

Purim Jews and Passover Jews

Shabbat Zachor 5781

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You know the stereotype of Jewish holidays: “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat!” Like all generalizations, it’s a gross overstatement of the case. Still, in springtime, the maxim rings true. On both Purim and Passover, we recall tyrants who sought to destroy us. In neither case, though, does the focus seem to be on the terror experienced by our spiritual ancestors. Instead, we celebrate liberation. And yes, we eat!

Purim, though, is preceded by *Shabbat Zachor*, a Sabbath of Remembrance, which we observe tonight. In addition to the weekly portion, traditional Jews read a passage from Deuteronomy, recalling the wickedness of Amalek, who attacked the Children of Israel at their weakest point, from the rear, as they approached the Promised Land near the end of forty years of desert wanderings.ⁱ Haman, the villain of Purim, is said to be descended from Amalek, and the connection is not farfetched. The Book of Esther identifies Haman as an Agagite,ⁱⁱ which is significant. Centuries earlier, King Saul had been commanded to destroy all the Amalekites, but he spares the king, whose name is Agagⁱⁱⁱ—and hence, his descendants, including Haman, are Agagites.

The moral of that story, of course, is that if one does not wipe out antisemites, they will multiply, and their descendants will threaten the Jewish people in the future. We are commanded to reflect on the harsh reality of antisemitism and the existential threat it poses to Judaism and the Jewish people before we enjoy the frivolity of Purim. Put another way, we are asked to take a significant pause to contemplate the “they tried to kill us” part before we get to, “Let’s eat!”

No such warning is issued in the run-up to Passover. The most solemn moment at the Seder table has us diminishing our cups of wine by ten drops, in recognition of the plagues and the suffering they brought to the Egyptians. Whereas Purim focuses us on antisemitism, Passover reminds us of our liberation and the attendant misfortune our blessings brought to others. Then, the Torah goes on to remind us, no less than thirty-six times, that our experience as slaves in Egypt should inspire us to “remember the stranger” and assure the welfare of those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

My teacher, Yossi Klein Halevi has written of the distinction between “Purim Jews” and “Passover Jews:” “Jewish history speaks ... in the voice of two biblical commands to remember--”^{iv} the first, tonight, in advance of Purim, to recall all who would seek to destroy us; the second, on Passover, to be mindful of the plight of others who suffer in this world.

Flipping the order of the holidays, Halevi elaborates: “The first voice commands us to remember that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and the message of that command is: Don’t be brutal. The second voice commands us to remember how the tribe of Amalek attacked us without provocation while we were wandering in the desert, and the message of that command is: Don’t be naïve.”^v

Halevi applies the dichotomy primarily to Israel and to American Jews’ reaction to Israeli policy. “Purim Jews” “are keenly aware of the external dangers facing the Jewish state.” For “Passover Jews,” by contrast, “the primary focus ... is on internal issues: the fraying of democracy, the seemingly irreversible occupation, the receding promise of peace.”^{vi}

Halevi wishes that an Orthodox rabbi who supports West Bank settlers—that is, a “Purim Jew”—would tell his community, “For all our devotion to the Jewish state and our concern for its survival, we have failed to acknowledge the consequences to Israel’s soul of occupying another people against its will.”^{vii}

He also dares to dream that a liberal rabbi—that is, a “Passover Jew”—would give a sermon, saying, “For all our devotion to the Jewish state and our concern for its democratic values, we have failed to acknowledge the urgency of the existential threat once again facing our people.”^{viii}

In short, Halevi is arguing that we must all be both “Purim Jews” and “Passover Jews.” And, of course, he is right. And his argument, originally articulated in 2013, applies equally to American Jews in our own context.

We, too, must answer Purim’s call: “Don’t be naïve.” After the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, we know that we must remain vigilant. The antisemitic and even Nazi imagery during the Capitol insurrection on January 6 was frightening. And even though violent antisemitism in America has come from the far right, we must not ignore its nefarious twin on the extreme left.

Being good Purim Jews—that is, paying attention to antisemitism, and keeping it at bay, not only for ourselves but for Jews across America and around the world—is a price that we have to pay in order to pursue our higher calling as

Passover Jews. We have been called into covenant, not merely to continue existing, but in order to be God’s partners, in the words of the prophet, “I, the Eternal, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped your hand. I created you and appointed you, a covenant people, a light of nations, opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement, from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”^{ix}

We have not been called into covenant merely to survive. Being Purim Jews, fighting off those who would destroy us, is a necessary but insufficient condition to fulfilling the covenant. Conversely, we cannot be Passover Jews if we and our people do not live to carry out that mission.

Nor have we been called into covenant because we are uniquely special, singled out for honor. The biblical narrative, and particularly our prophets, frequently remind us that God expects us to remember the stranger, to care for the poor, to raise our voices against injustice. Failure to do so risks suspension even of the covenant—and, for the ancient Israelites, exile from the Promised Land.

That exile led many of our people to Babylon—and then, about a century later, to Persia, where the Purim story is set. As that story comes to its happy end, we read in the Book of Esther, “The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, joy and honor,”^x words that Jana will sing in a moment. But the story does not end there. Even the original Purim Jew becomes a Passover Jew: Mordecai institutes annual celebration of that victory, including “feasting and merrymaking”^{xi}—yes, “Let’s eat!” Mordecai does not conclude the ordinances of celebration, though, until he commands the Jews to send “gifts to the poor.”^{xii}

Let each of us be Purim Jews, vigilant in protection of our people, wherever and whenever we may be threatened. Let each of us be Passover Jews, reaching beyond our own people to ensure the wellbeing of the entire human family. Then, may we fulfill God’s covenant.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

ⁱⁱ Esther 3:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ I Samuel 15.

^{iv} Yossi Klein Halevi, “Passover Jews vs. Purim Jews: The Agony of our dilemma,” *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle*, March 16, 2013.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

viii Ibid.

ix Isaiah 42:7.

x Esther 8:16.

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xii Esther 9:22.