



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Purim

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

March 19, 2011

Purim

Of Kings And Leaders



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

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ABSTRACT

What a shocking week this has been! Closest to home: The horrific slaughter of the Fogel family in Itamar... Across the globe: The devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan, taking over 25,000 lives, according to the latest estimates... And of course, the Middle Eastern tremors shaking up the entire region, with the latest eruption in the shape of Qaddafi massacring his own nation.

Just two months ago, who could have written such a script? In our amazingly advanced technological world - which was supposed to order, organize and give us unprecedented control over our lives - these latest convulsions leave us reeling, exposing our profound fragility in an ever more unstable and volatile universe. Above all is the question: What lies ahead? Can we find some comfort and security?

Fascinatingly, these 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 is a two part sermon:

Part I: “Two Faces of a Mysterious King” seeks to unlock the enigma of King Achashverosh of Persia. Was he a villain? Was he a hero? Or was he just an idiot who couldn't make up his mind?

First, he sided with Haman in his genocidal plot against the Jews. Then, he sided 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?

Part II: “Patterns in Time” seeks to take the enigma of Achashverosh – and indeed that of the holiday of Purim – further. It seeks to connect the dots – the pixels of history – to create a bigger picture.

It asks and answers the following questions: Who are the players in the current conflict in the Middle East? And how can we help them find their way to fulfill their divine mandate?

OF KINGS AND LEADERS

PART I: TWO FACES OF A MYSTERIOUS KING

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; 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 minded 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.

5. Roots of Purim

The story of Purim actually began about one-thousand years earlier, when the Jews – overwhelmed by their encounter with God at Mount Sinai – accepted the Torah. But it was not until Purim that they reaffirmed and upheld⁴ their acceptance of the divine law completely of their own volition, with 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.)

¹Talmud, *Megillah* 12a.

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

³Talmud, *Megillah* 15b.

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

⁵Talmud, *Shabbos* 88a.

Why was it so important for the Jews to reaffirm their 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 out of the “lowest states of existence.”

Until Sinai a schism existed between “above” and “below.” But Sinai infused us with the power to integrate the two.⁶ Transforming the material universe into spiritual energy is a partnership – a symbiotic relationship between the Divine and the human. Such a partnership requires not just Divine revelation, but complete human cooperation and acceptance. Thus the need for Purim.

On Purim, the people, on their own initiative, embraced the divine mandate, thereby consummating the Sinai covenant that they made nearly ten centuries earlier.

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, beginning with their leader, King Achashverosh.⁷

⁶ *Midrash Shemot Rabba 12:3. Tanchuma Vaairah 15.*

⁷ 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.”

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 had a perpetual effect on all of history – empowering the nations of the world to tame their “Haman-like” tendencies and reveal their “divine” personalities.

This is the essence of the Purim celebration: “The Jews established and accepted upon themselves and upon their descendants” to annually celebrate Purim and to “commemorate and celebrate these days in every generation, by every family, in every province and every city. And these days of Purim will never pass from among the Jews nor shall their memory depart from their descendants.”⁸

PART II: PATTERNS IN TIME

7. Purim’s Lessons for Today

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

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.

⁸ Esther 9:27-28.

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, 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 amongst the dots of our time. And when we see them, the nearly 2400 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 just as it lived then.

Patterns create eternity. They connect the details, which are isolated on their own, and unite them into one tapestry.

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 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.

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 Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain or where have you, could easily bring an Iranian-style theocracy into power. Why? Because American-style democracy is not part of the lexicon of these countries, 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?

As we know, Abraham, the Hebrew, was the “father of many nations.”⁹ His immediate descendants included: Ishmael (the progenitor Arab/Muslim people) and Isaac, the father of: Esau (also known as Edom, the progenitor of the Western/Christian world), and Jacob (also known as Israel, the progenitor of the Jews).

The battles between these children of Abraham foretold the battles that would be waged between their descendants, and these would be, essentially, a series of clashes reflecting 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 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.

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.¹⁰

But, as the centuries rolled on, first the children of Esau (with the birth of Christianity 2000 years ago) began to embrace Abraham’s original principles, and then the children of Ishmael (with the birth of Islam 1400 years ago).

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-like warrior instincts.

⁹Genesis 17:5.

¹⁰Talmud, *Avodah Zorah* 2b. See also Zohar III 192b. Mechilta, *Yitro* 20:2. Sifri and Rashi on Deuteronomy 33:2.

9. Esau - Amalek - Haman

Haman, a descendant of Esau (via his grandson Amalek¹¹) manifested Esau's hatred for Jacob and his descendant Mordechai.

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.

But Esau's "schizophrenia" – the conflict between his dual personalities – remained strong, and actually 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, expressed in history as the brutal dominance of the Church and of the Christian monarchies, which have terrorized their populations (especially the Jews)? Or will Esau's gentler genes prevail, 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, especially Jews, 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 these bedrocks of civilization.

¹¹Genesis 36:12.

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." Just witness, the horrific and unspeakable slaughter of the Fogel family - including a three-month old infant - in Itamar. May God console and bless this shattered family - and all of Israel - with strength and peace...

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

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

Perhaps God blessed them by splitting their ranks into Sunni and Shiite - a schism that goes back to Islam's infancy - so that they keep each other in check and maintain a balance.

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.

11. Western World and the Current Conflict

The political revolution in the Middle East led by the youth is a wake-up call to us all to inspire a spiritual revolution among our young.

As we begin reading the Book of Leviticus, let us call out to our pure and innocent ones: “Let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure!”

And as we approach Purim, let us follow the example of Mordechai – let us listen to our youth recite to us holy words of faith and trust in the One Above ... let them give us hope and confidence in the future.

Let us all speak with our children. Let us elicit from them their purity and their innocence.

When you come home from work, or before putting your children to sleep, or upon awakening – any time you can find – ask your children: “What did you learn today?” You may be surprised to hear what they say...

As well, let us all resolve to reach out and speak with the youth in our community. Let us ask them “What did you learn today?” And let us allow them to speak words of truth.

And finally, let us all seek to educate our children with passion and vivacity in the timeless values of Judaism. So that they can use their purity to lead the way. Amen.

12. 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 3300 years from Sinai and nearly 2400 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 may we all show each other one face – the face of love and unity – as we celebrate our freedom together.

Happy Purim!