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Confronting Our Anger

Posted By Jill Jacobs On 12th March 2006 @ 17:50 In [Purim](#), [Adar I/II](#), [Genocide](#), [Violence](#) | [4 Comments](#)

Purim is, by general consensus, the most fun holiday of the Jewish calendar. After all, what could be better than a religiously-sanctioned day of cross dressing, mocking everyone and everything, and drinking scotch for breakfast?

Paradoxically, Purim is also the darkest holiday of the Jewish calendar. The biblical Book of Esther (aka the Megillah) tells the story of an attempt by Haman, an evil advisor to the Persian King Ahasueros, to destroy the Jewish people. Angry at Mordechai, a leader of the Jewish people, Haman persuades the king to issue a decree that on a particular day, the Persians should go out and massacre Jews throughout the land. Esther, the Jewish queen, exposes this plot and saves the Jewish people. Haman and his sons then die on the gallows originally constructed for Mordechai (or?more probably, the crucifix, as hanging as we know it was not commonly practiced when the book of Esther was written).

So far so good: if the story had ended there, we might shudder a bit at the apparent justification of capital punishment, but we would at least be able to understand Haman?s death as a tit-for-tat response to an attempted mass murder. But the story doesn?t end there. Rather, as the Megillah continues, what begins as self-defense becomes a massacre as the Jews of Persia murder 75,000 people, and non-Jews throughout the country pretend to be Jewish in order to avoid the wrath of the Jews.

How can we hold a party on a holiday that is so full of death?

Some explain the violence of this story by noting that the book of Esther is, in itself, a parody. The sheer impossibility and exaggeration of the story, the literary nods to other parts of the biblical canon, and the upside-down-ness of a Jew becoming a Persian queen all mark the text as a joke, rather than as a serious morality tale.

Others reinterpret the struggle against evil, personified in the Megillah story as a fight between the ?good? Jews and the ?evil? Haman, as a struggle against the evil within. Within the Purim story, Haman is said to be a descendent of Amalek, the tribe that tried to kill the Jewish people as they fled slavery in Egypt. For this reason, the Shabbat preceding Purim includes a reading of the biblical commandment to wipe out the memory of Amalek. Some Jewish mystical traditions recast Amalek as an internal evil, and not primarily as an individual or a tribe. The Zohar, the primary book of Jewish mysticism, speaks of Amalek as an internal evil found in each person. (III:160a) This equation of Amalek with the yetzer ha-ra, the evil impulse, becomes commonplace in Hasidic and other later commentary.

It might be easy to write the Purim story off as a joke or as an internal struggle if not for the many Jews throughout history who have used Purim as an excuse for violent attacks against real or perceived enemies. In medieval Europe, some Jewish communities celebrated Purim by crucifying Haman in effigy; the parallel to the crucifixion of Jesus was hardly subtle. There are a few recorded instances of this ritual escalating into actual violence against Christians. (Elliot Horowitz, ?The Rite to Be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence?, in: Poetics Today 15 (1994), pp. 9?54 and upcoming book by same name.)

More recently, in 1994, Baruch Goldstein took the opportunity of Purim to carry out a massacre that left twenty-nine Palestinians dead and another 125 injured. Disturbingly, Goldstein, who was immediately murdered by survivors of the massacre, has become a martyr in the eyes of some Jews. Every year, Goldstein?s grave becomes the site of a Purim pilgrimage by Jewish extremists.

How many of us can drink to that?

Within the context of the Megillah, we might understand or even excuse the initial anger of the Jewish people toward the Persians as the natural anger of an oppressed people toward its oppressors. But the danger of tolerating such anger, as the end of the story makes clear, is that the acquisition of even a little political power can prompt an angry oppressed people to transform words into violent actions.

In the end, the Purim story presents us with more questions than answers. Rather than seek a pat

resolution that will allow me to enjoy Purim without a twinge of guilt, I would suggest that the very point of the Purim story is to demand that we struggle with the power of our own emotions, both as individuals and as a nation. We are uncomfortable identifying with the perpetrators of a massacre of 75,000 people. But precisely by forcing us to identify with these perpetrators, the Megillah asks us to grapple with our own capacity for anger. After all, how can any of us be sure that we would not be capable, under some circumstances, of allowing our anger to lead to violence ? either of our own doing, or done by the hands of others as we stand by silently?

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