

**Palace People:
A New Look at Purim
Parashat Vayikra;
March 11, 2011**

My friends, you know, some of you, I assume, that the word, in Hebrew, for prayerbook is *siddur*. The word means “order,” or “arrangement,” and is the same concept as that of the Passover seder... things come in a particular order, the prayers are arranged in a deliberate way. The horrible mnemonic I use to get people to remember the word is to play off the Yiddish pronunciation, and ask: what do you call a very small prayerbook? A baby *siddur*!

What fewer people know, however, is that there is a different word for the prayerbook used for holidays -- not just the High Holy Days, although that is when we encounter this different book most frequently – but all holidays. Traditionally even Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot use a different book of prayers. The prayerbook for any of these holidays is called a *machzor*. The root is the same as for the word “return.”

The cycle of the seasons is a circle indeed; the holidays just keep rolling around, again and again. Indeed, sometimes religious school students complain about the curriculum: “we’re studying that holiday *again!*”

But the point of a spiral curriculum – and the goal of annually occurring celebrations – is not, in fact, mind-numbing tedium. The goal of repetition, the point of coming back is, we hope, new insight, and deeper appreciation, each time. The familiar is not supposed to put us to sleep, but open us up.

And so as we met, a month ago in Jerusalem, with Rabbi Donniel Hartman, to explore the ethics of Purim, I was not surprised to encounter an approach I had never considered before. What I want to share with you tonight is largely derived from that session with colleagues, and, in the tradition of Jewish life which mandates that we give credit to our teachers, what follows is in large measure the work of Rabbi Hartman, while the words and the framing of the issues and some of the emphasis is mine.

All of us, I assume, or perhaps many of us, have rolled our eyes at Purim. The holiday is fun enough, but ridiculous as well. Pediatric in presentation, it is an underappreciated tale centered in a mighty city no one has been able to find, depicting events that no one can confirm. The book of Esther – the scroll known simply as the *megillah*, which is the word for scroll – never once mentions God, and it is the only story in the Hebrew Bible to take place entirely outside the land of Israel.

And yet, and yet... there is yet something here for us as well, the world we live in today... and the ways of the world we want to not live with anymore.

To be more specific, I believe that hidden in the pages of Esther... and the name Esther itself may contain an echo of the Hebrew term “hester,” which means hidden... that here, in this tale, is a story of core Jewish identity, a question of power and powerlessness, and a potential Zionist reaction against living forever on the whims of tyrants, or even

the precarious and ephemeral tolerance of being seen as guests generously welcomed by hosts who are the real masters of the house.

All this... all this will come, I hope, from an exploration of three characters, one lesson, and two twists.

Let us take a new look at the familiar faces at the heart of this story. What are their frames of reference, and to what world do they belong? [For anyone who wants to follow along, or who is unfamiliar with the story, the book of Esther begins on page 1785 of the JPS *Tanakh*, the Hebrew-English Bible which is underneath your seats.]

We begin with the tyrant whose own moral failings are softened by the silliness with which he is depicted in schpiels and Purim parades around the world. But what is Achashverosh? He is a man who lives in his own universe. What does it mean, to rule 127 kingdoms? To have so much that you simply assume that wanting and getting are identical. To not be able to even understand the word “no.” He throws a party, expects everyone to attend, and the party lasts for 180 days. Hello. Doesn’t he realize that... real people have... places to be, and things to do?

One of the essential features of the book of Esther, Rabbi Hartman taught, is the dichotomy between the world of the palace, and the outside world. In my words, it is Hollywood, and the rest of us; Qaddafi’s megalomania, and everything that is outside his tent; the puppet King in Mr. Rogers who couldn’t quite grasp that not everything revolved around him. To

Achashversosh, he doesn't have an outside world. His later offer to give "half" the kingdom to Esther is simply confirmation of his corruption and delusional disconnection from reality.

