

RABBI'S MESSAGE

From Purim to Pesach and Back

The Hebrew calendar gives us a double blessing in the months of Adar and Nissan, with the holidays of Purim and Passover coming back-to-back. These celebrations are very different from each other, and yet the progression of one to the other on the calendar can give interesting ideas to explore. Both deal with bitter enemies and the possibility of genocidal extinction. The Purim villain, Haman, manipulates the Persian king into decreeing legalized murder of the Jewish people. Haman's plan fails and the Jews retaliate. The Passover villain, Pharaoh, also threatens extinction by murdering Jewish baby boys at birth. This plan also fails, and the Israelites are redeemed by G-D's "mighty hand and outstretched arm" to escape into the wilderness and eventually the Promised Land. From the 15th of Adar to the 15th of Nissan, the score is: Jews 2, Evil 0.

Yes, both Purim and Pesach fulfill the traditional theme about Jewish holidays: *"They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat."* The survival elements and food are certainly part of our contemporary celebrations for both holidays. The threats occur differently, and so do our observances. While Passover precedes Purim chronologically, Purim precedes Passover on the calendar. I've often considered the various ways these two springtime festivals differ as ways to look at the growth of our people.

In the Book of Esther, the name of God is not mentioned. In the traditional Passover Haggadah, the name of Moses is not mentioned. We are taught that Moses' name was left out of the Haggadah for fear of deifying Moses. As the Haggadah was written at a time during the rise of Christianity, the rabbis wanted to make sure the Jewish people of future generations were aware that God was responsible for the miracles, not a single person like Moses. In contrast, God's presence was hidden in the Book of Esther, just like Esther's identity as a Jew was hidden until she needed to reveal herself to save her people. Mordecai and Esther, mortal humans, get all the credit.

Perhaps the most striking difference is what happens in these stories after the fear of genocide is resolved. In Exodus, when the Israelites cross the Sea of Reeds into freedom, they dance and sing. According to the Midrash, the angels also began to sing, but the Holy One rebuked them, saying, *"The work of My hands is drowning in the sea, and you will sing?"* (Sanhedrin 39b) According to the Midrash, God accepted the Israelites singing because they were receiving their own freedom; but God would not allow the angels to rejoice in the sorrow of Egyptians, reminding them that all God's children are sacred. Later in the Torah and in Jewish liturgy, we are continually reminded of our time in Egypt, with multiple variations of the teaching, *"You shall treat the stranger as one of your own, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."* (Leviticus 18:33) And in the Passover seder, when recounting the Ten Plagues that the Egyptians endured, we diminish our own joy by spilling out a drop of wine in sympathy for their suffering.

In Purim, there is no sympathy for anyone. It is not just the evil Haman who gets punished, but thousands of other Persians. If you read to the end of the Book of Esther, the Jews, in fear of those who might follow Haman's plans (despite the king rescinding the order), killed 75,510

Persians in what some might call a pre-emptive strike. Though Haman was the only real perpetrator, vengeance was meted out to thousands who might have been innocent. Even though we celebrate our liberation from Haman's plot, this act of violence is an example of a disproportionate attempt at justice. Elie Wiesel, author, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient once offered the theory that God did not want His name associated with the Book of Esther because of the over-zealous slaughter of the Persians.

My own thoughts: Purim is a short story. We were threatened and retaliated and then it was over...to be remembered one day a year with party. The redemptive parts of Purim are the modern customs of *mitzvot* that include giving *tzedakah* and gifts of food...and of course, a way for children to enjoy their heritage. But Passover is our long-lasting story of redemption. We suffered for generations, and learned what suffering is all about. And then, we were redeemed to spend future generations helping to heal the world of injustice. Passover is observed for a full week, not one day. And the redemption from Egypt is included in the Ten Commandments, in every Shabbat service, in every Kiddish and in daily prayers. Passover is with us all year long.

The brevity of Purim is like childhood and adolescence. It doesn't last long, but we have a lot of fun, make some mistakes, and learn valuable lessons.

The endurance of Passover helps us mature into a people that cares. Perhaps that's why Purim is earlier in the calendar than Pesach. It gives us time to grow up.

In our observances this year, let us remember a past that will lead us to a more caring future.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon