transformation. It's a party, a carnival and a dress-up day. It's a day for children to have fun and adults to release their inhibitions. We're not so much celebrating Haman's death as we are celebrating our own survival.

Some scholars maintain that aspects of the Purim story might be, at the very least, exaggerated. One theory is that it came about during a time period in which Jews were greatly persecuted. Hiding your identity was often important to survive harsh oppression. We needed a heroic tale, with mortals like Esther and Mordecai to remind us that people can step up to save the day, even during times G-d's presence doesn't look so obvious.

Regardless of your historical theory, Purim is different today...and it should be! We can celebrate that we no longer need to hide who we are. We can celebrate survival. We can sing, dance, party, dress funny and eat *hamantashen*. For what we are really celebrating is that we are here, we are Jewish and that in and of itself is a joy, worthy of a party.

And for those who want to revisit the gory details of the text, please add to your prayers that, the day after Purim, it will be time to take off our masks and share with the world that we are proud to be who we are.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon