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The Anxiety of Purim
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We usually think of Purim as a joyous holiday – through an amazing series of twists and turns, the Jewish people are saved from destruction through the heroism of Esther. We see God’s hand in the story and celebrate our salvation with carnivals, parties, and gift-giving.

But there is another side to Purim lurking just below the surface. We can look closer at the story and see in how many places it could have gone wrong. What if Ahashvarosh was not looking for a new queen? What if Esther was not chosen? What if she had revealed her Jewishness up front? What if Mordechai did not overhear the plot against the King? What if the King did not have a sleepless night, or if Mordechai had already been rewarded? What if Esther did not have the courage to confront the king? And what if she had the courage but not the political insight to pit Haman’s hunger for power against the King’s paranoia? At every turn, we see how a close call it was.

And even at the happy ending of the story, given how Ahashvarosh changes his mind and issues drastic decrees at the slightest provocation, can we be sure that Mordechai’s rise to power will be more than temporary?

Our sages in the Talmud recognize this predicament. In explaining why we do not say Hallel on Purim, they state that unlike Pesach, where God freed us from slavery under Pharaoh, after the Purim story we are still slaves to Ahashvarosh. (Talmud Bavli, Megillah 14a)

The Purim story is the story of the Jew in exile, and the end of the Megillah is really only the end of a chapter. The next chapter – the next attack on the Jewish people – may be right around the corner. The story is repeated throughout our history – the Inquisition, the pogroms, the Holocaust, the attacks against the State of Israel, the recent rise of antisemitism in Europe. Even here in the United States, where we are mostly secure, recently there have been cemetery desecrations, bomb threats, and other anti-semitic acts. The history of the Jewish people is a history of anxiety and insecurity that waxes and wanes through different periods.

Some of our Purim customs are a reflection of this underlying anxiety. We wear costumes and masks which allow us to become someone else. We drink more than usual – to the point where we confuse Haman and Mordechai – as a way of creating the appearance of an alternate reality. For one day, everything is topsy-turvy and reality is subverted, which enables us to hide

the anxiety of life in exile and celebrate our victory against our enemy.

But our sages added other, less festive, elements to our commemoration of Purim that also address the insecurity of the Jew in exile. The Shabbat before Purim we read Parshat Zachor – to remind us that evil exists and that we have an obligation to seek out and fight it. We give matanot l'evyonim to remind us that we need to be concerned about all of the Jewish people, particularly the poor and the weak. And we read Megillat Esther to remind us that we need the courage to stand up for what is right when the next crisis comes.



Rabbanit Gloria Nusbacher came to Maharat after a career in corporate law, including almost 20 years as a partner at one of the 100 largest U.S. law firms. She interned at Congregation Ohev Sholom - The National Synagogue in Washington, DC, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, and New York Presbyterian - Allen Hospital, and co-founded and ran her community's women's tefilla group. Rabbanit Gloria earned an AB from Barnard College and a JD from Columbia Law School, and has studied at Drisha. She lives in Riverdale and West Hempstead, NY with her husband, Burt, and is a proud mother and grandmother.