



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Purim 5768 By Rabbi Laura Geller

Many Jews think of Purim as a children's holiday, the perfect fairy tale: There's a Queen and a King. There's intrigue and heroism. Little girls dress up like Esther, little boys like Mordecai. No one gets upset when children make noise (as long as they do it when Haman's name is heard). And it all ends happily ever after.

But it is so much more.

As we look more deeply, we recognize that this is a story about power and about how people without explicit authority learn to make the system work for them. We read between the lines and discover a story about living in the Diaspora and how we sometimes have to maneuver around those who might hurt us. We might even notice how much we feel fulfilled by a story where the powerless become powerful.

And at the same time, we are deeply troubled by how bloody the story is. The Jews defend themselves against the people who tried to slaughter them, and they end up slaughtering their enemies.

What are we supposed to learn from this holiday?

It's instructive to look to the *parshah* we read every year on the Sabbath before Purim, the Sabbath we call *Shabbat Zachor*, the Shabbat of Remembering:

Remember what Amalek did to you on the road as you came out of Egypt – how he attacked all the stragglers in the rear, those who were famished and weary...Therefore when God gives you security from your enemies in the land that God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget.¹

Traditionally, we read about Amalek on *Shabbat Zachor* because our tradition regards Haman as a descendant of the tribe of Amalek. But there is also a deeper reason. Read again the commandment: "Remember what Amalek did to you... [and] blot out the memory of Amalek."

In contrast with the story in the *megillah*, in which we annihilate our enemies, the commandment that we inherit is not to blot out Amalek. The commandment is to blot out the memory of Amalek and therefore to blot out of ourselves the tendency to do to others what has been done to us. The commandment is turn rage into healing.

This combination of remembering and blotting out is a strategy for healing from abuse. We learn from psychologists that victims of abuse need first to acknowledge their memories of victimization, and then, at some point in the healing process, they need to blot out the power those memories have to control their lives.

Purim isn't a children's holiday. No, quite the contrary; it is the most grown up of all of our holidays, because it forces us to look at the side of us that has been hurt, the side that is afraid, the side that wants to take revenge

¹ Deuteronomy 25:17-19

against those who have hurt us. Purim tells us that it is okay to have those feelings, to tell the story, even to celebrate the fantasy, but not to act on those feelings.

A powerful example of this is the blessing we read at the end of the public reading of the story of Esther, “Blessed are you, God, who takes up our grievance, judges our claim and avenges the wrongs against us. You bring retribution on our enemies and vengeance on our foes.” In ascribing the act of retribution to God, we get to play out the fantasy of retribution without actually engaging in violence. Read this way, the blessing reminds us that vengeance should never be in our hands, but only in the hands of God.

Taken together, these perspectives on the Purim story teach us to keep those feelings in the realm of fantasy and, when we act, to act for healing.

Another set of commandments connected to Purim provides us with a way to begin this healing. We are commanded to send gifts to the poor, as it says in the *megillah*, “They were to observe these days for feasting and merry making, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor.”² In the midst of our fantasy of revenge, we engage with the reality of poverty. This act is curative.

In this sense, Purim stands as a testament to how to heal from pain: by taking responsibility to do what we can to make sure all people have food, housing, health care and social services. The deep message of Purim is to remember our own hurt, but to act to repair the world...not to take revenge.

Yes we need to remember, but we also need to blot out the memory. We need to free ourselves from despair and darkness and find a way to bring light and joy and gladness and honor to everyone in the world.



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² Megillat Esther 9:22