

Purim Day

Yes, today is Purim, and this past week we as a nation passed the half-million mark in total deaths due to the coronavirus thus far (I believe today we are at 504,000). Last night Mark, Lev and I sat here in my study in front of Mark's laptop screen and celebrated Purim, chanting the Megillah and blotting out Haman's name with our graggers, along with a modest but enthusiastic crowd of congregants on the other side of our screen. At the end we made a *l'chayyim* (Mark and Lev over a non-alcoholic beer, which they split, myself over a glass of white wine), and I held up the hamantaschen which I had made earlier in the day (along with a batch of Ranger cookies, according to my grandmother's recipe), and wished everyone a virtual taste.

Yesterday, when coming out of Shaw's supermarket, a man with a friendly smile approached me in the parking lot, asking if he could clean my car windows for a small donation. He said he was trying to get the money to pay for his family's stay in a hotel (they lost their home), and for food for his family. I said "okay," but had to check to see whether I had any cash in my wallet. I had a lot of quarters, so I gave him a dollar in quarters. He did a very good job. But I remembered that it was erev Purim, and I felt bad that that was all I had given him. One of the mitzvot of Purim is to make sure that the poor of your town are fed. So I reached into my grocery bag and gave him a loaf of bread. I asked him about his family (two kids, 16 and 18), and where he was staying, and where they go to school. And finally, I asked him his name (Tony). Yes, the "poor" should not be nameless. He has a name. I hope Tony and his family will eventually get back on track, get jobs and feel real agency over their lives soon.

I am hopeful that as more and more of us get vaccinated against the coronavirus (Mark went this morning to get his first shot – I still have to wait since I am younger) our economy will come roaring back. Many businesses that have closed will reopen, and they will have to start rehiring, since probably many of their previous workers have already moved on to other jobs. Also, it looks like there is a good chance that the Senate will pass President Biden's Covid Relief Bill soon

(although it looks like they may have to strip the 15 dollar new minimum wage statute out of it). There is even a chance that our country will begin to see that it is in our national interest to automatically supplement the incomes of a large swath of American families with children in order to boost the health and well-being of this next generation of Americans. According to a Feb. 7th article on this legislation in the Washington Post,

“...the Internal Revenue Service would provide \$3,600 over the course of the year per child under the age of 6, as well as \$3,000 per child of ages 6 to 17. The size of the benefit would diminish for Americans earning more than \$75,000 per year, as well as for couples jointly earning more than \$150,000 per year. The payments would be sent monthly beginning in July, a delay intended to give the IRS time to prepare for the massive new initiative.” (Jeff Stein, “Senior Democrats to unveil \$3,000-per-child benefit as Biden stimulus gains steam”)

For almost all of this country’s history, there has been a widespread belief that “God helps those who help themselves,” and a concomitant belief that to help people too much makes them dependent and reduces their incentive to really work hard to succeed. But this myth ignores the fact that most of those in the middle or upper middle class (not to mention the truly wealthy) came from (usually white) families that already had enough wealth to be able to help their children go to college, buy a car, buy their first home, etc. This was certainly true for me.

The myth also ignores all the obstacles that have always been put in the way for Black Americans, beginning with being captured and brought here to be slaves, and on through being “freed” after the Civil War but with no capital with which to begin their new lives, and later to the corrupt, unjust laws that were crafted (especially in the South, but elsewhere as well) to keep Blacks out of the middle class. Of course every new immigrant group to this nation has had prejudice to overcome, but the abomination that was slavery left in its wake remnants of distrust, guilt, and fear between the White establishment and Black Americans that has persisted to this day. I am not sure if it is possible for this wound to ever heal completely. But the more that we as a nation make it possible for Black individuals and families to succeed despite the lingering resentment (and sometimes, even violence) of certain parts of our white population, the closer we will come to truly being a nation of people united.

This past weekend I watched a documentary called “Mr. Soul,” about Ellis Haizlip, who hosted a seventies-era PBS series called “Soul,” which featured many aspects of Black life. At the end, as the credits were rolling, one of the

interviewees (alas, I did not get his name) said something that I think is both a great motto to live by, and also a great summing up of the Torah:

Service to others is the rent we pay for taking up space on the planet.

I would just amend this to make clear that *others* can mean not just other human beings, but all other forms of planetary life. We need to remember our debt to the forests and oceans, the deserts, the birds and insects, etc. – *along with* our fellow human creatures.

