

# From the Cantor-Educator



This month brings one of my favorite Jewish holidays: *Purim*. On its face, *Purim* is a fun-filled, upside-down holiday where we conceal ourselves, revel in reversals, and unmask hidden truths. Like any good Jewish holiday, there's a plot against the Jews, we overcome it, and then we eat. That sumptuous victory meal

is an important, sometimes overlooked, aspect of the holiday, along with sending gifts to friends and to the less fortunate lost somewhere between the *megillah* reading and the costume parade. The deeper value of the holiday is ironically hidden behind its "masks."

*Purim* is also notable for highlighting the sometimes precarious position of the diasporic Jewish condition. As in America, the Jews of ancient Persia struck a balance between assimilation and the continuity of self-preservation. The Jews of Shushan and every other province under Ahasuerus' rule had, within a few generations of their forced arrival from Judea by Nebuchadnezzar, found their way into relative prosperity and comfort in Babylon. Indeed, Esther's identity as a Jew is an ethnic one that is veiled only by her silence on the matter.

Still, the Jewish citizens of the Persian empire were susceptible to being "othered" by the likes of Haman the Aggadite. As a purported descendent of Amalek, the national nemesis of the ancient Israelites, he too descended from aliens to Babylon. Thus, when he was promoted to the role of Vizier to Ahasuerus, he was insulted when Mordechai, a great-grandson of a more recent arrival, refused to bow to him, he sought to assert his bona fides as a "Persian" by differentiating his own immigrant past from that of "a certain people," conspiring to their alienation, persecution and murder. Some things never change...

Queen Esther's identity as a Jew is veiled in secrecy. Ahasuerus' intelligence and shrewdness are masked by seeming intoxication and boorishness. Haman's power-hungry self-interest is masked by his feigned loyalty to the crown. God is so well hidden in *Megillat Esther*, the only hints to his presence are in Mordechai's donning sackcloth on the announcement of Jewish persecution and Esther's missive to her people to fast on her behalf (to whom?).

The entire story may even be a Persian novella masquerading as a Jewish one- that is, the assimilated Persian Jews mitigating their religious identity by adopting a local tale into their own ethnic narrative. However one views *Megillat Esther*, in the end, everything is unmasked and the truth comes out. This deeper meaning of the holiday forces us to reckon with some important issues. What and why are we trying to hide from one another and from ourselves? We all naturally try to cover our own weaknesses and things we fear may expose us to mockery or exploitation.

If we can pull away veil and unmask our true selves, however, we actually accomplish several important things as individuals. First, we rob enemies of ammunition they can use against us. Next, rather than blending in, we reveal what makes us unique. Third, we can recognize in ourselves aspects we wish to improve. Finally, we can realize our unique power as individuals to make a difference in our world.

Esther, while beautiful, was just another pretty girl in the royal harem. It was only when she recognized her unique position to serve to truth and that she had to reveal her identity that found her sense of purpose, mission and agency in the royal court.

Yes, *Purim* may hold special resonance in this unprecedented American era. Yes, perhaps the Emperor has no clothes. Yes, we've heard this story before, each year, for thousands of years. After the *groggers*, the fun of the *spiel* and the carnival, the hamentashen and the costumes, though, we must unmask ourselves to our own potential to change the world. Once we've done that, it's up to each of us to act.

## Color Fun Run

Sunday, May 21

Stay tuned for more information!

