

Purim Notes: Surviving in the Jewish Diaspora

1. Unlike Hanukkah, Purim is a Jewish holiday whose origins are in the Diaspora. For this reason Purim was not co-opted by Zionism as a commemoration of any real nationalist significance.
2. Over the course of time however it has become increasingly clear that the themes of Purim have been integrated into Religious Zionism and, most (in)famously, became the logical underpinning for the notorious murders perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein in Hebron back in 1994. With the continued advances of the messianic Jewish Settlers and their allies, Purim has loomed large in fanatical Jewish thinking and a countertrend rejecting it has been emerging in Leftist circles.
3. The celebration of Purim is based on events related in the Biblical Book of Esther, a scroll that was purportedly composed in ancient Persia during the reign of the historical Xerxes I (486-465 BCE). Some scholars have identified this Ahashverosh as Artaxerxes II (405-359 BCE).
4. There is no historical evidence that any of the events of the Book of Esther took place exactly as written. Modern scholars generally agree that the book provides an accurate cultural context for ancient Persian society and that the book is based on actual events whose exact details are now lost to us.
5. The Sages of the Jerusalem Talmud (Megillah 70d) debated whether or not to include the book in the Biblical canon. The book is the only canonical text not included in the Dead Sea Scrolls Bible.
6. Difficulties in the book revolve around the thorny issue of Esther's marriage to a Gentile king, a matter prohibited in rabbinic law. The names of the Jewish protagonists, Mordekhai and Esther, are of Babylonian pagan deities – Marduk and Ishtar. The names of Haman and Vashti recall the names of Elamite gods Humman and Mashti. The name of God never appears in the book and any explicit prophetic elements are lacking. The names fit into a neat typology based on ancient Near Eastern pagan mythology.
7. In spite of the debate over the legitimacy and authenticity of the Book of Esther, the work was indeed included in the Jewish Bible.
8. The story of Esther revolves around the simple Near Eastern literary motif of a King, his harem, and court intrigue. Ahashverosh is married to Vashti and puts her to the test. At a celebratory soiree, the King wishes to show off his wife's great beauty to the revelers and she refuses his command. The Queen is then executed and the search for a new Queen begins.
9. A Jewish exile living in Susa named Mordekhai proposes that his orphan cousin who he himself has been raising enter her name in the contest for new Queen. The young woman succeeds and soon becomes Queen.
10. Mordekhai discovers a plot against the King which is duly noted in the court records.
11. It is made known that one of the King's officials, Haman the Aggagite, has risen to a high state at court and is upset that this same Mordekhai refuses to show the proper respect due to him. Haman then sets a plot to kill off Mordekhai's people, the Jews.

12. Learning of Haman's plan, Mordekhai quickly approaches Esther realizing that her becoming Queen is a godsend and that inside the palace she can be of great use to her people.
13. Esther and Mordekhai concoct a plot to undermine Haman who has been given a royal firman to destroy the Jews of the Persian Empire. Esther invites both the King and Haman to a party where she will make sure that Haman is undone.
14. Mordekhai's role in foiling the plot on the King's life is finally recognized and Ahashverosh sets out to honor him. Mordekhai and Haman cross paths as the King assigns Haman to lead the tribute to his Jewish arch-nemesis.
15. At the private party that Esther has set up, the King waxes wroth with Haman who has been found in a compromising position with the Queen. Summarily, Haman's fortunes go from bad to worse and he and his sons are executed.
16. After learning of the royal firman for the destruction of the Jews from Esther, Ahashverosh orders that the Jews be allowed to go on the offensive and kill their enemies. The text states that the Jews killed some 75,000 people in massacres.
17. The historicity of the Book of Esther has been contested. The dating of Mordekhai in the text is suspect. If he was one of the exiles from the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, his age would be difficult to square with the Persian kings who are thought to be Ahashverosh. The Babylonian exile takes place in 587 BCE which at the very earliest would make Mordekhai over 100 years old as the story takes place. His familial relationship with Esther – his cousin – would be somewhat hard to square given his old age and her youth.
18. The holiday of Purim, unlike the holiday of Hanukkah, had deep religious roots in Judaism. Hanukkah was the commemoration of a military success whose sole religious command – lighting candles – is not recounted in the Book of Maccabees.
19. The commemoration of Purim contains five religious precepts that are central to a proper observance of the holiday: i. A public fast in commemoration of Esther's fast. ii. Two public readings of the Book of Esther. iii. Giving two gifts of foodstuffs to neighbors (mishlo'ah manot 'ish le-re'ehu). iv. Giving two charitable meals to the poor (matanot la-'ebyonim). v. A festive meal (se'udat Purim).
20. The application of these rituals is detailed in the Talmud tractate Megillah.
21. The Book of Esther and Purim are thus both part of the traditional Jewish literature, unlike Hanukkah whose literary sources were not included in either the Biblical canon or the rabbinical literature.
22. The Book of Esther has been the subject of a Midrashic compilation, Esther Rabbah.
23. Thus, the holiday of Purim is grounded in a literary and Halakhic reality that has captured the traditional Jewish mind over the course of many centuries.
24. In a lecture that I gave in 2009, I reviewed the complex conceptual issues involved in the Book of Esther. The lecture, called "Patshegen ha-Ketab: History as Written Inscription in Megillat Esther" may be accessed at the following website: http://www.merkaz.com/lectures/Shasha_Pruim.WMA
25. In the lecture I discussed one of the primary literary themes of the Book of Esther: how history is written and inscribed for posterity. The Book of Esther is replete

with numerous instances of how history is remembered. The term *patshegen ha-ketab*, the text of the document, of Persian origin, signifies the process of transmitting events in announcement form.

