

SHABBAT TETZAVEH/SHABBAT ZACHOR 5769

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חור | כַּרְפָּס וּתְכֵלֶת אַחֲוַי בְּחִבְלֵי-בָוַץ וְאַרְגָּמָן עַל-גְּלִילֵי כֶסֶף וְעִמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מִטּוֹת | זָהָב
וְכֶסֶף עַל רְצֵפֹת בַּהֲטָוֶשֶׁשׁ וְדָר וְסִחְרָת: וְהַשְּׂקוֹת בְּכֵלֵי זָהָב וְכֵלִים מִכֵּלִים שׁוֹנִים...

Hangings of white, fine cotton, and blue, bordered with cords of fine linen and purple, upon silver rods and pillars of marble; the couches were of gold and silver, upon a floor of green, and white, and shell, and onyx marble. And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, vessels of all different types...

This kind of description occurs in only two kinds of contexts in the Tanakh. The Torah is not given to elaborate physical depictions, or even not very elaborate ones. What do you know from the Bible about how Rachel or Avraham or King David look? One context for such flowery description is the Temple in Jerusalem, or its model -- the Mishkan, the sacred space the Israelites were building in the desert. Since that's what we read about this morning, you might think that's where I'm quoting from. But I'm actually reading from the other place: the Megillah.

We don't usually pay much attention to the opening words of the Megillah; we usually glide over them and get right to the story. But the rabbis of the Talmud noticed the unusual language there and made a connection. They thought about the fact that the story of the Esther is set roughly a century after the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the exile of the Jews to Babylonia -- which was then conquered by Persia. They read the verses about linen and purple, silver and marble, vessels of gold -- and they said: Ahashverosh's banquet hall was made out of the ruins carted off from the Temple.

It's not the only connection we could make between the story of Purim and the biblical sanctuary. Both have an inner sanctum where no one is allowed without special permission -- the Holy of Holies, and the throne room of Ahashverosh. Both stories are anchored by a framework of laws punishable by death. The connections point to something deeper than a literary game. My colleague Rabbi Jan Urbach suggests that among other things, the story of Purim is a kind of satire. What if the Megillah is consciously mocking our section in the Torah, about the creation of the sacred place?

Because what the parallels call attention to, really, are the contrasts between our parasha and the Megillah we'll read on Monday evening. The design of the Mishkan is all about order -- orderly design connected to a moral order, all of which brings God's presence into our world. The story of Purim is all about accident, and the quick turn between good fortune and bad, then back again, for no good reason at all.

In this morning's parasha, as in last week's, each item for the sanctuary and the priests who serve there is described precisely and set in its place. The language and the style of this whole section of the Torah track the opening chapter of Genesis. There too, each day is an orderly unit in an orderly sequence. Everything is where it belongs. All things respond faithfully to God's command. You can hardly call these stories at all; they are architectural plans for the world. In this framework of order, God's presence is felt, comes to rest someplace in our world.

These chapters are a religious worldview. They see the world as a place that is fundamental orderly, just as the moral codes we live by can be specified and make us secure. We can stand firm, just like the standing acacia boards that hold up the Mishkan like trees rooted in the earth. There's no disturbing element here, and nothing that would set in motion a story.

The Megillah is the absolute opposite. Put aside for now the costumes and everything else we do around the Megillah reading. Esther is a story where the fate of the Jews turns entirely on accidents -- the girl Achashverosh happens to choose as queen, the plot Mordechai happens to overhear against the life of the king, the night the king happens to wake from his sleep, the times the king does or doesn't put two and two together. And of course there's the word that gives the holiday its name. *פּוּר* means "lot" -- everything turns on a throw of the dice. Everything, as in life and death.

We experience Purim as a light holiday, which it surely is. But the story is on one level a dark one. Megillat Esther interrogates the worldview of our parasha, of the Mishkan. It turns the tropes and language of the Torah back on the Torah itself.

The Megillah takes us far from the Torah's world, literally -- of all the books of the Bible, it has the least connection with *Eretz Yisrael*, a single mention. There is no explicit mention of God. The laws of Shushan, the capital, permeate the book. There is a law about drinking at the king's feast -- the law is that no one can force you to drink any particular wine. There is a law about wives honoring their husbands by being at their beckon call. There is a law about coming into the king's presence -- if you come unbidden, you are executed. There's apparently a law that the king can't rescind his own laws, and for the Jews to defend themselves at the end requires its own law. And there's a command -- a *mitzvah* -- that everyone bows down to Haman. These are laws, but strange and troubling ones, far from the commandments we are familiar with.