I always have mixed feelings about Purim. In communities where Jews take the holiday as an opportunity to put on funny skits and parodies, to laugh even while we are dealing with the ever-lurking fear of anti-Semitism, Purim traditions seem to be a healthy psychological valve for blowing off steam. But the story itself has so many disturbing elements. A young girl being pressured into selling her beauty (i.e. her body) to the king in order to safeguard her people; her hiding of her identity as a Jew; the bloody vengeance taken on Haman, his many sons, and then later thousands of Persians...it is hard to square these things with the verse from the Book of Esther that we lift for the *Havdalah* service every Saturday night:

La Yehudim hayita orah v'simchah v'sason vi-kar.

But the Jews had light and happiness, joy and honor. (Esther 8:16)

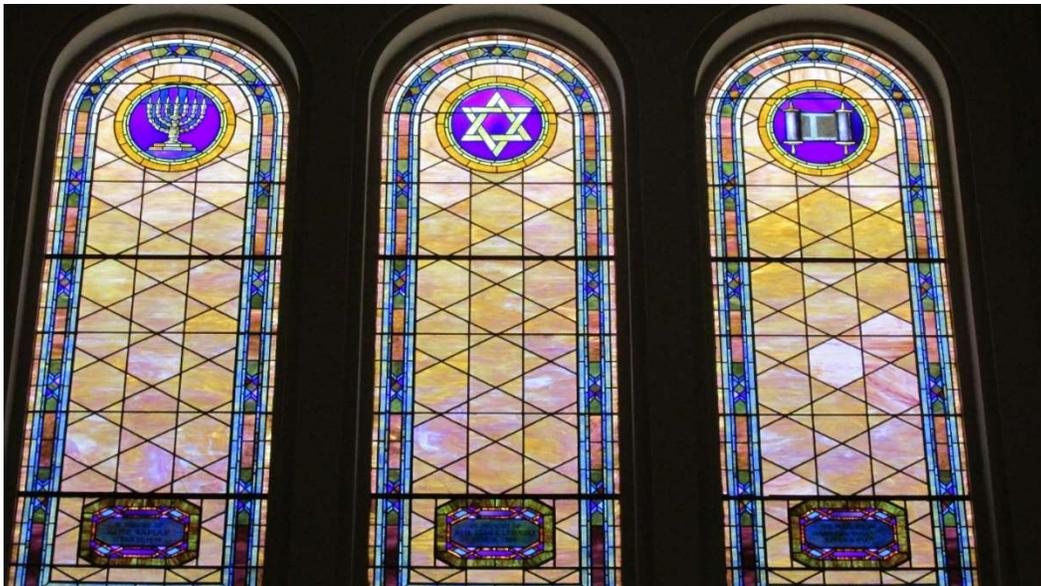
But I suppose it is a *good* thing that we take this verse out of context every week and transform it into an affirmation of what Shabbat gives us – making it joy over *Shabbat* (and over all that that entails: worship, study, community, good food and family time) – rather than it somehow being a happiness that is coming from, or at least taking place while, our “enemies” are being killed.

And yet, however much I may not want to look at that side of human nature, there *is* a kind of joy over the fall of our enemies, or over those whom we perceive to be enemies of humanity or of the planet. Mark and I enjoy this kind of catharsis whenever we watch a typical Hollywood movie where the terrible bad guys “get it” in the end. And yet we know it is not real – that all the blood is fake, and that these are just actors. Can we not see the Purim story in the same way? I think it is because the Purim story is part of our *sacred* story, *and* part of an important synagogue ritual, that its violence and seeming delight in vengeance is more disturbing than the much more realistic-looking violence in any film.

In the traditional way of chanting the Megillah – at least in the Ashkenazi tradition – each verse, and especially each chapter of the Megillah ends with a musical phrasing that sounds “unresolved.” As I was practicing and practicing my chanting in preparation for last night, it struck me that the musical mode is trying to convey a kind of truth about life for Jews in the Diaspora. Yes, we survived this time – but what about next time?

And yet life for Jews under their own sovereignty in the State of Israel has its uncertainty as well. At least as much so! A colleague of mine recently wrote about how uncomfortable the Book of Esther made her from a feminist point of view. How much better was Moses’ way to power, she wrote, confronting Pharaoh head-on, rather than having to resort to deception and the self-objectification, like Esther! At first I felt that I heartily agreed with her. But then I began to think about what self-rule really means in the real world. Having to make decisions about power in situations where there is no real “good” solution, to make deals with “the enemy of my enemy,” etc. Self-rule can be just as difficult and demeaning (or at least soul-imperiling) as the subversive path to power when under the thumb of others.

Well, what can we do as a species, but stumble the best we can towards the light? May the day soon come when we *all* (and all God’s creatures) will know “light and happiness, joy and honor.” In the meantime, for those who so choose, we have Shabbat, our small “taste of the world to come.”



Windows of the western wall of Temple Beth El, Fall River, lit up with the afternoon light.