

“Hope Amidst the Chaos (Purim)”

Yom Kippur Sermon

Rabbi Erica Asch

Temple Beth El

October 9, 2019

They say that every Jewish holiday can be summed up very simply. They tried to kill us. They didn't. Let's eat! Of course, as we sit here this Yom Kippur we know that may be a bit over-simplified. But thanks to a handy Reddit thread by “yolish” we have more definitive statistics. Half the time they tried to kill us. 75% of the time we're still alive. And if you take out those pesky minor fast days, we get to eat 83% of the time. The odds are pretty good.

A classic “they tried to kill us, we're alive, let's eat” holiday is Purim, a holiday that seems to have very little in common with Yom Kippur. Purim is a holiday of excess--partying, drinking, reversing roles, irreverent parodies. It is a day when everything is turned on its head. Yom Kippur is about deprivation, introspection, and traditional rituals. Yom Kippur reinforces, rather than upends, tradition. No one tried to kill us, we are indeed still alive, but we don't get to eat anything at all.

As most of you know by now, I'm taking the opportunity this year to look at different Jewish holidays to see how they can shed new light on this season. Today, we'll look at Purim and Yom Kippur, two holidays that seem diametrically opposed. What insights could we possibly gain from examining Purim at this time of year?

While these two holidays are indeed quite different on the surface, they are actually quite similar. The Zohar, a 12th century mystical work, shares a pun on the names. Yom Kippurim (what we call Yom Kippur) is *yom ki purim*, which translates literally as “a Day like Purim.” Yom kippurim, yom ki purim. Yom Kippur is a day like Purim.

Both holidays take place outside of ordinary time and ordinary rules. On Purim, we are allowed to be as crazy and transgressive as we want to be. The Talmud (Megillah 7a) relates a rather bizarre story about Rava and Rabbi Zeira who prepared a Purim feast. They became so drunk that Rava killed Rabbi Zeira. The next day, when Rava sobered up, he asked God for mercy and God brought Rabbi Zeira back to life. The next year, Rava invited Rabbi Zeira to another Purim feast. Rabbi Zeira replied, “Miracles do not happen at every hour.” In other words, I'm not sure we'll get that lucky twice, so maybe we should not have a second feast. Purim is a crazy day, but it is only one day. After our revelry and flouting of the rules, we go back to our ordinary lives. Calmer heads prevail.

Similarly, Yom Kippur exists outside of normal time. Through the actions we take today--not eating or drinking, avoiding bodily pleasure, wearing white, and so on -- we are, in essence, rehearsing our own deaths. We step out of the normal ebb and flow of time and into the day of Yom Kippur with its multiple services and introspection. And then, just like with Purim, we step back into our ordinary lives. Indeed, we traditionally start building the sukkah right after Neilah services, symbolically moving onto the next holiday.

Embedded within both of these holidays is an act of chance. On Purim, Haman casts lots to determine on what day the Jews will die. In fact, the name Purim comes from *pur*, the Hebrew word for the lot that Haman casts. Similarly, on Yom Kippur, the high priest casts lots over two goats. One goat is sent into the wilderness, to *azazel*, the other is to be sacrificed in the Temple. Chance and luck are built into the foundation of both observances.

And yet, Purim and Yom Kippur are also quite different. As Rabbi Rachel Adler, a contemporary theologian, points out, “Viewing Purim as the inverse of Yom Kippur brings us closer to understanding their likeness, for an inversion is merely a likeness reversed (*Beginning Anew: A Women’s Companion to the High Holidays*, p. 325).” Most Jewish holidays have both a physical and a spiritual component. During Sukkot, we build a sukkah to appreciate God’s protection. At Passover, we eat matzah to relive the freedom gained by our ancestors. Purim, however, is almost all physical. The name of God is not even mentioned in the book of Esther. It is a holiday of physical excess, whereas Yom Kippur is almost all spiritual. We go to great lengths to remove any physical distractions so we can focus on our own spiritual life. In a sense, Purim and Yom Kippur are each a different side of the same coin.

