

## **Purim's Path Toward Salvation: A Meditation on Mediation**

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Though the Oscars have come and gone, I was reminded this week of a very important scene from one of the greatest movies of all time, Airplane. The airport is preparing for an emergency landing. And a voice on the loudspeaker comes on and says, "Air Israel: Please clear the runway." And the camera captures the Air Israel plane which is of course draped in a Tallis and wearing a great big yarmulkeh.

As you may have read about this week, Team Israel is making an improbable run at the World Baseball Classic. Odds-makers said there was a 200-1 chance they would win, but so far they are undefeated.

It's not just the team's success on the field that's been so unexpected. There was another surprise. When the players, most of whom are American Jews, doffed their hats for the singing of Hatikvah, lo and behold, their heads were covered with kippot.

It occurred to me that if ever there were a Shabbat to wear a World Baseball Classic Team Israel yarmulkeh, this would be it. The kippah is actually available through Major League Baseball's official website, mlbshop.com. I discovered that for only \$24.99 the Kippah could be mine. It was like shopping on the Upper West Side.... But it's so popular that it's out of stock.

Three questions about the Megillah have been on my mind this year:

First: why do we celebrate Purim on two different days? It's bizarre? Every other holiday or national commemoration has one date on the calendar. What does it mean that Purim has two?

Second: What does Esther mean when she tells Mordechai that she won't go see the king because she hasn't been called in 30 days?

And finally: Mordechai and Esther refer to their letter – and maybe to the Megilla itself as דברי שלום ואמת – words of peace and truth. What's the meaning of this enigmatic expression?

What I want to argue that is that, writ large, the Megillah is an elegy in praise of collaboration and compromise. The characters that are able to find middle positions make it to the end of the book; the characters that follow their first impulses and are utterly unwilling to bend, achieve nothing but ignominy.

Consider the failures:

Think of Bigtan and Teresh, the conspirators planning the palace coupe. Why are they intent on killing the king? קצף. The Megillah gives us one word. They were angry, so they try to assassinate Achashverosh. No deliberation; no negotiation. But the plan backfires and it's they who lose their lives.

Haman is the most self-evident example. His whole genocidal plot is triggered by a personal slight. Surely there was a diplomatic solution to be found; but such was not his way. He goes straight for the jugular and ends up on the scaffold.

Even Vashti fits this pattern. She defies the command of the king and we never hear from her again. We probably can't fault her for not being overly enthusiastic about the king's overture. But it's worth noticing that she never suggests an alternative. "Maybe I can come for a short while or in a few days." There's no room for conversation; her emphatic refusal forecloses the very possibility of dialogue.

And of course Amalek itself is characterized by these very qualities: impulsivity, extremism and a singular unwillingness to compromise.

Now think of the books heroes. Mordechai and Esther actually represent diametrically opposed character types. Mordechai is a zealous crusader while Esther is a strategist.

And yet the two of them together are able to identify a middle ground.

When the chips are down, Mordechai wants Esther to march straight into the throne room and tell Achashverosh exactly what he should do. But Esther is reluctant. We usually interpret the Megillah to mean that Esther was unwilling to put her neck on the line until Mordechai convinced her of just how much was riding on her. But a closer look at the text reveals a very different perspective.

וּלְצִוֹת עָלֶיהָ, לְבוֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַתְחַנֵּן-לוֹ וּלְבַקֵּשׁ מִלְפָּנָיו--עַל-עֲמֹהָ .

Mordechai's plan is direct, immediate and confrontational.

When Esther responds, she's not saying that she won't go; she's saying that timing matters.

כָּל-עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יָדְעִים, אֲשֶׁר כָּל-אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יָבוֹא-אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-הַחֲצַר הַפְּנִימִית אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִקְרָא אֶחָת דָּתוֹ לְהָמִית, לְבַד מֵאִשְׁרֵי יוֹשֵׁיט-לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-שָׂרְבִיט הַזֶּהב, וְחָיָה; וְאֲנִי, לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לְבוֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ--זֶה, שְׁלוֹשִׁים יוֹם.

