



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Tetzaveh

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Tetzaveh - Zachor- Purim

How Purim Changed the World



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Egypt is in disarray. Syria is teetering, as Al-Qaeda takes stronger and stronger hold there. Israeli troops are massing on the northern border in preparation for a Hezbollah attack. This one – they fear – will be reinforced with chemical weapons seized from Assad. Israeli citizens are lining up for gas masks once again and preparing bomb shelters.

What lies ahead for the Nation of Israel? Can the Jewish people ever find some comfort and security?

It is worth considering that these latest events are taking place right around Purim – a holiday that celebrates God’s hidden hand behind world events. Purim teaches us that, when we connect the dots, amazing patterns emerge leading us to... salvation.

This Purim/Zachor sermon seeks to do so by examining the behavior of the King Achashverosh of Persia – who seems to be a most mysterious man possessed of two faces. First, he sides with Haman in his genocidal plot against the Jews. Then, he sides with Esther and Mordechai and, because of him, instead of Purim being a day of tragedy for the Jews, it became a day of celebration.

So what are we to make of all this waffling? Was he a villain? Was he a hero? Or was he just an idiot who couldn’t make up his mind?

In answering these questions, we take the enigma of Achashverosh – and indeed the enigma of Purim – further. We connect the dots – the pixels of history – to create a bigger picture that explains the past and gives us a glimpse into the future.

And in the process we find the answer to the following questions as well: Who are the players in the current conflict in the Middle East? How can we help them find their way to fulfill their divine mandate? And what each of us can do about it in our personal lives?

Podium Notes / Talking Points:

- 1) Purim was the consummation of Sinai.
- 2) Sinai was an acceptance that was influenced by revelation – Purim's acceptance (fulfillment) was made purely due the Jew's inner commitment to God.
- 3) This allowed for the furtherance of the ultimate divine goal of creation to bring heaven down to earth.
- 4) The nations of the world are meant to be part of the process of *dirah bitachtonim* – Purim was meant to influence all the nations to tame their "Haman-like" tendencies and reveal their "divine" personalities.
- 5) All global events throughout history are interconnected – while they might seem to be disparate, in truth they are all influenced by each other. Nations that have failed to see themselves as part of this continuum have oftentimes cut themselves off from the chain of history and become lost forever.

- 6) The battles between the children of Abraham foretold the battles that would be waged between their descendants. They reflect the tensions of a material universe attempting to find its spiritual direction.
- 7) At Sinai, the Jews made the eternal commitment to the “principles of Abraham” the notion of “spirituality over materialism.” The other nations did not.
- 8) Over time, as Christianity and Islam were founded, there was movement toward the principles of Abraham, but ever since then those nations vacillated between those values.
- 9) While the Purim experience for Jews was one where they deepened their commitment to the principles of Sinai/ Abraham, for Achashverosh/the nations of the world/Esau, there was some movement but they still vacillate.

HOW PURIM CHANGED THE WORLD

Was Achashverosh an Idiot?

1. Leadership Quiz (Joke)

It is time to elect the world leader, and your vote counts. Here are some facts about the three leading candidates (and you can assume that all three have strong/charismatic personalities and are brilliant orators):

Candidate A: Associates with crooked politicians and consults with astrologists. He’s suspected of having been unfaithful to his wife on more than one occasion. He also chain smokes and drinks quite a few martinis a day.

Candidate B: He has been kicked out of office twice. He sleeps until noon. He has used opium in college, and he has recurrent problems with depression.

Candidate C: He is a decorated war hero. He's a vegetarian, who doesn't smoke or drink. He loves dogs.

Which of these candidates would be your choice?

Made your decision?

So let me tell you ... if you chose Candidate A, you chose Franklin Delano Roosevelt. If you chose Candidate B, you chose Winston Churchill. If you chose Candidate C, you chose Adolf Hitler.

I guess you never know who hides behind the mask.

And this brings me to the topic of the day which is unmasking the Persian leader who ruled the civilized world in the time of Esther, the heroine of the Purim Megillah – King Achashverosh.

2. A Hero or a Villain?

King Achashverosh is perhaps the most intriguing, and definitely the most mysterious, character in the Book of Esther – better known as the *Megillah*.

Every story has its heroes and villains, and so does this one. Mordechai and Esther are the obvious heroes here, and they come out triumphant at the end. Haman and his cronies are the obvious villains, and they are humiliated and hanged at the end. But what about Achashverosh – what are we to make of him?

Initially, he went along with Haman's plot and issued the decree to annihilate all the Jews in his entire kingdom. But then, Esther convinced him to reverse that decree and direct his wrath at Haman. And so, instead of Purim being a day of tragedy for the Jews, it became – at Achashverosh's behest – a day of celebration.