26. This understanding of the history process is confirmed in a series of references to writing and inscribing that are scattered through the book. Here is a listing of these references:

1:19-1:22

2:23

3:9

3:12-3:14

4:8

6:1-6:2

8:2

8:5

8:8-8:14

9:20-9:23

9:26-9:32

10:2

27. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, the Greek philosopher Plato states the following regarding writing: “Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory.” Plato affirmed the primacy of oral transmission over written inscription. By contrast, the Jewish tradition as embodied in the Book of Esther tracks the line of written documents and affirms their centrality in our understanding of history. The Book is the source through which we understand and process history.
28. The Book of Esther is a written narrative of events long passed that are buried inside a fabricated story. The book functions as a rhetorical device meant to inculcate the ways in which Jews are commanded to remember. The story encodes a historical memory of Jewish salvation. The story is a typical Middle Eastern phantasmagoria whose contours would not be out of place in the Arabian Nights literature. We have sexual intrigue, political machinations, existential angst, and personal devotion all played out on a colorful stage.
29. The story of Esther has become indelibly imprinted on the Jewish consciousness in a way that the story of Hanukkah is not. Counter-intuitively, Hanukkah is a historical event that was accurately recounted in a book that was not included in the Jewish canon.
30. Hanukkah marks the encounter of Judaism with Greek civilization and remnants of that Hellenism have become part of the way in which the story of Maccabees was told. In a bland and straightforward manner, without rhetorical flourish, the Jewish revolt against Greece was preserved in books that have now been largely forgotten. The original events in Persia were retold and embellished by anonymous writers and editors and have remained central to Jewish

self-understanding. A hint of this rhetorical modality can be found in the following Biblical passages where writing and text-production are central to Jewish self-understanding:

Ezekiel 2:7-3:3

Zechariah 5:1-5:4

Nehemiah 8:8

31. In these three cases, we see that writing and memory are dialectically inter-related. Reality is understood, contrary to the Platonic-Hellenistic contention, as completely tied to the story and the text. The Book of Esther is thus a model of historiography which subsumes history to the manner in which history is told.
32. The current approach of certain parts of the Orthodox Jewish community to the story of Purim reflects an imposition of Hellenistic modes of thinking on Jewish tradition. The story is read as literal history and the theme of Jewish revenge is highlighted in a national-religious context. As we have said, there does not appear to be any historical evidence that massacres perpetrated by Jews ever happened in ancient Persia. The scholarly reading of the Book of Esther as a historical novella fits in perfectly with a rhetorical understanding of historical writing in the Jewish tradition.
33. The Jewish tradition of Midrash, or Melisa, is a rhetorical construction that serves to embellish and transform historical reality into a literary narrative that contains historical elements but would be considered according to rational logic a novelistic fiction. Midrash takes historical “fact” and makes the open-ended recapitulation and transformation of that “fact” its central concern. History is thus remembered as a process that is identified by the literary characters and stories found in books.
34. Plato, famously, would have considered Midrash a falsification of history rather than a means to preserve memories that would have otherwise been forgotten. And in this sense it is somewhat paradoxical that the Jewish tradition with its Midrashic motifs and devices has more successfully preserved its past than the dead cultures of Athens and Rome. Midrashic dialectics preserved history in a way that other cultures were not successful in doing.
35. Purim is a holiday that celebrates the triumph of the Jewish people over its enemies by the telling of stories and presenting the memory of literary figures whose presence continues to capture the imagination. It promotes the internal unity of the Jewish community, charitable works, and domestic tranquility of family. Jews gather together in their Synagogues to hear the reading of the Book of Esther, they give presents to one another, provide meals for the poor, and celebrate at a festive meal where wine flows and food is plentiful. Purim day takes on a carnival-like aspect.
36. Like the celebration of Passover, a ritual system is set up to commemorate an event that may or may not have happened precisely as it has been written in the Bible. But, more importantly, it is a holiday that instills a consciousness in all who celebrate it that is life-affirming and spiritually elevating.

37. Over the course of many centuries, Purim acted as a model for Jewish triumph over persecution. Jews all over the world took pride in the Diaspora victory engineered by Mordekhai and Esther and sometimes composed their own victory scrolls in honor of their own community's successes in repelling tragedy.
38. Those who seek to apply the Purim holiday to the militant strains of Jewish nationalism are conflating the uplifting tale of Jewish triumph over disaster and persecution with a nationalist-messianic view that is largely absent from the story as it has been preserved in the Jewish tradition.
39. The Book of Esther ends with the ultimate triumph of King Ahashverosh who imposes a financial tribute on his domains. He appoints the Jew Mordekhai as his Vice-Regent. The story ends with the secure triumph of Jews in the Diaspora and does not show them returning to the Holy Land under the wings of the Messiah.
40. The story of Purim is thus an affirmation of the Diaspora whereas Hanukkah was a commemoration of the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. From this standpoint it is interesting to note the difference in the two holidays' relative importance in the Jewish liturgical cycle over the course of Jewish history.

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