
The renewal of purim and the fast of esther

Arthur Waskow

This year, we have two months from Tu B'Shvat to Purim--twice as long as usual--to focus on what it means to observe Purim. Perhaps this year of all years, we need this time. For this year the hilarity of Purim will be shadowed by the horror of last Purim--the mass murder of 40 Muslims prostrate in prayer, carried out by a religiously committed Jew who said he was acting in the name of God.

Before last Purim and since, of course, we have also witnessed analogous mass murders committed by Muslims upon Jews, also in the name of God. Ideally, our two communities should be proceeding together to re-examine what in each of our traditions has led some of the followers of each to interpret them in these ways, and to uproot such misinterpretations. May that day come soon, speedily, in our own days!

But if that day is to come, it will probably require that each community begin the process on its own, in its own inwardness, using its own approaches, drawing on its own spiritual resources for its own self-examination. Within the Jewish community, some Jews began that effort last year, even on Purim afternoon itself. This essay is an effort to move forward another step in that self-examination and renewal.

When Fantasies Become Real

The date of the Hebron massacre was no accident of timing: Purim itself played a role in creating that horror.

Most Jews today understand the whole story of Esther as a novel, the first *Purimspiel*, a double joke on antisemites and misogynists. Haman is hanged on the same gallows he intended for Mordechai, the king who had denounced Vashti and said he would never take orders from a woman ends up by doing exactly what Esther tells him.

And we can understand--as the angry fantasy of a powerless people--the bloody denouement of the story, when the Jews respond to a threat of Holocaust first with self-defense and then with a mass killing of 75,000 Persians.

If this is the fantasy of the weak, what shall we do when we are no longer powerless? What spiritual and ethical dangers do we run when we are powerful but pretend still to be powerless?

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Jewish tradition connects the Purim story with a story from the Wilderness: the nation Amalek attacked the Jews from the rear, killing women and children. The Torah teaches that forever, Jews must remember to blot out the memory of Amalek. Haman, Torquemada, Hitler. They are all Amalek.

Of course, in the generation after the Nazi Holocaust--the Holocaust that actually did happen, the one from which no Esther saved the Jews--this archetypal myth of disaster bites home with intense cruelty and fear. So in our generation, for some Jews the whole Palestinian people becomes Amalek. We must "blot out" their memory.

Defining the Mitzvah Toward Amalek

What does this mean? To Goldstein, it meant murder. And he could make the fantasy come true.

In some new and deeper understanding of Torah, "blotting out the memory of Amalek" must come to mean something other than murder.

The key command has two parts: First, "Remember what Amalek did to you." Then, "When your God brings you safely into the land, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek."

The chair of the board of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, Barbara Breitman, drawing on her own experience as a psychotherapist, teaches that this means:

First, the victim must clearly and fully recover the memories of victimization and abuse.

But then, when we are no longer weak and powerless, when we are "safe in a good land", we must no longer be obsessed with Amalek; for it is exactly an unrealistic and obsessive fear that will drive us to desperate acts--indeed, into acting like Amalek.

Rabbi Tirzah Firestone of Colorado, points out that Amalek was a descendant of Esau--that grandson of Abraham who was cheated out of the birthright and the blessing that would have let him follow in Abraham's footsteps. Amalek, she suggests, is part of our own family--the residue of rage that sprang from the grief and anger Esau felt. Amalek is always a possibility within us, as well as in others. The Torah is teaching that we must blot out the urge to Amalek within our selves, by turning that urge toward compassion.

Otherwise, we run the risk that like *Baruch/Aror* Goldstein himself, we ourselves may become Amalek. For Persians, or Germans, or Arabs, or Jews can choose to behave like Amalek or like *Queen Esther*--who in a courageous act of nonviolent civil disobedience challenged a king to do justice, at the risk of her life.

Traditionally, on the day before Purim, Jews honored Esther's courage with the Fast of Esther. This fast day has fallen into non-observance among most Jews.