Was Achashverosh simply ambiguous and impressionable, or was there something else going on?

3. A Closer Look

A closer look at Achashverosh's life exposes unpredictable and erratic behavior:

First he loves his wife Vashti, then he hates her and has her killed. He then begins an outrageously hilarious search for a new bride. And women of all sorts line up, preening and perfuming themselves for the King. And at the end of all this, he chooses Esther as his queen.

Next, he is convinced by Haman to exterminate all the Jews. He suffers from insomnia, decides to reward Mordechai, the Jew, and then, in response to Esther's appeals, reverses his death decree. He has Haman hung and Mordechai rewarded and promoted to prominent leadership.

What's with this Achashverosh? Was he a good man or bad man? Was he a hero, a villain, or just an idiot who couldn't make up his mind?

4. Talmudic Opinions

The opinions in the Talmud are divided on this issue. Some say that Achashverosh was wise, others that he was a fool.¹

Some feel that he was more hateful to the Jews than even Haman – that “he was cruel from beginning to end.”² Others feel that he was manipulated by Haman. Still others say he was a “fickle/temperamental king.”³

To understand Achashverosh's conflicted psyche we need to probe into the deeper story of Purim and trace it back to its roots.

¹ *Megillah* 12a.

² *Esther Rabba* 7:20 and *Megillah* 11a.

³ *Megillah* 15b.

5. Roots of Purim

The story of Purim actually began about one-thousand years earlier, when the Jews accepted the Torah. Granted that they were overwhelmed by their encounter with God at Mount Sinai, but they did accept. However, it was not until Purim that they reaffirmed and upheld⁴ their acceptance of the divine law completely of their own volition. This time, there was no hint of being overwhelmed by the presence of God.⁵ (This is emphasized in the Purim *Megillah* by the fact that God's name is never even mentioned.)

Why was it so important for the Jews to reaffirm their Torah commitment on Purim?

The Sinai experience was no small matter. It essentially represented the fusion of dichotomous worlds – the world of matter and the world of spirit. And it underscored the purpose of existence to sanctify the universe and create a home for God in the lowest realm of existence.⁶

Until Sinai a schism existed between “above” and “below.” But Sinai infused us with the power to integrate the two.⁷ Transforming the material universe into spiritual energy is a partnership – a symbiotic relationship between the Divine and humanity. Such a partnership requires not just Divine revelation, but complete human cooperation and acceptance. Thus the need for Purim.

On Purim, the Jewish people embraced the divine mandate on their own initiative. And by so doing, they consummated the Sinai covenant that they made nearly ten centuries earlier.

⁴ *Kimu v'kiblu ha'yehudim, Esther 9:27.*

⁵ *Shabbos 88a.*

⁶ *Midrash Tanchuma* Parshat Naso 16, Parshat Bechukotai 3. *Midrash Bamidbar Rabba* 3:6. Tanya, beginning of Chapter 36.

⁷ *Shemot Rabba* 12:3. *Tanchuma Vaeirah* 15.

6. Not the End of the Story

However, the story of Purim doesn't end there, for even if the Jewish people accepted the divine mandate, the rest of the world did not. And there is no way to transform the physical universe into a "divine home" if all the nations on earth are not part of the process.

Purim, therefore, came to influence all the nations, as the Book of Esther states:

And all the ministers of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's functionaries honored the Jews ...⁸

Yet, despite the happy ending, deep tensions still remained. Purim provided a respite, but much work still remained to bridge the dichotomy between the divine plan and the selfish world. Indeed, the harshest times were still to come.

Achashverosh, the dominant leader of his time, reflected this duality in his own personality – one side of him gravitated toward Haman and genocide, the other toward benevolence in his support of Mordechai and Esther.

What Purim achieved, however, was not a temporary reprieve. It actually had a perpetual effect on all of history. It empowered the nations of the world – *if they so chose* – to tame their "Haman-like" tendencies and reveal their "divine" personalities.

The question is: Have they?

The answer is: Some have. Some have not – or, at least, not as yet.

⁸ Esther 9:2-3. Also see the ending Esther 10:1-3, which states: "King Achashverosh levied a tax upon the mainland and the islands of the sea. And the entire history of his power and strength, and the account of Mordechai's greatness, whom the king had promoted, are recorded in the book of chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia. For Mordechai the Jew was second to King Achashverosh, a leader to the Jews, and loved by his many brethren. He sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace for all their descendants."

