

PURIM, THE STORY OF ESTHER

The story of Purim can be found in the Old Covenant scriptures in the Book of Esther. The King becomes irritated with his wife when she fails to come running when he calls for her. Concerned that her behavior would incite the rest of the women of the kingdom to disobedience, the King's ministers advised him to trade her in on someone younger and more compliant. They suggested that the eligible young maidens throughout the land be brought to the palace at Shushan so that Ahasuerus could select a replacement. This struck the King as a fine idea.

Among the young women brought before him was Esther 😊, a Jewish girl being raised by her uncle Mordecai 😊. The Tanakh (Jewish Old Testament) describes Esther 😊 as "shapely and beautiful," a combination which was not lost on Ahasuerus. He chose her to be his wife and queen. He didn't know that she was Jewish and Esther saw no reason to tell him.

Some time after that, Ahasuerus elevated one of his courtiers to a high position, higher than any of his other ministers. This man's name was Haman 😡. Haman loved the power that came with the job and took great joy into forcing the King's subjects to bow before him as he rode through the kingdom. But Mordecai 😊 refused to bow before Haman 😡 explaining to the King's advisors that he was a Jew and would bow only before G-d. Haman 😡 was outraged. When he heard of this, he determined to do away with all of Mordecai's 😊 people. He plotted the extermination of all the Jews of the Kingdom. An edict was issued that called for the death of every Jew, young and old, children and women. The massacre was to take place on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar.

When Mordecai 😊 heard of this, he was understandably upset. He sent word to Esther 😊 and implored her to use her influence with the king to stay the execution and rescind the order. Esther 😊 sent word back to her uncle, telling him that she could do nothing. It was forbidden for anyone to enter the king's presence without having been summoned by him. The penalty for doing so was death.

Mordecai 😊 sent another message, telling her that she was marked for death anyhow. He further suggested that Esther 😊 may very well have attained her high position for the very purpose of providing the means for the deliverance of the Jews. Esther 😊 was moved by his argument and sent back a request that all the Jews of Shushan fast and pray for three days on her behalf. At the end of that time, she would go to the king and, in her own words, "If I am to perish, I shall perish!"

On the appointed day, Esther 😊 had a complete makeover and put on her fanciest clothes to increase her chances with the king. She walked bravely into the throne room and faced the king. Despite the serious breach of protocol, the king extended his scepter to her, signifying that he would receive her. "What troubles you, Queen Esther 😊?" he asked. "Ask me anything, even half of my kingdom, and I will give it to you." Esther 😊 had only one simple request; that the king would come to a feast she had prepared for him and bring Haman 😡 with him. The king readily agreed.

At the feast, the king was still quite pleased with Esther 😊 and repeated his offer to grant her any wish. She replied that she wished only for him and Haman 😡 to come to lunch again on the following day.

That night, the king couldn't sleep. He ordered the book of records to be brought and read to him. Among the outstanding accounts recorded in this book, the king discovered that a certain man

named Mordecai 😊 had done the kingdom a great service. He had discovered a plot against the king's life and had turned in the conspirators. The king was displeased to learn that nothing had been done to reward this man. He thought long and hard to come up with a suitable reward.

Finally, he went to Haman 😡 and asked him what should be done for a man that the king desired to honor. True to his nature, Haman 😡 could only assume that the king was referring to him. He suggested that this man be dressed in royal clothes and placed on one of the king's own horses and that a crown be placed on his head. He should then be paraded through the city square for the people to honor him. The king liked this idea and ordered Haman 😡 to go and prepare everything, just as he had suggested, for Mordecai 😊

Haman 😡 was devastated, but he still managed to make lunch at Esther's later that day. Once again, the king asked her what he could do for her. This time, Esther 😊 requested that her life be spared as well as the lives of her people, as they had all been slated for extermination by an evil adversary. "Who is he and where is he that has dared to do this?" thundered the king. Esther 😊 was only too happy to tell him. The king was incensed by Haman's 😡 audacity. When he learned that there was a stake standing at Haman's 😡 house to be used for Mordecai's 😊 execution, he ordered Haman 😡 impaled upon it. 😊

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NOTES:

The story is satisfying on several levels. Aside from the very real pleasure of seeing a deserving villain undone by his own schemes, there is the sense that G-d (who oddly enough is not mentioned directly even one time in the entire book, the only book of the Bible where this is so) is easily able to rescue His people. This is a particularly comforting message in a century that has given us the Holocaust and the constant threat of attack on Israel from hostile Arab neighbors.

We aren't the first to note the similarities between the perils that faced the Jews then and more modern perils. One of the SS officers sentenced to hang in the Nuremburg war crimes trials, Julius Streicher, made a similar observation. As he faced his accusers at his execution, Streicher suddenly screamed, "Purim Fest, 1946!" Then he was hanged.

The Purim story is a marvelous testimony to the endurance of Jewish memory. As we celebrate this holiday, we can pinpoint exactly the moment it all began. Following the death of Haman 😡, Mordecai 😊 was elevated to a position of power. He commanded that the thirteenth day of Adar, the very day that had been set for the destruction of the Jews, be commemorated forever. In chapter 9, verses 27-28 we read:

The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year. Consequently, these days are recalled and observed in every generation: by every family, every province, and every city. And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never perish among their descendants.

Those words were written over two thousand years ago. All of us who observe Purim, whether descendants of Esther 😊 and Mordecai 😊 or among those who choose to join them in rejoicing over the deliverance of G-d's people are a part of fulfilling the truth of the Word of G-d. 😊