There are times... there are times in our history when we have had to deal with tyrants, and we have managed with different degrees of success. Court Jews, emissaries, obsequious manipulators playing the game as best we could... sometimes it has worked, and sometimes it has not. Into this world one Jewish man named Mordecai thinks to plant a spy, of sorts, a hidden agent, sacrificing what would have been her life for something wholly foreign. Indeed, in a detail I had somehow not noticed before, how much preparation does Esther need, to make the transfer from the ordinary world, to the palace? Twelve months! An entire year! This is, I think, about more than finding the right kind of makeup. It is a makeover of a different sort. An attempt – and we shall see how successful it was – for an outer transformation to truly be an inner one as well.

Mordecai. Mordecai changes throughout the story. His initial plans backfired, perhaps very badly. He was trying to accomplish something, hanging on the outskirts of power – a borderland, a transitional place between the palace and the people. His own amorphous loitering actually is what leads to the encounter on which the whole rest of the story hinges... and what a whole lot of trouble flowed from a strange act on Mordecai's part! Actually, and against what we are usually taught when we read this story, Jewish tradition

encourages us to bow down to a king; would deference to a prime minister really have been so bad?

But when he learns about the decree against our people, Mordecai changes. Chapter Four opens with a strong series of verbs, a flow from one to another depicting now a man of action. *Yada, Vayikra, Vayilbash, Vayeitzei, Vayizak, Vayavo*. He knew. He tore his clothes. He changed clothes (putting on sackcloth and ashes.) He went out. He cried out. And he came – or tried to come – to the palace.

Yada. He knew. When you encounter evil, the first critical moment is... what you choose to know. To focus. To be aware of a need. To not just change the channel.

But then the next step is to stop what you are doing. To not just carry on. Moral heroes, I remember Rabbi Hartman saying, are characterized not by money, and not by charisma, but by calendar. By how much time they spend, on combating evil.

And then... he tears his clothes. He puts on sackcloth. Because... because one of the more brilliant principles of Jewish law – one often derided and dismissed by people who look down on ritual -- is the awareness... that a change in behavior can lead to a change in consciousness. The outer impacts the inner. Or at least, that is the way it is supposed to work.

But then he comes to the palace. And he is stopped at the gate. Because the palace is not a place that knows sackcloth and ashes. You can't go there connected to an outer reality. It is a world of fantasy. Pain and fear, connection and commitment are not allowed. Breaking the spell is strictly forbidden.

And Esther. Esther is told of Mordecai's showing up in this strange way at the gate, and is greatly agitated. She sends proper clothes, but he refuses to put them on. Shouldn't her first question have been: who died? She... she does not know. She does not know there is a problem. The people in the city know. But she does not. She has become a palace person. How then... how is Mordecai to face his challenge. How does he get Esther to be a Jew again?

And here we encounter the book of Esther's two pivotal definitions, perhaps, of Jewish identity.

The first is Mordecai's comment to Esther, in Chapter 4, Verse 14: "*Mi yodea im l'eit kazot higa'at l'malkhut?* Who knows if it was not for such a time as this that you attained your royal position?" A Jew, Mordecai is saying.. a Jew does not see his or her status in life... a meant for personal aggrandizement alone. There is a larger purpose. We remain connected to our people.

The second pivotal moment is Esther's eventual response. "*K'asher avaditi, avaditi;* I shall go in to the King, even though it is against the law... and if I perish, I perish."

It is here, perhaps, that we can begin to connect the dots. Donniel Hartman interjected, when we studied this verse together, that one of the reasons he is a Zionist, one of the reasons he is proud to live and raise his children in Israel, is that, he said “I am in the midst of a country where millions of people actually *live* by the ethic of *k’asher avaditi, avaditi*.”

One of the ethical lessons of Purim, then, is that when a Jew is in danger, *yada, v’yavo*. You know. And you come. You change your behavior. You don’t go to sleep at night.

