

Purim

Purim is all about appearances and how misleading they can be (disguise).

Normally we like to think that “what you see is what you get”. But the fact is that things are very rarely what they seem. A politician on the rise will say whatever needs to be said to gain support and cash. Money and taxes always play an important role in any campaigns. The Purim story includes all of these, political rivalries, manipulation, plots, seduction, alcohol and bribery.

The late and great Rav Moshe Shapiro of Brisk, Be'er Yaakov, and Etz Chaim liked to see Israeli politics in the story; secularists versus the religious and political corruption. He laced his Purim Torah with barbs.

The Jewish Agency, the Sochnut, has always been an object of derision ever since the state was founded in 1948; what was effectively the representative body of Jews in Palestine should have simply closed up shop and handed the keys to the elected government of Israel. But it remained a weak duplication of other institutions purporting to represent Israel's link to World Jewry. It was given the task of encouraging and integrating Aliyah, immigration and the integration of new arrivals. Why you need a bloated bureaucracy for that, Lord only knows. All the more so since money was so short in the early years of the State that many would be immigrants were actually discouraged until funds were available. Nowadays it is clear that private enterprise usually does a much more efficient job for less.

The Jewish Agency used to send poorly qualified shelichim, representatives, around the world on expense-paid junkets, or to spend a few years outside Israel ostensibly working for the State but in reality amassing material goods that were still difficult to get back home. Yes, of course there were remarkable exceptions, but they only proved the rule.

I experienced all this at firsthand in education and communal affairs in the UK. We would tell jokes at their expense. Like the prize cow from Kibbutz Deganiah that was sent to Africa to show them how advanced Israeli agriculture was. Once there she just sat down in the field all day long, chewing the cud. The complaints started coming in, so the Head of the Cowshed went out to see what the Africans were complaining about, and he saw they were right. “Why is it that back home you were the most productive cow in Israel, but here you're a lazy bum?” he asked. The cow replied, “In Israel I was a pioneer, here I am a Shaliach.” Or the Time and Motion study to make the Jewish Agency more efficient. The first bureaucrat interviewed explained that he came in to work at 8:00 AM, read the Haaretz newspaper till 11:00 AM, had coffee from 11:00 to 12:00, read the afternoon paper, Maariv, until 3:00, and then went home. The second fellow said exactly the same thing. So they fired one of them because there were two people doing the same job.

Working for the Jewish Agency was a sinecure, a reward for hacks, placemen, and political also-rans. Over the years they tinkered here, it merged with

the World Zionist Organization, but it still remained an incompetent and virtually irrelevant institution overlapping and interfering with legitimate government bodies. And still the money poured in, sometimes less, sometimes more, from government and abroad.

A recent survey of the Jewish Agency has revealed that its top pen pushers get paid hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, while its chief gets nearly three-quarters of a million. And for what exactly? No one really knows. They'll bravely try to justify themselves with puffery of course. Who can't? It's just a dinosaur, a remnant of the old command and control approach of failed systems.

Here's an example of Rav Shapiro's Purim Torah. In the Book of Esther they set up a whole government department to gather in virgins to find a new wife for the king. They actually do find one, Esther, and they crown her. But then look at Esther 2:19. Why does it say, "And when they went out to gather virgins a second time"? If the department set up to do a job has done it, there's no need for it, so surely you close it down. But not in Persia and not in Israel, and that's the only reason the Jewish Agency still exists. Unless of course it takes on the obligation on Purim to give presents to friends and thinks this ought to go on all year round to anyone employed by it!

That of course was fifty years ago. Things have improved. Israel's economy has escaped the deadening hand of pioneer left-wing doctrine (although in enriching a few well connected families, mafia bosses, and corrupt oligarchs it seems eager to imitate everything that's wrong with Russian society). And actually nowadays anyone who has experienced American bureaucracy will confirm that it's far worse than Israel's which has improved dramatically. Sadly the Jewish Agency has not.

And this, my friends explains why it is so important to drink on Purim. Because otherwise you might get depressed and start crying, which is why we get dressed up—because as we all know, beneath the clown's makeup, there's a tear.