

A HOLIDAY IN HIDING

by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman

Poor Purim. It has become the Jewish mardi gras, a day of revelry, drinking, and masquerades. But it is much more than this.

Purim is the holiday in hiding. One has to probe beneath the surface to find the spiritual dimension that lies underneath. In fact, the disguises and the masks are all designed to underscore the essential hiddenness of this day.

This theme of concealment is found in the very name of the heroine of Purim. "Esther" derives from the root str, which in Hebrew means "hidden." In the Torah (Dt. 31:18), God says to Israel: "I will surely hide (hastir astir) My face from you..." The sages see this Hebrew phrase as a subtle suggestion of the hiddenness of G-d during the time of Esther.

Take Esther herself. No one except Mordecai knows who she really is. Even King Ahashveros is kept in the dark. "Ein Esther magedet moledetah," says the Megillah in 2:20. "Esther did not reveal her origins..." This is the theme of the day: nothing is revealed.

Note also the lineage of the protagonists of the Purim story. It is the lineage of hiddenness. Mordechai and Esther are descendants of mother Rachel. Rachel, the mother of Yosef, is the very essence of hiddenness and concealment. When her sister Leah is substituted for her in marriage to Yaakov, why does Rachel not cry out and protest that an injustice is being done? Because to do so would have humiliated her sister. Rachel knows how to conceal things, including her bitter disappointment.

Rachel's son Joseph is also a master of concealment. His essential qualities of holiness are concealed from his brothers, who do not recognize his greatness because he effectively hides them. And when the brothers come down to Egypt 22 years later, they again fail to recognize him, for he is now concealed behind his garments. The Talmud (Sotah 10) underscores the hidden qualities of Joseph when it states that - in the case of Potiphar's wife - Joseph sanctified the name of G-d in private, in a hidden way. And Saul, from the same lineage as Joseph, feels unworthy of becoming king of Israel: he hides among the vessels when they search for him to become king.

It is thus fitting that Esther and Mordechai, who stem from the same lineage, should also do their saving work quietly, secretly, in a hidden and concealed manner.

Even G-d himself is hidden in the Purim story. Search the Megillah from beginning to end, but you

find no mention of His name. Is this not strange for a biblical book? The closest we come to a reference to G-d is when Mordecai says to Esther that redemption for the Jews will come from makom aher, "another place."

To underscore the hiddenness of G-d, the entire story seems to be one of chance, happenstance, and coincidence - the very things that the Bible tells us the world is not! In the Megillah, the role of G-d is unseen, His hand invisible. Queen Vashti just happens to refuse to appear at the royal feast; the king just happens to rid himself of her and to search for a new queen; Mordecai just happens to be in the right place at the right moment to foil a plot against the king's life; the king just happens to have a sleepless night and his courtiers remind him that Mordecai saved his life; Haman just happens to be in the Queen's chambers when the King walks in. Even the date on which the Jews are to be exterminated is determined by the casting of lots: *hipil pur hu hagoral*, "he cast a pur, that is the lot..." (Esther 3:7) and it is this "pur" that gives us the name of the holiday. All these echoes of randomness and chance suggest anything but the guiding hand of G-d.

Even the miracle of Purim is a hidden one. Contrast this with the miracle of Hanukkah. There, the oil that is enough for one day burns instead for eight days, which is a *nes niglah*, an open miracle that everyone can see. But the Purim miracle - whereby the entire Jewish community is saved from destruction - is a hidden miracle, a *nes nistar*. The interceding hand of G-d is invisible. It could easily be ascribed to happenstance, the way everything else in the story seems to be happenstance.

Gradually we begin to understand the role of masks in the Purim story. The entire deliverance of the Jewish people is masked. It is a story wrapped in a disguise, hidden behind a costume, concealed behind a mask.

Even that strange dictum in the Talmud (Megillah 7b) that ordains us to become intoxicated on Purim *ad delo yada*, "until we know not the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordecai" - even this is part of the theme of hiddenness. For how strange is the Talmudic advice. Ours is, after all, a tradition that abhors drunkenness. We are a people of the mind, discernment, analysis - all those things that fall under the rubric of *daat*. But on Purim we are bidden to become intoxicated and conceal our vaunted *daat* - to the point of *ad delo yada* - "until there is no *daat* - and to enter a universe where reality has no meaning and we begin to realize that it is not our intellects that guide the world but the One Intellect above that guides the world.

There is another strange hiddenness about Purim. This is the most physical of all our holidays. The festive Purim *seudah*, the sending of food gifts, the encouragement to drink to excess - these are matters that deal with the body. What by contrast, is the most spiritual of our holy days? Obviously it is Yom Kippur. Our observance of these two days are in diametric opposition to one another. But upon closer examination we perceive that the two are closely related in a very hidden but real way. The official name of Yom Kippur is Yom HaKippurim. Literally, this means, "a day like Purim." This is stunning. Yom Kippur is like Purim? How can this be?

It can be, because Purim and Yom Hakippurim are mirror images of one another. On Yom Kippur we are forbidden to eat or drink; on Purim we are bidden to eat and drink. Yom Kippur is overwhelmingly spiritual; Purim is overwhelmingly physical. But on each day we are required to serve G-d fully, with our bodies and with our souls.

The lesson is clear: G-d can be served not only in the solemnity of a Yom Kippur, but also in the revelry of a Purim. G-d is present not only in the open ark of Yom Kippur when spirituality seems so close, but also in the open food and drink of Purim when spirituality seems so remote. It is much more of a challenge to remember G-d amidst the revelry than to remember Him in the midst of the solemnity. To imbibe and to feast and to remember the Author of all; this is the great challenge of Purim - perhaps a greater challenge than any other holy day.

Purim is the holiday in hiding. But its message need not be concealed from us.

The above article by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman appears in his new book "The Shul Without A Clock" - Second Thoughts from a Rabbi's Notebook (Feldheim Publications).

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