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Tetzaveh (Exodus 27 - 30)

GOOD MORNING! Whether you are young or old, this is one of the most highly anticipated weeks on the Jewish calendar. This week we celebrate the holiday of Purim! Purim begins Thursday night, February 25th, at sundown, and families around the globe will gather in synagogues or other socially distanced venues for the reading of the Megillah – the Book of Esther. Then Friday morning everyone returns to hear the Megillah read once again.

The holiday of Purim is a very special time; children of ALL ages dress up and go from home to home, spreading cheer and distributing gifts of food and delicacies to friends and neighbors. The *mitzvot* of the day include *mishloach manot* – everyone is required to provide at least one person with two food items – and there is a specific Purim obligation to help those who are needy (*matanot l'evyonim*). These acts of gift-giving and charity are meant to foster brotherhood and unity. Purim is a time when even the dourest amongst us manages to crack a smile.

I cannot even begin to tell you how much I dislike, perhaps even abhor, the following cynical (though pithy) assessment of the Jewish holidays: “They tried to kill us. We won. Let’s eat.”

Even though there are many reasons why it's simply inaccurate, what really bothers me is the underlying presumption that a Jewish holiday would be established without a deep and meaningful purpose that it is meant to perpetuate.

Admittedly, the holiday of Purim, when looked at superficially, seems to fulfill that credo. But as we mentioned last week, according to Jewish tradition the holiday of Purim is the one holiday that will survive forevermore; even during the “end of days” when all the other holidays will no longer be practiced. Clearly, there is something extraordinary about Purim, something that we need to internalize forever. What is this all about?

Quite remarkably, there are some uncanny similarities between the events surrounding Purim some 2500 years ago, and the situation of the Jewish people today in the 21st century.

The story of Purim (which opens with the lavish party thrown by the Persian king Xerxes – otherwise known as Achashverosh) takes place some seventy years after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem. At the time of the destruction, about 90% of the Jewish population were exiled from their ancestral home in the land of Israel. The Jewish populace in ancient Persia were the survivors of that horrific war, and included their children and grandchildren.

Along came a thoroughly evil man, Haman, who was a descendant of the ancient archenemy of the Jewish nation – the Amalekites: a nation committed to the annihilation of the Jewish people. Haman was able to manipulate Achashverosh to decree that all the Jews in the kingdom were to be slaughtered on the 13th day of Adar of the following year.

Pausing here, we can already draw some parallels to Jewish life in the 21st century. We too, are some seventy years removed from what is perhaps the greatest tragedy in Jewish history since the destruction of the Temple – the

Holocaust. Our generation too, is comprised of survivors of that horror and their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

We too have an implacable enemy sworn to the destruction of Israel – and not coincidentally, they too hail from the land of ancient Persia: Iran. Mahmoud Ahamindegad, as Iranian president, has called for the annihilation of the State of Israel on numerous occasions and “Supreme Leader” Ayatollah Khamenei just last year called for the “final solution” (invoking the term coined by the Nazis) – the destruction of Israel.

But there is an even stronger connection between Jewish life in ancient Persia and Jewish life in the 21st century: the existential threat of assimilation. Almost shockingly, the generations that followed two of the almost inconceivably tragic events in Jewish history fell into a downward spiral of self-obliteration.

The Talmud (*Megillah* 12a) makes an extraordinary statement regarding the events surrounding Purim: “The student of R’ Shimon Bar Yochai asked, ‘Why did the Jews of that generation deserve to be annihilated?’ He answered, ‘Because they enjoyed the feast of Achashverosh.’” To understand this very strange and enigmatic statement we need some more background.

As mentioned above, the Book of Esther opens with Achashverosh throwing an incredibly lavish and extravagant feast in the third year of his reign. Why did he wait until the 3rd year of his reign and what was the purpose of this party?

According to the Talmud, he was celebrating that the Jews were no longer the “chosen people” and had in fact been abandoned by God. There had been a prophecy that after 70 years in exile they would triumphantly return to Israel. Achashverosh waited until, by his calculation, the 70 years were up

and yet the Jewish people were still in exile as his subjects. He then made an extravagant feast celebrating the demise of the Jewish culture.