7. Purim's Lessons for Today

But Purim promises they will. Indeed, Purim contains many lessons for us today, not the least of which are the current events in the Middle East.

Egypt is in disarray. Syria is teetering, as Al-Qaeda takes stronger and stronger hold there. Israeli troops are massing on the northern border in preparation for a Hezbollah attack. This one – they fear – will be reinforced with chemical weapons seized from Assad. Israeli citizens are lining up for gas masks once again and preparing bomb shelters.

What lies ahead for the Nation of Israel? Can the Jewish people ever find some comfort and security?

Global events are all dots, often appearing disjointed. Every event is another pixel in the larger picture. While we live through these events we only see the dots/pixels – we see the trees, not the forest. It is only in retrospect that we can discern the patterns emerging.

The same is true for history as a whole. History is a process, with each respective generation making its contribution to the bigger picture. But this fact has been lost on many nations and empires. Instead of seeing their role as part of the past and the future, they have indulged in the power of the moment, basking in the glow of their own achievements, failing to see themselves as dots, as links in the chain of history. Thus, they bring about their inevitable demise. A dot will be lost if it does not join its neighbors in creating the greater picture.

Purim teaches us to search for the patterns created by the dots of our time. And when we see them, the nearly 2,400 years since Purim originally took place is not a wide span that separates then and now. Indeed, all these years – the past and the present – become one continuum. Purim is not just some distant memory that we commemorate, but an event that lives on today.

Let's now look at some of the dots in our times, and see how the two-faced, split-personality of Achashverosh has its counterparts today, and how it can offer us some fascinating insights into the current global battles centered in the Middle East.

8. Deep Background

The current global eruptions – centering on the clash of civilizations between Western-style democracy and Muslim-style theocracy – can be traced back to the battles in the home of Abraham.⁹

As we know, Abraham, the Hebrew, was the “father of many nations.”¹⁰ His immediate descendants included:

- His two son, Ishmael, who is the progenitor Arab/Muslim people, and Isaac, the father of Esau and Jacob
- Esau is also known as Edom, and he is the progenitor of the Western/Christian world, and
- Jacob is also known as Israel, and he is the progenitor of the Jews

The battles between these children of Abraham foretold the battles that would be waged between their descendants. And these battles would essentially reflect the tensions of a material universe attempting to find its spiritual direction.

Abraham learned and then taught his children that true peace, true inner harmony, true purpose, could only be achieved under certain circumstances, namely:

- when we make our peace with God ...
- when we learn how to overcome our natural egocentricity and become beacons of altruism and love ...
- when we transcend our self-interest and assume our responsibility to refine and spiritualize our universe.

⁹ OPTIONAL COMMENT: And make no mistake about it, what is happening in the Middle East is just another facet of this clash. It is not a yearning for American-style democracy. Indeed, democratic elections in Egypt – for example – have only brought another kind of dictatorship into power with hints of Iranian-style theocracy in the offing. Why? Because American-style democracy is not part of the lexicon of the Middle East, and after decades of dominations by dictators and tyrants, they know little else. Further, the mosques and their imams/mullahs dominate the culture and their views are the most loudly heard, not those of the Facebook-empowered intelligentsia of the cities. And how many of these imams/mullahs relate to Abraham and his path?

¹⁰ Genesis 17:5.

At Sinai, the children of Jacob formally committed their lives to fulfill the divine mandate to build a civilized world, while the children of Ishmael and Esau did not.¹¹

But, as the centuries rolled on, first the children of Esau (with the birth of Christianity 2,000 years ago) began to embrace Abraham's original principles, and then the children of Ishmael (with the birth of Islam 1,400 years ago) as well.

But note that the children of Esau (and his European and American descendents) have two faces: they aspire to Abraham's values, and yet they still have Esau's predatory warrior instincts.

9. Esau - Amalek - Haman

Haman, a descendant of Esau (via his grandson Amalek¹²) manifested Esau's hatred for Jacob and his descendant Mordechai.

[This is why we read in the Torah today (on the Shabbat before Purim, Shabbat Zachor) the chapter of Zachor, remembering Amalek, in order to "associate the elimination of Amalek to the elimination of Haman,"¹³ first we remember then we fulfill the commandment¹⁴].

Achashverosh had both faces of Esau – one that responded to Abraham's legacy and another that responded to Haman's aggression. The events related in the Purim *Megillah* show that, at the end of the story, Achashverosh's better-side prevailed.

¹¹ Avodah Zorah 2b. See also Zohar III 192b. Mechilta, Yitro 20:2. Sifri and Rashi on Deuteronomy 33:2.

¹² Genesis 36:12. See Targum to Esther 3:1.

