

Purim 2011

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

At the time of Purim, Persia was the most cultured, technologically advanced, and powerful state in the Middle East, two and a half thousand years ago. Then came Rome, Christianity, and Islam. The Jews were omnipresent and persistent, influencing, working behind the scenes; never the Oscar winners, but always the nominees for supporting role, with a consistency that in the end compensated for never making the top spot. If there is a lesson to be learnt from that, it is that sometimes the little man overcomes and survives the big bully. This year that is particularly relevant. As are some other lessons that jump out of the pages of the Megillah.

King Achashverosh was a typical Oriental ruler—autocratic, self-centered, self-indulgent. By turns blustering and arrogant, then fumbling, juvenile, and pathetic. Surrounded by his seven inner advisors, who only told him what they thought he wanted to hear, he was effectively insulated from his people. One could only gain access to him by making it through a series of courtyards; even then if you got there, a flick of his scepter and you were a dead person.

His idea of buying loyalty was throwing huge, booze-washed parties. That was, and indeed is, the way in the East, the equivalent of the Bahraini king's cash to all citizens or the Saudi king's massive handouts to ensure loyalty. Achashverosh does at least realize the first law of politics: "It's the economy, stupid." He uses tax reductions to win support both at the start and at the end of the story. Doubtless he was utterly convinced his people loved him.

The Talmud debates as to whether he was right to give a party to the provincial grandees first and then, only after having secured the fringes, to turn to securing his home base in Shushan the capital, or whether he should have done it the other way round. Just as Ga Duffy, who behaves just as I imagine Achashverosh did, secured Tripoli first, he knew he could rely on the loyalty of his own local tribesmen because they all had their snouts in the pig swill (sorry to offend good Muslims, I should rather have said "oil wells"). And I have no doubt that, like current Persia today he'd have had no compunction in torturing to death anyone who dared challenge him or bombing the guts out of peaceful civilians.

Why did Achashverosh give the provinces a feast lasting 180 days and the capital only seven? Perhaps it was a numbers game, the empire stretched from India to Egypt, after all, and I suspect he offered a rolling buffet as each delegation arrived at the end of a long and tiring journey. His aim obviously was to impress, to show off, and to overpower. As now, that was how excessive consumer extravagance proclaimed a man's bank balance, driving around Shushan in Lamborghinis, princes of the realm demanding cash for influence (oops that was Britain, not Persia). But there is no reference in the story to his trying to impress with wisdom, culture, or technology.

The huge feasts and display of wealth, reminds me of the late Shah's massive celebration of 2,500 years of the Persian Empire at Persepolis in 1971. He was not secure either. Achashverosh was nervous about insurrection. Not just because in Bigtan and Teresh he had evidence of plots against him, but also in Queen Vashti's rebellion against his authority. He was the first recorded example of a male chauvinist being challenged by woman power. Just look at that pathetic declaration "that every man should rule his own house and only speak his mother tongue". As if an Imperial fiat is going to have any such effect. What a pointless desire to show who is boss in his own home that cannot but indicate a profound sense of insecurity.

Indeed, insecurity is there all the time as a subtext: Esther's insecurity about her position, the Jews about theirs, Haman's about his position, and the king's idiotic insistence that he cannot contradict himself and therefore every instruction he gives cannot be withdrawn but has to stand. It reminds me of the Catholic Church making papal infallibility a dogma in the nineteenth century just as Darwin, Huxley, and modern science were making monkeys out of religious fundamentalism.

We all have our insecurities, but the key word of the Megillah is "Venahafoch", meaning "And it was overturned". What appears an obstacle or a disaster at one moment, can change overnight. Who would have thought at the height of Nazi power or Stalin's iron grip that the whole efficient overpowering machine would crumble? As Lenin once said, "Sometimes decades pass and nothing happens, and then sometimes weeks pass and decades happen."

Purim reminds us that what was true then is as true today, whether it is an evil cruel regime, an overconfident or an overindulgent one, the world of human affairs, the Wheel of Fortune, and God make sure that things do not stay the same forever. As King Solomon says in Kohelet, Ecclesiastes (11:9) "If you only indulge and follow your heart and your eyes, know that the day of reckoning will come." He might well have been thinking of Middle Eastern potentates.