

Adar 5768
March, 2008

“When Adar enters, we increase joy” (משנכנס אדר מרבין בשמחה) (Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 29a). Last month, I wrote about the role of joy in prayer. This month our joy increases, as Adar begins and we celebrate Purim.

How serious is Purim? Given the merriment with which it is observed, Purim is often dismissed as either a children’s holiday, or a mere stop-gap, enlivening with lighthearted release the long winter stretch between Hanukkah and Pesah. But Purim falls in Adar -- the twelfth month -- at the conclusion of the festival year which began last spring in Nissan. Viewed this way, Purim is neither transitional nor preparatory; on the contrary, all of the holy days -- Pesah, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot -- can be seen as preparatory for Purim! Occupying as it does a privileged place at the culmination of the liturgical year, Purim marks the completion of the long journey to redemption on which we embark each spring. Plumbing its depths demands of us great spiritual maturity, for which the entire year’s observance is necessary preparation. Thus, ideally, the joy of Adar grows out of the joy with which we serve God all year -- it is not “new” joy, but “increased” joy.

But if Purim is the crowning achievement of our annual cycle of spiritual strivings, why do we observe it with humor, costumes (especially cross-dressing!), and near-maniacal merrymaking -- expressions of joy associated with anything *but* holiness and service to God, and usually barred from our worship? Admittedly, the revelry of Purim can easily mask the seriousness of the day. Properly understood, however, the particular form in which we express our joy on Purim reveals profound depths of meaning.

Purim humor is not generic silliness or hilarity; it is satire and wit specifically directed at Judaism. We make fun of our worship, Torah study, and observance as an expression of the most mature kind of faith. Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk (the Kotzker Rebbe) adjures us to guard against making an idol of the commandments (*Amud HaEmet* on Deut. 4:23). Purim is one way in which we heed the Kotzker’s warning. Inherent in every religious commitment is the risk that the commitment itself, or our expression thereof, will become a golden calf -- a substitute for God. By making fun of our own worship, we give ourselves an annual anti-idolatry inoculation. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg puts it thus:

Humor . . . takes sanctity itself with a sense of limits. Satire prevents us from making the sacred absolute (only God is absolute). The unchecked tendency to respect religion all too often leads to deifying the ritual and the outward form of God. If people take the sacred too solemnly, they are confusing their religious expression -- which is relative and limited in truth -- with the infinite God whom they really seek to serve (Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, p. 254).

Once a year, we remind ourselves that our prayer, observance, and study are not absolutes, in and of themselves holy. God is holy. The discomfort we may feel at satirizing that which we usually hold sacred is precisely the point. By mocking our prayer service and our reading of scripture, we force ourselves to make the distinction between our religious forms (prayer, halakhah, study) and God.

Moreover, Purim merriment not only keeps us from idolatry, it both forces and enables us to be fully honest in facing the irresolvable theological challenges which lurk beneath the surface all

year. The story told in the *Megillah*, while humorously burlesque and ultimately redemptive, is both frightening and absurd. Why is there so much hatred (of Jews and non-Jews) in our world? How does the specter of horrific genocide arise from mere randomness and triviality? In the *Megillah* the Jews (if not Shushan) are ultimately saved; how many times throughout history, and in our own days, have things not worked out so well? And in all of this, where is God?

The form of the *Megillah* further highlights the challenge presented by its plot: God's name is utterly absent from the text. The midrash (Babylonian Talmud, *Hullin* 139b) makes explicit our experience of God's absence, linking the name Esther with the Biblical concept of the "hiding of the Divine Face" (*hester panim*):

אסתר מן התורה מנין? ואנכי הסתר אסתיר

Where is Esther indicated in the Torah? "I will surely hide (*hester astir*) my face"
(Deut. 31:18).

Even more provocatively, the ineffectual, boorish King Ahashverosh (*ha-melekh*) can be read as a parody of God (*ha-Melekh*). Thus, although we are taught that the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4), in this story Israel is saved by the mere fluke of the king's insomnia.

We are left with the discomfiting questions: what if there is no God, or worse yet, what if we are simply wrong about God's benevolence or omnipotence? All year long, in our prayer, study, and deeds, we affirm truths about the nature of God, humanity, and the created world; but too often, in the reality in which we live, those truths do not seem true. On Purim, we use humor to highlight the discrepancy, to ask the hard questions, and to vent our outrage and dismay. Once a year we put on a mask and mock ourselves and our faith, satirizing our own relationship with God. Once a year we openly acknowledge the terrifying possibility that life is but a Purim *spiel*, and Judaism a cruel joke. Wearing the face of another, we say in jest that which would be too terrifying, painful, and disrespectful to say in all seriousness as ourselves.

Mature faith demands no less. Our worship is impoverished if it is grounded in dishonesty or denial, and our faith enfeebled when it cannot admit of doubt. No longer dependent children newly released from slavery, on Purim we are finally strong enough to confront head-on -- with humor but without romanticism -- the reality that our world remains unredeemed, and that there may well be none but ourselves to redeem it. As Yitz Greenberg writes, "[i]n laughing at religious forms and at reality, one admits the fallibility of religious hopes but one also affirms them" (*ibid.*). By including religious satire within the rubric of religious observance, we affirm that our faith and our tradition is broad enough to encompass even our doubts and our anger; moments of faithlessness and even despair are not external to religious life, but part and parcel of it. Purim provides the opportunity to pour our fear, anger and bitterness into the crucible of laughter, where it can become intermingled with our delight, our hope, and our love, and be thus transformed into that complex cocktail we call faith.

Purim Sameah!
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