

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach
Purim, 2009

... חֹר כִּרְפֵס וּתְכֵלֶת אַחֲזוּ בְּחַבְלֵי-בוּץ וְאַרְגָּמָן... Upon first hearing, we might think this verse comes from one of the parashiyot we read from the Torah during these weeks -- Terumah or Tetzaveh. It sounds like the description of the building of the Mishkan: beautiful fabrics and colored threads, white wool, rich purples and reds. And *tekhelet* -- that special blue-green which is used in the Torah only in connection with the Mishkan itself, the garments of the kohanim who serve there, and the *tzitzit* that we put on our garments to remind ourselves of the Divine.

But in fact, this verse is not from the Torah reading, it is a verse from Megillat Esther (1:6). It describes not the home we are to build for God, but the courtyard and gardens of the all-too-human king, Ahashverosh.

Nor is this the only passage in Megillat Esther which invites comparison between the king in the story, *hamelekh* Ahashverosh, and the King of Kings, *HaMelekh*, God. We read that Ahashverosh displayed *מְלָכוּתוֹ* and *גְּדוּלָתוֹ* (Est. 1:4), terms we associate with God. The text emphasizes the theologically-significant number seven: the king has a feast of seven days, reminiscent of Sukkot and Pesah (Est. 1:5), there are seven servants (Est. 1:10) and seven ministers (Est. 1:14), and Esther is selected in the seventh year of the king's reign (Est. 2:16). Perhaps most strikingly, the summoning and banishment of Queen Vashti occurs *בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי* (Est. 1:10), when the king was "happy with wine" -- an odd reversal of the mystical teaching that on Shabbat, the seventh day, the Divine King (that is, the masculine aspect of God: *Tiferet, HaKadosh Barukh Hu, Adonai*) reunites with the Divine Queen (that is, the feminine aspect of God: *Malkhut, Shekhinah*). Indeed the association between Ahashverosh's palace and his feast with God and the Mishkan was strong enough to suggest to the rabbis of the Talmud that the vessels in which Ahashverosh served were actually the very vessels stolen from the destroyed Temple (Meg. 11b).

Why would Megillat Esther evoke such a strong connection between the buffoonish human king and God?

One possibility is that the similarities are intended to highlight the differences. In keeping with classic midrashic style, it is possible to read King Ahashverosh as the antithesis of God: a human king behaves in such and such a manner, not so the King of Kings.

But here's another possibility: this is parody. What if Ahashverosh is intended to be not a contrast to God, but a parody of God, a parody which reaches its climax at the beginning of chapter 6: *בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא נִדְדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ* (on that night, the king's sleep was disturbed) (Est. 6:1). Traditionally, when the Megillah is chanted aloud, this reference to *hamelekh* is chanted in High Holy Day nusah, suggesting the workings of the Divine beneath this seemingly random turning point of the story. But perhaps the use of the High Holy Day melody here suggests also the horrific possibility that it is in fact God's sleep which is disturbed. *הֲנֵה לֹא יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוּמֵר*. "Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps!" (Psalms 121:4). Is it possible that God is asleep on the job?

Which brings us to the nature of Purim. What is Purim? Our usual association with Purim as a lighthearted children's holiday is inconsistent with its placement in the calendar. Purim actually functions as the conclusion of the festival year, which begins in Nisan with Pesah. As such, it

should represent our most mature expression of faith, the growth we strive for all year.

And indeed it does. Purim represents that point in our spiritual development in which we trust that our relationship with God is strong enough to handle thoughts and feelings that may previously have been too scary, or too hard, to acknowledge. As in the the best human relationships, Purim celebrates the moment when our relationship with God has grown deep and mature enough that it is safe to voice our disappointment, our frustration, and even our anger at God. There is an anger beneath the seemingly child-like Purim story. Despite it's happy ending, the story of Megillat Esther is deeply disturbing; it is not "ok." Yes, everything worked out in the end. But what if it hadn't? And what about all those times in life when it doesn't? We know all too well that evil people aren't always hanged, and innocent people aren't always rescued just in the nick of time. Sometimes our experience of life leaves us disappointed or angry at God. Sometimes we may wonder if there is a God, or worse yet (as C.S. Lewis says), that God isn't Who we think God is. Sometimes when we look at the world, it may indeed seem like God is asleep on the job.

So Purim comes, and allows us to own and acknowledge these difficult realities. Like any good therapeutic experience, it provides a container for these thoughts and feelings: our fear and anxiety, our doubt, our anger. We put on a mask and costume, taking on a new identity, so that it's "not really us" saying these things. We have a good stiff drink, so we can say it's the alcohol talking. And we say it all in jest -- because truer things are said in jest, and to acknowledge the terrible possibility that this is all a joke and that the joke is on us.

This, I believe, is the great genius of Purim. In providing that container -- in allowing us to put our questions and doubts out there, right in front of God and everyone, and laugh at them -- Purim allows us to move forward. It helps us reclaim our faith. It lets us begin the year again, with the naivete of a young lover following our beloved God once more into the wilderness, chanting Shir haShirim, confident that the strong hand and outstretched arm will be there to rescue us come what may.

Without that naive faith, without the rich and rewarding year of spiritual growth beginning each Pesah, who would ever have the courage to fully experience Purim? But without Purim, how could we re-immers ourselves in Pesah with intellectual and emotional integrity?

Purim teaches us that it's not either/or, faith or doubt -- that we don't have to choose. We can have room for both and still be a good Jew. We can allow ourselves to see what we see *and also* see beyond it, to own the fullness of our human response to the mystery and often deep pain of the human condition, and still claim God as our own.