

Some Purim Thoughts — For Passover

March 2017

The following speech was given by our congregant Becky Schur, at Agudath B'nai Yisrael, a synagogue in Lorain where a swastika was painted just before Purim. In response, the broader Lorain community came out 250 strong for a Solidarity Shabbat. Becky, who regularly reads torah there and leads services on the High Holydays, delivered this address from the bima.

It's only too appropriate that the holiday of Purim begins tonight. I find the narrative of Purim, which is told in the book of Esther, to be one of the most relatable biblical stories to modern American Jewish life. The Jews are living in the diaspora, spread throughout a foreign kingdom, and they grapple with issues of identity and minority, while they encounter a crisis that can only befall a people that lack self-determination. We find the Jews in Shushan, the capitol of Persia. King Ahasverosh is 3 years into his rule, and he's not a great king. He seems to be more interested in his own riches than he is in governing. He has a short temper and is easily manipulated by his advisers. King Ahasverosh banishes the queen, Vashti, when she refuses to dance in front of his friends for entertainment. In his search for a new queen, he takes women from throughout his kingdom. He ultimately picks a Jewish woman named Hadassah. Hadassah changes her name to Esther, hides the fact that she's a Jew out of fear for her life, and goes to live in the king's harem. Meanwhile, the king's top adviser, Haman, was insulted by a Jewish man, Mordechai, who is also Esther's uncle/cousin and guardian. Haman convinces the king to issue a decree to kill all of the Jews on one specific day, and it's up to Mordechai and Esther to get the decree overturned. Ultimately, they save the Jews, and in an act of poetic justice, they hang Haman on the gallows that he had built for Mordechai.

Every year I read the story of Purim differently. Some years, I see Vashti, the strong and independent queen who refuses to let her husband mandate how she uses her body. Other times, I identify with Esther, who hides her identity for the sake of her safety, and then transforms into a leader whose bravery comes from being true to herself. This year I can't help but read the story through the lens of what's happening now in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and across the country.

One of the remarkable moments of the story of Purim is an exchange between Mordechai and Esther. Until now, Esther has been safely tucked away in the palace where nobody knows that she's Jewish. The decree to kill the Jews has been issued, and Mordechai is looking for any way he can to save his people. Esther is afraid to approach the king because she knows that if she's rejected, the punishment will be severe. To convince her to act, Mordechai sends Esther this message: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On

the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." (*ESTHER 4:13-14*). Esther was a normal person who didn't ask for any of this. She didn't ask to be taken to the king's harem and made into the queen. She was scared. But with Mordechai's words, she understood that she was in a unique position to help people who had no one to champion them. Esther had access to power, and with it, she had the ability and responsibility to use her voice. She had to put her personal, immediate safety and comfort aside to speak up for those who could not. She hosted feasts for King Achashverosh and Haman, had the decree repealed, and the Jews were saved.

It would seem that now life would be happily ever after for the Jews in Persia. But of course, we know that's never the case. The end of the book of Esther is disconcerting because after all of this drama, it's as if nothing has changed. King Achashverosh is still in power and can still be easily manipulated. If anything, the king now has more power because Mordechai has instituted a system of taxation. We're left without reassurance that this story will not repeat itself. Yes, we read of the brave acts of heroism of Mordechai and Esther, but what happens the next time when there's no Esther living in the palace and no Mordechai to embolden her? And we can imagine that if this happened to the Jews, surely it could have happened to other minority groups throughout the 127 provinces in King Achashverosh's domain.

What's missing from the book of Esther is anyone standing up for a group that's different from themselves. Where were the ordinary Persian people? In the first chapter we learn the names of seven of King Achashverosh's closest advisers — why did none of them speak up for the Jews? Imagine what could have happened had normal Persians stood up for their neighbors and vice versa?

The story of Purim is built on baseless hatred. Destinies of entire nations are at the whim of a weak king and his vengeful adviser, yet the people affected can't communicate across cultural boundaries to stand up for one another. As we move into Purim and through this year, let's remember these lessons from the book of Esther: when we have access to power and an opportunity to use our voices, we must speak up — not only for ourselves and for our own, but for everyone who needs it.

Shabbat shalom.