

“Purim, or How Not to Take Things So  
Seriously!”

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There must be something in the spring air. We've already taken our hats off to Groundhog's Day, talked about the pairing of birds through Valentine's Day. And now from the historical tradition of Judaism we come upon festival of Purim in which all religious etiquette is thrown to the winds, with nary even a reference to God.

In this lesser known but unique celebration we find a time of laughter, fun and play, a time when midday meals are made and exchanged with friends, when money is given to the poor. There is a Jewish joke, about this day's prescribed generosity- is that this is the reason the Talmud,

says “It is the obligation of each person to be so drunk on Purim as not to be able to tell the difference between “Blessed be ...” and “cursed be ...” And believe me there is lots of drinking on Purim! It is after all required by the Talmud!

Jews who are often known for their rectitude and law will dress up on this festival day in costumes and masquerade around their homes and in some cases towns and or neighborhoods. This, for many non Jews seems out of character. In fact someone once commented to me that Purim was kind of a Jewish Mardi Gras.

Certainly there is a shared spirit I suppose among those who have participated in a Mardi Gras in New Orleans or Carnival in Rio and among those who celebrate an old school Purim festival in some conservative Jewish neighborhoods. But the lessons of Purim go much deeper than the

costumes, foods, or the excessive use of alcohol, which are the only actual commonalities between these respective festivals.

In Purim there are many things that occur traditionally for a reason, not only the masquerading and drinking. There are foods that are specific to Purim like hat shaped cookies which are called hamantaschen, or Haman's hat, filled with dried fruit or sweet poppy seed fillings.

"Hamen" is a main character, and a bad one, in the book of Esther where this festival finds its roots.

We learn in the book of Esther that Haman is a wicked, cur of a man.

But before I go into the story, I need to explain another tradition of this time. Whenever the name Haman is mentioned you should all boo or hiss, or make negative, disparaging sounds to drown out

his name. So from now on you all need to do that when I say the name “Haman.”

Haman. (\*!) That’s better!

The story of Purim is literally the book of Esther and is in some ways very simple and unlike most of the books of the Holy Scriptures, which relate indirectly or directly to the relationship between God and the chosen people.

This book or story is more like a Shakespeare play with all the classical characters. We have the King of Persia. Then we have his proud wife, the Queen Vashti, who is disobedient and doesn’t follow what is expected of her. So the King, supported by all his advisors, decides that he must banish Queen Vashti in order to keep all the wives of Persia obedient.

With her banishment the King can choose a new bride. The grand vizier, or high ranking officer, - Haman (\*!)-, suggests a beauty contest to the king as a way to pick his new bride. Mordechai, (a good guy) who is Esther's protector, perceives this opportunity as a one-of-a-kind deal and convinces Esther to enter the contest even though she is a Jew. Which is a big no-no! The King, who is seen through the story as easily manipulated and a bit foolish seems to never be aware of her religion. And of course in the end Esther gets chosen as the new Queen. However, Mordechai after the fact refuses to bow down to - Haman (\*!)-.

Who is upset at this slight and in response to Mordechai, -Haman (\*!)- who is really a despicable, revengeful character convinces the King to a massacre all the Jews throughout his kingdom. But because there are so many Jews they decide that the massacre needs to be done by lots until it is

fully completed. This is where the festival gets its name. Purim literally translates as 'lot. '

As you can guess, Mordechai and Esther go to work to counter this plan when they hear of it. Esther goes to see the King. Doing this without being called in a more true to life setting quite likely would have gotten her a death sentence or at least in serious trouble.

But Esther is beautiful and beguiling, as well as Jewish. She reveals to the king at this point that she is actually Jewish, and that all her people are to be killed because Mordechai would not bow down to Haman - (!)-. She goes on to reveal that -Haman (!)- is plotting to kill the King. This is something that we never are quite sure of in the story, other than -Haman- is clearly capable of plotting such a thing.

So armed with her beauty and charm, and with not just a little cleverness, she convinces the King of all this. Not surprisingly from such a king, without any investigation into these accusations he reverses the orders to massacre all the Jews and to top it off -- and no pun intended -- he has Haman's head on a platter. Some say he is hanged.

I liken this book of Esther to many of Shakespeare's comedies, there are all kinds of rich twists and turns, dull and bright characters, both indisputable good guys and despicable bad ones from which it grows farce and humor. The first hint of this book actually being a comedy is in the idea that sets the story, that a bunch of men can make a decree that their wives must obey them.

I mean really, Just on whose planet? Certainly a funny idea to run with, unless of course you try it at home!