Reclaiming the Fast of Esther

What if we were to revitalize this *Ta'anit Esther*? What if it became either once again a day of fasting--or perhaps a day to be observed by an act of reconciliation, an act of nonviolent challenge to injustice, an act that truly honors Esther, an act that could legitimately be followed by a "mitzvah meal" as is the study of Torah on the day before Pesah, when firstborns gather to study Torah instead of fasting?

Jews could do this on their own, or could invite nearby mosques or Palestinian-American groups to take part.

Or Jews could decide to undertake a public act of seeking justice, pursuing peace--perhaps working with a mosque or on our own to build homes for the homeless, or to support a shelter for battered women in memory of Vashti, the battered Queen of the Megillah.

And we could, every Purim from now on, pause in the reading of the Scroll of Esther at the troubling verses that express the fantasies of the powerless for revenge, and when we pause, explain what we are doing: "In sorrow over the deaths on Purim 5754 of our cousins the children of Ishmael in the Tomb of Abraham, we are reciting these verses in an undertone and in the wailing melody of the Book of Lamentations, lest anyone think that these verses are a call to wanton murder." (These ideas seems to have emerged last year in several different places at once. I heard them first on the day after Purim, in a conversation with David Waskow of Los Angeles. A havurah in Philadelphia, *Dorshei Derekh*, adopted this idea in a version proposed by Rivkah Walton.)

And perhaps the day of the Fast of Esther could be a time for leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities to begin meeting to address shared issues of everyday life--for example, the joint production and sale of food that is certified both *kosher* and *halal* (suitable to both Jewish and Muslim standards), joint work for religious freedom, discussions about what creative arrangements might honor both peoples' stakes in Jerusalem and economic cooperation to assist both Israel and Palestine.

Some Challenges

In discussions of these ideas among the electronic subscribers to *Sh'ma On-Line*, there were three concerns raised by some participants:

One was that we not lose sight of the *p'shat* (on-the-surface) teaching of the Torah that sometimes Amalek

may turn out to be a whole people with mass-murderous intent against the Jews, not only the shadow within each community or people. That is true; certainly the Nazi Holocaust came as close as any imaginable event to being perpetrated by a whole people that had allowed itself to become Amalek. Yet even then the Jewish people in its deep wisdom did not interpret "Blot out his name" to mean the mass destruction of all Germans.

Instead, we applied a powerful rabbinic midrash about the moment when Ishmael is dying of thirst. The Torah says, "God heard (*Vayishma elohim*) the voice of the boy where he is." Said the Rabbis, "Why this extraneous 'where he is'? Because the angels said to God, 'Why save him? His seed will attack your people!' and God said, 'Where is he at this very moment?' 'Innocent,' they said. 'Where he is, there I hear him,' said God--and sent the well to give him life." If that is how we treated specific Germans in the wake of the Holocaust, how much more should we act in this way toward specific children of Ishmael themselves, in the midst of the thorny path of peace-and-violence intertwined.

Not Ourselves Alone

The second concern of some *Sh'ma On-Liners* was over what it meant to reawaken the Fast of Esther and in the very same breath transform it, even perhaps make it not a fast day but a day of pursuing justice. Here there is certainly room for Jewish pluralism and experiment. Some will want to renew the fast itself, just as it was. Some may welcome the fast out of memory that the Rabbis instituted *Ta'anit Esther* on a day that had been Yom Nicanor, a festive day to celebrate a military victory over the Seleucid general Nicanor, and thus shattered that military festival by requiring a fast. Some might even want to invite Muslims and Christians to join in the fast, to honor Esther's courage and to honor all those who call kings to turn away from murder. Still others may think it better to walk publicly in Esther's path, through nonviolent action. For those who think the tradition rich in meaning, surely it is better to have that meaning debated and explored rather than forgotten.