But, Purim is not all fun and games. It also contains an undercurrent of sadness. As Arthur Waskow writes, “The laughter of Purim is not gentle laughter: it is a kind of angry, red-blooded humor that celebrates the tyrant’s overthrow (*Seasons of Our Joy*, p.115).” We read part of the megillah, the story of Purim, in the mournful trope of Lamentations, recalling the destruction of the First Temple. And the Purim story includes death. Granted, the Jews are saved, but the killing that the Jews do in the last chapter lends a chilling coda to an otherwise farcical story. And, let us not forget, that not every Jewish story of persecution ends as happily as Purim does. There were many times in Jewish history when a tyrant arose who wanted to kill or exile the Jews and succeeded. For much of Jewish history there was no Queen Esther who could avert the evil decree. The Jews, and not our enemies, perished.

Yom Kippur, with all its solemnity, also has a farcical side. Rabbi Adler explores this in depth with an examination of the book of Jonah, which we will read this afternoon. Jonah is a reluctant prophet. When told to go to Nineveh, he runs in the opposite direction. When he is thrown overboard and the sea miraculously calms, the sailors hold a revival meeting on board. Later, Jonah delivers what Adler calls, “The world’s most laconic prophecy (p. 329)”: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown (3:4).” A mere five words in Hebrew, yet Jonah’s prophecy comes to pass almost immediately. Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel pour out entire chapters of eloquent prophecies to the Israelites to no avail. Jonah goes to a bunch of non-Jews, says one sentence and they run and do *teshuvah*. As Adler says, “Although he lacks any discernible gifts either of evangelism or of charm, wherever this curmudgeon of a prophet goes, he leaves a trail of people beating their breasts and shouting hallelujah (p. 328).” Jonah, the recalcitrant prophet, manages to convert an entire city with just five words. Not only the people, but the animals too! He is the only successful prophet, despite his obvious shortcomings. Jonah’s story this afternoon lends an air of absurdity to an otherwise somber holiday.

Indeed, Purim and Yom Kippur have more in common than we might think. In both holidays, death and justice are central themes, and we Jews don’t have control over what happens. The Purim story is predicated on a series of fortunate events that might or might not be directed by a God who is absent in the story. It causes us to think about how the story could have gone badly for the Jews. What if Esther had not been made queen? What if Moredechai had not happened to overhear the plot to kill the king? What if the king had not allowed Esther to approach him? What if? The fate of the Jews was precarious, their knowledge and power limited. They had little control over what happened to them.

And, today, on Yom Kippur, what happens is also out of our control, not in the hands of a rash king, but in the hands of a seemingly distant God. This holiday focuses on death and justice as we are judged for the next year. We acted in the way we acted, and now God will do what God will do. Who will live and who will die? We have no way of knowing. What will the next

year bring us? We're not sure. Do we really believe that what happens to us for the next year is predicated on what we have done in the past ten days? Probably not. But, we know we are not in control. We know that on this day, as in the Purim story, our knowledge and power are limited.

Yom Kippur is predicated on heavenly and earthly order. But as we examine Purim, we are reminded of a different side of this day and of our lives. What happens to us often is not in our control. Life often does not make sense.

As we sit here in the year 5780, we might feel that the world does not make sense. That there are bigger forces out there that we do not have the power to change. The news brings stories of senseless tragedies, natural disasters, and ongoing war. Our government seems to be spinning out of control. Long-held norms for behavior are upended. And, we have a police presence outside of this building. My colleague Rabbi Andy Gordon points out that usually this season brings the biggest group of people to the synagogue. Last year, our largest gathering wasn't for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, but the Shabbat after the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue. It can seem that the topsy-turvy nature of Purim is no longer confined to just one holiday, but is bleeding into our everyday lives.

