



James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Purim: An Ethical Response Within a Religious Tradition

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The story of Esther is not just a Jewish traditional story, one which has become a central part of the Jewish year, but is also important for us today in Western culture. The story itself, whether or not it is true, though many scholars believe that it has some historical basis, speaks to a very basic human condition---majority and minority rights, privilege and oppression. The story, in our English translations has lost much of the impact of the original but it can still be found within the Hebrew account, particularly when viewed through the lenses of historical and literary critique. In order to reclaim a small part of the message that has been lost through time and translation, I want to fill in at least some of the gaps with a little historical background and through the application of one aspect of literary criticism---name derivations. And then share why Esther's story is important to me personally.

The Megilat, or scroll, of Esther is thought to have been written down somewhere between 538-333 BCE.¹ The author is completely unknown. The basic text of today was edited and canonized shortly after its writing. The king, Achashverosh, is thought to have been either the Persian King Xerxes I (485-465 BCE) or Artaxerxes II (404-358 BCE).³

One of the reasons that I used the title that I did for today, "Purim: An Ethical Response Within a Religious Tradition," is that the word G-d does not appear in the original Hebrew or Aramaic texts. The story is about doing what's right for yourself and others not to please some god or avoid some beyond life punishment. It appears that there was some issue over this, since around 165 BCE, the Greek translations of Esther, adds the word G-d over fifty times, as well an additional 100 verses mainly prayers and supplications to G-d. Also, in the Greek additions, Esther's role as savior of her people is downplayed in favour of the intervention from the male God. According to the notes in The New Oxford Annotated Bible, the Greek addition D, "portrays an Esther undone by feminine weakness and incapable of fulfilling her mission on her own." But the Hebrew scriptures have a rich tradition which cannot be undone completely by later redaction, additions or subtractions. One particular theme or literary device common in Hebrew scriptures is 'name derivation.' Names tell us more about the story. In the account of Esther the name derivations speak to power and intent of Esther as the central figure and provide insight about the other players.

I don't think that it is by accident that the word G-d is missing from the original account of Esther. The divine spirit is realized in the way in which the beloved community is lived out. It is clear to me that G-d is there, in the act of loving and selfless commitment to stand in solidarity with those that would be denied their right to exist, even risking one's own life. It is this radical idea, that G-d is in all things, and that the coming of the kingdom of God takes place in the here and now, that was so threatening that attempts were made to obscure this message. In a patriarchal society it was impossible to accept a female and particularly one of no notable lineage as important or able to be a "savior" for her people.

Let's take a closer look at the names of the players in this drama: We have Esther/Haddassah, Mordecai, King Achashverosh, the would be assassins Teresh and Bigthan, Hamen and his father Hammedatha, the casting of lots "Purim," and the date of the supposed massacre turned time of victory-- Adar.

Assa, the root word in Haddassah, Esther's Hebrew name, means "myrtle," but in Aramaic it means "healing physician, or remedy." and in Assyrian it means "bride." There is a rich tradition within Hebrew scriptures to use names that have more than one meaning; a layering if you will of clear and obscured, overt and covert meanings which give depth to the stories. It may well be that the name Haddassah was intended to allude to all of these, which would have been understood by most readers at the time of the writing. Her Hebrew name signified her as the "bride" of the king and the "remedy" for the injustices that were planned against her people. Her Persian name, Esther, which means "star" is a clear allusion to the Babylonian Goddess Ishtar, which also comes from the same root word as "star." It seems possible that in giving our Heroine the name Esther, the author is advancing a praiseworthy contender for the ancient Goddess Ishtar. Esther, as the "star goddess" then trumps any human king.

Mordecai in Hebrew means, "little man," but is also a covert allusion to the Babylonian God Marduk. Mordecai as the "little man" is reminding the reader of the youth David, the man who would be king, who stood against the giant Goliath. Just as we saw with Esther, Mordacai is elevated to the status of god which offers a positive contender to the Babylonian deity Marduk. The name of the king, Achashverosh, has a Persian root word meaning "I will be silent and poor." An odd title indeed for the King of Persia, or could it be a fitting name for a king who was merely the puppet of extreme elements within the empire? As for the traitors--- Teresh, means "strictness," and Bigthan, means, "in their wine press," extremes in human behaviour from piousness to drunkenness. I don't miss the comparison of the traitors from Esther's story and the far right hypocrites of today, who on the hand seem so strict, intolerant and pious while on the other hand hide, and non-too-well there own short comings. While on the other hand we have Esther, who breaks several laws of Judaism. She marries outside of her race and religion. She covers her head with turban, she eats foods that aren't within a prescribed diet, and she breaks a number of other prohibitions. It's of interest then, that in the later Greek additions to Esther, these matters are "cleaned up" and Esther is put in her place as a "mere woman."

