

Sparks

by Rabbi David Aaron
Founder and Dean, Isralight
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Purim: Secrets Behind the Purim Mask

Purim celebrates the salvation of the Jews from the wicked Haman's scheme to exterminate all the Jewish men, women, and children living in the Persian empire in the year 357 B.C.E., which essentially meant all the Jews in the world. Some of the commandments of Purim, such as hearing Megillat Esther, which recounts the Purim story, and enjoying a festive meal, are obvious ways to commemorate this deliverance.

Other commandments and customs have no apparent connection to what happened on Purim. Why are we required to give charity to the poor, send two food items to a friend, and get so drunk that we do not know the difference between Haman, the villain, and Mordechai, the righteous hero of the story? (This last commandment, I understand, is very rigorously kept in college dorms all year round.)

What is behind the customs to dress up in costume and to eat hamentaschen, delicious, sweet tarts named literally, "Haman's hat"? In Hebrew, the tarts are called "Haman's ears." Imagine that you didn't know that much about Jewish culinary customs and you walk into a bakery before Purim, and the Hasidic guy in front of you orders, "a dozen of Haman's ears." Over the counter they hand him something with black stuff in the middle, which he gives to his little children. And the kids munch away happily, saying, "I love these Haman's ears." Doesn't that sound sick? Why would anyone want to eat a part of the cruel anti-Semite Haman?

The scroll of Esther, the Purim story, in Hebrew is called, "Megillat Esther." "Megillah" comes from the root word meaning, "revelation." The name Esther is related to the Hebrew word for hiddenness. So Megillat Esther suggests "the revelation of hiddenness."

The hiddenness which is revealed on Purim is the hiddenness of G-d's oneness. You see, the oneness of G-d is such that G-d can create a being who has free choice, yet, mysteriously, that free choice cannot oppose G-d's will and plan. It can do other than G-d's will, but it won't in any way interfere with G-d's will and plan.

We see this paradox illustrated throughout the events of the Purim story. The Jews of the Persian Empire are assimilating. The evil Haman decides to destroy the Jewish people, and proceeds to execute his plot, making his moves toward the final solution of the Jews. The irony of the story is that everything he does to destroy us, destroys him-and saves us. By threatening our existence, Haman indirectly initiates a renewal in the Jews' commitment to Torah, reversing the tide of assimilation which is always the greatest threat to Jewish survival. And Haman digs his own grave, or more accurately, builds his own gallows, for the gallows he had built to hang Mordechai are used for Haman's own execution.

In the Purim story, there are no miraculous interventions, no sea splitting. In fact, G-d's name is not even mentioned in the Book of Esther. This is a tremendous revelation of G-d's oneness. The greatest revelation of G-d's oneness is that G-d does not have to interfere. This is the revelation of hiddenness:

that within the natural world, within the free choices of human beings, G-d's plan is being completely fulfilled, step by step.

G-d has written a script, and we are the actors in that drama. The question isn't whether we are going to play our parts, but how we will play our parts-whether consciously and willingly, or obliviously and with resistance. Whether we choose to work for G-d's plan of growth, love, and oneness, or against it, is our choice.

Again, we see this illustrated dramatically in the story of Esther. Esther, who is secretly Jewish, has by a strange set of circumstances married the King of Persia. (Sounds like fate at work?) But soon after, Haman the Prime Minister begins to execute his plot to destroy the Jewish people. So Mordechai, Esther's uncle, says to her: "We've got to save the Jewish people. Perhaps G-d has orchestrated things in this very manner so that you could be queen and in a position to save the Jewish people."

But Esther isn't convinced. She tells Mordechai, "You know the rules of the palace. If I go to the king without being invited, he could have me killed!"

To that Mordechai says something bizarre: "If you don't do this, Esther, the salvation of the Jews will come from someplace else."

What kind of argument is that? I mean, if you want to get somebody to do something what method do you use? Guilt! Mordechai should have said to Esther, "If you don't do it, the Jewish people will be destroyed. This will be the end of Jewish history."

Instead he says, "If you don't do it, the Jews will be saved anyway, but you'll lose out on the starring role."

Mordechai was teaching Esther the secret of choice: In terms of G-d's great plan, it doesn't make a difference what you do. But in terms of your own life, it makes all the difference in the world. Do you want to actively, consciously participate in G-d's plan, or not? If you don't sign on, it will still happen. But you'll lose out. You can be the star, or an extra on the set. That's your choice.

And Esther decides to do it. The Jewish people are saved, with Esther in the starring role, because she chose to play her part.

On Purim we try to get to a drunken state where we don't perceive a difference between "Blessed Mordechai" and "Cursed Haman." In gematria, the numerical equivalent of each phrase is the same: 502. In what way is the evil Haman equal to the righteous Mordechai? Because they both serve the Divine plan, Haman, with all his foul machinations, initiated the process of repentance which saved the Jewish people from assimilation and eventually made them worthy to return to the Land of Israel and rebuild the Temple. Now you'll understand why the sweet treat of the holiday is "Haman's ears." Because that bitter, destructive man turned out to be the source of sweetness and nourishment for Jewish survival.

That's Haman's greatest punishment: to realize that he saved the Jewish people. The Talmud teaches that G-d's praise comes out of Gehennom (hell) as it comes out of Gan Eden (paradise). In other words, the evil ones also end up serving G-d's plan, albeit against their own will.

On Purim, we're celebrating that everything is going according to G-d's plan. Whether we see it or not. On Purim, we recognize G-d's hiddenness, and celebrate that hiddenness. That's why we dress up in disguises. We are emulating G-d, who is the Master of Disguise, the Master of Hiddenness. G-d's plan disguises itself even as the evil people in the world. On Purim, we see that it's a disguise. There is only one Actor, playing a myriad of roles. G-d is One.

In our ordinary consciousness, we do not see this transcendent oneness. But on Purim, with a little Jack Daniels, it's amazing what we can see. So, I wish each of you an incredible Purim. And if you happen to see a drunk redheaded rabbi that looks like me wandering around the streets of Jerusalem's Old City on Purim, please send him home. His wife and children are waiting for him.

Rabbi David Aaron

Author of Endless Light, Seeing G-d, The Secret Life of G-d, Inviting G-d In, Love is My Religion, Soul Powered Prayer, Living A Joyous Life, and The G-d-Powered Life