

Instead of giving our usual Torah Meditation and Jewish hero, I am going to give you a brief explanation of the Festival of Purim just before we have our reading play.

Purim is a festival of deliverance that celebrates both bravery and ingenuity in the face of appalling adversity, rather than direct divine intervention at a time when our people's survival was once again in jeopardy. You see Haman, one of the senior counsellors of the King, got permission to kill all the Jews in the Persian empire for the bounty of 10,000 talents of silver, which he would pay the King (a talent was 3,000 shekels and a shekel would be worth around \$5, so $5 \times 3,000 = \$15,000$. $\$15,000 \times 10,000 = \$150,000,000$ which is quite a large sum.)

During the Babylonian captivity, the Medes and Persians overthrew the Babylonian empire and eventually allowed our people to return to the Holy Land. A substantial number of Jewish people chose to remain in the dispersion and the story of Esther takes place among those of our people who did not return to the Holy Land and is the story of those Jews who were involved in the royal Persian court at Shushan (Susa), which was the winter capital of the Persian kings.

There were significant Jewish populations throughout the Persian Empire and their safety depended directly on the good will of the Persian monarchs. In the story of Esther we see first her elevation to the status of the principle wife of a rather large harem, then her intervention with the king to prevent the wholesale slaughter of Jewish people through the Persian controlled territory.

Our enemy Haman was the rising star in the Persian court. He had a personal grudge against Mordecai and obtained an irrevocable royal decree to kill the Jews, but he had to decide on the date of this gory event. On the first day of the first month (Nissan), he threw dice to determine which day would be best for killing the Jews and decided on the 13th of the twelfth month, which is the 13th of Adar. On the thirteenth of Nissan (the day before the Passover Seder), the decree went out to all 127 provinces, so the enemies of the Jews had nearly a year to prepare the slaughter.

Esther was warned that if she did not take steps to help, help would come from another source and she and her father's house would perish. Rather than make a direct appeal to her husband, Esther displayed some wisdom in positioning her plea for the Jewish people in a way that would be heard with the most favour. She convinced the King that this was an attack on her personally, but she had to deal with some considerable handicaps.

The first of these was that her position was symbolic and carried only influence, but no real power. Her role was to please the King and she was not supposed to get involved in politics and from what we know of harem life at this time, she would have had her hands full with the endless intrigues a large group of isolated and idle women generated. She also had to somehow counter the influence of Haman, which could not be done directly.

She was not even allowed to enter her husband's presence without a prior invitation and her doing so may well have been the most dangerous and bold move of the whole story. The Persian King in question seemed to leave the actual running of the 127 provinces to his officials and only intervened on the advice of his ministers or when he took a personal interest

in a particular situation, especially if it involved profit, because he had an extravagant lifestyle.

Haman had succeeded in getting the King to pass a law granting him the right to kill and rob all the Jews in the empire and it would be impossible for Mordecai or any other Jewish officials to reverse a royal decree and to try to do so would have placed them in direct opposition to the King. The intervention had to come indirectly and without appearing to directly contradict or confront the King because his decrees were considered to be irrevocable.

Haman had engineered this decree against the Jewish people with considerable skill; for all intents and purposes he had outmanoeuvred his enemy and competitor Mordecai by using an immense bribe from his considerable fortune. He hoped to recuperate this bribe (and then some) by killing and robbing the Persian Jewish population, including Mordecai. Rather than weep and wail against an impossible situation, Mordecai used a strategically placed insider to get the King's ear.

It involved quite a gamble and in a very real sense the outcome depended on a roll of the dice - which is what the word Purim means - dice. Esther had to outmanoeuvre Haman, not arouse his suspicions and find a way to counter the royal kill order. She had less than a year to do it, because the kill order had already gone out.

Esther had to be as wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove, so she adopted an indirect approach which avoided any confrontation before she had the King's ear. She put him at ease and did not arouse any suspicion from Haman, whom she strategically included in the party ruse. Once the King and his guest were at ease, she pounced and let the King see that the plot was also against her and made it look like Haman was plotting her downfall.

The King offered to give her up to half of his Kingdom four times in the story and it must be noted that after the first feast, he probably figured all that she wanted was some fancy jewelry or clothes which he could easily have paid for from the blood money Haman had paid to him. She appeared just to want to party and to curry favour with the King's new favourite.

She was able to unseat Haman, but she still had to deal with the King's Edict which could not be altered even by the King himself. She used wisdom and guile and pre-empted the decree by having the King issue another one which allowed our people to defend themselves and kill their enemies on the same day that they were authorized to kill us.

This resulted in the second mass conversion to Judaism recorded in the Scriptures, the first being the mass conversion of Egyptians just before Passover. It showed that deliverance comes in many forms and that the L-rd gives us the ability to both strategically place ourselves and to use wisdom to outsmart our enemies at crucial times in our lives.

The revised kill order was carried out in three waves - first in Shushan, where 500 opponents were killed, then the next day 300 more people were killed - perhaps the second group were not those who would have participated in the killing, but who would have benefited from it and helped to round up and identify the Jews - even those who may have gone into hiding. The third wave was when Jews in all 127 provinces killed their opponents who were planning to kill them. This occurred over three days and the total reached 75,000.

The revised kill order provided for the Jews to pillage those they were killing, but they did not

do any pillaging. Perhaps the King hoped for a new bribe, but the Jews did not wish to enrich themselves with the property of those who wanted to kill them. It is likely then, that all the goods and money of their enemies reverted to the state and the King got his second "bribe" and would have understood that the Jews did not kill their enemies to gain any material advantage but only to save their lives.

There are two more things of note before we move on to see how this would apply to us today. Esther was given the household and goods of Haman and she established Mordecai over it and he became not only the undisputed royal favourite, but his fame spread throughout the empire and people learned not to mess with the Jews. It is also interesting to note that this took place in ancient Persia which is now modern Iran - we have never been natural enemies to the Iranian (Persian) people.

The second thing of note concerns the shame of Haman. After he had to promenade Mordecai in a royal procession, he went home with his face veiled because he was too ashamed to have people look on him - especially people who knew about the decree to kill the Jews and who would have mocked him for this surprising turn of fortune; but there was more to come.

After he was upstaged by Esther and the King assumed that he was trying to violate the queen (actually he was trying to violate the people of the King of Heaven), his face was veiled so that the King did not have to look on him. He was led away to be executed along with his ten sons. On the day when the slaughter of the Jews was to occur, the tables were turned on our enemies and they were slaughtered and the King was paid a second large sum of money - the royal treasury was enriched by the money and possessions of 75,000 wealthy and powerful people.

If we were to guesstimate the average net worth of such a large number of people, it would be safe to assume that the amount would be considerably higher than a mere \$150,000,000. If we were to say that on the average each of the enemies was worth at least a talent of silver (\$15,000), the king would have received at least \$1,125,000,000 (almost 10 times Haman's bribe) - though it was likely considerably higher - and the only household goods which did not revert to the King were Haman's, which went to his wife.

It was not all about the money, but rather about the blessing and protection of the L-rd over His people in the midst of whatever trials and enemies we encounter.

Does this mean that we will always be delivered from every Haman who rises up against us? Yes and no. The enemy has engineered numerous wholesale slaughters of our people, but we are still here and our enemies have perished and this reality will not change.

G-d told Abraham that He would bless those who blessed us and curse those who cursed us and that all the families of the earth would be blessed in us and this spiritual principle is still in effect in the world. Anti-Semitism is still on the rise and has even affected the campuses of universities around the world. It is also creeping back into many churches around the world with an old lie - replacement theology and its cousin Palestinian Christianity.

This false teaching says that the church has replaced Israel as G-d's people, instead of being grafted in as fellow citizens with our people. The Gospel will always be to the Jew first and

also to the Gentile and instead of being jealous of Jews or suspicious of us, the nations of the world need to see that we will always first and foremost be a source of blessing to the nations.

The idea to kill the Jews came from our enemies. The idea to kill our enemies was defensive, to protect ourselves when we could not revoke the original killing order. One of the best and most proficient armies in the modern world also exercises the most restraint of any military force in history - the Israeli Defence Force or IDF. They have always responded to the various killing orders various Muslim groups have declared against our people and our land, but only to defend our land and never to build an empire that would overrun the Middle East.

In conclusion and just before we get ready for our play, let me make a few comments about how to apply Purim to our lives. From the story we realize that there will always be enemies which will rise up against us and while we should never desire their death (and should even welcome those who wish to join our ranks), we need to see that generationally, believers, both Jew and Gentile, will always be positioned for "such a time as this". This means that there will always be a way for us to escape and overcome whatever adversity which rises up against us - either through direct divine intervention or through the use of bravery and ingenuity.

So when we encounter adversity and trials which are set up by modern day Haman's and their henchmen, we need to see that we are never really outmanoeuvred, cornered or trapped. Rather, we should ask the L-rd for eyes to see that greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world, for I am persuaded that if G-d be for us, nothing can ultimately stop us or even thwart G-d's purposes. Even if we perish, our people and our faith shall prevail.

It is customary in Judaism to commemorate individual deliverances at this season of Purim and to remember that in all the affairs of this world, G-d's superintendence can be as powerful a source of deliverance as His direct intervention. So instead of being mesmerized by the enemies who surround us, we should keep our eyes peeled for His deliverance, either by direct intervention or by positioning us to use both wisdom and courage because we are put wherever we are for all the "such a time as this" occasions which we encounter in our pilgrimage through this life. We will always be delivered even if it means that we take refuge in death. Let's pray and get ready for the play.