The Purim story continues in classic comedy form. It is one contrivance after another followed by predictable actions and responses from very obvious characters, both stupid and clever.

This book is unlike any other books in the torah. It's the single book that has no reference at all to God in it. Jewish scholars believe that the lack of any mention of God in the book is because it would be irreverent to mention God in such a comic setting. Could be, but regardless it is the only book in Jewish scripture that leaves God out, even in the subtexts.

Of course for Unitarian Universalists this is not an issue. God often finds itself in an irreverent role with some of us. And that is not bad. Certainly if there is anything I would demand from my God, if I were to be so inclined to do something like that,

and actually held that there was one, it would be a sense of humor – and one that mirrored mine very closely.

My friend and colleague, Robert Fulghum, once showed me a picture of Jesus. The classical bearded white male figures that we all conger up in our minds from our youthful indoctrinations. But in this picture he is in a full and roaring laugh. It was a first in images of this character for me that I could actually appreciate.

And like that picture this story of Purim has something very powerful to say, and teach. Not only to Jews but to we Unitarian Universalists as well, who lest we forget have a long standing and deep connection with the Jewish people and traditions.

Inside this tale of farce there is a message, and it is this: Remember to laugh, have fun, and be joyful. Even in the worst of circumstances. Let yourself be playful and most importantly don't take yourself or your experience of the world too seriously. We all need reminders of this lest we lose the smiles of life and sink into the abyss of being solely creatures of judgment.

God forbid, like - Haman!-

Don't get me wrong here, certainly judging is written into our DNA. This is a piece of our nature that really is essential in keeping us alive. But I call this capital 'J' Judgment—that part of us which makes our heart beat, digest food and regulates blood chemistry. It is that part which constantly judges and acts through our nervous system. This is serious business which does not rely on thinking, discerning or any other mental play.

Now the judgments we make with our linear minds, our thinking minds, are small j judgments and something quite different than capital 'J.'

Judgments and yet we often confuse the two. This is the issue.

Small 'j' judgments are driven by all kinds of human frailties and limited knowledge. We can lose track of this reality and often 'over think' the importance of our role, become self-righteous about what we 'think' we know to be true. We trap our judgments in a time and space.

These kinds of mental acrobatics are some of the biggest problems we have and we need to recognize this. It can and often does limit our ability to stay flexible in a constantly changing world and humor is one of the best tools I know of for helping to keep one open.

Our thinking process for the most part is driven by what we see as reason and logic. This makes it OK to hold tightly, but can in turn constrict our experience of the world. We can find ourselves less and less able to embrace the whole. We can miss meaning and joy that often is there. And I believe joy and laughter are close kin to meaning. As well as soothing balm for the numerous aches and pains of life.

The key is to remember how to let things go. The ability to let go of 'serious stuff' is one of the most difficult things for humans to do. But time and religious mystics throughout the centuries have shown us, it is also a most important tool we must cultivate.

It is this ability to laugh and particularly to laugh at ourselves that can help keep us in balance in this way and prepares us for the future.

When we can laugh we can trust what might yet become. But if we lose the laughter we can truly be at risk of not becoming.

Humor accesses our inherent flexibility better than any other tool I know of. Humor is the ability to let go, to see with a different light, to enjoy paradox rather than fight against it. It is a key to meanings held deep in the shadows of our souls. Remembering the lighter side of reality is a key to happiness and in turn evolution of the spirit, in very real ways. There is so much intensity in our lives we need to remember that perspective is key and that laughter can give us that.

The Jews with their intense history and experience know this well. The saddest and most heart rendering situations in life can be made more manageable, workable and changeable when they can be seen through the refreshed eyes of laughter.

When we understand that the most ridiculous, preposterously stupid and laughable situation of life are just as real as all the other heavy stuff, we can start to find balance.

Our lives have so much more meaning when we can willfully and expectantly embrace wisdom in the petals of laughter and joy.

So in closing this “Purim, or How Not to Take Things So Seriously!” morning I offer you these words adapted from Swami Beyondananda.

“Be a Fundamentalist - make sure the Fun always comes before the Mental. Realize that life is a situation comedy that will never be canceled and like photography. You use the negative to develop.

If we want world peace, we must let go of our attachments and truly live like nomads. That is I no mad at you, you no mad at me. That way, there'll surely be nomadness on the planet.

My advice is simple. When you find a fault, just don't dwell on it. And if you're looking to find the key to the Universe, I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is- there is no key to the Universe. The good news is- it has been left unlocked. And no matter what adversity you face, God certainly loves you—She's just not ready to make a commitment.”

So may a belly laugh of the universe always find its way into your heart alongside the deep truth of your existence—now and forever.

So be it.