And yet, despite all of this--our limited human knowledge, our finite power to change the world, our imperfect understanding of a divine system of justice--Judaism is not a religion that throws up its hands and gives into the seeming chaos of the universe. We are a people of rules and laws, of stories and traditions, of community and family. And all of these forces help to buffer the sometimes disordered world around us.

Poet Walt Whitman writes,

“Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more
faithless?)...”

The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.”

We are here. The world goes on and we are able to contribute a little something to the great story of our people. The Torah says this too. In this morning's Torah portion we read, “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live, by loving the LORD your God, heeding God's commands, and holding fast to God. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that the LORD swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them (Deuteronomy 30:19).” The Torah tells us that world is not a fairy tale where everything will always turn out perfectly. If we believe that the Torah was compiled after our exile from Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, it becomes an even more powerful statement. We were a people in exile; everything we knew was upended. But we compiled a book that, after listing all the blessings and curses which could befall us, encouraged us to choose the path of life by following the laws contained within it. In a time of chaos, we turned not away from tradition, but towards it.

Our additional service we will read this afternoon is full of stories of people who turned towards tradition in difficult times. This service contains the martyrology, the list of Jews who have died because they were Jewish. All these people lived in times of great danger for Jews, but they continued practicing their religion. There were the ten martyrs who lived during the time of Roman persecution. They continued teaching Torah to their students although it was illegal,

dangerous and ultimately cost them their lives. There were the Jews who lived during the Crusades, who refused to convert when threatened, but instead chose death. The Jews of Spain, the Conversos, practiced Judaism in secret when the Inquisition came to their shores. During the Holocaust countless Jews remained true to their religion in the face of horror and death. In Soviet Russia Jews gathered in secret to pass on traditions and keep their faith alive in dark times. Throughout history, we have turned to tradition when times have been difficult.

As we know, our lives are not always difficult. Sitting here, relatively safe compared to our ancestors, we can feel a little bit comfortable. But we shouldn't get too comfortable. We shouldn't be too sure of our own goodness. We shouldn't forget others in need. Adler writes that the trick of Yom Kippur is to get enough distance to laugh at ourselves just a little bit. When we "posture and preen ourselves on our temporary bodily depravations without attaining an iota of concern for the needs and suffering of others living beings then God finds us shocking and ridiculous (p.330-331)." How does God help us to rectify our mindset? We are laughed and teased back into compassion. Adler continues, "If we have understood we will be able to extrapolate from our own growling bellies, aching heads, boredom, and weariness to the infinitely precious and vulnerable spirit-flooded bodies of other living creatures. Leaving behind us both self-abasement and self-congratulation frees us to see ourselves as God sees us, with amused tenderness and persistent hope (p. 331)." Amused tenderness and persistent hope.

We are a hopeful people. Only a hopeful people would cry out to God after being in slavery for hundreds of years. Only a hopeful people would say "Next year in Jerusalem" at a Passover seder held in Northern Africa or the Pale of Settlement, knowing intellectually that this journey would not happen. Only a hopeful people when asked if the messiah had come would say, "Not yet." A hopeful people would read, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the tale of God pardoning an entire city of non-Jews (and their animals), after just a few words from a recalcitrant prophet. Only a hopeful people would assume Esther would save us from destruction. Only a hopeful people would believe that the gates of repentance would remain open for us.

We take two days a year to sit in the extremes, but then we go back to the world. If we are lucky, we keep with us our outlook of amused tenderness and persistent hope. Arthur Waskow teaches that while these days remind us that chance has a part in the world, chance does not rule the world. "There is absurdity in the world, but the world is not absurd (p. 125)." Yom Kippur gives us the break we need from the world. And then, when this day is over, we enter back into the seemingly chaotic world and can look at it with a spirit of hope and a little bit of laughter. This is the world we live in, with all of its complexities. In the words of Andy Dufresne in the Shawshank Redemption, we can either "Get busy living or get busy dying." Judaism is clear. *U'barchata b'chaim*.--choose life.