¹³ Rashi Megilah 29a.

¹⁴ See Megilah 30a.

But Esau's "schizophrenia" – the conflict between his dual personalities – remained strong. And actually, it is one of the most powerful factors that has defined history. We continue to ask which one of Esau's two faces will prevail in the end?

Will Esau's sword dominate? Will we continue to see what has been expressed in history as the brutal dominance of the Church and of the Christian monarchies, which have terrorized their populations and especially the Jews? Or will Esau's gentler genes prevail? Will we see what has been expressed in history as respect for personal dignity and individual rights? Will Esau commit to the divine mandate to civilize and refine our world ... to live according to the higher moral code taught by Abraham, formalized at Sinai and consummated at Purim?

It's difficult to overstate or even fathom how this battle of Esau's dual psyche has impacted us all. Over time, it has caused untold agony, spilled the blood of millions, and torn the world asunder in the past two millennia.

Only after many painful centuries did Abraham's vision become manifest with the birth of freedom in America – a nation built on the divine principles of morality given at Sinai. And now these ideals have spread (and are spreading) to other nations, who have embraced and continue to embrace them.

10. Ishmael

But Esau (the Western World) is only part of the story. Esau has not been alone in his dual nature.

Not to be outdone, Ishmael has not been a slouch when it comes to duality. As a son of Abraham, Ishmael had many great qualities, which were passed on to his grandchildren. Just as Christianity brought a new spirit of Godliness to the pagan children of Esau, Islam did the same for the pagan children of Ishmael.

But there is another side to Ishmael – sadly coming to the fore in our own times – his aggression, intolerance and fanaticism aggravated by a suicidal philosophy, which justifies the killing of innocent people in the name of “jihad.”

Lest this be misunderstood, allow me to state this disclaimer: I have no doubt that most Muslims are not terrorists and want to live in peace. What I am referring to here is the tolerance for, and the cultivation of, violent methods to advance a religious cause. But ...

Like Christianity before it, Islamic countries have become a breeding ground for forces terrorizing the world. And like Christianity, these forces need to be tamed and re-educated in the teachings of Ishmael's father Abraham.

Let's hope that what we are seeing now is the start of that re-education process – a process which cannot be imposed from without by the descendants of Esau, but which must come from within the descendants of Ishmael.

As the various Ishmaelite factions face off, the Western World must keep a healthy distance, even as it uses its influence to shape a stable future. We must allow the Muslims to figure out how to make peace with Abraham's standards and with each other. Let them be. Let the brothers work it out.

We can and should use our vast foreign aid and our oil-buying power to insure that the reformists have a chance and are not overwhelmed by forces of tyranny or theocracy. As their benefactors and customers, we are in the unique position to challenge them to reform their education systems from within ... to teach their children the beauty of faith – a faith that leads us all to love, not kill, each other.

11. Message of Purim

As we contemplate the rapidly changing face of the globe this Purim, the message in the scroll is that we have been given a divine blueprint for life – a universal mandate for all human beings how to live our lives in the noblest way possible. Abraham, “father of many nations,” taught his children how to live up to this calling and how to co-exist in total peace with their brothers and neighbors.

It took centuries for the nations of the world to first embrace the blueprint and then integrate it into their institutions. For two millennia, the nations have gone through their “growing pains” and killed millions of Jews and others in the process.

Now, some 3,300 years from Sinai and nearly 2,400 years from Purim, we are obliged to declare that the calling of our time is to finish the process. We are meant to empower each other, so that all peoples of the world – the children of Esau, and especially the children of Ishmael as well as all their brothers, sisters and cousins all over the world – will embrace, once and for all, the divine teachings of Abraham, the common father we all share.

And we begin at home. Our sages teach us that every individual is an “entire universe in microcosm.”¹⁵ All the characters in the world, their different philosophies and battles play themselves out subtly in our personal lives. When we embrace the principles of Sinai, reaffirmed and ratified on Purim, our actions have a “butterfly effect” on the entire globe.

So as we prepare to celebrate Purim, let us all reaffirm our commitment to the message of Sinai and Purim: to do all we can to ensure that peace and virtue reigns in our homes and communities; to go beyond our natural self-interest and become beacons of altruism and love; to assume our responsibility to refine and elevate our environments and spheres of influence.

¹⁵ Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 3.

By doing so in our own lives and inspiring in kind all those with whom we come in contact, will then have a ripple effect on the entire universe, helping bring about global harmony.

Just as unity brought about the redemption of Purim back then, now too, as we show each other one face – the face of love and unity – may we finally celebrate our ultimate freedom together with the coming of the final redemption.

Happy Purim!