



Purim: A dark story, a crazy party, and a call to leadership

By Abigail Pogrebin

Purim is a dark story marked by a crazy party. I'm still unsure why a close brush with extermination became, in the Middle Ages, an opportunity for costumes and farce, but there you have it.

It's the fifth century BCE, about a hundred years after the First Temple's destruction. The Jews who were exiled to Babylon are now ruled by the Persian king Ahasuerus, who thinks highly of himself. In the city of Shushan, the king's adviser, Haman, is a cruel Jew-hater. He hatches a plan to kill all the Jews and draws lots ("purim") to pick the day it will happen, persuading Ahasuerus to go along.

A proclamation is made throughout the kingdom: On that day, all Jews shall be killed. A Jew named Mordechai entreats his cousin, the gorgeous Queen Esther, to prevent it by pleading for mercy with her husband the king.

Esther was married to Ahasuerus essentially against her will. He chose her out of a bevy of prospective wives at a banquet after banishing his then-wife, Vashti, who refused to display her beauty for his guests. (Some say she refused to dance naked.) Esther's Jewish roots were kept secret when she married the king, so for her to now entreat her husband would mean exposing her Judaism — not to mention that in those days it was life threatening to approach the king without having been summoned.

Nevertheless, she plucks up the courage, successfully appeals to her husband and foils the massacre. The king kills Haman and his sons, and then, because the proclamation could not officially be canceled according to Persian law, the Jews can only defend themselves with a preemptive strike. Some say they took self-defense too far, slaughtering 75,000.

Purim's modern observance, at least in Reform synagogues I've visited, does not focus on that brutal coda, highlighting instead the reenactment of cruel Haman and courageous Esther. The ritual is to read aloud the story from a scroll of parchment known as the megillah, which has the biblical book of Esther inscribed on it.

The narrative is then often theatricalized with wacky costumes in a play called a *spiel* — pronounced “shpeel.” Whenever Haman is mentioned during the satire, people “boo” vigorously or spin noisemakers, called *groggers*, to drown out his name.

Purim is, hands down, the biggest party of the Jewish year. Simchat Torah pales by comparison, with its sips of single malt. This is the Big Megillah (wordplay intended), and we're supposed to get so trashed that we can't tell the difference between Mordechai (good guy) and Haman (really bad).

I decide to sample some of the elaborate *spiel*-prep under way in New York City, so I spend an evening watching rehearsals at the Stephen Wise Synagogue on the Upper West Side of New York City, where congregant Norman Roth, 76, a retired accountant, has been writing and directing the shul's *spiel* for the past three decades.

Some of his past triumphs line the stairway in colorful, theatrical show posters with titles like “Michael Jackson's The Thriller Megiller,” “Les Mis — Les Me-gillah,” and “Oh What a Spiel — The Jersey Boys Megillah.” This year's theme is Elvis. One of Roth's lyrics riffs on “Blue Suede Shoes,” when the king tells Haman, “Don't you step on my Shushan Jews.”

Roth takes great pride in his *spiel* scripts. And he points out that in his librettos, Haman never dies.

“We have very few men in the show, so we need Haman for the closing number. We never kill him off,” he says.

I ask Roth if it gives him pause to know he's leaving out the real bloody end of the story — the 75,000 slain.

“I don't think God really let that happen,” he says. “That's human beings writing that story, not God.”

But it's in the megillah, I point out.

“It's not in my megillah,” Roth counters.

But my amusement is tempered when I remember I have to fast before this holiday.

It must be embroidered on a sampler somewhere: “Before Jews party, they should suffer.” The day before Purim is Taanit Esther, the Fast of Esther. This will be my fourth fast of the year, with two more to go.

Taanit Esther is not in the Bible, but was created by the rabbis in the eighth century. The fast springs from the book of Esther — in the Bible's “Writings” section — when Esther decides to prepare herself to confront her husband by fasting for a day.

One Esther expert is Erica Brown, a Washington, D.C.-based author and educator.

“The thing that I most admire about the Esther story,” she tells me over the phone, “is its notion of the tests that are thrown at an individual and the way in which they transform themselves as a result.”

Brown continues: “Esther’s cousin, Mordechai, says to her, essentially, ‘How do you know you weren’t put in this position of royalty for exactly this moment?’ I would throw in the Sheryl Sandberg ‘Lean In’ way of looking at this, of initially having the insecurity to say, ‘I’m not the right person. I can’t do this for any number of reasons.’ You opt out of your own future. And then you have someone like Mordechai who says, ‘No, this is your time. Take advantage. Leap into that.’”

I think about the challenges I’ve avoided; the moments I’ve chickened out. A few come to mind, both large and quotidian: causes I didn’t fight for (gun control), people I haven’t aided (domestic-abuse victims and Rwandan refugees), articles I didn’t pitch (a long list), physical feats I avoided (parasailing).

But this holiday forces me to reflect on leadership — what it means to be thrust forward when that wasn’t your plan. Seven months earlier, I was asked by the current president of New York’s Central Synagogue if I would be interested in being considered to succeed him.

The very request left me choked up. The job is not only a tremendous honor, it’s also daunting and important. I love Central in a way I never expected to love an institution. I’ve seen how clergy can deepen daily life, how a synagogue community can anchor a family. But if you had asked me back in college, when I was focused on being an actor or writer, if I thought I’d end up as a shul president, I’d have said, “In what universe?”

Now this invitation feels like a blessing and a test: Can you do your part to guide a place that has challenged and changed you? Obviously, being a board president isn’t comparable to Esther’s assignment. But Judaism is always asking us to apply epic stories to everyday decisions.

I say yes to Central's president and yes to Esther's fast, even though it's another holiday that few around me observe.

"The joy of victory in her story is so much more colorful, rich and deep when you participate in the suffering," Brown says. "The joy that I experience every Purim is heightened by the fact that I've fasted and I've tried to put myself in that moment of risk — leadership risk — that Esther took all those years ago because so much pivoted on that one individual."

I love Brown's term "leadership risk" because as I get older, I've come to see how those words are conjoined. Trying to lead is risky, but then so is not trying. Despite my mother's feminist inculcation, I often worry that people will see audacity in my saying "I'm up to the task." Esther reminds me to stop apologizing for myself and get on with it.

Then again, she was saving lives, which is a little more pressing.

<https://www.jta.org/2017/02/24/lifestyle/how-purim-is-a-call-to-leadership>