And if the Megillah is a kind of satire or parable, we ought to pay attention to the king. We don't think of Achashverosh as anything other than a dupe and a fool. At the center of the book, one night the king's sleep is disturbed by tossing and turning. Instead of counting sheep, he asks that his royal journal be read to him, and he comes across the report of how Mordechai saved his life by overhearing the plot against him. Then follows the wonderful story of Haman coming in -- what's he doing there in the middle of the night -- and thinking he must be the one who the king wants to honor, and Haman ends up being the one to lead Mordechai through the streets of Shushan as the king's hero, and we know we've reached a turning point and things will be all right.

On this episode we find an astounding comment in the Talmud:

נְדָדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ -- רַבִּי תַנְחוּם אוֹמֵר: נִרְדָּה שְׁנַת מַלְכוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם

Rabbi Tanchum says: *The king's sleep was disturbed*, means: the King of the Universe was aroused from his sleep.

It's the kind of comment that would get you kicked out of most yeshivahs! Rabbi Tanchum says: Achashverosh is a metaphor for God. Through this whole story, God was asleep -- worse yet, drunk! Asleep at the wheel. There's this long dangerous time when things are going out of control, and God was not supervising events in this world.

Until that moment when he woke up, there the king sat in his inner sanctum, his Holy of Holies, and Esther worried that she couldn't go in there, couldn't voice her prayer, couldn't take the action she needed to take, to save her own life and the life of her people, to rescue Persia and Media from Haman.

What if we open the ark, and there's nothing there?

The world of Shushan is topsy-turvy from the start. It's law without moral order, it's a place without a spiritual order, and life is literally a lottery. That's why the rabbis looked at it and saw all the beautiful materials from the Temple in Jerusalem mashed together and strew about to make Achashverosh's palace. That's why one tradition of Purim was to induce in ourselves a drunken stupor in which you didn't believe there was any difference between אֲרוֹר הַמֶּן and בְּרוּךְ מֵרַדְכַּי, between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai". As Noreen reminded me the other day, in gematria (Jewish numerology) the true statements have the exact same numeric value.

A lot of the time our world looks a lot more like Shushan than the Mishkan. Would you say most of the time? Do you believe in God's providence, or is life a throw of the dice? Do you believe we live in a society where the rules point to a guiding hand, or are the laws all about human power? What if the only path to security is a גִּשְׁר צָר מְאֹד, a narrow escape?

These are the questions raised by the Megillah as a book in its own right. I thought about this in connection with a comment one of my colleagues made at the conference where I was last week: "I have a coworker who is a great guy. He hates me." I thought about it last week, as in our small community we marked both Jan's shiva and Nancy's simcha. Fill in your own jumble.

Well there's the Megillah, and there's Purim. Purim gives us a safety valve to ask these hard questions and blow off steam in the process. We have permission to enter the imagination that says: Shushan is reality. We take the book seriously, read this story from a scroll just like the Torah. But we dress ourselves up and read this story, and we boo the bad guy and make sure that everything turns out fine in the end. We acknowledge that the world is complicated, but we make fun of that -- and the Megillah is a very funny story. We don't exclude questions and even doubt from our religious life as Jews. We do in a Jewish container -- we mask our faces to make it safer to say daring and even blasphemous things, we do it with humor, we do it in community.

Some say that Purim is the prelude to Pesach -- we get these questions out of our system then move onto the serious things and what we really believe. My colleague Rabbi Urbach, who I mentioned before, argues: Purim is the last holiday of the year. We ask our tough questions at the height of our spiritual growth. Off the firm foundation of everything Jews rely on, from Pesach to Rosh Hashanah and beyond, it's safe and even wise to do so.

I would like to think that Megillat Esther helps us understand our parasha and the Mishkan, the symbol of order in our lives, rather than to reject it. With the Megillah in mind, we can pay attention to the precious materials in our hands. We have gold and silver, marble and silk, cotton and linen, and all kind of colors. We decide what to build in our lives and our world. A Temple or its ruins. Places and moments of sanctity, or the vapid palaces and drinking parties of Achashverosh.

And the Megillah allows us to zoom out a bit, gain some perspective. While the parasha takes us only into the careful craftsmanship of the Tabernacle, we can see that the structure stands at the center of a camp, a small place of order surrounded by the real world. Sometimes life feels like the Mishkan, and other times like the open or busy spaces around it. It's both. While there may be more empty space in real life, the sanctuary is still there at the center if we can find it.

So think about the Megillah, and the sometimes chaotic world it represents. And know too there is a sanctuary to come to -- in safety, as a haven, but also in questions and even in doubt.

Shabbat Shalom and Simchat Purim!