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## A GUIDE TO PURIM

by Irving Greenberg

### A. IS PURIM FOR REAL?

The holiday of Purim is one of the two major holidays added to the Jewish calendar in the late or post-Biblical period to celebrate an all too rare victory in the history of the Jews. (The other holiday is Chanukah which commemorates the Hasmonean victory over the Hellenists and Greeks in the 2nd century B.C.E.). The story of Purim is told in the Book of Esther. This scroll made it into the Bible while the various accounts of Chanukah did not enter into the accepted canon of Sacred Scripture. There is some irony in this because the historicity of Chanukah is unchallenged, but some scholars question whether the Purim events ever occurred. These scholars argue from the nature of Purim (its festivity - carnival - drinking overtones) that it is a Jewish adaptation of folk spring festivals, i.e., the "feast of fools" (or Mardi-gras/Fasching) traditions which abound in many cultures in which people 'cut loose' after a long winter's repression.

Those who uphold the historical character of Purim tend to date it to the reign of Artaxerxes II of Persia (404-361 BCE). True, no definitive external proof of the Purim events has been established. But for those for whom Biblical authority is not enough, we may invoke Elie Wiesel's dictum: Some stories are true although they never occurred; while other events happened but they are not true. In this spirit, the story of Purim is all too familiar - except maybe for the happy ending.

An ambitious courtier, Haman, uses the fear and hatred of the Jews as outsiders (see Esther, Chapter 3, v.8), and the vanity and cupidity of the emperor to instigate a genocide of the Jews. The decree is promulgated; lots (Purim) are cast to pick the dread date and it comes out: Adar 14, The knives are sharpened for the Jews; the Jews weep, mourn and await their inevitable destruction or expulsion. This time, however, there is a switch, thanks to some clever work by Mordecai and Esther. Esther uses all her womanly wiles, sex and tricks, on the fatuous King. Haman is overthrown and the Jews given the right to defend themselves. In a cruel showdown, the enemies of the Jews are smashed; thousands are killed and Haman and his sons executed. Jewish feasting and celebration follow and a decision is made to make the date of the attempted genocide a permanent celebration of this narrow escape and great triumph. Contemporary Jews who have lived through a period in which the genocide was successfully carried out can appreciate the delirious joy with which Jews greeted the event of stopping the decree.

### B. THE PROBLEMATICS OF PURIM

The Purim story is full of moral and religious ambiguities and the history of the holiday shows that it was not easily accepted.

In recent times, the execution of Vashti for refusing to appear at Ahashverosh's drunken celebration (see Esther, Chapter I) is seen by some feminists as pure male chauvinism. This impression is strengthened by the Rabbinic tradition that she was ordered to appear nude, and that is why she declined to come. It should be added here that Rabbinic tradition has it that Kashti was cruel and arbitrary with her own servants and that she declined to pose nude not out of modesty - but out of vanity. She had a skin infection at the time and refused to be seen except at her best. Still, latter-day feminists have taken up Vashti's cause, seeing her as victim of drunken, oppressive males. Esther suffers by this standard since she is correspondingly seen as the 'scab' who took Vashri's place. Adding insult to injury, she won her queenship in a beauty contest and used traditional 'feminine' wiles to save her people (posing as the demure, retiring bedroom/kitchen wife rather than fighting the system). Here ultra-traditional elements join in the reservations about Esther. Clearly, Esther is not the 'right' heroine for a simple piety tale. She wins her place by sleeping with the boss (Esther, Ch. 2) and proving to be more attractive (sexy?) than the other woman. (Again a disclaimer: Rabbinical tradition has it that she was quite plain looking - but won it on character and personality. The Rabbis' logic: A jaded king had all the sex and stimulation he wanted. Esther's difference must be in her character - and God's grace). Still, Esther clearly played her attractiveness to the hilt and probably aroused the King's sexual jealousy in her feasts for him and Haman. (Compare Esther, Ch. 5, v. 2-8; Ch. 7, v. 2-8, especially verse 8). Besides, Esther has the ultimate disqualification for a religious heroine: she is married to a shaygitz! (gentile). The Talmud tells us that there was great resistance to adding this holiday to the sacred days calendar and it took a special convocation of the Men of the Great Assembly (85 sages including 30 prophets) to find some Biblical validation for the holiday. (see Yerushalm; Megillah, Chapter 1 Mishnah 5). Further proof of the folk nature of this holiday is seen by many scholars in the traditions of observing Purim day. It is celebrated on Adar 14 in regular cities; Adar 15 (so-called Shushan Purim) in cities with ancient fortress walls around them and, optionally, on the 11, 12, or 13 Adar in rural areas where the date was linked with farm market days in order to get a good crowd for the Megillah reading. (compare Mishnah in TB Megillah, Chapter 1, Mishnah 1, with Book of Esther Ch. 9, v. 18-19). Some scholars argue the multiplicity of dates shows that local folk created the holiday on a variety of days before the Rabbis accepted and then standardized the day.

