

PURIM, PASSPORTS, & AHMADINEJAD

by Jonathan Rosenblum

Listening to the Megila this Purim, I could not help thinking about a latter-day Haman from Persia, who also boasts of his desire to wipe out, annihilate, destroy and kill every Jew in Israel.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has had a way of late of insinuating himself into the happiest of moments. As I sat at the Purim meal, surrounded by my sons, each pleasantly high enough to cast aside any restraints on saying words of Torah and singing at the top of his lungs, I wondered if I could possibly feel happier than at that particular moment. No sooner did this thought pop into my head than another followed: There must also have been Jews in Poland who felt the same way at their Purim feast in the spring of 1939.

Historian Benny Morris's January 18 piece, "This Holocaust will be different" presented the worst case scenario vis-a-vis Iran as an absolute certainty - no ifs, buts or maybes intruded into his analysis. According to Morris, Iran will certainly obtain nuclear weapons. And once in possession of those weapons, Iran will employ them against Israel within five years.

One can quibble with his analysis at various points, but my only question upon finishing Morris's piece was whether he had already secured an academic appointment abroad and booked passage for himself and his family. And to tell the truth, I have been wondering myself whether it isn't time to renew my membership in the Illinois State Bar Association and make sure all our U.S. passports are up-to-date.

Why, I ask myself, should Jews in Germany have seen the writing on the wall after 1933, and taken seriously Hitler's expressed ambitions, while I ignore Ahmadinejad's equally clear ambitions, even as he comes ever closer to obtaining the ability to act upon them?

Ultimately I cannot see any answer to that question that is not based upon a religious perspective. Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh said as much recently when he predicted that Israelis will flee en masse as soon as Iran's nuclear capacity is confirmed.

When I posed my question to a Torah scholar to whom I am close, he replied that the Jews of Germany had a choice to leave. Most of those who arrived in Israel after World War II had little choice. Those from Europe had no homes to which to return, and could not imagine remaining on a continent whose soil was drenched with the blood of their loved ones. And those from Arab lands

fled in the face of threats from the local populations. "I cannot believe," he told me, "that God gathered so many Jews together just to destroy them."

After the Holocaust, only the creation of the State of Israel offered hope and a sense of identity for the vast majority of the world's Jews. Another trauma on that scale within little more than half a century would destroy whatever is left of Jewish identity worldwide. In addition, a nuclear attack on Israel would destroy the centers of Torah learning so miraculously rebuilt after the Holocaust.

The first result of the destruction of Israel by a nuclear weapon would contradict the divine promise of the Jewish people's central role in the fulfillment of God's plan for the world; the second result contradicts the promise that Torah will never be forgotten from among the Jewish people.

As the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai was smuggled out of the city in a coffin and brought to the Roman encampment. There he twice greeted the Roman commander Vespasian, "Peace be upon you king." Vespasian told him that he was subject to the death penalty for having called him king when he was not. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai assured Vespasian that he must be a king, for the verse in Isaiah says, "Halevanon [i.e., the Temple] will fall to a mighty one," and we know from another verse that mighty one refers to a king (Gittin 56).

Yet even if Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai was sure of his interpretation of the verse, why did he take the unnecessary risk of addressing Vespasian as king? The answer is: He wanted Vespasian to understand that he had not defeated the God of the Jews by conquering Jerusalem. Rather he was a mere actor in a divine plan long foretold.

Similarly, the current threat from Persia was described long ago in our classic sources. Our Sages say in the midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 499 to Isaiah 59) states that in the year that the messiah reveals himself, all the nations will threaten one another. In particular, the ruler of Persia will threaten that of Arabia. (Most experts predict that the first thing a nuclear Iran would do is to threaten destruction of Saudi oil fields to force Saudi compliance with its demands to raise oil prices.)

The king of Persia will destroy the whole world, the Midrash continues, and all the nations of the world will be seized with terror. Israel too will be terrified, and ask, "Where should we flee." God will then answer them, "Why are you afraid? Do not be afraid, for the time of your redemption has arrived. Everything that I did, I did only for you. Nor will this redemption be like the first [from Egypt]... For the final redemption will not be followed by any further suffering or servitude to the nations."

Just as the threat of Haman to utterly destroy the entire Jewish people was flipped in an instant to the source of our salvation, may the threats of our later day Hamans become the source of an even greater salvation.

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