There is a gruesome image I learned, recently, which I may use again if I can figure out a way to make it even slightly more palatable. In the case of a Siamese twin with two heads, the Talmud asks, how do you know if you are dealing with one person, one *nefesh*, one soul, or two? You... I can’t even say what they said so I’ll just say they do something on the scalp of one of them. If the other one screams, you know, they conclude, that you are dealing with one soul. So, too, if a Jewish community in Syria, or the former Soviet Union, or somewhere far away from us is in trouble, and we scream, we know that we are a people, that we are connected.

Despite the graphic imagery, this is an ethic of collective responsibility. We are here today... we are here at all... because at some point in our past, when someone was in danger, someone else said “*k’asher avaditi, avaditi*. I am going to do something about this. And if I perish, I perish.”

Two final twists, though, before we bring our exploration of Esther to a close.

I think the oddest bit of Talmud I learned last month was *not* the story of the Siamese twins. No, it was something else I hadn't studied before. It was the tradition, from *Masechet Megillah*, the tractate of the Talmud that deals with the story of Purim, which says that this story, this occasion... is when the people of Israel truly received the Torah. It was the moment when... the covenant with God was sealed.

What? That makes no sense at all. This is one of only two books in the Bible in which the name of God does not appear at all! We seem to rely entirely on our own devices here. How can this be about renewing the covenant with God?

The answer, for the Talmud and later tradition, is that because we *chose* to see the hand of God in history, because we recite the blessing *Al HaNissim*, for the miracles God did for us...on Chanukah and on Purim... in stories in which God is not... obvious on the stage... because we see God precisely when and where God is hidden... it is here, then, that we renew the covenant.

I don't know. Is this making lemonades out of lemons? Or is this a powerful insight, into the spiritual loyalty of a people who has passed from supernatural stunts and onto the level of life in the world as we know it?

And finally. The story centers so much on that one verb... “*yada*. To know.” It is about what Mordecai knows, what Esther knows, how, finally, she gets the king to say... “I didn’t know!”

But for a story which centers on knowing... we have a celebration which centers around *not* knowing. For, on Purim, we are supposed to get so smashed that we *cannot tell the difference...* between Haman and Mordecai. “*Ad she’lo yada...* Until we do not know.” Why? What’s up with that?

Maybe, in the end, there is something utterly precarious about this story after all. What are the elements of the tale we left out tonight? All the happenstance. All the coincidences.

If Mordecai didn’t happen to overhear a plot against the king... if the king didn’t happen to have a sleepless night... if Haman didn’t happen to fall onto the king’s bed while Esther was there, making the king think his personal “property” was about to be violated... Does our survival really depend... on that level of coincidence?

Here, a link with this week’s Torah portion comes to mind. It is the tiny aleph that our Bat Mitzvah girl asked me about at her rehearsal the other day, a single letter in the word *Vayikra*, which scribal tradition teaches must be rendered in a way which is smaller than the other letters. No one knows the reason why, but one theory is that this teaches the tiny difference between two words: “*vayikar*; and it happened”... and “*vayikra*...and he called.” A small

difference, barely pronounced, almost invisible...between chance and choice, purpose and whim.

At some level, part of our tradition says that the only response to that is to get drunk. How can you cope with such a world?

But there is another way. It is the way in which we take our fate and our future into our own hands. To be a Zionist, once again, is to say that we can change the verbs, expand the options that are open to us.

Rabbi Hartman's conclusion was that he would take the moral challenges of having power *any day* over the vagaries and dependencies expressed in this book... but, that he knows, and we know, that once we have power, we may use it in the wrong way.

In the end, there are so many aspects of our lives, which we assume to be fixed and given. But we can see beyond the superficial assumptions. We can break beyond what is expected of us. We can be there for each other. And we can take our future back... into our own hands.

Purim. From the glitter of the palace... back to the center... of the highest, and truest, and best that we can be... of ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.