Other reservations: Esther at first seems to vacillate about trying to save the Jews for fear of being executed by the King (Esther, Ch. 4, v. 8-11) until she is sharply reprovved by Mordecai. (Esther, Ch. 4, V. 13-14 ("Do not imagine you will escape to the

King's court from the fate of all the Jews. If you remain silent at this time, the Jews will be relieved and saved from some other source, but you and your family will perish. Who knows if it was not for the sake of this moment that you attained the queenship?") Liberal's sensibilities are offended by the destruction of Haman and his family and by the Empire-wide war of the Jews which led to heavy loss in lives. Traditionalists are disturbed that the Scroll of Esther nowhere mentions God's name or credits God with the rescue. What kind of attitude is that for a good Jewish book to have? Finally, the traditions of the holiday were not the decorous, respectable ones many people associate with religion. Purim celebration includes satire, parody, masquerading and - a commandment to get drunk! Martin Luther reportedly wanted to eliminate the Book of Esther from the Bible as a secular tale lacking in piety and 'spirituality'. Apparently, the holiday of Purim faced the same opposition in its earlier days.

Yet, the Talmud (in Shabbat 88a) hails the acceptance of Purim as an event on a par with the Sinai Revelation. On the verse in Esther (Ch. 11, V.I) "the Jews validated and accepted (these days of Purim)". The Talmud comments: (by accepting Purim) the Jews validated what they had already accepted - at Sinai. In fact, says the Talmud, we are bound to Jewish faith today by the acceptance of Purim rather than by the Sinai acceptance. Why?

#### C. THE RELIGIOUS REVELATION OF PURIM

The holiday of Purim represents a great step forward in the history of Revelation and in the sophistication of Jewish religious understanding. Unlike the earlier traditions of Exodus, the redemption from Egypt which was accompanied by unique phenomena of a miraculous nature; unlike even the later victory of Chanukah which had at least one extraordinary sign attributed to it (the oil which burned for eight days), Purim appears to be a purely natural, man-made phenomenon. It was achieved by court intrigue and bedroom politics. Its heroine was not a larger than life 'superhero' but a person who at first was afraid for her own skin and who used her 'feminist' wiles because it was the only technique she had - and the only one that could have worked. Like all achievements in the real world, Purim was an admixture of moral ideal and moral compromise which upsets perfectionists and religious 'purists'. These people objected that the holiday was not given in the Torah. It lacked the overtly 'supernatural'; it was flawed by evil and human frailty and achieved by morally ambiguous methods. It would have been easy to dismiss Purim as secular; as not sanctioned by God - or to explain it away as accident. This is expressed in the absence of God's name in the Scroll.

However, the people and ultimately the Rabbis, showed their grasp of the way we must come to understand God's operation in history in the 'post modern' age. They realized that God operates not as deus ex machina, but in the center of life as the one who is present in

the "natural" and in the redemptive process in which the human is co-partner. The Exodus model of Revelation is 'flawed' in that the saved humans are overawed, or 'coerced' by the mighty redemption. Says the Talmud: it was if God took them to Sinai, held the mountain over their heads and said: 'Accept my Torah! If not, I will bury you. (Shabbat 88A). Thus, if Jews fail to live up to the covenant, they can always claim they were coerced into accepting God's revelation and commandments. In Purim, however, the mature Jewish people rejecting the need for 'audio-visual' fireworks, passed up the chance to dismiss the event as natural and random and instead, discerned God's presence in their history. This understanding enables us to encounter God in the reality situation where limited, flawed human beings are the carriers of redemption, and moral ambiguity dilutes but does not deny the triumph of good. This is Revelation for our time.

The Talmud finds the Biblical source for Esther in the Deuteronomy verse (Ch. 31, v. 18) Anochi haster asteer" - "I will hide my face on that day" (Asteer is a Hebrew pun on Esther). In the hiddenness of God, in a time of 'eclipse of God', we look for His redemption in the triumph of good even though it does not meet our pre-set notions of purity and perfection. To pass that up is to ask to be back in the infancy of religion when the answers are crystal clear and miraculous and Redemption is untouched by human hands. That is no longer available. If we insist on having it, we will end up perceiving ourselves as living in a world abandoned by God, when in fact God is the Divine redeeming presence found in the partial, flawed actions of humans. The truth of this salvation eludes both those who explain away all as coincidence and random and those who insist on 'out of the world' revelation.

