



Around the Shabbat Table Parashat Tetzaveh (Shabbat Zachor) 5762

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Shalom!

Introduction

During the coming week we celebrate the holiday of Purim. On the Shabbat preceding Purim, a special Torah reading accompanies the regular Torah reading. In this additional reading, it is stated: "Remember what *Amalek* did to you by the way as you came forth out of Egypt." For this reason, this Shabbat is often called *Shabbat Zachor*, the Shabbat of Remembrance.

The Book of Esther relates that evil Haman descended from a king of *Amalek*. Yet, much earlier in our people's history, the Israelites had successfully defended themselves against the attacking Amalekites during their journey through the Sinai Desert. This event foreshadows one of the morals of the Purim story: that good can triumph over evil and the weak can prevail over the strong.

A brief synopsis of the Purim story:

Esther, a beautiful Jewish maiden was chosen to become the wife of Ahashuerus, king of Persia. When the king's prime minister, Haman, plotted to kill all the Jews, Esther's cousin Mordechai alerted her. Esther risked her life to turn the King against Haman, saving her people.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together this Shabbat, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

I. The obvious issue of anti-Semitism evolves from Haman's targeting the Jews for elimination. There have been many Purims (and Hamans and Amaleks) throughout our history, and identifying these is a source of stimulating discourse. For example, the Jewish community in Prague remembers a rabbi who was saved from a death sentence in 1629, while Jews in Portugal

celebrate their triumph over danger in 1578. Are there dates and events in your family on which people were saved? How do you celebrate these dates?

2. The concept of feminism emerges in the dethroning of Vashti and the heroism and assertiveness of Esther. In fact, when Vashti refuses to appear before the king during his festivities, his advisors are alarmed ("When Queen Vashti was disobedient, she hurt not only the king but also all the ministers of all the nations in all of the provinces of King Achashvairosh's empire. When word of the Queen's behavior gets out to all the women, they will treat their husbands with less respect"). What were the roles and expectation of women in the Book of Esther? How do they differ from our expectation of women today?

3. The Purim story informs us that Queen Esther risked her life by disobeying the king's decree in order to save the Jewish people. When have you taken a big risk by standing up for something in which you believed even though doing so meant getting into trouble or losing a friend?

4. Then there is the concept of *Adloyadaya* (literally, until he did not know -- that is, the practice some had of getting drunk on Purim to the point where they could not tell the difference between "Blessed be Mordechai" and "Cursed be Haman"). As a result of the great and unexpected victory of the Jews over Haman and because the route to victory began at a "banquet of wine" (Esther 5:6), letting go, or getting drunk was permitted, even encouraged, on Purim. What do you think about the wisdom of this custom?

Texts to Wrestle With

Megillat Esther is unique in many ways. One unusual feature is that it does not mention God's name even once! Another is that we cannot verify from other sources whether the events related in the Book of Esther are historically accurate or not. Whether we do or do not take the events of the book as literal history, we can all understand the story's depiction of the life of the Jewish people in an alien and hostile world. In fact, Esther 3:8 has been called a "classic statement of anti-Semitism, perhaps the first written statement anywhere." We attribute the anti-Semitic statement to Haman, who used it to justify the persecution of the Jews:

"There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the King's laws; and it is not in your Majesty's interest to tolerate them."

Purim teaches us about the notion of *K'lal Yisrael* (an inclusive community of Israel) where no Jew is free from the obligation to help fellow Jews: "Every Jew is responsible for every other Jew" is what Mordechai impresses on Esther (4:13-14):

"Don't imagine that you alone among the Jews will escape to the king's palace, and that this will save your life. Even if you are silent now, the Jews will get relief and rescue some other way, and you and your father's house will be lost. And who knows? Maybe it was for just such an occasion that you were made queen!"

Towards an Action Agenda

1. Tzedakah opportunity- on Purim gifts of money or food are given to the poor (*matanot le'evyonim*). You can fulfill this mitzva through organizations like The Interfaith Nutrition Network,

<http://www.the-inn.org/>

or the Kosher Food Pantry of Congregation Beth El in Massapequa

http://www.uscj.org/metny/massapequa/acting_responsibly.htm

2. Volunteer to help spread the word about the danger of drinking and driving. Contact SADD (Students Against Drunk Driving) or MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving):

<http://www.saddonline.com/>

<http://www.madd.org/home/>

Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact us at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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