

Poor Him

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Purim. Poor Him. But "poor" who? Ahasuerus the drunken incompetent sop of a passive king? Vashti the deposed queen? Perhaps all the virgins corralled into the king's harem? Esther, the Metoo# nice Jewish girl who had to sleep with the king and face the chance that if she failed to please him she would be denied the starring role and end up an extra in the King's seraglio? Or Mordechai whose refusal to bow to Haman (thus offending the express command of the King) and disobeying the king's command not to appear at court in sackcloth, put the whole of the Jewish community at risk? Should we feel sorry for Bigtan and Teresh the incompetent plotters? Or is Haman, who overreached in his quest for power, driven by ambition and hatred, ended with his ten sons strung up on a scaffold? Take your pick. And people do.

Whether you believe it actually happened or not, the message of Purim is that people screw up, life is unpredictable. It can suck. Even if we put our trust in God, who is not mentioned in the text but works behind the scenes, we still have to do our part.

Purim is named after the lottery of life. Even those who think they can see it in the stars, the cards, the crystal ball, financial algorithms, academic hothouses, even wonder Rebbes, know full well no one ever gets everything right all of the time. We rise and fall, succeed and fail. Yet often and against the odds, we manage to overcome and survive. That is life. And we have to make the best of it.

I get really annoyed by those hyper-sensitive self-flagellating Jews who look at the story of Purim and feel ashamed of what they see as Jewish violence. All those poor Persian anti-Semites killed over two days. Haman strung up with his sons. How could we be so cruel as to want to survive by killing those who want to kill us? Bloody Zionists!!

First of all, for goodness sake, it was two and a half thousand years ago! Let's examine the facts such as they were. It was Haman who started it by being an ambitious, intolerant, prejudiced bully. He persuaded the king that Jews were dangerous aliens got him to agree to kill them all, every single one of them, and confiscate their property. Wouldn't you think we had a right to defend ourselves? After all Jewish law allows for killing in self-defense! Were we supposed to just lie down and allow ourselves to be exterminated?

It is true I do not like the expression "kill men, women and children" which is used by both sides and indeed is a phrase common throughout the ancient world. But this was a common way of expressing deterrent (not unlike dropping an Atomic bomb on whoever is down below, men, women, and children). And one should not confuse hyperbole with fact. In the way that Canaanites survived and thrived for hundreds of years despite a biblical command to get rid of them.

As for killing sons of traitors, our own king Zedekiah was forced to watch his sons killed by the Babylonians before they put his eyes out. It was the law of the jungle then. A thousand years later Genghis Khan and Atilla the Hun did the same as they invaded territories. Not to mention what the Germans to children in our era. Why even today Mexican drug kings have the offspring of their competitors killed.

When Esther got the King to understand the enormity of his actions, he could not rescind the signed and sealed law. He was supposed to be infallible. That in itself was and the height of irrationality. Infallibility is a dangerous dogma. The best he could do was to decree that the Jews were allowed to defend themselves. In doing so he was in effect saying in public that he had changed his mind and would rather not have people killed.

No one forced those subjects who took him at his first word to attack the Jews. If they did, it was because they wanted to for their nefarious reasons. In fact, those Persian supremacist maniacs amounted to a relatively small percentage of the population. Professor Google gives the population of the empire at that time as around 56 million. In Shushan, the capital on the first day 500 were killed and on the second day 300. Across an empire stretching from India to the Mediterranean only 75,000 chose to fight and die. This confirms that prejudice is usually worse in the rural areas than the metropolitan. Even so, it palls into insignificance compared with what Assad has been doing these past eight years in Syria. And don't ask why the Megilah contradicts itself and says that no one stood up against the Jews. The Walking Dead perhaps or perhaps it means that anyone who is so prejudiced, is a nobody!

Of course, we celebrate surviving genocide. So you would think that the whole of the Jewish community. They would be united in respect and admiration for Esther and Mordechai. But don't you believe it. They were as divided against themselves then as nowadays. When Mordechai tried to get the Jews to agree to celebrate Purim is says in the last sentence of the Megilah that "Mordechai was acceptable to most Jews." Most? No all? Can you believe it? Why it's like nowadays, Bernie Sanders and the left oppose Israel defending itself against those who want to destroy it! What the heck is wrong with us? If anyone is poor in Poor Him it is those nominal, alienated Jews themselves!

I suppose I can take comfort from the fact that in the three hundred years before Purim the Jews were divided into two Kingdoms that often went to war against each other. At least that's not happening now. Perhaps that's why we are commanded to drink on Purim, make merry, give presents and charity. To show that the way to respond to hatred, after it has been neutralized, is to try to be nice and kind and not let it eat us up. Getting a little drunk is one way of forgetting how divided we are.

And as a Purim postscript for those of you who will encounter hordes of drunken revelers.

The rabbis of the Talmudic era said that a person can be judged by how he handles three things, *BeKiso*, *Bekoso* *uBeKa'aso*. His pocket (his money), his cup and his anger. We should be charitable, drink in moderation and not lose self-control. Hatred or anger destroys objectivity. Drunkenness diminishes one's dignity. And failing to be charitable undermines one's humanity. Everything in moderation, but don't expect everyone to agree. Poor Them.

Happy Purim and don't let the virus get you!