

Purim or Poor them.

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Purim is the happiest and craziest day in the Jewish calendar and the only festival that celebrates an event in the Diaspora. But is it really?

According to tradition, the story of Purim and the Book of Esther date to the early Persian period somewhere in the 5th century BCE. The story is of a naïve, drunken, male chauvinist, incompetent Persian king. He rules over an empire that extended from India to Africa but has no control over his wife. He relies on a series of different advisors who can twist him around their fingers. And issues pathetic Royal decrees insisting that all wives should obey their husbands and only speak their native tongue. Ahasuerus, otherwise known as Achashverosh, is gulled by a wicked Haman into agreeing to kill all the Jews of the Persian Empire. But the evil plan is thwarted by the combined stratagems of Queen Esther (who hides her Jewish ancestry) and her uncle Mordechai.

It is in fact the first example of anti-Semitism. Hating and wanting to destroy Jews for absolutely no logical reason other than that they are different and have different ways of life. The bad guy of the story, Haman, is called the Agagite. And Agag was an Amalekite king mentioned in the Bible. The author obviously wanted to make a connection with the first attack by the Amalekites on the Israelites, vulnerable as they left Egypt. The Amalekites were not being threatened so that the attack on the exhausted stragglers was particularly despicable. The Torah commanded the Israelites to never forget their enemies.

Did the story of Esther and Mordechai ever take place? Some have argued that this is all about the rivalry of the Babylonian gods Marduk and Ishtar, as mentioned in the Gilgamesh Epic. Of course, names do not necessarily date anything. No more than someone called Mary in the USA today has any connection with the Virgin Mary of Christianity.

The story raises all kinds of questions. The fact is that the first Persian king, Cyrus (600-530 BCE) decreed that all religions should be tolerated and respected throughout his empire. His declaration, the Cyrus Stele, can be seen today in the British Museum. Although succeeding kings varied in the degree of their support of Jewish communities both in Babylon and Judea, there is no evidence of a Persian king wanting to exterminate the Jews. Being different was never a problem so long as you accepted the political authority. Indeed, this policy continued under Alexander the Great when he conquered the Persian Empire. This is why it may have been a story concocted much later that reflected tensions between Jews and Greeks two thousand years ago.

The timeline as given in the Biblical Book of Esther is also problematic. According to the text Mordechai arrived in Babylon with the first exile in 609 BCE in the reign of the Judean king Yechonia, which was

well before the final destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BCE. Opinions vary as to who Achashverosh might have been. The earliest candidate would be Xerxes (518-465 BCE) followed by Artaxerxes (who ruled 465-424 BCE) when Mordechai would have been well over one hundred years old. It also might even have been Darius II (423-404) who wrote to the priests of Elephantine in Upper Egypt, ordering them to stop harassing the Judean garrison and allow them to keep the Passover unmolested.

Purim and the Megillah were challenged in the Jewish world on theological and political grounds. The Megillah does not mention the name of God. The Jewish characters are not shown performing any Jewish religious rituals. The heroine is a Jewish woman married to a heathen king (and had to agree to a one-night-stand to get there).

The Book of Esther itself tells how after the crisis was over, Esther had to issue repeated decrees calling on reluctant Jews to keep Purim. And that Mordechai's authority was not accepted by everyone in the community. The Talmud concedes that Purim first was established in Shushan and only later throughout the Jewish diaspora (Megillah 7a). Ben Sira, writing in the Land of Israel around 200 BCE, did not mention Mordecai and Esther in his list of ancient Israelite heroes (Ecclesiasticus 49).

The Talmud says that the eighty-five Men of the Great Assembly challenged Mordecai and Esther's request for the establishment of the holiday (Yerushalmi Megillah 70b). Mordechai was blamed for not having bowed down to Haman. Such recklessness endangered the entire Jewish people. After all, Mordechai's ancestor Jacob bowed to Haman's ancestor Esau (Yalkut Shimoni Esther 1054).

In Roman times many rabbis, apologetically thought it was inappropriate to celebrate Jews killing non-Jews for fear that this might be taken as encouraging the rebellion against Roman authority. On May 29th 408 CE, the Roman emperors Honorius, in the West, and Theodosius II in the East passed a law forbidding Jewish revelry on Purim because it appeared to be a mockery of Christian symbolism. They assumed that burning an effigy of Haman was really a substitute for burning their Christ.

By the end of the Talmudic era, the vast majority of Jews had willingly and lovingly adopted Purim and the Book of Esther entered the Canon. They had added blessings whose wording stated that Purim was Divinely Ordained on a par with Chanukah. Doubtless, the carnival tradition at this time of the year in Christianity is where we got the idea of getting dressed up in disguise. As well as an opportunity to let our hair down.

Some later rabbis disapproved of celebrating Purim altogether (Sheilot u'Teshuvot Radvaz 1:284). Others objected to the drunken and disorderly celebrations that often went too far. The Hassidic communities celebrated and still do without much restraint. The Lithuanians have always been more reserved. The one thing they all agree on is the generous disbursement of charity, food, and drunk.

In the 19th century, some Reform congregations in Central Europe and the

United States abolished Purim. Abraham Geiger, the leading intellectual of early Reform, referred to the Megillah as a mean-spirited book, encouraging violence against one's enemies and regretted its canonization. In the 1930s, Purim began to creep back into the Reform congregation in Berlin. Emancipation and integration had proven to be illusory dreams. Haman had returned in the form of Adolph Hitler.

Today sadly, anti-Semitism has metastasized. Jews are again being accused of divided loyalties in precisely the same language that Haman used. Poor him. Poor them, apologies for human beings. We need to be reminded of our history of fighting back. And, given our fractious, divided Jewish world in which people like to claim they are better Jews than everyone else, the lesson is that salvation can come from many different sources, human and Divine. Not just from the pious or the professionals!

We should be grateful, for life and for our good fortune. This is why we celebrate Purim by being kind to our neighbors, giving charity to the poor, and being happy, not sad. In the popular Latin phrase "Illegitimi non-carborundum" or "Do not let the bastards get you down."

Happy Purim.