

I have a terrible confession to make: I hate Purim. Oh, I know—it's great for kids—carnivals, costumes and all that. And it is also great for big people, who get to act like kids for one day, although often with the aid of a lot of alcohol, which is not really much of a kids' thing.

I used to like Purim, with all that frivolity, and especially that great story of peril and heroic redemption, with its colorful cast of characters. But then, I actually started to pay attention to the whole megillah. There are plenty of issues with the heroes of the story—Mordechai and Esther--- maybe we can talk about that next year. What really turns me off is the big-time vengeance at the end of the story.

"On the thirteenth day of the month of Adar the Jews of the king's provinces killed seventy-five thousand of their foes... , and they rested on the fourteenth day and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing."

So—what is wrong with this? Why shouldn't the Jews kill 75,000 Persians who, apparently, did not like them, and then rejoice and feast the very next day?

This might be a little cringeworthy, but after all---Isn't there plenty of vengeance upon mass populations in the Tanakh?

In Bereshit, Didn't God destroy Sodom and Gemorrah ?

In Sh'mot, didn't God promise to " utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek under heaven?"

And—also in Sh'mot, didn't God tell Moses to have 3000 men slain after the episode of the golden calf?

In B'midbar, didn't God instruct Moses, to "avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites?"

Didn't Isaiah warn: "For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity"

Didn't God tell Ezekiel: 'I will execute great vengeance ... Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I lay my vengeance upon them."

And didn't Jeremiah plead with God: "O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them."

So—what is the difference between all these instances and the end of the megillah of Esther?

The difference is -----that in all these instances, vengeance is up to God, not man.

As we all know, the megillah of Esther is a secular story—there is never any mention of God. The bloody vengeance of the Jews was their own, not God's.

The Torah makes it clear that such vengeance, unsanctioned by God, is NOT acceptable.

The best example: When Shimon and Levi slew all the males of Shechem,----- on their own,---- without divine permission—they were rebuked and condemned.

Even God, yes, even God--- had restraints on the wanton destruction of whole populations:

Going back to that story of Sodom and Gemorrah, recall that Abraham argued with God, making the good point that it was unjust to destroy the righteous along with the wicked. Only when it was clear that the entire population was wicked, did God destroy them.

Vengeance is God's, and God's alone, and even that has its limits.

And—what about this:

None of us get too upset over Haman being executed, but isn't it troubling that his ten sons are killed as well? What did they do wrong? And—this was at the specific request of our beloved heroine Esther.

In Devorim, it specifically states that "Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin."

Didn't they read the Torah in Shushan?

Speaking of Torah, there are all sorts of rabbinic rationalizations of these issues.

Most commentators regard the ending as some sort of legitimate self-defense, although this is problematic, because the text itself does not identify those 75,000 victims as specifically persecutors of Jews, much less as actively threatening them at that time. In addition, the text itself makes it clear that Haman's hatred of the Jews is personal, apparently related to Mordechai's refusal to pay him his expected respect. Nothing suggests that the populace, as a whole, is clamoring to kill all the Jews in the kingdom.

The Malbim asserted that the Jews only killed those who had actively plotted against them, and not those who simply hated them, which, in his view, made it more palatable.

Likewise, the Vilna Gaon distinguished between enemies, who actively want to do evil and haters who are simply bystanders to evil. Unlike Malbim, however, he believed that those in both categories were slain by the Jews, making the provocative argument that both were equally culpable. He defended the Jews by noting that they did not kill them for monetary gain, only in fulfillment of the king's orders.

Honestly---this seems like a rather shabby argument to me.

There have also been attempts to soften the issue of Haman's sons. Since the text is ambiguous, as to whether they were hung while alive, or whether their dead bodies were hung, many commentators choose the latter alternative, and maintain that they were killed while trying to attack Jews. Others agreed that they were hung while alive, justifying this by arguing that they were destined to persecute the Jews in the future had they lived. Interestingly, different commentators have claimed that Haman actually had many more sons---20, 40, even up to 208, so that, I guess, only the really bad sons were killed.