Purim is the holiday for our time, the model for our experience of Redemption in the rebirth of Israel. Here, too, the redemption is flawed - by the narrow escape, by the great loss of life on both sides, by the officially 'irreligious' nature of the leadership, by the mixed motives and characters of those who carried it out, by the human suffering it brings in its wake. Here, too, the 'purists' (Neturey Karta) wait for a 'supernatural' miracle; some (Agudat Israel) object to the religiously non-observant admixture; some (new left) are crushed by the morally disturbing Arab refugee problem. Doctrinaire feminists get hung up on the 'feminine' techniques of Esther; doctrinaire ideologues are put off by the moral compromises necessarily involved in Israel's alliances or or by the fact it now gets support from the establishment, thereby they miss the over-riding moral validity of the Purim and Israel events which occurred when the moral of the world needed such redemption at almost all costs. Similarly the Martin Luthers of the world are embarrassed by 'religious' miracles that cost blood and involve military efforts. Such groups allow serious flaws to obscure the fundamental validity of a divine but all too human redemption. The people, Israel, knew better then and now. In an imperfect world, we must be grateful for partial

redemption. Our celebration inspires us to perfect it even further.

The Purim model hints that as Jews come to embrace the religious revelation in the rebirth of Israel, it will constitute a new covenant acceptance on a par with Sinai. I would suggest that a Talmud written in our time would say that the previous Jewish covenant acceptance of Sinai was impugned by the mass destruction (on the grounds of Divine failure to live up to it), but in reaccepting the revelation of Israel reborn, contemporary Jews revalidated the ancient covenant. In fact, there is a way in which the contemporary redemption outranks Purim. Purim left Jews in exile; their fundamental position of powerlessness was unaffected. Yom Atzmaut (Israel Independence Day) brought us independence and a decisive shift in ability to protect ourselves. In this way, Yom Atzmaut is closer to Chanukah which upheld Jewish self-government. The Talmud suggests this is why Hallel (the hymns of praise) is sung on Chanukah but not on Purim. Of course, Israel's independence lacked one thing Chanukah did not lack: discovery of a large supply of oil. I've been convinced for years that if only Israel discovered a large supply of oil, the whole world would recognize it as a miracle, vote to uphold it and sing Hallel over it. In the absence of that 'miracle', it awaits maturation of religious insight to bestow on it the central dignity it deserves.

D. CELEBRATING PURIM

In the spirit of secularity with divine hiddenness at its core, the holiday of Purim is marked not as 'sacred time' (with prohibitions on work, creation, etc.) but by a spirit of secularity and natural joy. All men, women and children are commanded to celebrate this holiday because all Jews - men, women and children - were saved by the natural miracle of Purim. Therefore, women are obligated to hear the Megillah reading despite the fact that it is a positive commandment with a fixed time for observance. Halachically, women are usually excused from such observances - but not this time. Since women are obligated, the Talmud states they may read the Megillah for others, including men. It is a rare if unexercised religious role for women. (So much for the feminist put down of Purim!). Purim is a holiday you have to love. When else can you eat, drink (even get drunk!), send and receive gifts, make jokes and kid around, even have the Rabbi encourage you to make noise in the synagogue (at the proper time, that is) - and get mitzvah points for doing this

1. Purim opens on a somber note. Haman, who sought to mass murder innocent people is seen as the descendant - or ancestor - of Amalek, the people who attacked Israel in the desert, the symbol of cruelty and wantonness to the weak. Before we celebrate the defeat of the wicked, we must remember that "God (and God's people) has a war with Amalek and will not be at ease until Amalek is blotted out. (Deut. 25, 19). In this way, we pledge to work for the end of oppression of the weak everywhere. A temporary victory should not blind us to the persistence of evil in the world.

On the Sabbath before Purim (in 1976, March 13) the portion of the Torah dealing with Amalek (Deut. 25, 17-19) is read. The Haftorah deals with the same theme (1 Samuel 15). All Jews are commanded to remember Amalek and the war against it. This Sabbath is called the Sabbath of Remembrance (Shabbat Zachor). It is a special mitzvah of the Torah to be present and hear the reading and thus remember (cf. Shulchan Aruch, Chapter 605, Section 7).

