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Today's Torah

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Purim

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**By: Rabbi Cheryl Peretz
Associate Dean
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University**

Present in the Absence

Today we celebrate the holiday of Purim. A time of prizes, noisemakers, costumes and treats, Purim invites us to celebrate the absurd and laugh at ourselves. As we read the story from the Purim Megillah (scroll), we drown out the name of Haman, the evil man of Sushan who sought to destroy the Jewish people. Dressing in costume, eating the three cornered hamentaschen cookies, making noise, and celebrating beyond comprehension all draw our attention to the fun and frivolity of the day. And, of all of our holidays, it is about Purim which the Midrash on the book of Proverbs proclaims: 'All holidays will in the future be annulled, yet the days of Purim will never be annulled.'

What is it about Purim that makes it the one holiday our rabbis say will endure even in the messianic area? In the moments of the arrival of the complete and final redemption, is it really possible that the most important Jewish moment would be the one holiday when our frolic and celebration leads us as Purim asks

us to go - beyond comprehension between good and evil 'ad sh'lo yada – until it is impossible to know the distinction between Haman and Mordechai'?

It would be far easier to understand any one of several of our other holidays to be the one holiday that would endure beyond this world. After all, Purim is certainly not the holiday most of us would naturally identify as being the most important one or perhaps the most significant one. The re-enactment of the exodus from Egypt and the telling of the Master Story of our people associated with Passover feels far more significant and far-reaching. Were it not for that experience, our people might never have found our way to Mt. Sinai to receive God's Torah. Likewise, Yom Kippur's process of personal and communal repentance and return seems more naturally a part of the enduring growth and development of the Jewish soul and of the Jewish people. Or, perhaps one of the many other holidays as well. So, why Purim?

The answer it seems to me lies in the Megillah itself – in the story of Purim itself. Or, rather, what is not in the story. In the entire narrative of the book of Esther, one character seems to be absent. The king signs Haman's plan as an edict: the Jews are to be killed. Mordechai tells Esther that the Jews need her intervention. Initially hesitant to do so, Esther goes to ask the King to spare the Jewish people. Esther warns Mordechai that no one, except those to whom the king holds out his golden scepter comes to the inner court on orders of death. Mordechai, in turn, warns Esther not to think that just because she is in the palace she would escape the fate of the rest of her nation. Esther's reaction is to instruct Mordechai to gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan to fast for Esther. Esther wines and dines the king, reveals to him that she is Jewish and convinces him to save her people. Haman is hung on the very day he drew to destroy the Jewish people.

So, who is missing?

God! No where in the entire narrative is God name mentioned – not even once. What an absurd idea for us – a Jewish holiday whose primary narrative doesn't mention God? In all other holidays, the narrative of the holiday makes clear God's appearance and instruction. On Passover, we speak of God's role in bringing about the redemption from slavery; on Yom Kippur it from God whom we seek to absolve ourselves of our vows; on Shavuot, it is God who reveals God's Torah atop Mt. Sinai. And the list could go on for all other holidays except Purim. Only on Purim is God's name left out of the narrative of the day. How is it that the one day which marks God's absence is the one enduring day into the messianic era?

In a discussion on Esther's approaching the king, the Talmudic rabbi, Rabbi Levi, records a similar discomfort with God's absence in the story of Esther. Looking at the verse from the scroll of Esther, "And she stood in the inner court of the king's house," he laments that to enter the inner most chambers of any king other than God leads to idol worship. And, so he superimposes the image of Esther speaking the words of the book of Psalms to God in that moment: 'Eli, Eli, lamah azavtani - My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'

Yet, Esther was not paralyzed by the experience. From the inner court of the king, she moves to stand in front of the king and bear her soul to him in the hope that she, Mordechai, and the entire Jewish community would be spared. She reveals Haman's plan to the king, and it is Haman whose demise is ultimately brought on the very day he chose to destroy the Jewish people. She could not wait for Mordechai or any one else to act in the world, but she herself had to dig within herself to find the courage and faith to stand up against evil and cry for justice in the world, even knowing that she could have to pay the price for approaching the king in her unorthodox ways. And indeed God sat with her in those moments.

God does not want each of us to wait for others to act to bring justice, nor does God want us to assume it can be done by God alone (regardless of whether or not we believe that God has the power and ability to do so). Esther helped bring God into the world and fulfill her divine mission when she took those steps to approach the king and to fight for her people. Like, her, we too help manifest God's presence in the world when we make God's implicit presence explicit in the ways we act and in the justice we seek. And, when we

do so, we move one step closer to the fulfillment of our divine mission and to a world in which salvation is truly possible and probable. This is our mission, this is our hope.

Purim Sameach.

Rabbi Cheryl Peretz, is the Associate Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, where she also received her ordination. She also holds her MBA in Marketing Management from Baruch College, and helps bring those skills and expertise into the operational practices of rabbis and congregations throughout North America.



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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90077
310-440-1218
www.aju.edu/ziegler

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