To me these arguments just do not ring true, and cannot explain away the plain meaning of the text.

Also worth noting is the fact that we read parshat Zakhor on the Shabbat before Purim, reminding us of the command to wipe out Amalek in every generation. This is meant to send the clear message that those 75,000 Persians we read about the following week are to be thought of as Amalekites, worthy of extinction.

This is not an abstract argument. In ancient times, soon after the birth of Christianity, before that new religion overtook Judaism in influence and power in the region, Purim was seen as an occasion for violence against Christians.

And---it was no coincidence when, in 1994, Baruch Goldstein chose Purim to massacre 29 peaceful Muslim worshippers in Hebron. He had explicitly equated these Palestinians with Amalek, and, by extension, with those 75,000 Persians, deserving, indeed required, to be killed.

It is also curious that, although we modern folk tend to try to ignore these violent, vengeful aspects of the Purim story, earlier generations of Jews glorified them. Megillot as old as a thousand years ago, up to the early twentieth century, often had illustrations depicting the hanging of Haman and his sons, and, sometimes, the Jews killing their neighbors.

In short, it seems that the story of Purim is a poor reflection of core Jewish values. Frankly---
- I think it is embarrassing.

And--- I am not the only one.

Martin Luther, not a big fan of the Jews, wrote in 1543 that Jews "love the Book of Esther, which so well fits their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous greed and hope. " Ouch.

Frederich Bleek, a German Protestant Old Testament scholar, writing in 1865, complained of the "very narrow minded and Jewish spirit of revenge and persecution" in the book. This fit neatly into the widely accepted Christian concept that the Jewish people had fallen from their lofty ideals in the days of the Torah, to a depraved state, just crying out for the redemption of the messiah--and we know who that was.

Even secularists, like the Englishman Austin Holyoake, writing in 1870, could assert that "we close the bloodstained Book of Esther with feelings of loathing and disgust." By the way, he wrote that in a pamphlet with the interesting title: *The Book of Esther: A Specimen of What Passes as the "Inspired Word of God."*

Even more to the point, many prominent Jews have felt uneasy about the violence in the book.

A version of the Book of Esther, authorized by England's chief rabbi in 1877, altered the end of the book, implying instead that the Jews were simply authorized by the king to fairly defend themselves if attacked, and omitting any mention of the 75,000 casualties. The hanging of Haman's ten sons was changed to say that they "were slain in battle."

In 1896, Claude Goldschmid Montefiore, the great-nephew of the renowned Sir Moses Montefiore, and a leading figure himself among the observant English Jewish community, wrote that "among the thousands and thousands of Jews who have celebrated... the festival of Purim, it is likely that very few have paid any heed to the moral and religious worth of the book on which the festival now depends." He deplored that "just as there was to have been a massacre of unresisting Jews,

so now there is a massacre of unresisting Gentiles."

Incidentally, since, as an observant Jew he could not take the next, perhaps logical, step of suggesting that the Book (and perhaps, holiday) be abandoned, he offered an interesting justification: since the actual historicity of the story could not be verified, he wrote: "in truth, the slaughter is purely a paper one...the stroke of a pen did not hurt a single human being." In other words, since none of this ever happened, what difference did it make? It is just a symbolic fairy tale.

These concerns have continued to the present time, with many Jewish intellectual leaders, especially in the Reform movement, echoing their unease over the violence in the Book of Esther.

So—what to make of all this???

You should, and will, draw your own conclusions, but I, for one, find it difficult to view the holiday with the unadorned pleasure I once did. You might say it is the end of innocence for me. I guess that's what happens when you get older. Watch out, it may even happen to some of you.

I know this talk is kind of a downer. But----

I figured this was the perfect time to give this talk, since it was one week AFTER Purim. So-- I knew it would not ruin anyone's Purim fun this year, and I could feel confident that we would all forget about it long before the fun next year. I do hope, though, that I have given you something to think about, at least for this very short time.

Shabbat shalom