

Purim 2024: How Would You Respond?

The Megillah, the Book of Esther contains nine chapters. It consists of 167 verses, and numerous exchanges, speeches and dialogues between the primary characters.

I want to focus this morning on just one of those conversations. It takes up only two verses, but is a pivotal moment in the story. It determines the outcome of the rest of the book, and perhaps even more than that, the fate of the Jewish people for the rest of time.

When Mordechai learns of Haman's plan to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom of Persia, he appeals to Esther to approach her husband, King Ahashverosh on behalf of the people and to request that he intervene and annul the plot. Although Esther is the queen, she is reluctant to approach the king because only one who is summoned may enter to speak with him, and she hasn't been called in to see him for a full month.

We are left wondering if there is a problem, or if it is a temporary distancing. We are not told the reason, and we, like she, can only speculate. Perhaps she is no longer in the King's favor. Perhaps he has a new love interest. Perhaps the king is distracted and is dealing with other matters. Perhaps her identity as a Jew, which until now she has kept hidden, has become revealed. She is worried that she could suffer the fate of anyone who goes to the inner court uninvited, which is to be sentenced to death.

But Mordechai is undeterred. He does not hesitate for a moment. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, he insists that she go in and speak to the king. He continues with his appeal to her:

אַל־תִּדְמִי בְּנַפְשְׁךָ לְהִמָּלֵט בַּיַּת־הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל־הַיְהוּדִים:

Mordecai's message to Esther is simple and direct: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life just because you are in the king's palace." He continues,

כִּי אִם־הִתְרַשׁ פְּתוֹרֵי־שֵׁי בָּעֵת הַזֹּאת רְנוּחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹוד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאַתְּ וּבֵית־אַבְיָךָ תִּאבְדוּ .

"On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish." He then concludes his speech with powerful and stirring words:

וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגְעַתָּ לְמַלְכוּת

“And who knows, perhaps you have attained your royal position for just such a crisis,” for just this very moment.

As we all know, he succeeds in convincing her that she must take the risk, even if it may cost her her life. Without that turn of events, prompted by his speech, the story ends. She must do what she can, and not be silent. She must use her position of influence to speak out on behalf of her people.

How are we to understand the events of the Megillah? Is it just a tale of long ago? Should we read it as history, or as literature, as a fantasy, a legend, a fanciful imaginary story?

Unfortunately, as we all know, the story is all too true, and played out all too often. The story of Purim took place long ago, in a far-away land. But it is not so distant and detached from our history, from reality, and from today. An evil character filled with irrational hatred who schemes to wipe out the Jews is not just a story. Unfortunately, the story of Haman is the history of our people.

As we will read at our Passover seders in a month, *bechol dor vador*, in each and every generation there are those who seek to destroy us. Then, as well as at other critical times in our history, the fate of the Jewish nation depended on the courage of Jews in a position of power, of those with access to leaders to use their position of prominence to defend the Jewish people.

I have often focused on Mordechai’s direct challenge to Esther, when he says, “Who knows if perhaps you have attained your position of power; Who knows, if there isn’t a Divine plan, that the reason you are where you are, the reason you have attained such a royal position is precisely so that you will be in a position where you can make a difference, where you have the opportunity to rise to the occasion and to take a significant action that will save your people.

From Haman’s birthplace, modern day Iran, there is a regime that wishes to wipe Israel and the Jewish people off the face of the earth. Iran sends its proxies to do its bidding and to carry out its plan.

Where do we see ourselves in the story?

Would we be like Mordechai or Esther, acting on behalf of our people, or would we shirk our responsibility?

As we look for parallels, I want to comment on what prompted Haman’s anger, and the reaction to it. Haman was angry and decided to take revenge because Mordechai refused to bow down to him.

As a result of the actions of one person, Haman decided he was going to wipe out all the Jews.

And how did they react?

We only know what the Megillah tells us.

It explains their anxiety and tells us that they donned sackcloth and ashes, and mourned and prayed. What I find interesting is -- it doesn't say is that they were angry at Mordechai. They didn't turn on him. They stood behind and with him, despite the precarious situation he put them in. They didn't condemn him for jeopardizing their position in the kingdom. They were united. They didn't say that Mordechai should be replaced by a different leader.

Mordechai's message to Esther, actually has three parts.

First he tells her, don't think that just because you happen to be the Queen that your fate will be different than what is going to be done to your fellow Jews.

Indeed, when Hamas terrorists and others invaded and attacked Israel on October 7, they didn't stop and ask, nor did they care how people felt about judicial reform. They didn't ask which party people belonged to. As they went on their killing spree and rampage, they didn't stop to inquire if people supported peace or a two-state solution. They committed vicious atrocities with joy to any and all they encountered.

Mordechai then goes on to tell her words that are often overlooked. He tells her that salvation will come, that the Jewish people will prevail and will survive. Had she chosen to remain silent, and not speak up, someone else would have been the conduit to save the Jewish people. The question he presents to her is -- what role will she play? It is as if he is saying -- Somehow, this people will be saved. The question is -- Will she do her part? Will she be remembered as one who rose to the occasion and stood up and acted to save her people?

He concludes by telling her that it may be for this very reason that fate has placed her where she was. As one rabbi wrote, "Esther was thrust onto the stage of history with the spotlight shining brightly upon her."

Purim is a story of a world turned upside down, topsy turvy. And no less is true today. Israel gets attacked by the most sadistic army of terrorists carrying out a massacre on a wanton path of destruction, and somehow the world rallies to the side of the perpetrators.

And so we conclude by going back to Mordechai's challenge, and ask: Where do you see yourself in the story, and how would we respond to Mordechai's call?