

FEBRUARY 26, 1999

PARASHAT TETZAVEH

SHABBAT ZACHOR

Tonight begins Shabbat Zachor. The Shabbat of Memory. You might remember that another holy day is called Yom Hazikaron, the day of remembrance. That's Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, a day when we hope G-d remembers us for the book of life. Now, six months after Yom Hazikaron, half way through the cycle of the year, comes the Shabbat of memory. But in this case the memory refers not to G-d, but to our own remembering. And what we are reminded to remember on this Shabbat is not G-d's presence in our lives, but the presence of our enemies. Shabbat Zachor comes the week before Purim and on it we read a special Torah portion about Amalek, whose people attacked the Israelites in the wilderness:

"Remember what Amalek did to you," says G-d, "on your journey after you left Egypt. How, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers, those who had fallen behind. Therefore, when G-d grants you safety from all your enemies in the land that G-d is giving you as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Lo tishkakh--Do not forget!" [Deut. 25:17-19]

We remember Amalek on this shabbat before Purim because supposedly Haman, the villain of the Purim story, was his descendant. I love the irony of this passage, though. Do not forget to blot out the memory of Amalek. Each year we remind ourselves not to forget to forget: you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Lo tishkakh--Do not forget! In other words, remember to forget to remember. When are we to forget finally? Only when G-d gives us rest from our enemies in the land that G-d is giving us as an inheritance -- only then, only when we are home in our own land AND have no enemies -- only then can we truly rest, only then will we have the luxury of forgetting who our enemies were, of blotting out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Until then, though, we remember not only our enemies but also perhaps our own role in allowing them in.

Our teachers tell us that the purpose of this special Shabbat, and of Purim too, is to remind us to be ever vigilant--it's when we become complacent or unwarrantedly optimistic that the forces of evil can overtake us. Remember, the verses from Deuteronomy tell us that Amalek surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers, those who had fallen behind. Why have we let the stragglers fall behind? Why didn't we keep them safe in the middle, carry them if need be? Why don't we do that in society

today? One of the mitzvot of Purim is to give tzedakah to the poor -- dropping money in the pushke is ok, but better is actually to give money or help directly into the hand of someone who needs it. [Chabad ad on Purim in Jewish Journal 2/26/99, p.3]

Everything is so uncertain on Purim. Rowdiness and goodness, disguise and vulnerability, a world turned upside down. It is a bit unsettling--like life. And as we study Purim, and perform the mitzvot of it, we consider how opposites confront us in a Purim world.

Where, for example, does the word haman appear in Torah? The character himself does not appear in Torah, but the letters of his name do in a couple of places. One is in the miracle food we are given in the wilderness. What is it? Manna, in Hebrew man nm sometimes called, haman -- the manna. Prof. Carol Ochs points out that manna is like mother's milk: perfect sustenance, always just as much as you need, there whenever you need it. And Torah tells us: "The Israelites ate the manna forty years, until they came to a settled land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan" [Ex. 16:35]; in other words, until they left the wilderness and entered the promised land.

You see how always on the edge we are? Good and evil -- manna and Haman -- are both always there. And life can turn in an instant (in a phone call) from manna -- from mother's milk -- to Haman, symbol of misery, enemy of the people.

In preparation for the celebration of Purim, and during the celebration itself, we remember our enemies: we blot out the name of Haman by writing it on the bottoms of our shoes and then rubbing it off on the floor, or by making so much noise we can't hear his name being spoken, but to do that every year requires remembering those names.

This insistence on selective remembering--or is it selective forgetting?-- is perhaps also behind the reasoning for an oft-quoted hasidic saying about Purim. The remark makes use of the term Yom Kipurim, which is one of the Torah names for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Literally, Yom Kippurim means the Day of Atonements, but some students of Torah make a pun of it, and read it as Yom kipurim: the day that is ke purim, that is "like Purim." At first the remark seems absurd. How is Yom Kippur, the most serious and somber holy day of the year, like Purim, the silliest, most irreverent and light-hearted day of the year?

For me, the statement Yom Kippur is a day like Purim reminds us how important both holidays are, and both kinds of celebration: the most serious and the most riotous and rowdy. Neither are frivolous. The two holidays are six months apart--halfway through the year that begins with Yom Kippur comes Purim. Six months into a year seems quite a good time, in the scheme of things, to take a break, to remember to laugh and make fun of ourselves and one another--to lighten up!

The statement tells me something else as well. For I think Purim and its story of Esther is a good example of what doing the work of Yom Kippur can lead you to. On Yom Kippur we are asked to be self-reflective, to take an accounting of ourselves--it's called a chesbon hanefesh--an accounting of the soul. We are expected to look at the ways we have behaved, to try to understand our behavior, to try to make amends for our failures, and to resolve to improve. Perhaps we can do this each year because we know that such a thing is possible, for Judaism understands and teaches that we are all human and therefore imperfect, but that change, like forgiveness, is possible. Judaism teaches that we can become, each year, an even better person than we were the year before.

At Purim, even amidst all the clutter and clatter and commotion, we are instructed to listen to the story told in the Book of Esther. And despite its troubling ending, it is a wonderful story, not the least because of the character of Esther, who begins as a quiet, obedient, fearful and closeted Jewish woman, appreciated mainly for her beauty, and becomes the brave and clever savior of her people. Esther definitely had a choice. She could have remained the closeted, favorite wife of the king, living an easy life. Instead, with the help of her good cousin Mordecai, she came to understand that the time for remaining closeted was over, that she could do the most good for the most number of her people by going public. Casting her fear aside, she puts her own life at risk in an effort to save her people, but she does so only after taking an accounting of herself, with the help of Mordecai.

At her moment of doubt, knowing that if she took action, the king might have her killed, Mordecai helped Esther take an accounting: "Do not think in your heart that you, of all the Jews, will escape because you are in the king's house," said Mordecai. "For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place; but you and your father's house will be destroyed--and who knows whether you have not come into royal estate for just such a time as this?" [4:13-14] Esther had then to do her own self-accounting and reflection, and upon doing so, she made a decision to act, and she also asked for help. Knowing she could not gather the strength she needed all alone, she asked her people to help give her strength, to give her morale support. She asks them to fast for three days where they are, in support of her, while she at the same time will also fast. "Then," says Esther, "I will go in to the king, though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." [14:16] As much as it all hinged on Esther's bravery and resolve, she also relied on the support of her people [4:15-17].

On Yom Kippur too, we know something about fasting in order to gain spiritual strength for the task at hand. We also know something about gathering together to help lend one another spiritual strength.

On Yom Kippur we gather in community, for strength and support, to do the internal work of self-reflection and self-evaluation and to resolve to become still better people. On Purim we gather in community to hear a story of what can

result when that internal work has been done well, when one's self has been understood and one's fears conquered. How perfect, then, that Purim is a day of celebration and rejoicing, of laughter and enjoyment, for those should be the rewards that the work of Yom Kippur can yield.

So go ahead and lighten up as we head toward Purim. But remember not to forget the villains in our midst: our own complacency among them. And remember too not to forget the story of Esther, and of how her yom kipurim, her day of atonements, brought us Purim, a day to celebrate the results of Esther's self-understanding, and of her willingness to change and grow.

When faced in our own lives with those moments of fear about coming out-- whatever that may mean -- or a choice between taking the easiest route and the better route, may we remember Esther and what a little self-reflection, and also a little moral and morale support from others, can do. And oh yes, be happy, it's Adar already and it's almost Purim!

Shabbat Shalom