

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### *Pondering Purim*

Purim is in the middle of this month. Oddly enough, the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, this year, is also the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar, so the Gregorian and Hebrew calendars match up exactly, as they rarely do. I look forward to a multi-generational group celebrating at our Beth Torah Purim/Shabbat service on Friday, March 14. Though many of our children are on Spring Break, I am hoping for costumes, groggers and revelry for all.

It is a mitzvah on Purim to give gifts of food, to enjoy a festive meal and give tzedakah for the needy. It is also a mitzvah to hear the Book of Esther in its entirety. Sometimes, I wish it weren't. There are parts of the Book of Esther that are painful to remember, especially now, when there are hostages in Gaza who are being released (finally) after being traumatized for over 500 days, hostages who are still in captivity, and hostages who are being returned in coffins. And the retaliation continues as there seems to be little choice.

It's hard to read the story of hatred and ignorance. How one person with a grudge, Haman, was able to influence a powerful king, Ahasuerus, to make it legal and proper to kill Jews. It's hard to read how Jewish lives were threatened so mercilessly because of Haman's whim, the king's ability to be manipulated and the public's willingness to follow along. And even how a heroine, Esther, infiltrated the palace, deceptively hiding her identity while building up the courage to oppose her husband's plan to carry out Haman's wishes.

Even our victory is hard for me to read this year. How we, the Jews, became necessarily empowered to murder tens of thousands because of the fear that they would try to murder us. If you read the book to the end, you see us celebrating our murders, just as we are horrified to see others celebrate Jewish suffering.

Oded Lifschitz, age 88, was the uncle of an Israeli man who lives in Huffman, Texas, not far from our community. Mr. Lifschitz was a journalist and a peace advocate, who drove sick Palestinians to hospitals in Israel for treatment. He and his wife of over 60 years, Yocheved, had been taken hostage by Hamas from the kibbutz they helped found. Yocheved, as an elderly woman, was separated from her husband when she was one of the first hostages released. She did not know what happened until Oded was returned to Israel in a coffin on February 19.

The word HAMAS in Hebrew, means violence and chaos. If you substitute an N for the final S, Hamas becomes Haman. Are we reliving Purim? Is Hamas the new Haman?

The Shabbat before Purim is called Shabbat Zachor, or the Sabbath of Remembrance. It includes the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus, and then we add an extra Torah reading from Deuteronomy.

*Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey after you left Egypt. Undeterred by the fear of God, he surprised you when you were famished and weary and cut down the stragglers in the rear...(and when you settle in the land)...you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. DO NOT FORGET! (Deuteronomy 25:17-19).*

Scholars have suggested that Haman was a descendant of the Amalekites, and obliterating the memory is why we make noise to drown out hearing Haman's name while reading the Megillah. It is confusing, though. The same Torah passage teaches us to both *remember* Amalek and *obliterate the memory* of Amalek. Within three verses, we are instructed to **remember, to blot out the memory**, and then **do not forget!** How can we do both? When I first studied this passage, I thought it was suggesting genocide, ridding the world of a people. I was very troubled, as this is the very fear we have endured throughout history when others want to obliterate Jews. But a friend pointed out to me that, perhaps, obliterating Amalek isn't about killing people, but killing concepts. We can put our energies into obliterating the *attitude* of Amalek; the hatred and ignorance that causes people to treat humans in inhumane ways.

While celebrating Purim, we rejoice in our survival. Personally, I don't like that it took death threats and retaliation to ensure that survival. So, we dress in costumes, make noise, laugh and sing, eat cookies and (for some) get drunk enough to remember while forgetting. Heroes and villains become blurred. Without forgetting the dangers of ignorance, we can remember our survival, our fortitude and our faith. We must continue to be careful and cautious while also opening our hearts to the possibility that people *can* learn when given the opportunity. The Book of Esther gives us permission to proactively protect ourselves. Modern sensibility can lead us to develop the kind of relationships with others that lead to obliterating ignorance. Our world will be much better when there is no need for violent reactions.

**Fighting hatred with hatred rarely works in anyone's best interests.** As Martin Luther King said, "*Love is the only thing that can turn an enemy into a friend.*" Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker added his own teaching. In January 2022, the rabbi and three congregants were held hostage by a gunman for 11 hours at Congregation Beth Israel in Conway, Texas. Adding to Dr. King's comment, Rabbi Charlie said, "*If we live by that rule, we will have many more friends with whom we disagree. But we will have a lot fewer enemies!*"

We must remember – to do our part to make the world free from hatred, violence and ignorance. We CAN and we MUST!

L'Shalom,

*Rabbi Dan Gordon*