Our villain, the name we must try to obliterate, Hamen---means "magnificent," while his father's name, Hemmedatha means, "double." Anyone who has read much of Hebrew scriptures can tell you that genealogies are very important. Since the scriptures are patriarchal, it's fair to say that a "man" is judged not only by his own actions but also by the actions of his "fathers." I can't say for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised if Haman's father's name as "double," doesn't in some way reflect on Hamen being "two sided," or "two faced," appearing good while committing such evil acts such as genocide.. He didn't tell the king that Mordecai, and the Jewish people had only refused to bow down to him, nor why, but instead had told the king that the Jews were not obeying the king's laws. He shifted the facts to fit his bias.

The name of this Jewish celebration is Purim, which refers to the casting of "pur" or lots, like dice,

hence the flaming dice on the cover of your order of service.

Hamen cast the "dice" to see which day would be the best day to massacre the Jews. The "lots" fell on the fourteenth day of Adar, which means "glorious." What was to be day of destruction for the Jews became a day of celebration; a day where they claimed their self esteem and fought against the forces that would destroy them and exploit their resources. These were freedom fighters and I'm sure to the followers of Hamen they were understood what in today's terms might be called terrorists.

You might wonder why all this is important. Without the understanding from the names, which was commonly understood by the audience over two thousand years ago, Esther's story might be similar to an "American," watching a British comedy. It might still be funny, but much of the nuance is lost because of the cultural and geographic differences which are required in order to get the full meaning from the story. Scripture works that way too. I consider it irresponsible to spout off scripture in support of, or against something, in complete disregard for the fact that time, translation, and changes within the text may have completely altered the intended meaning. In looking at the story of Esther through the lens of literary criticism, particularly the name derivations used within the story, I become aware of a deeper and richer story than that which appears only in the surface narrative. Here's some of what I deduce from the story when I take into account this new information:

First, here is a story which attempts to provide an alternative for the gods and goddesses of the Persian and Babylonian Empires. From the Jewish perspective, the false deities of Ishtar and Morduk, both revered during the time of Cyrus the Great, some 100 years before the fabled King Achashverosh, are replaced by the very real people Esther and Mordecai. Esther, as the "star", goddess of power and destruction, the "healing physician" and the "remedy," is more powerful than the kings Xerxes I or Artaxerxes II, renamed as Achashverosh, the puppet whose name means "I will be silent and poor." Mordecai, as the "little man" stands up to the giant, the "magnificent" Haman, in similar fashion to David standing up to Goliath, an oral tradition which was written down a few hundred years prior to the recording of the Story of Esther. This is a message for the underdogs, the minority. It offers hope for the hopeless. This is a story of empowerment: one that claims humanity as sacred. The story of Esther becomes a reframing of what is sacred, and a reclaiming of self esteem by an oppressed people. And it comes by being called to be who you are, being authentic-

Just what is the relevance of Esther's story today?

My coming out story..... I came out for me, not "my community"

Esther had to come out

Yes she could pass....and did for a time

Another Jew, Mordecai, had to stand in the streets in sack cloth and ashes to get her attention. Then in secret, tell her that she had to come out. (Embarrassed- don't make a spectacle- put on good clothes.)

She risked everything in order to be true to herself. and to others

A traditional food during Purim is Hamantaschen, or "Haman's pockets." It is a pastry, baked in a triangle, said to be the shape of Haman's hat. Inside each pastry is a rich fruit filling, reminding us of the riches that Haman sought to gain by exploiting others. After today's service, I invite you to feast on Hamantaschen, remembering that Coming Out, to one's true self is important not just for ourselves but for others. And that there have always been silly rulers who sway with extremists... but sometimes even the courage of one person can make a difference!