Zachor is a mitzvah that has always made modern Jews uncomfortable. It offends our liberalism. One should forgive and forget. The demonism of our time which has murdered six million Jews and which contemplated with equanimity - or supports - the possibility of murdering three million more; which allows mass starvation or killing sometimes of diplomatic and strategic considerations and which faces the prospects of worldwide hunger in the seventies with equanimity; is the best rebuke to our moral paternalism. If you don't remember then you are part of the danger of repetition.

II. On the holiday itself, we gather to hear the story of Purim retold. The day is characterized by hilarity, fun and sharing pleasures with others. The Rabbis and the people established four mitzvot to cover all these activities. 1/ HEAR THE STORY:- We gather - men, women and children - to read or listen to the Megillah. This is done traditionally at night and again next morning. The reader reads the Megillah for the entire congregation. However, each person should listen quietly, carefully and intentionally, and thus fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the entire Megillah. It is preferable to hear the public reading because in this way, the miracle is publicly proclaimed. However, if one cannot be present in the synagogue or group, the Megillah may be read at home. The reader should use an actual kosher parchment scroll Megillah.

Before the Megillah is read, three blessings are sung by the reader. The blessings are for the commandment to read the Megillah, gratitude for the miracles done for our fathers and for us, and shecheyanu - gratitude that we have been kept alive to this day. The congregation listens silently and answers amen. Thereby, we express our intent to associate ourselves fully with what the reader is saying. You will note that the Megillah is folded like a letter from a relative telling the story of Purim (see Esther, ch. 9, v.26,29). The intent is to re-enact the story in all its drama. We should be depressed and frightened by the threat of genocide; anxious for Esther's strategy; and overjoyed at the sudden deliverance. We should be angered at Haman's viciousness (we boo, razz, etc.) and delighted at Mordecai's rise to power and his salvation of the Jews. (This is accomplished by the congregation joining in and exultantly chanting the verses of his rise to power (Esther, ch. 2, v.5; Ch. 3, v. 15,16; Ch. 10,v.3). This has given rise to an atmosphere which can only be compared to an old true-blue 'meller-drammer'. Haman Hardheart is booed wherever he is mentioned (by clacking groggers, blowing horns, firing cap pistols, stamping feet, etc.) Mordecai Milk-of -



kindness is saluted. Some have developed the custom of reading the Megillah with appropriate voices - snarling basso Haman (ha! ha! me proud beauty: I've come to foreclose the mortgage!) sweet soprano Esther, beamish baritone Mordecai, etc.

Before the reading of the Megillah, on the night of Purim, it is customary for all men over the age of twenty to donate three half-dollars to the synagogue in remembrance of the half-shekel given in ancient times to the Temple. These are used for charity.

2 - FUN AND PLEASURE: On the day of Purim, we celebrate with a festive meal (Purim Seudah). Hamantashen - tricorned dough cookies filled with poppy seed or prunes are eaten on this day. The meal should be eaten during the day so that it will clearly be a celebration of the holiday. We recite the prayer al hanissimin ('we thank you for the miracle') during the bentshen even if the meal is finished after dark. The whole family joins together to eat, drink and be joyful in every way. The Rabbis were so determined to celebrate that they instructed people to drink at least up to the point when they no longer can tell the difference between blessed Mordecai and accursed Haman. (Those Jews who can't tell the difference all year long are excused on Purim). Purim is a challenge to the "uptight" approach to religion. The excessive emphasis on decorum and propriety in the 'sacred precincts' of the synagogue is shattered by this outpouring of humor and emotion. It is a challenge to let go - which dramatizes the Torah's conception of man as a creature capable of the widest range of emotion and response. I am surprised that the liquor industry has not yet latched on to this natural sales event. I am disappointed that liquor sales do not soar more on Purim. We need more Jews to give their all for the cause!

We also celebrate with hilarity in the synagogue - including, of course, noise-making upon hearing Haman's name. We also do not fast or say eulogies on this day, so as not to spoil the atmosphere of joy. Similarly, the traditional penitential prayers (tachanun) and lamnatzeach are not said during daily services - as these are prayers of sadness.