Everyone knows you can't see the king without an invitation. And I haven't been called for 30 days. What she means is this: Thirty days have already passed since I've been summoned by the king. I'll be receiving an invitation any day. Why rush the process? Why jeopardize a certain audience with the king and risk losing our people's surest chance of access?

Activist Mordechai and strategist Esther air their respective positions; they engage in healthy dialogue; Esther is convinced by the urgency of the moment... and they strike a compromise. Yes, Esther will go – but only after three days of fasting and prayer.

And even when she does go, she backs away from the hardline approach of Mordechai. There's a process and there's a plan. By implicating Haman in a power-grab, Esther is able not only to save the Jewish people from a genocidal agenda, but rid her people of their most odious enemy in the process. It's their compromise position that saves the day.

And this is why it's not surprising that we find Purim observed on two different days. History was witness to two different narratives. The Jews of Shushan celebrated their salvation on the 15<sup>th</sup>; the outlying provinces celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup>. The whole of the holiday celebrates the virtue of compromise. To choose one day over the other would give short shrift to an entire population center. In the spirit of Purim itself, why not open the path for each community to celebrate on its appointed day.

And this is the meaning of דברי שלום ואמת. It's the Megillah's idiom for compromise or maybe even reconciliation. Peace and truth are paradigmatic opposites. To bring them together is to find a middle ground.

And of course this explanation throws light on another of the holiday's enigmas: Why מתנות לאביונים and משלוח מנות? Why gifts to the poor and gifts to our friends? Are we interested in social justice or are we interested in promoting fraternal relations? The ethic of אמת would dictate that we help the people who really need it. The ethic of שלום would insist we reach out to people who are actually fine. And so we do both – to capture the spirit of the day.

There are a thousand ways that we can allow Purim's message to elevate our lives, but allow me to briefly suggest three.

First, and perhaps most obviously, we are living in polarized times. And so it goes without saying that our political discourse could benefit from an approach that attaches meaning to these values. Mordechai never would have succeeded without hearing Esther's point of view; and Esther never would have succeeded without hearing Mordechai's. We're so convinced of what we believe, that sometimes we don't make enough time or space to really listen to the other side. The Mitzvah of the Megillah is to listen – to hear every word. It certainly won't hurt to do more listening in the course of our political lives.

Second, I want us to challenge ourselves to do more matchmaking. To the untrained eye, Mordechai and Esther would have made a lousy team.

- They were different ages;
- He was very open about his Jewishness; she was more closed.
- He preferred activism; she preferred prayer.

And yet when they came together, they brought about the salvation of the Jewish people.

With a little creativity and a little tolerance for failure, there's no reason that each of us can't be in the business of matchmaking. You never know who might just click. You never whose lives you might change forever.

And finally, I want to say something about our religious lives. Our sages tell us that Purim was a moment of national rededication to Jewish practice. Who knows just how assimilated were the Jews of Persia? They had adopted Persian names and were full participants in months-long Persian drinking parties. And yet the story of the Megillah helped remind them to re-order their religious priorities.

Each of us naturally inclines toward one side of the **אמת/שלום** divide. We're careful and confident when it comes to **חסד**, but less so when it comes to **כשרות**. Or vice versa. We can all fill in the blanks and imagine those areas of Judaism that are harder for us.

Even Moshe Rabbeinu needed an Aaron. We all need people in our lives who will challenge us to do better and to do more. Maybe we can be that person for someone else and maybe he or she can be that person for us.

Who would have predicted that a rag-tag group of Jewish former major leaguers would rise to the top of the baseball world? And who would have predicted that they would do so under the banner of such emphatic Jewish pride?

I don't know if Team Israel will pull off a Purim miracle, but this holiday is a great reminder to see the hand of the divine even when it seems less than clear – to remember that just because something's unexpected doesn't mean it won't happen. Politically, socially and religiously: it really is possible to bring people together – and accomplish extraordinary things.

**בימים ההם ובזמן הזה**

Both in those days and in ours, greatness awaits.