

Esther's Message Rings True Today for Jews

Beginning Saturday night, Jews around the world began celebrating Purim, a holiday that's known less than Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah and Passover, but one that's no less significant—and no less meaningful—particularly today.

Purim's name comes from the casting of lots in the Book of Esther, and that's exactly what we celebrate. The date, the 14th of the Hebrew month Adar, is ordained in Esther 9:17, and our whole celebration is that of the story of Esther and Mordecai.

Before the celebration begins, we have a day of fasting and prayer to commemorate Esther's own fast. During Purim itself, we recount the Book of Esther chanted to a special tune, during which we make noise to drown out the name Haman, each time he and his sons are mentioned. We dress in festive costumes, give presents to one another, give gifts to the poor (Esth. 9:19-22), and share a festive meal with family and friends. There's even a custom observed by some to get so drunk that we don't recognize the difference between the righteous Mordecai and the evil Haman.

Basically on Purim, we celebrate the overcoming of an evil ancient Persian leader who sought to kill all the Jews, and how we not only overcame and defeated him, but his plot was turned upside down, literally, as he was hung on the same gallows that he built for killing our people. There is an old joke told the occasion of many Jewish holidays, "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat."

Given threats and rumblings from modern Persia (Iran), the celebration of the past and God's protection in the present have never been more relevant or meaningful. Indeed, this may

be the last Purim before modern Persia's number comes up in Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. There is comfort in the words of Haman's wife, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him," (Esth. 6:13) which resonate today.

For most of my life, I looked at Esther with a deep sense of conflict because a key element of Esther is the intermarriage of a young Jewish woman whose family had been exiled from Israel. Being Jewish isn't easy. Persevering and surviving as a people for thousands of years challenges us uniquely. And yet we still survive.

Today, intermarriage and assimilation are problems that run deep. My festive celebration was often tempered by the realization, 'yeah, but Esther married out.'

I am not an advocate for Jews to intermarry and assimilate, but I do advocate for a strong and enduring fellowship between Jews and Christians, something that I have been privileged to experience throughout my life, and something that enriches me and makes me a better Jew.

Today more than ever, this lesson is vivid as there are many modern Hamans who seek to destroy us all, Jews and Christians, and vilify God. In this light, I have grown to understand Esther's message in a different way.

For nearly 2,000 years, the history of Jewish and Christian relations was not marked by lots of mutual warmth, respect or understanding—to put it nicely. However, in the past few generations, the tide has turned and history is being rewritten.

Nevertheless, many boundaries exist that lead to a lack of understanding between Jews and Christians, which is out of place given that we are the people who are the standard bearers of ethical monotheism.

Esther teaches us that we each have our own role, Jew and Gentile. Indeed, we rely on one another in many ways. We're partners. We play on the same all-star team, but go home to our respective families at the end of the day.

Just as Esther helped the king understand the threat to her and her people, Christians today need to understand the history and baggage that Jews carry, and to grasp the Jewish way of thinking. Out of love, the king offered Esther half of his kingdom, and Christians should continue their unconditional love of Israel and the Jewish people, proselytizing only other Christians to understand that this is what God wants.

Jews need to understand the vast diversity among Christianity, that past crimes supposedly in the name of "the church" do not represent modern thinking, and embrace and support the growing movement that expresses itself with devoted and righteous Gentiles expressing their love and support for us in ways that are deep and sincere.

We need to not wince and become uncomfortable when they mention Jesus, who was a Jew, or think that simply sharing their love for Jesus and Jews is necessarily mutually exclusive, or about trying to convert us.

There are many ways for Jews and Christians to come closer to one another, and affirm that we are on the same side, honoring God according to our respective faiths. Esther gives us a model to follow. Purim is a great season to express and commit to this fellowship.

Whether we begin by fasting and prayer as Esther did, and share the euphoria of the victory of good over evil, God willing, we will be privileged to continue to increase our understanding, become more open to one another, and have "light and joy and gladness" in our day, as did the Jews of ancient Persia.

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