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## The Problem with Purim

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טו הה"ד (תהלים ס"ו) אמרו  
לאלהים מה נורא מעשיך . . .  
הנהרגים הורגין את הורגיהם  
והנצלבין צולבין את צולביהן  
המשוקעין בים משקעין את  
משקיעיהן הוי (שם/תהלים ס"ו),  
ברוב עזך יכחשו לך אויבך,

This is the meaning of the  
verse, "Say to God, 'how  
awesome are your works!'"  
(Psalms 61:3) the slaughters  
kill their slaughterers; the  
crucified crucify their  
crucifiers; those drowned in  
the sea drown those who  
drowned them. Thus,  
"Through your great strength,  
your enemies will dwindle"  
(Psalms 61:3) --*Midrash  
Esther Rabbah* 10:15

*This text notices the parallel  
between the story of Purim and  
that of the exodus from Egypt; in  
the Purim story, the Jews kill  
Haman and the others who  
planned to participate in the  
murder of the Jews; in the story of  
the exodus, the Egyptians attempt  
to destroy the Jewish people by  
drowning all of the male babies in  
the Nile; in the end, the Egyptian  
army is drowned in the sea.*

*This midrash (rabbinic  
interpretation), which probably  
dates from the tenth or eleventh  
century, uses a common  
interpretive tactic of ascribing  
separate interpretations to two  
parts of a verse. In this case, one  
verse from Psalms is split in two,  
with the first half of the verse  
understood as a description of the  
divine power that allows for  
reversals of fortune, and the  
second half read as a description  
of the outcome of this practice of  
divine power.*

א ובשנים עשר חדש הוא חדש אדר בשלושה עשר יום בו אשר הגיע דבר המלך ודתו  
להעשות ביום אשר שברו איבי היהודים לשלוט בהם ונהפוך הוא אשר ישלטו היהודים  
המה בשנאיהם: ב נקהלו היהודים בעריהם בכל מדינות המלך אחשוורוש לשלח יד  
במבקשי רעתם ואיש לא עמד לפניהם כי נפל פחדם על כל העמים: ג וכל שרי המדינות  
והאחשדרפנים והפחות ועשי המלאכה אשר למלך מנשאים את היהודים כי נפל  
פחד מרדכי עליהם: . . . ה ויכו היהודים בכל איביהם מפת חרב והרגו ואבדו ויעשו  
בשנאיהם כרצונם: . . . טו ויקהלו היהודיים [היהודים] אשר בשושן גם ביום ארבעה  
עשר לחדש אדר ויהרגו בשושן שלש מאות איש ובבזזה לא שלחו את ידם: טז ושאר  
היהודים אשר במדינות המלך נקהלו ויעמד על נפשם ונוח מאיביהם והרג בשנאיהם  
חמשה ושבעים אלף ובבזזה לא שלחו את ידם:

<sup>1</sup> And in the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of  
the same, when the king's command and his decree drew near to be put in  
execution, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over  
them, though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over those  
who hated them; <sup>2</sup>The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities  
throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as  
sought their hurt; and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell  
upon all people. <sup>3</sup>And all the rulers of the provinces, and the satraps, and the  
governors, and the officials of the king, helped the Jews; because the fear of  
Mordecai had fallen upon them. . . <sup>5</sup> Thus the Jews struck all their enemies  
with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they  
would to those who hated them. <sup>6</sup>And in Shushan the capital the Jews slew and  
destroyed five hundred men. . .

<sup>15</sup>For the Jews who were in Shushan gathered themselves together also on the  
fourteenth day of the month Adar, and slew three hundred men at Shushan;  
but on the plunder they did not lay their hand. <sup>16</sup>But the other Jews who were  
in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives,  
and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes seventy five thousand,  
but they laid not their hands on the plunder.

**Of course, the Jews were not given permission to kill anyone they wished,** for it was only written in the

books that they could take revenge on their oppressors. . . they only killed their enemies whose animosity toward the Jews was public and who threatened evil against them, but not their haters (for the difference between an "enemy" and a "hater" is that an enemy's hatred is evident, whereas a hater's hatred is hidden), for they only did to their haters "as they wished," that is—they were able to rob them and to degrade them.

--Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush, 1809-1879)

עמלק יושב בארץ הנגב, הא יצרא בישא  
קטיגורא מקטרגא דבר נש דישתכח תדיר  
בגופא.

**Amalek dwells in the south.** This refers to the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination), which seduces a person, and which is always found in the human body.

*The book of Esther describes Haman, the villain of the story, as an "Agagite." In the book of Numbers (24:7), Agag is identified as the king of the Amalekites, the tribe that attacks the Jewish people as they are fleeing slavery in Egypt. (Exodus 17:8-15) In Jewish literature, the Amalekites epitomize evil; it therefore makes sense that Haman would be identified with this group.*

**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 crucifix originally constructed for Mordechai.

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.

Who can drink to that?

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. Still others point to the textual designation as the non-Jews as "enemies" as evidence that the Jews were operating only in self-defense.

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. The book of Esther identifies Haman as 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.

Within the context of the Purim story, we might understand or even excuse the initial anger of the Jewish people toward the Persians as the natural way in which an oppressed people responds to 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 the transformation of angry words into violent actions.

In the end, the Purim story presents us with more questions than answers. Rather than seek a pat resolution, we might say 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?