

Dear Community,

At a time when anti-Semitism is again becoming part of the national conversation, American Jews, long considered immune from the ravages of this historical blight, are again having the age-old conversation of how to adapt to this re-emergent reality. How do we deal with hate? What can we do to protect ourselves not only from the physical dangers of persecution, but from the emotional and spiritual toll that living in the shadow of bigotry exacts from us?

This coming week we will celebrate the holiday of Purim. For many of us, Purim is a childish holiday, a time for fun for the entire family. Beneath the masks, candy, and parties, we miss the powerful lesson in Jewish survival that Purim is here to teach us. Now more than ever, as we grapple with what it means to be hated as Jews, this is the holiday that shows us how to embrace our faith and our identity, and to find hope in the darkest of times.

The story of Purim, the desire of Haman to destroy us, encompasses the central theme of all the hate directed toward us as Jews. Haman does not view Mordechai as one man, one threat, one enemy; he immediately sees him as a Jew, a representative of a nation, a people that must be destroyed. Haman approaches Achashverosh accusing the Jews of not being patriotic: they have dual loyalties. In an empire made up of a diverse set of nations, languages, and cultures, all of whom were lovingly catered to at the various feasts, it is the Jewish culture and faith that are disloyal.

The decree to wipe out the Jews is sent out, and no one rises to their defense. The Jews stand alone. Change the names and the scale of the attack, and this story could be about any of the persecutions anti-Semites have inflicted on us throughout history.

The story of Purim ends with three themes that we need to develop in order to be able to face the Hamans of the present: joy, unity, and Torah. Joy, a central theme of Purim, is essential for us not to be broken by hate. The Shulchan Aruch (A'C 698) writes that on Purim one is allowed to get married, while on a regular holiday one cannot. On all of the other holidays we cannot marry due to the importance of not mixing joys, and in the process diminishing the specific joy demanded from each of the individual occasions. If so, how could we get married on Purim? Aren't we explicitly commanded to be joyous? Surely the same reasoning should apply?

The answer is that on Purim, we don't need to be joyous for any particular reason - we just need to be happy (commentaries, *ibid*). Joy, pure joy, banishes darkness. It enables

us to see past our pain and fear, to feel love, feel connection to G-d, feel our bonds with each other, even in the presence of a grim reality. There is a reason why Jews are known for their ability to laugh in the face of death, to feel hope in the depths of despair. The message of Purim permeates our national consciences.

The second theme is unity, exemplified by the obligations to give charity and meshloach manot (gifts of food) on Purim. We are not persecuted as individuals: we are threatened as a nation, and we must face these threats as one. If we are to be condemned to destruction as a people, we need to affirm our right to life, to existence with unity.

Finally, we must embrace our national heritage, the identity and mission as given to us at Sinai. The Talmud in Shabbat (87a) writes that at the time of Purim, there was a mass renewal of our dedication to the Torah, in particular to the Oral Law (Maharal). It is in our embrace of who we are meant to be that we are able to see the beauty in being a Jew, a glisten that will not lose its luster in the face of all those who wish to tarnish it. If we do not internalize our value, we will break in the face of those who wish to rob us of it.

Please, in this time more than any other, embrace Purim, internalize Purim, and let us come together as a joyous people, unified in mission, identity, and purpose. Let us not be broken by the forces of darkness even as they muster ever stronger.

Good Shabbos and A' Freilechen Purim,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein