

Purim Carnival

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I do believe that the core principles of all religions are virtually the same. They may have different ways of describing the ultimate power, force, or energy that many call God. They all agree on the importance and priority of being a good person, being considerate to others, and trying to make the world a better, more meaningful and spiritual place. But of course, between and within the world's religions there are very different practical, cultural, and theological ways of going about achieving this dual relationship that we call *Bein Adam LaMakom* (between humanity and God) and *Bein Adam LeHavero* (between people and their "friends"). Most obviously, not one of them seems capable of agreeing who "friends" are, and very few succeed in living up to their own ideals!

I do not want to be diverted into writing about the failures of religions. But I am fascinated by the similarities and differences that usually can be put down to what we call cultural and historical factors. All religions have days of happiness, sadness, fasting, celebration, atonement, and forgiveness.

Judaism adapted the Mesopotamian harvest festivals. It turned Shappatu into the idea of Shabbat and celebrated it on Saturday. Christians liked the idea, but intentionally switched it to Sunday. And Muslims followed with Friday. Judaism and Christianity both have customs of penitence and self-denial. Elul in August gets us ready for the High Holy Days. Then between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur we have the Ten Days of Repentance. That is followed by the festival of Sucot when, in addition to eating in the Sucah, we wave palm branches as part of the Four Plants. When it ends, we have the lively celebration of Simhat Torah. Judaism waves palms in the autumn, but Christians wave palms in the spring.

Perhaps in Christianity's early days some Bishop got confused between Tabernacles and Easter. Just as I am inclined to think that calling Jesus a Nazarene had something to do with confusing him with the Nazirites, as much as coming from a town called Nazareth (as opposed to Bethlehem). But then religious traditions often embrace confusion. Was the mountain called Sinai, Horeb, or the Mountain of God? Or maybe waving palms at Easter was just another example of trying to be different.

There are examples of coincidence. Like Hanukah and Yuletide, or Carnival and Purim. Carnival, Carnevale (goodbye to meat in Latin), originated as a farewell to meat, before the Christian period of mourning and abstinence called Lent. Lent is also known as Shrovetide, old English for Time of Forgiveness. To parallel ours, I think, at a different time of the year. Perhaps to get it over and done with before harvest time.

The most famous carnival is that of Venice, with Rio de Janeiro a close second. They are gaudy, riotous, and colorful affairs, with an abundance of drink, food, and sex. Casanova's favorite stalking time! Big tourist

attractions now. Carnivals often involved mock battles; social satire and mockery of authorities; weird displays of large noses, bellies, mouths, and phalluses, and of animal bodies; abusive language and degrading acts; depictions of death; and a general reversal of everyday rules and norms. When Lent it is over, the Christians celebrate the festival of Easter with its cute little bunny rabbits and Easter eggs—usually at about the time when we celebrate Passover/Pesah. And as it records the crucifixion which is hardly a happy day in itself. There are those on our side too who might argue that the hard slog of getting our homes ready for Pesah, might just as well be Lent.

Drink and food are features of Purim too. The Bible talks about feasting, giving gifts to friends and the poor and reading the Megilah. But I am convinced that the excesses, the masks mocking the authorities and the riotous behavior owe more to Christian revelry than Mordecai and Esther. Given that society always advances in cycles, the more licentious the carnivals became, the more the Church and the authorities sought to ban or suppress them. I think we could do with a bit of that, the way Purim now often manifests itself in many ultra-Orthodox enclaves. But then I always was a bit of a killjoy (to some, an admirer of moderation to others).

Another feature of Lent in Christian countries is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, which lasts six weeks. It is when you see people walk around with crosses of ash daubed on their foreheads. It isn't always precise. This year it fell on Valentines day.

The official version is that Ash Wednesday derives its name not from a tree called the ash, but from the placing of repentance ashes on the foreheads of participants to remind its faithful of the biblical words: "Repent, and remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The ashes were often prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations, which must have been preserved, the way many of us throw our used lulavim onto the top of the ark in our synagogues. You see Palm Sunday is a Christian feast that falls on the Sunday before Easter and commemorates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, where everyone conveniently was waving palm fronds to shade his way. Were they keeping them handy since Sucot? Very confusing—but then isn't it all?

Now we celebrate Purim and look forward to celebrating Pesah. Ash Wednesday looks backwards to the happy time of the Carnival. Although some might argue that the month's worth of hard grind and slog preparing our homes for Pesah, might be the equivalent of suffering during Lent.

But I have another theory. I think there is another connection between Purim and Ash Wednesday. Yes! Wood and trees! Ash Wednesday could be named after the Ash tree. Trees play an important part in Christian culture. What with its yew trees, mistletoe, holly, and Xmas trees. Ash wood as every baseball fan knows is also the ideal wood for baseball bats. Who knows perhaps early Christians invented the game or filched it off the pagans. Was that the link? Games? Fun?

And there's another tree link. Purim celebrates hanging Haman and his sons on a tree, eytz. Which could have been a scaffold, a kind of cross, or an actual

tree. Perhaps those trees were also used by the Romans to hang their victims on. Back to Christianity. And they were burnt after the bodies were taken down (Deut. 21:23). But I wonder if there were ash trees in the Middle East in those days, anybody? I have my doubts.

Either way, the tree of Purim and the tree of Ash Wednesday may be related cousins in the way that many religions and religious customs are. Perhaps the tree, like the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, is really a sign to warn us against making the wrong decisions. To stop us being so mean to each other. Or being forced into conflicts we never wanted to get involved in, in the first place. To enjoy happy days by being nice to everyone, instead of rolling drunk in the gutter or celebrating orgies. And, like the parable of the trees and the bramble (Judges 9), to teach us a little humility too.

Now this, ladies and gentlemen, is what we call Purim Torah. Happy Purim, everyone.