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And some *Sh'ma On-Liners* expressed concern that to the extent we try to heal ourselves, we may give the impression that we alone need healing. For me, the reverse is true: the more fully we address the healing that we ourselves must seek for the sake of our own health, the more authentically we will be able also--gently, clearly, firmly, vigorously, repeatedly--to say to Muslims that given the murders of Afula and Buenos Aires alongside Hebron, it is indeed not one community alone but both--theirs as well as ours--that bear the shadow of Amalek within, and must confront the meaning of that shadow.□

One year later: reflections on the incident at hebron

Aaron I. Reichel

One of the tragedies highlighted in the wake of the Purim preemptive response of Dr. Baruch Goldstein to the Arab battlecries, specifically on the eve of this past Purim, to slaughter the Jews in Hebron, is that extremists on both sides of the political and religious spectrum are misinterpreting the values and teachings of Rabbi Meir Kahane.

As a result, tens of thousands of West Bank settlers are cast unfairly in a negative light, as if all who admired many of the attributes of this charismatic but perhaps too fiery orator--even without endorsing everything he ever said or did--approved of Goldstein's murders in the mosque. This enables many Jews to rationalize the traditionally unthinkable proposal to have the Jewish government ultimately do to virtually all of the West Bank settlers (most of whom are *not* Orthodox and certainly not "Kahanists") what Hitler attempted but failed to do, i.e., force all Jews out of a whole region of a country, never to have the right to return.

Such a course of action would make all of pre-1967 Israel more vulnerable to the inevitable attacks, God forbid, of Arabs whose "moderates" openly advocate the perpetuation of the PLO Covenant that seeks to destroy the country of Israel.

Simultaneously, some of Kahane's more conspicuous "followers" are not necessarily following through on his every view.

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Look at Kahane's Record

Had Kahane advocated the mass murder of dozens of civilians in a house of worship, as many extremists on the right and on the left maintain, then Kahane would have authorized such a deed, or done it himself, in his lifetime. His never having authorized such a killing or done anything remotely like it should prove that Goldstein was *not* following Kahane's approach.

Kahane set the tone for his life's work by establishing the Jewish Defense League. He aimed to prevent bloodshed; not to create it. He began by making neighborhoods safe for Jews; not by forcing them out of some of their holiest, most historic, meaningful and beloved cities.

No matter what anyone may think about Kahane's views or tactics, the fact is that when Kahane helped lay the groundwork for the movement to save Soviet Jewry, he did it by shedding a minimum of red blood, to generate a maximum of black newsprint for the cause of physical and spiritual freedom, and he succeeded.

When Kahane burst onto the Israeli scene, he advocated buying Arab real estate, just as Abraham had bought the property in Hebron (as per the biblical book of Genesis), which was used as a burial place for his family; which was forbidden to all Jews after the Arab government-sponsored massacres of the Jews in 1929 and 1936 (as was the whole West Bank from 1948-1967) on pain of certain continued annihilation and torture; which in 1967 was re-opened to all Arabs by the government of the Jews, which was the scene of routine threats of annihilation of the Jewish benefactors by Arab beneficiaries; and which, for a few violent minutes, became the scene of one man's preemptive attack on the precise day of the scheduled re-massacre of Jews by Arabs, according to the Israeli government's own almost universally ignored (in this respect) Shamgar Report!

Kahane Was Not Racist

Many of the disinformation spewers that dominate the mass media maintain that Kahane was comparable to the Nazis, obviously not because of the rabbi's physical actions--or, more precisely, inactions--but rather because of the sharpness of the rabbi's tongue, even though many of Israel's free-speech-suppressing incumbent leaders want some of the holiest places in the Jewish religion to be *Judenrein*, although in their case euphemistic language is used, but their contemplated follow-up *actions* will have the bluntness of squadrons of bulldozers.

Many who liken Kahane to Nazis pounce on his salutation at a Hebrew University rally, "Jews and dogs." In context, he was facing death threats and worse from the Arabs. What other politician has been accused of