

FIGHTING IRON WITH IRONY: A CONTEMPORARY PURIM THOUGHT

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

On a beautiful clear night in 1924 at Landsberg am Lech, where he was imprisoned by the Bavarian government, Adolf Hitler remarked to Rudolf Hess: You know, it's only the moon I hate...For it is something dead and terrible and inhuman...It is as if there still lives in the moon a part of the terror it once sent down to earth...I hate it!

A chill accompanied my first encounter with that quote. Because the Jewish religious tradition sees the ever-rejuvenating, shining disk of the moon as a symbol of the Jewish people. Indeed, the very first commandment we Jews were given as a people, while still awaiting the Exodus in Egypt, was to identify ourselves through our calendar with the moon. The moon Hitler feared.

There is much other oddness about Hitler with connections to ancient Jewish tradition, things like his fondness for ravens, in Jewish lore associated with cruelty; he went so far as to issue special orders protecting the birds. And like his fascination with the art of Franz von Stuck (the artist who had the greatest impact on his life, he once said), whose major themes are snakes and sinister women. In the Jewish mystical tradition, snakes evoke evil and its embodiment, Amalek; and there are hints of an antithetical relationship between the irredeemable wickedness of Amalek and women.

And then there is the matter of the most loathsome of Hitler's henchmen, Julius Streicher, the editor of *Der Sturmer*, the premier journal of Jew-baiting.

At its peak in 1938, print runs of Streicher's vile tabloid ran as high as 2,000,000. A typical offering included a close-up of the face of a deformed Jew above the legend *The Scum of Humanity*: This Jew says that he is a member of God's chosen people. Another displayed a cartoon of a vampire bat with a grotesquely exaggerated nose and a Jewish star on its chest. In yet another, a Jewish butcher was depicted snidely dropping a rat into his meat grinder and, elsewhere in the issue, the punctured necks of handsome German youths were shown bleeding into a bowl held by a Jew more gargoyle

than human.

In 1935, speaking to a closed meeting of a Nazi student organization, Streicher, displaying an unarguably Amalekian approach, declared:

All our struggles are in vain if the battle against the Jews is not fought to the finish. It is not enough to get the Jews out of Germany. No, they must be destroyed throughout the entire world so that humanity will be free of them.

The suspicion that in Streicher's blind, baseless, and absolute hatred of the Jews lay the legacy of Amalek makes the story of his capture and death nothing short of chilling.

Purim is the only Jewish holiday that celebrates the defeat of an Amalekite, Haman. Even a passing familiarity with the Purim story is sufficient to know that the downfall of its villain is saturated with what seem to be chance ironies; he turns up at the wrong place at the wrong time, and all that he so carefully plans eventually comes to backfire on him in an almost comical way a theme The Book of Esther characterizes with the words *v'nahafoch hu*, and it was turned upside down!

Such chance happenings are the very hallmark of Amalek's defeat, a fact reflected in the casting of lots from which Purim takes its name. Chance, Esther teaches us, is an illusion; G-d is in charge. Amalek may fight with iron but he is defeated with irony.

As was Streicher. In the days after Germany's final defeat, an American major, Henry Blitt, en route to Berchtesgaden, made an unplanned stop at a farmhouse just off the road. It was occupied by a short, bearded man.

What do you think of the Nazis? Blitt asked.

I'm an artist, came the reply, and have never bothered about politics.

But you look like Julius Streicher! Blitt joked, trying to make conversation.

You recognized me? the man blurted out incredulously, startling Blitt, who managed to compose himself and arrest his serendipitous catch.

Major Blitt, incidentally was Jewish.

Another happy irony in Streicher's life involved the fate of his considerable estate. As reported in Stars and Stripes in late 1945, his considerable possessions were converted to cash and used to create an agricultural training school for Jews intending to settle in Palestine. Just as Haman's riches, as recorded in the Book of Esther, were bestowed upon his nemesis Mordechai.

There is a good deal more of interest in the life of Julius Streicher to associate him with Jewish traditions about Amalek. But one of the most shocking narratives about him is the one concerning his death. Streicher was one of the Nazis tried, convicted, and hanged at Nuremberg in 1946.

During the trial, Streicher remained disgustingly true to form. When the prosecution showed a film of the concentration camps as they had been found by the Allies, a spotlight was left on the defendants box for security reasons. Many present preferred to watch the defendants reactions rather than the mounds of bodies, matchstick limbs and common graves. Few of the defendants could bear to watch the film for long. Goering seemed calm at first, but eventually began to nervously wipe his sweaty palms. Schacht turned away; Ribbentrop buried his face in his hands. Keitel wiped his reddened eyes with a handkerchief. Only Streicher leaned forward throughout, looking anxiously at the film and excitedly nodding his head.

While no proof was found that Streicher had ever killed a Jew by his own hand, the tribunal nevertheless decided that his clear-cut incitement of others to the task constituted the act of a war criminal; and so he was sentenced, along with ten other defendants, to hang.

And hang he did. But not before taking the opportunity to share a few final words with the journalists present at the gallows. Heil Hitler. Now I go to God, he announced. And then, just before the trap sprang open, he blurted out most clearly: Purim Feast 1946! an odd thing to say in any event, but especially so on an October morning.

The Amalek-irony of the Nuremberg executions doesn't end there, either. The Book of Esther recounts how Haman's ten sons were hanged in Shushan. An eleventh child, a daughter, committed suicide earlier, according to an account in the Talmud. At Nuremberg, while eleven men were condemned to execution by hanging, only ten were actually hanged. The eleventh, the foppish, effeminate Goering, died in his cell only hours before the execution; he had crushed a hidden cyanide capsule between his teeth.

Something even more striking was noted by the late Belzer Rebbe. In scrolls of the Book of Esther, the names of the ten sons of Haman are unusually prominent; they are written in two parallel columns, a highly unusual configuration. Odder still is the fact that three letters in the list, following an unexplained halachic tradition, are written very small, and one very large. The large letter is the Hebrew character for the number six (Hebrew letters all have numeric values); the small letters, added together, yield the number 707. If the large letter is taken to refer to the millennium and 707 to the year in the millennium, something fascinating emerges. According to Jewish reckoning, the present year is 5762. The year 5707 the 707th year in the sixth millennium was the year we know as 1946, when ten sworn enemies of the Jewish people were hanged in Nuremberg, just as ten others had been in Shushan more than two thousand years earlier.

The Book of Esther, (9:13), moreover, refers to the hanging of Haman's sons in the future tense, after the event had been recounted, presaging, it might seem, some hanging yet to happen.

To believing Jews, the Holocaust was the tip of an unimaginable iceberg of evil, stretching far and deep into the past even as one of its ugly tips punctured the relative peace of the modern world.

And so, as we prepare to celebrate Purim and the downfall of the Amalekite Haman, especially these days, when Jew-hatred has once again made itself manifest in the world, we would do well to ponder that the evil he represents may have been defeated at times throughout history but it has not yet been vanquished.

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