To illustrate this point, he took out all the vessels that had been looted from the Holy Temple and used them at his party. In addition, he dressed himself in the clothes of the *Kohen Gadol* – the High Priest – and paraded around in them during his party. This party was meant to be a celebration of the end of the Jewish people and their special connection to the Almighty.

Imagine for a moment the following situation: A historically non-Jewish law firm throws a holiday party at the end of the year and one of the founding partners stands up and makes a blatantly offensive anti-Semitic joke as part of his remarks. Most Jewish employees in attendance would probably cringe and lose any interest in what they were eating. Some might even leave in disgust. But any Jew who enjoys the joke, stays, and continues reveling in the party has obviously emotionally disconnected himself from his Jewish roots.

This is what Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai meant. The fact that the Jews could actually enjoy the feast of Achashverosh – a party with the sole purpose of celebrating the end of their culture – showed that they identified themselves primarily as Persians and not as Jews. They had already begun to assimilate into Persian culture. Thus, they were deserving of annihilation.

There is a shocking parallel here to Jewish life in the 21st century as well. Consider the following statistics: In 1880 the Jewish world population was approximately 7,800,000. By 1939 (right before the Holocaust) that number had grown to 16,728,000, a growth of about 110% in less than sixty years. In 1960 the number of Jews worldwide was approximately 12,079,000. In 2019 – about sixty years later, the number hovers at about 14,707,400 – a minuscule (and quite shocking) growth rate of about 21%.

To what can we attribute this absolute crash in the Jewish growth rate during the post-Holocaust years? Well, obviously, there are many factors such as birth control and generally smaller families, but that doesn't sufficiently explain the incredible decline (particularly when you consider that average life expectancy has improved by several decades).

Undoubtedly, the primary reason for this decline is assimilation – some Jews marry out of their faith, while others marry Jews but do not bother to raise their children with any Jewish identity. Some are born Jewish, even raised with Jewish ideals, but have long since abandoned those ideals and replaced it with American “values” and no longer really identify as Jews. These people are barely even culturally Jewish (eating Chinese takeout on Sunday night doesn't qualify). The Jewish people are literally putting themselves out of business.

Perhaps this is the reason that, in general, Jews who are committed to practicing traditional Judaism are the ones with the largest families. One of my friends, a law partner in a prestigious national law firm, always surprises his associates when they ask how many children he has (8). When they ask the inevitable follow-up question of how many he is planning on having, he answers, “six million.” Now that's a person with a Jewish perspective!

This reminds me of a funny story I heard this week. I was speaking to a rabbi who runs “extreme” camp experiences during the summer months. His “campers” go to a remote mountainous region and camp there for several weeks at a time. One year, his wife was due at the end of the summer. Because there is no cell reception at the camp site, he would come down off the mountain from time to time to check on his wife and see how she was doing.

During one of his check-ins his wife informed him that she was experiencing an early onset of labor and her doctor had advised her to go immediately to the hospital and prepare to give birth. He was, of course,

shocked as she wasn't yet due for a few weeks, and there was no way he would be there for the birth since she was halfway around the world. He apologized profusely and wished her well and an easy labor (men have no concept). He then received a message that he was urgently needed back at the campsite.

The rabbi then got a ride up the mountain to the campsite from a friendly local. The trip took some time and they began to have a conversation. Knowing that rabbis often have many children the man asks the rabbi, "So, how many kids do you have?" You can only imagine the look of shock on the man's face when the rabbi replied, "To tell you the truth, I am not sure!"

The story of Purim is crucial to understanding not just the history of the Jewish people, but also the future of the Jewish nation. Even in "the end of times," we must be cognizant that the very survival of the Jewish nation is dependent solely on our individual commitment to Judaism. When one goes so does the other. We have to recommit to our Jewish identity and living as Jews. Only in this way can the ideals and purpose of this nationhood last.



TORAH PORTION OF THE WEEK

Tetzaveh, Exodus 27:20 - 30:10

The Torah continues this week with the command to make for use in the Mishkan - the Portable Sanctuary - oil for the Menorah and clothes for the Cohanim - the Priests. It then gives instruction for the consecration of the Cohanim and the Outer Altar. The portion concludes with instructions for constructing the Incense Altar.

“ Quote of the Week ”

There are two things that are infinite, the universe and man's stupidity...and I am not sure about the universe.

— Albert Einstein

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