Other elements of satire have been added. Purim nussach: The evening service is chanted with a medley of melodies which are taken from the more solemn holidays - and satirized here. Some use popular and folk melodies for the prayers to create the humorous musical effect. 'Purim Torah': in which learning and scholarship are burlesqued. Sample: the Megillah tells us that on the 15th of Adar the Jews found relief from their enemies). (Esther Ch. 9 v.16 - may oyvehem. In Hebrew, this can be read literally: Noah from their enemies). Question: what was Noah - a good man - (see genesis, Ch. 6, v.9) doing amidst their enemies? He should have been on the side of the Jews. Answer: the Rabbis commanded us to drink on Purim until we cannot tell the difference between blessed Mordecai and accursed Haman. Noah - that old rapsallion and drunkard

(see Genesis, Ch. 9, v. 21) was only too glad to get drunk on Purim - and then not knowing the difference, he got on Haman's side by error. 'Purim Kiddush is recited. It consists of sentences in which bits of of various verses are strung together in nonsense meanings. Verses run on into each other. Sample: Aleynu leshabeach la-adon/ Adon olam asher malach beterem Kol/Kol od baleyvav p'rimah, (Hatikvah) etc. Purim masquerades are also popular. Some congregations come to the Megillah reading in costumes. Purim shpielers go around to homes in costume, putting on little skits, and are rewarded with coins for charity.

The laughter and humor reaches surprising heights and forces us to consider the role of humor in religion in general. Purim is, of course, a put-on in many ways. The broad caricature of the Megillah; the humor and raucousness of the celebration, etc. However, the humor carries a religious message. The humor expresses our transcendence of un-redeemed reality - and our taking sanctity itself with a sense of limits. This prevents us from absolutizing the sacred. The unchecked tendency to respect religion, all too often leads to deifying the ritual and the form of God. If we take the sacred too solemnly, we are confusing our religious expression - which is relative and limited in truth - with the infinite God we really seek to serve.

There is another element involved - an element we can appreciate a bit more in the generation after the Holocaust. The humor is in part a defiance and an outcry. Is it not, in a sense, absurd that the genocide came so close? That a drunken, fatuous King could remove a ring, give an order and the Jews be threatened with genocide? Is it not ridiculous that but for Esther's politics and by that narrow margin, Jews were barely saved from total savagery? Does not this momentary confrontation with mass death strip the veil of rationality and moral calculation from off reality, exposing its tragic and outrageous nature? One can only respond with laughter and mockery and put on - satirizing God and the bitter joke this world threatens to become. It is enough to drive a person to drink! (We act this out). But as the hilarity reaches its climax we move beyond bitterness to humor. In laughing at our religious forms and at reality - we admit the fallibility of our religious hopes, but we affirm them too. In satire and humor, we puncture the pretensions of the moment and we live in a reality which transcends it. Thus we keep hope alive and the Messiah remains possible. Jews resorted to humor and satire to transcend even the Kingdom of Hell. (Auschwitz humor: Tired, exhausted prisoners are marched endlessly up and down in a mock parade designed to break them down. At each path they cross, they are required to remove hats and repeat after the guard the signpost full of pretentious names for miserable locations. Then they march back. At one corner, the guard shouts: Goering Strasse! The prisoners: Goering Strasse! At another. Guard: Goebbels Allee! Prisoners: Goebbels Allee! At another. Guard: Hitler Platz! Prisoners: Amen! Jews laughed - and outlived.

SHARING PLEASURE: No true Jewish simcha is complete without sharing it with friends - and with the needy. Accordingly,

the Rabbis instituted two other Purim commandments.

3. Shalach Manos (gift sending) - on Purim day, two portions or gifts (traditionally of ready-to-eat food) are sent to at least one friend (see Esther, Ch. 9, v.19). Of course, you may send gifts to more than one friend - if you have more than one. Spending some time making up the gifts, then going around and delivering them with the children is a marvelous family activity. It is all the more joyful as others give back or bring gifts and goodies.

4. Matanos laEvyonim - (gifts to the needy) - It is a separate and special mitzvah to give money or food to at least two poor persons on the day of Purim. If there are no poor people available on the spot, put the money aside on Purim and give it afterwards. An ideal way of fulfilling this mitzvah is to give a contribution to synagogue funds for direct food for the poor. It is a mitzvah to give as much as possible for gifts to the poor. Our own joy is not complete unless others share it also.

Purim is a marvelous holiday; joyful, secular yet religious, full of humor, gifts and charity. It is ideal for the entire family. Make it a family day in the synagogue and at the feast. It is a classic example of the way we can serve God in affluence and pleasure just as we once served primarily in poverty. Perhaps this is why one Talmudic Midrash tells us that in Messianic times, all the holidays will pass. Purim alone will endure and be celebrated. (Yerushalmi Megillah, Chapter 1, mishrah 5)