

GROGGER: THE PURIM NOISEMAKER

by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

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The reading of the Megillah on Purim is an event in the life of every synagogue when there appears to be a general breakdown in decorum. Barely a paragraph goes by without the incoherent wail of untold noisemakers interrupting the rabbi and drowning out his best efforts to read from the sacred parchment scroll.

A close observation reveals that there is a particular word in the text of the Megillah which triggers the clamorous response from the outrageously clad Purim worshippers. The word is "Haman." While Haman is the villain of the Purim story, in truth, he represents far more than one regime's attempt to destroy the Jewish people. Haman is a descendent of the Jewish nation's arch enemy, the people of Amalek. Ever since the Amalakite's first unprovoked attack on the Jews, after their receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai, Amalek and their descendants have been identified as the classical champions of evil, and the Jewish people's existential rival.

Ominously, over two hundred years before the rise of modern Germany, in reference to a passage in the Talmud (Tractate Megillah 6b), two great Jewish scholars identified the region inhabited by the German tribes as the locale of this era's descendants of Amalek.

The Torah assigns a particular commandment to "erase" any memory of the nation of Amalek. By making noise when Haman's name is mentioned during the Megillah reading, we are symbolically "erasing the name of Haman" and thereby blotting out the memory of Amalek.

WHY ERASE HAMAN?

Judaism believes in identifying evil for what it is - evil. While people readily acknowledge certain actions as evil, they are loathe to label the perpetrators of those actions as evil.

Is a systematic attempt to exterminate an entire group of people whose only crime is their identification with a common religious ancestry evil? Of course it is. Everyone admits that. But what about the individuals who carefully calculated, planned and implemented every detail of the

extermination of a people who posed no territorial or military threat? Are those people evil or are they just sick?

Judaism does not deny the existence of individuals with the most extreme psychological disorders, but it does assert that one need not be "sick" to carry out the most brutal and hideous of crimes. Adolf Hitler, Adolf Eichmann and the thousands of doctors, professors, farmers, teachers, barbers, receptionists, retailers, lawyers, mechanics, entrepreneurs and secretaries who made soap, lamp shades, coat stuffing and ashes out of Jews were not sick! They were just plain evil.

The gragger in the hand of a child on Purim is there to remind us how to relate to evil. Like Amalek, it must be erased. Not by labeling it as sick and psychoanalyzing it into oblivion, but by calling it what it is - evil - and dealing with it as bluntly as it would deal with us.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR GROGGER EXPERIENCE

Synagogue is serious and solemn; a place for reflection, study, prayer and FUN! For Jewish kids whose parents only take them to synagogue twice a year, I would like to cast a vote in favor of those two days being Purim and Simchat Torah, not Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. When children - and adults - immerse themselves in the celebration of Purim one of the most important lessons they learn is that Jewish life incorporates the gamut of human emotional experience. Singing and dancing, costumes, fun and all around merrymaking are as integral to Judaism as charity, prayer and fasting.

Graggers are not just for kids. Come on, let loose! You too can have a blast while drowning out the name of Haman.

Sure, you can buy graggers and take them to synagogue with you. Or you can use the ready-made graggers you already have at home - like alarm clocks, toddler xylophones, dolls that cry with the push of a button, a toy police car with siren and flashing lights or anything else that will make a wonderfully annoying noise.

For kids, a gragger-making art project can also be a lot of fun. Fill a can or plastic cup with beans, glue on a handle, decorate, and presto - homemade madness.

So you despise the evil Haman and want to see his name wiped out forever? Great! Just write Haman on a piece of masking tape, stick it to the bottom of your shoe and spend the day stamping out Haman. Or write Haman on your napkin, wipe your face or table with him and then toss him into the garbage. Bye, bye, Haman.

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